

Sermons

Seeking the "Correctly transmitted Dharma" - A Dharma Talk on the Origin of Japanese Zen Buddhism (A Chronicle of the ancestral Teachers in Zen) by Rev. Shunya Sano

The basic approach to the Buddha's teaching can be summarized as study of *Sangaku*, the Threefold Study - of *kai* (precepts), *jo* (meditation), and *e* (wisdom). This means to follow the precepts, to practice concentration, and to cultivate wisdom.

Precepts are instructions to follow and maintain so that people can live together in peaceful coexistence.

Concentration is to regulate one's body and mind in concentration without being swayed by whatever is around oneself. Precepts are to govern our own actions, and in doing so, to maintain our composure and integration of our bodies and minds is concentration. We need wisdom to make the correct decisions to achieve this end. This is the way of training that the Buddha continuously imparted to his disciples. Concentration is *samadhi* – a state of intense attention achieved through meditation. Zen is nothing but the practice of this. Buddha himself attained awakening through this concentration.

When I was training at the Head Temple, I wondered about what the Buddha was seeking when he left home. While practicing the Threefold Study, I was not sure about the meaning of the practice and often lost sight of the purpose of it. As a result, I could not concentrate well while sitting zazen. I continued to seek an answer to why we sit zazen. When later reading the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* I found it contained hints to the answers I sought. "My disciple, Subhadda, I left home to seek the good at the age of twenty-nine." (Chapter 5, Section 27). The Buddha said these words to his last disciple, Subhadda, right before his death, and they are thought to express the truth in his heart. The original word for "the good" in the Pali language is derived from words such as *kusala*, *punna*, and *bhadra*, among others. They each carry with them meanings such as "being of benefit," "being fair and reasonable," and "that which represents supreme bliss," respectively. The Buddha "left his home to seek that which benefits and gives happiness to others through an authentic life that is both fair and reasonable."

In *Nicomachean Ethics* the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle said that "the maximum good is happiness itself." While cultivating virtue through practice and customs is important, he preaches moderation in that "each specific character excellence lies between an excess and a deficiency," and that "the state of happiness lies at a mean between two extremes." Aristotle's words speak from the standpoint of a class society, and are not to be taken in the same light as those spoken by the Buddha, who wished for the happiness of all sentient beings. However, I think both the Buddha and Aristotle shared an idea that it is important to keep an aspiration and to live with a sense of purpose, and this constitutes what is good.

The Buddha devoted himself to practice in the search of what is good. In searching for this path he first studied under two hermit masters of yogic meditation, Alara Kalama and Udraka Ramaputta. The source of Zen Buddhism is said to lie in yoga, but the state taught by these masters is something similar to a trance in which one only controls one's own mind in meditation. That controls over one's mind only in temporary and cannot dissolve the root of defilements. Following this, the Buddha practiced various forms of austerities tried by other practitioners of the day who had renounced the world. The Buddha realized that extreme austerities were not the path to attain enlightenment and gave up on yoga. After that, he finally found the true form of *dhyana*, or meditative concentration. This is a method of practicing that can be constantly performed by anyone, anywhere at anytime. In Japanese this is referred to as *shikan*, or "stopping and seeing." "Stopping" means "to remain calm and to preserve one's composure," while "seeing" means "to clearly observe the true state of the world around us." You will eventually attain the enlightenment through the practice of this true form of meditative concentration.

However the content of Zen has undergone changes with the passage of time, becoming more complicated, more fragmented, and deviating greatly from its original meaning.

Zen brought by Bodhidharma to China was more and more refined in the climate of the land. Japanese Zen learned from Chinese Zen then developed in the unique way of Japan, in an inevitable transition.

I will now take a moment to briefly summarize these changes as described in "*Zenshu no Rekishi (History of Zen Buddhism)*" by Aishin Imaeda.

By the Tang dynasty (618-907), knowledge of Zen Buddhism had already reached Japan from China. Dosho, who accompanied Japanese envoys in their travels to Tang China, passed on what he had learnt about Tang dynasty Zen Buddhism, leading to his

servicing as the head of the first Zen temple in Japan. Later, monks from Tang China would come to Japan. It is recorded that Saicho practiced Zen methods. Sutras relating to Zen Buddhism were read by two head priests of the Tendai sect, Ennin and Enchin. They brought Zen methods to Mt. Hiei. Gaoku Noko traveled to Tang China to practice Zen under Dongshan Liangjie. He is known as the first one who succeeded to the line of Soto Zen Buddhism. However, their teachings were fragmented and lacked cohesiveness, and as such they did not take root as a Zen Buddhist school in Japan.

Later we see several Zen practitioners travel to Song China (960-1279), but this still did not lead to a full-fledged introduction of Zen Buddhism in Japan.

