

# Sermons

---

## The Zen Life - Learning Our Attitude for Living from Zen by Rev. Hosho Kurata

---

I would now like to address you - you, the person clicking on this sermon. You and I have now "met" through this sermon. Life is a series of encounters. We live, learning a great many things through a wide range of encounters. Each and every one of us is guaranteed to have encounters that greatly influence the way we live our lives.

About 790 years ago, Dogen Zenji, who founded Eihei-ji temple, crossed over to China at the age of 24 to study the true Buddha Dharma. It was there he encountered his lifelong teacher, Zen Master Rujing. It goes without saying that this meeting was the greatest one in Master Dogen's life, but he also had many acquaintances with other Zen monks who trained together with him in China. Through these encounters Dogen Zenji learned great lessons that definitely shaped his lifelong practice. One of these was an unforgettable lesson from an old *tenzo* priest (cook) named Yong.

The place of training was the Qìngdé Temple on Tiāntóng Mountain. What took place occurred on one summer's day. After lunch young Dogen proceeded down a long passageway paved with stone. Walking along this passageway, he spotted an old priest drying mushrooms in the sun. The old priest's was a cook assigned to make meals for the monks in training, and he went about his work with sweat dripping down his forehead in the blazing hot sun. He looked incredibly strained as he carried out his work, but in spite of his sweat and strain, he lined up the mushrooms in a clean row. The old priest's back was curved like a bow, and his eyebrows were as white as a crane's feathers.

Seeing the appearance of the old priest, Dogen caught himself asking the priest his age. "Sixty eight," the old cook replied. Dogen immediately inquired, "At that age why not relax and ask one of the young monks in training or servants for help?" Without resting his hands from his work the old priest replied, "Others are not me" (If someone else were to do it, I would not be the one to have done it).

Even on hearing this, the young Dogen still did not understand. He asked again.

"That is correct, but why must you do it now, when the sun is so hot?" The bow-curved back of the old cook straightened as his face, with eyebrows as white as the feathers of a crane turned to face his young questioner. With a dignified air he replied, "There is no time but now" (Only now, when the sun is at its strongest, can mushrooms be dried. When should I dry them if not now?). These two replies had a strong impact on Dogen. There was no doubt that these words showed the very way of training undertaken by the old cook and the way of the Zen life.

With this meeting, Dogen, who had previously considered the role of cook as one that did not go beyond performing chores, now saw it as a most noble form of training, giving root to his view on Zen training, that of *igi-soku buppō* (dignified forms are themselves Buddha's awakening) - that is, there is nothing in our everyday actions that is not inherently Buddha Dharma. More so than anything else, he learned firsthand the important attitude, the attitude needed to undertake Zen training, the attitude of saying "I expend every effort now doing what should be done now. Only with this do my actions have meaning." On countless occasions Dogen Zenji would later emphasize to trainee monks that "there is a need for those following the Buddha Way to thoroughly live the present moment for themselves."

Eight whole years have passed since I parted ways with a woman, a meeting I will never forget. She was 58 years old. In her forties she suffered from both breast cancer and colon cancer, and when we met she had cancer of the liver. Her condition was such that surgery was no longer possible, and she told me her treatment now consisted of just taking anticancer drugs and therapies as needed to cope with her situation. While her body was afflicted with illness, she always gave a bright sense of calm to those around her. She was a person filled with affection for others. I asked her once, "How can you be so kind?" To which she answered without hesitating, "This is the way I live." As the cancer progressed, the woman's doctor told her that she did not have much longer to live and she was hospitalized.

When I went to see how she was doing, she thanked me repeatedly and told me. "Thank you so much for coming today. You have helped lift my spirits. I can give it my all again. To be honest, this is extremely tough for me. Not being able to do things that

I could do so easily before saddens me and makes me feel miserable. Above all else, I worry about the family I will leave behind. Once I start thinking about them I can't stop. But this is my life; nobody can take my place. My body has been afflicted by illness, but I don't want it to envelop my feelings as well. With this attitude, I give everything I am able to do in the here and now my all, whether that be eating, or sleeping or going to the toilet - I'm doing my very best." The braveness of her words startled me.

