

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

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Right Practice

- ❑ “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”
- ❑ In Japan we have the phrase shoshin, which means “beginner’s mind.” The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner’s mind.
- ❑ If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.
- ❑ All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner’s mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless.
- ❑ Now I would like to talk about our zazen posture. When you sit in the full lotus position, your left foot is on your right thigh, and your right foot is on your left thigh. When we cross our legs like this, even though we have a right leg and a left leg, they have become one.
- ❑ The most important thing in taking the zazen posture is to keep your spine straight. Your ears and your shoulders should be on one line. Relax your shoulders, and push up towards the ceiling with the back of your head. And you should pull your chin in. When your chin is tilted up, you have no strength in your posture; you are probably dreaming. Also to gain strength in your posture, press your diaphragm down towards your hara, or lower abdomen. This will help you maintain your physical and mental balance. When you try to keep this posture, at first you may find some difficulty breathing naturally, but when you get accustomed to it you will be able to breathe naturally
- ❑ Your hands should form the “cosmic mudra.” If you put your left hand on top of your right, middle joints of your middle fingers together, and touch your thumbs lightly together (as if you held a piece of paper between them), your hands will make a beautiful oval.
- ❑ You should not be tilted sideways, backwards, or forwards. You should be sitting straight up as if you were supporting the sky with your head.

- ❑ To take this posture itself is the purpose of our practice. When you have this posture, you have the right state of mind, so there is no need to try to attain some special state. When you try to attain something, your mind starts to wander about somewhere else. When you do not try to attain anything, you have your own body and mind right here. A Zen master would say, “Kill the Buddha!” Kill the Buddha if the Buddha exists somewhere else. Kill the Buddha, because you should resume your own Buddha nature.
- ❑ When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say “inner world” or “outer world,” but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think, “I breathe,” the “I” is extra. There is no you to say “I.” What we call “I” is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale.
- ❑ So when you practice zazen, there is no idea of time or space. You may say, “We started sitting at a quarter to six in this room.” Thus you have some idea of time (a quarter to six), and some idea of space (in this room). Actually what you are doing, however, is just sitting and being aware of the universal activity.
- ❑ Moment after moment each one of us repeats this activity. Here there is no idea of time or space. Time and space are one. You may say, “I must do something this afternoon,” but actually there is no “this afternoon.” We do things one after the other. That is all.
- ❑ When we become truly ourselves, we just become a swinging door, and we are purely independent of, and at the same time, dependent upon everything. Without air, we cannot breathe. Each one of us is in the midst of myriads of worlds. We are in the center of the world always, moment after moment. So we are completely dependent and independent. If you have this kind of experience, this kind of existence, you have absolute independence; you will not be bothered by anything
- ❑ Whatever we see is changing, losing its balance. The reason everything looks beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its background is always in perfect harmony. This is how everything exists in the realm of Buddha nature, losing its balance against a background of perfect balance. So if you see things without realizing the background of Buddha nature, everything appears to be in the form of suffering. But if you understand the background of existence, you realize that suffering itself is how we live, and how we extend our life.
- ❑ Even though you try to put people under some control, it is impossible. You cannot do it. The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous.
- ❑ Then they will be in control in its wider sense. To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him. So it is with people: first let them do what they want, and watch them. This is the best policy. To ignore them is not good; that is the worst policy. The second worst is trying to control them. The best one is to watch them, just to watch them, without trying to control them.