In the Kamakura Period (1185-1333), Zen Buddhism in Japan prospered and many priests were trained. This includes those connected to Eisai at Kenninji following the Oryu School of the Rinzaï sect, and his disciple, Myozen (the former teacher of Dogen Zenji). The Enni sect referred to as the Shoichi School also flourished during this period. The Hoto School also came to prominence under the teachings of Muhon. The thing these schools had in common was not an initial desire to establish particular Buddhist sects, but rather a move to convey the teachings of Zen Buddhism alongside those of existing religious orders to reinforce their teachings. The impression we have is that Eisai was the first to disseminate Zen Buddhism in Japan, but actually he attached the greatest importance to the adherence of the Buddhist precepts and to developing a new comprehensive order based on the Tendai doctrine that integrates En (Tendai), Esoteric (Mikkyo), Zen (Zen-shu) and Kai (Kairitsu) teachings. This form of Zen Buddhism at the beginning of the Kamakura period developed in a syncretization with existing Buddhism. During this period, Dainichibo Nonin, who is said to have received the teachings of the Chinese Zen Buddhist master Dahui Zonggao, lived in seclusion in the hope of transmitting the teachings of Song dynasty Zen Buddhism, diligently working on expanding the influence of the Zen Buddhism called the Daruma School. However, this movement triggered a protest from the existing Buddhist schools, and his teaching was suppressed.

Amidst these events Dogen Zenji returned to Japan, having inherited the teaching of Zen Master Rujing. Immediately upon returning to Japan, Dogen Zenji wrote "*Fukanzazengi* (Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen)," where he focused on promoting the importance of zazen. This devotion to zazen was consistently preached throughout his work without pause, emphasizing that "one should practice *shikantaza* (zazen practice where one does not actively seek enlightenment), following the activities of the ancient masters."

However this came into conflict with Tendai teachings, subjecting Dogen Zenji to pressure. Buddhism continually changed depending on the relationship with the political power of the time. In view of this, it is both sad and foolish to have those of the same Buddhist faith come into conflict and criticize one another over differing doctrines. Dogen Zenji was not constrained by a limited view of "Zen Buddhism" as a religious sect, but rather advocated for a Zen Buddhism that went beyond sectarianism. He preached *shikantaza* as the teaching of the "correctly transmitted Buddha Dharma," that is, the way of the Buddha, the way of buddhas and ancestral teachers before the teaching branched into the sects.

The Great Master Shakyamuni exactly transmitted, as the authentic tradition, this subtle method of attaining the Way, and the tathagatas of the three times all attained the Way through zazen. Thus the fact that zazen is the authentic gate has been transmitted and received. Furthermore, all the ancestral teachers of the Western Heavens and the Eastern Lands attained the Way through zazen. Therefore I am now preaching zazen to human beings and gods as the authentic gate. (Bendowa)

The teaching Dogen Zenji obtained from Master Rujing is that "practicing Zen is shedding body-mind" and "to practice Zen is to practice zazen."

In the authentic transmission of our tradition, it is said that this Buddha dharma, which has been authentically and directly transmitted one-to-one, is supreme among the supreme. (Bendowa)

And there is his realization that "enlightenment manifests when practicing *shikantaza*." (practice based upon realization)

The thought that practice and experience are not one thing is just the idea of non-Buddhists. In the Buddha dharma practice and experience are completely the same. Practice now is practice based upon realization; therefore, a beginner's effort of the Way is just the whole body of the original realization. (Bendowa)

Zen in Mahayana Buddhism places primary importance on a complete embodiment of Buddhist teachings in body and mind that goes beyond simply reading and understanding the Buddhist texts. There are limits to Buddhism as a "line of thought," and it is vitally important to abandon preconceived notions and directly face the reality in which one is living in. Even if one were to

become versed in a profound line of thought, the true value of it will not emerge as long as it is not used to aid one in his or her daily life. Zen training requires one to give one's body and mind fully to any task, whether that may be washing one's face, bathing one's body, eating, or working, not just when practicing zazen. With this as a basis, Dogen Zenji preaches the practice of *shikantaza*, not with the explicit objective of obtaining something through zazen, but that "zazenitself is the practice of the Buddha."

At the end of September in 2013, I was given the opportunity to travel to North America to give dharma talks as the Sotoshu specially dispatched teacher. Beginning with Zenshuji in Los Angeles, I toured Zen centers in Mexico City, Houston, Texas, and Bloomington, Indiana, among others, before finally wrapping up this valuable experience with a visit to Sokoji in San Francisco. Buddhist memorial services during the equinoctial week were mainly conducted by Japanese-Americans at Zenshuji and Sokoji. Seeing that the spirit of Buddhist memorial services had passed on to those who had made the journey to the U.S. as the first generation and to their descendants in such a noble manner, I was deeply moved in sheer gratitude as I gave my sermons. Other Zen centers are operated according to different forms depending on the local circumstances. I could spend a short while in zazen with people visiting daily in an earnest search for the teachings of Zen Buddhism and pass on the words of the Head Priest of Sotoshu. What left a particularly great impression on me was the chief priest at each Zen center continuing to practice the Threefold Study on a daily basis. It was immediately apparent how much each teacher was sitting zazen for long periods of time. All those under them as well, from beginners to those with decades of experience, sat wholeheartedly absorbed in zazen. While those Zen centers differed from the training monasteries in Japan in terms of regulations, the teachings of the two founders were being resolutely transmitted. "The Buddha dharma of Shakyamuni also lives here." This was the moment that I felt that the authentic form of *shikantaza* is present in a foreign land.

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