

Sermons

Zazen - Stop using the ego too much by Rev. Tenshin Nakano

At no point in Japan's almost eight-hundred-year history of Zen Buddhism has there been such a time as now where there are so many ordinary lay practitioners practicing zazen. A wide range of people, young and old, men and women, attend zazen sessions at the temple where I am the chief priest. The reasons people come to practice zazen differ from person to person, but each and every one of them are earnest in their approach to the practice. Among them, there are more than a few people who have a wealth of knowledge gained from regularly attending things like public lectures and study seminars and who have a deep interest in Zen. However, they often say that their main intent for coming to zazen is "a desire to develop a strong sense of confidence and peace of mind within oneself."

Needless to say, each person has a different outlook on life and a different set of values. I call this the mind's "yardstick." The environment you grew up in, the education you received, the wide range of interpersonal relationships you have maintained, and the interactions you have had with each and every thing have shaped how you think, how you speak and how you live out your own life. All this has had a major influence on your sense of humanity, your outlook on life and your set of values.

The stronger the will and the greater the appetite for learning a person has, the more they will try to learn from reading writings by a variety of people and listening to many talks. Of course, broadening your mind and deepening your knowledge from reading and listening is important. However, it is also important to note that reading and listening in the wrong manner – that is, using the yardstick of your own mind too much while reading or listening to the words of others – will mean that you only ever manage to read or listen in a manner that keeps asking whether you like what is being said or whether what is being said suits you or not. This is actually not learning. Even when attempting to learn, all this will do is make you more stubborn in your biased viewpoints and sense of ego. If you cling to your ego too much, you will not be able to accept differences of opinion. In some situations, we humans might allow this clinging to cause conflicts, sometimes escalating to all-out war.

In *Shobogenzo Zuimonki* in which he intimately explained to his disciples how to practice the Buddha way, Dogen Zenji, founder of Daihonzan Eihei ji, strongly admonished against such actions.

Students today, however, cling to their own discriminating minds. Their thinking is based on their own personal views that Buddha must be such and such; if it goes against their ideas, they say that Buddha cannot be that way. Having such an attitude and wandering here and there in delusion, searching after what conforms to their preconceptions, few of them ever make any progress in the Buddha-Way.

There are various problems in life that absolutely cannot be resolved with the outlook on life and set of values that you have previously clung on to as a foundation. This is definitely true for problems in dealing with birth, old age, sickness and death.

Around 2,500 years ago Buddha himself gave up his rank as prince and a life that lacked for nothing with regard to material possessions to leave the palace in pursuit of practice as a renunciant in the hope of resolving these life-related problems. There were many religions in the Buddha's birthplace of India. There were also two main types of training to awaken to the truth: meditative concentration, and asceticism.

Gautama, as he was known before he woke up, first trained in the ways of meditation under two sages. Each time, he immediately reached a state beyond that of his teacher. However, he found no satisfaction in this. For the next six years he pursued a series of strict austerities. At the time, the rationale for practicing such austerities was based on the dualism of mind and body. It was thought that having the body undergo incredible pain would cause one's spirit to leave the trappings and influence of the body and appear in its original, purest form. This was regarded as spiritual enlightenment. Gautama stopped his breathing, went without food, stood upright from morning to night, performed ablutions three times every day and night – he underwent every austerity imaginable, and after doing so he is to have said "No one before me, here with me, or after me will take their austerities as far as me." However, even after continuing to pursue such severe austerities he could not reach the highest form of enlightenment.

After six years of intense training, Gautama saw that he was not going to be able to achieve his ideals by harming his body through extreme austerities, and hence gave up on them. He bathed his dirtied body in the Niranjana River and recovered his strength by accepting milk and rice pudding rich with nutrition from a young girl named Sujata. He then sat under a pipal tree in a place later known as Bodhi Gaya where he practiced zazen guided by his own thoughts and experiences. For seven days and seven nights he remained in a state of zazen, and at dawn on the eighth day he awakened to the truth and became the Buddha (the Awakened One).

Practicing zazen is training oneself to keep one's ego's yardstick of the mind in check and to practice the way of living as the Buddha. Dogen Zenji demonstrated this as "throwing oneself into the house of the Buddha."

The Buddha taught that the root cause for the suffering and confusion in human beings is *avidyā*. *Avidyā* refers to the ignorance of having lost sight of the truth. In other words, *avidyā* means being unable to see things as they really are. The reason for not being able to do so is because you are using your ego – that is, the yardstick of your ego-centered mind – too much in seeing reality.

This would be akin to trying to fill up a container (one's thinking) which has a lot of holes with the water of the ocean of the truth – trying again and again to scoop up the water of truth with this container. A vessel with holes will never hold water. Then what should we do? The answer to this question lies in letting go of this vessel with holes and throwing it into the ocean. By doing so this vessel gets filled to the brim with the water of the ocean of the truth. Letting go of your own vessel (thinking) and throwing it into the ocean is what is meant by throwing oneself into the house of the Buddha. In other words, it is to stop using one's own ego and to absorb oneself in zazen.

Buddhism teaches that the mind and the body are not two separate things. First, straighten your back and harmonize your posture and then your breathing. When doing so, do not become disturbed by thoughts appearing in your mind. Do not be bothered by them. Just let them be as they are and continue to harmonize your posture and breathing. When you do this, your mind will be naturally and gradually harmonized.

It is important when practicing zazen not to attempt it with a sense of purpose in mind - "I want to be healthier," "I want to strengthen my mind," "I want to attain enlightenment," and so forth. Doing zazen with this mindset will make you consumed by thoughts and cling to your ego when you should be letting go of it. You will find yourself naturally achieving such things without specifically desiring to do so when you truly leave your ego behind and absorb yourself in zazen.

A great many scientists and medical researchers have verified that zazen and other forms of meditation massively influence the production of endorphins in the brain, along with alpha waves and serotonin. The actions of these greatly impact the health of the brain, body and mind.

While it is never a waste to look outwards in the pursuit of knowledge, why not first cultivate the field of the mind within oneself to develop a rich mind? We very much hope that you find the right teacher and join us in practicing zazen.