- ❑ The same way works for you yourself as well. If you want to obtain perfect calmness in your zazen, you should not be bothered by the various images you find in your mind.
- ❑ Suppose you are sitting under some extraordinary circumstances. If you try to calm your mind you will be unable to sit, and if you try not to be disturbed, your effort will not be the right effort. The only effort that will help you is to count your breathing, or to concentrate on your inhaling and exhaling. We say concentration, but to concentrate your mind on something is not the true purpose of Zen. The true purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes. This is to put everything under control in its widest sense.
- ❑ Dogen-zenji said, "Time goes from present to past." This is absurd, but in our practice sometimes it is true. Instead of time progressing from past to present, it goes backwards from present to past. Yoshitsune was a famous warrior who lived in medieval Japan. Because of the situation of the country at that time, he was sent to the northern provinces, where he was killed. Before he left he bade farewell to his wife, and soon after she wrote in a poem, "Just as you unreel the thread from a spool, I want the past to become present."
- ❑ When you are practicing zazen, do not try to stop your thinking. Let it stop by itself. If something comes into your mind, let it come in, and let it go out. It will not stay long.
- ❑ Usually we think of our mind as receiving impressions and experiences from outside, but that is not a true understanding of our mind. The true understanding is that the mind includes everything; when you think something comes from outside it means only that something appears in your mind. Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind. If you leave your mind as it is, it will become calm.
- ❑ Even though waves arise, the essence of your mind is pure; it is just like clear water with a few waves. Actually water always has waves. Waves are the practice of the water. To speak of waves apart from water or water apart from waves is a delusion. Water and waves are one. Big mind and small mind are one. When you understand your mind in this way, you have some security in your feeling. As your mind does not expect anything from outside, it is always filled. A mind with waves in it is not a disturbed mind, but actually an amplified one. Whatever you experience is an expression of big mind.
- ❑ We say, "Pulling out the weeds we give nourishment to the plant." We pull the weeds and bury them near the plant to give it nourishment. So even though you have some difficulty in your practice, even though you have some waves while you are sitting, those waves themselves will help you.
- ❑ We should try to continue our effort forever, but we should not expect to reach some stage when we will forget all about it. We should just try to keep our mind on our breathing. That is our actual practice. That effort will be refined more and more while you are sitting. At first the effort you make is quite rough and impure, but by the power of practice the effort will become purer and purer. When your effort becomes pure, your body and mind become pure.
- ❑ In our scriptures (Samyuktagama Sutra, volume 33), it is said that there are four kinds of horses: excellent ones, good ones, poor ones, and bad ones. The best horse will run slow and fast, right

and left, at the driver's will, before it sees the shadow of the whip; the second best will run as well as the first one does, just before the whip reaches its skin; the third one will run when it feels pain on its body; the fourth will run after the pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones. You can imagine how difficult it is for the fourth one to learn how to run! When we hear this story, almost all of us want to be the best horse. If it is impossible to be the best one, we want to be the second best. This is, I think, the usual understanding of this story, and of Zen. You may think that when you sit in zazen you will find out whether you are one of the best horses or one of the worst ones.

- ❑ Suppose your children are suffering from a hopeless disease. You do not know what to do; you cannot lie in bed. Normally the most comfortable place for you would be a warm comfortable bed, but now because of your mental agony you cannot rest. You may walk up and down, in and out, but this does not help. Actually the best way to relieve your mental suffering is to sit in zazen, even in such a confused state of mind and bad posture.
- ❑ When you feel disagreeable it is better for you to sit. There is no other way to accept your problem and work on it. Whether you are the best horse or the worst, or whether your posture is good or bad is out of the question. Everyone can practice zazen, and in this way work on his problems and accept them.
- ❑ When you find it difficult to stop your mind while you are sitting and when you are still trying to stop your mind, this is the stage of "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." But while you are practicing in this dualistic way, more and more you will have oneness with your goal. And when your practice becomes effortless, you can stop your mind. This is the stage of "form is form and emptiness is emptiness."
- ❑ After zazen we bow to the floor nine times. By bowing we are giving up ourselves. To give up ourselves means to give up our dualistic ideas. So there is no difference between zazen practice and bowing. Usually to bow means to pay our respects to something which is more worthy of respect than ourselves. But when you bow to Buddha you should have no idea of Buddha, you just become one with Buddha, you are already Buddha himself.
- ❑ Sometimes the disciple bows to the master; sometimes the master bows to the disciple. A master who cannot bow to his disciple cannot bow to Buddha. Sometimes the master and disciple bow together to Buddha. Sometimes we may bow to cats and dogs.
- ❑ Your effort appeases your inmost desire. There is no other way to attain calmness. Calmness of mind does not mean you should stop your activity. Real calmness should be found in activity itself. We say, "It is easy to have calmness in inactivity, it is hard to have calmness in activity, but calmness in activity is true calmness."
- ❑ This is the Soto way of practice. We can say either that we make progress little by little, or that we do not even expect to make progress. Just to be sincere and make our full effort in each moment is enough. There is no Nirvana outside our practice.
- ❑ As long as we are alive, we are always doing something. But as long as you think, "I am doing this," or "I have to do this," or "I must attain something special," you are actually not doing anything. When you give up, when you no longer want something, or when you do not try to do

anything special, then you do something. When there is no gaining idea in what you do, then you do something. In zazen what you are doing is not for the sake of anything. You