At that time, upon hearing this woman's words and seeing her I had a strong sensation that "she has not given up on living, she is doing her utmost to do what she can do now, she is living in the moment, living her life to the fullest."

Two months later she passed away peacefully.

Looking back, I see much of how she lived her life in the way the old cook on Tiāntóng Mountain approached life. You could say that her way of living - "This is my life, nobody can take my place... I give everything I can do in the here and now my all" - can be linked to the attitude of the old cook. I see it as this. Did she find this way of living because she was afflicted with an incurable disease, one that did not give her much time to live? No, I don't think so. You would not be able to express those words from such a thin veneer. I truly believe that it was only because she had always lived in the moment that she could live in this frame of mind no matter the situation, of that I have no doubt. I have no way of knowing whether she knew of the words of the old cook. However, I do know that she taught and showed me a wonderful way of living in much the same way as Dogen Zenji had been taught by the old cook.

The paths our lives take us down are not at all uneventful. There are ups and downs - the reality of life is that more often than not things do not work out as we hope. When inundated with troubles, we complain, sometimes shed tears and cry, "what I am doing is tough." That in itself does not matter. It does not matter, but what good can come from simply complaining or wallowing, and trying to live on while looking away from anything that does not go our way? Doing so will not solve anything. "Others are not me" - that is, nobody can take my place. I can only stand resolute to meet everything that happens to me face-to-face and accept it. Doing this, we need to keep in mind, "if I don't do what I need to do, who will?"

In the teaching that "there is no time but now" we learn that our lives are a matter of "time." The seconds, minutes, hours that make up our life continue to change and move on, never to return. There is no such time as "again." This is the reality of impermanence. Ever changing, there is no such thing as something that remains fixed, and this means that our lives are never guaranteed for the next moment. Not even a second in the time of our lives is spent in rehearsal or preparation. Every moment is real, crucial. Living while grasping the certainty of now leads to brightening up our lives in important ways. "There is no time but now" teaches this first and foremost. In our lives regret and anxiety hover around us. "What if I had done it that way back then," "Why didn't I do this back then?" Regrets for a past we cannot return to. "What should I do if this happens?" Anxiety about a future that has not yet come. We cannot change the past, we do not know the future. Everybody knows this. Yet sometimes we become trapped by a sense of regret and anxiety and cannot move freely. This is a habit humans share. To remove the possibility of falling into this habit we must concentrate on what we need to do now so we do not miss the opportunity of doing what needs to be done now. All I can do is keep the current moment in time completely burning at full strength. "If not now, when?" This is what is meant by "there is no time but now."

The old cook taught us that "With no one to take my place I burn the current moment in time at full strength." It would not be an exaggeration to say that this exhibits a full mastery of the Zen attitude. The Zen life does not necessarily mean a life spent only inside a temple, and it is not something that someone can provide for you. It starts from fully embodying this attitude with complete awareness. Every aspect of life, from greeting others, cleaning, cooking, eating, washing and bathing to going to the toilet is to be done in earnest with a sense of importance that comes with a deep awareness of this attitude. Hearing this, there are some that will think, "Well, that's kind of obvious." However, the problem lies with how much we can put the obvious into practice. Seeking fulfillment and satisfaction in life while forgetting the "now, here, myself" will end with us asking for the impossible in every instance. From the beginning, there is no perfect way of living. Progress forward with care at your own pace, continuing one step at a time in an effort towards "what I need to do in the here and now" without giving up, or comparing yourself to others. Our lives will shine brightly with this way of living, and we are sure to find a life of satisfaction.

With this in mind, let's take a step together towards "the Zen life," a life lived with the Zen attitude.