Right Practice

- ❑ Most people have a double or triple notion in one activity. There is a saying, “To catch two birds with one stone.” That is what people usually try to do. Because they want to catch too many birds they find it difficult to be concentrated on one activity, and they may end up not catching any birds at all!
- ❑ Thinking which leaves traces comes out of your relative confused mind. Relative mind is the mind which sets itself in relation to other things, thus limiting itself. It is this small mind which creates gaining ideas and leaves traces of itself.
- ❑ If you leave a trace of your thinking on your activity, you will be attached to the trace. For instance, you may say, “This is what I have done!” But actually it is not so. In your recollection you may say, “I did such and such a thing in some certain way,” but actually that is never exactly what happened. When you think in this way you limit the actual experience of what you have done. So if you attach to the idea of what you have done, you are involved in selfish ideas.
- ❑ When others listen to someone proudly telling something which he has done, they will feel funny, because they know his recollection is one-sided. They know that what he has told them is not exactly what he did. Moreover, if he is proud of what he did, that pride will create some problem for him. Repeating his recollections in this way, his personality will be twisted more and more, until he becomes quite a disagreeable, stubborn fellow.
- ❑ It is necessary to remember what we have done, but we should not become attached to what we have done in some special sense. What we call “attachment” is just these traces of our thought and activity.
- ❑ In order not to leave any traces, when you do something, you should do it with your whole body and mind; you should be concentrated on what you do. You should do it completely, like a good bonfire. You should not be a smoky fire. You should burn yourself completely.
- ❑ Dogen-zenji said, “To give is nonattachment.” That is, just not to attach to anything is to give. It does not matter what is given. To give a penny or a piece of leaf is dana prajna paramita; to give one line, or even one word of teaching is dana prajna paramita. If given in the spirit of nonattachment, the material offering and the teaching offering have the same value. With the right spirit, all that we do, all that we create is dana prajna paramita.
- ❑ When we sit in the cross-legged posture, we resume our fundamental activity of creation. There are perhaps three kinds of creation. The first is to be aware of ourselves after we finish zazen.
- ❑ When we sit we are nothing, we do not even realize what we are; we just sit. But when we stand up, we are there! That is the first step in creation. When you are there, everything else is there; everything is created all at once. When we emerge from nothing, when everything emerges from nothing, we see it all as a fresh new creation. This is nonattachment.

- ❑ The second kind of creation is when you act, or produce or prepare something like food or tea. The third kind is to create something within yourself, such as education, or culture, or art, or some system for our society.
- ❑ Usually everyone forgets about zazen. Everyone forgets about God. They work very hard at the second and third kinds of creation, but God does not help the activity. How is it possible for Him to help when He does not realize who He is? That is why we have so many problems in this world. When we forget the fundamental source of our creating, we are like children who do not know what to do when they lose their parents.
- ❑ “It is when your practice is rather greedy that you become discouraged with it. So you should be grateful that you have a sign or warning signal to show you the weak point in your practice.”
- ❑ When you are idealistic, you have some gaining idea within yourself; by the time you attain your ideal or goal, your gaining idea will create another ideal. So as long as your practice is based on a gaining idea, and you practice zazen in an idealistic way, you will have no time actually to attain your ideal.
- ❑ “Usually when someone believes in a particular religion, his attitude becomes more and more a sharp angle pointing away from himself. In our way the point of the angle is always towards ourselves.”
- ❑ When we practice zazen we limit our activity to the smallest extent. Just keeping the right posture and being concentrated on sitting is how we express the universal nature. Then we become Buddha, and we express Buddha nature. So instead of having some object of worship, we just concentrate on the activity which we do in each moment. When you bow, you should just bow; when you sit, you should just sit; when you eat, you should just eat. If you do this, the universal nature is there. In Japanese we call it ichigyo-zammai, or “one-act samadhi.” Sammai (or samadhi) is “concentration.” Ichigyo is “one practice.”
- ❑ Usually when someone believes in a particular religion, his attitude becomes more and more a sharp angle pointing away from himself. But our way is not like this. In our way the point of the sharp angle is always towards ourselves, not away from ourselves.
- ❑ Dogen-zenji said, “To study Buddhism is to study ourselves. To study ourselves is to forget ourselves.”
- ❑ What is true zazen? When you become you! When you are you, then no matter what you do, that is zazen.
- ❑ So when you practice zazen, your problem will practice zazen, and everything else will practice zazen too.
- ❑ “People who know the state of emptiness will always be able to dissolve their problems by constancy.”
- ❑ The usual translation of the Japanese word nin is “patience,” but perhaps “constancy” is a better word. You must force yourself to be patient, but in constancy there is no particular effort involved—there is only the unchanging ability to accept things as they are. For people who have

no idea of emptiness, this ability may appear to be patience, but patience can actually be nonacceptance.

- ❑ “Without any intentional, fancy way of adjusting yourself, to express yourself as you are is the most important thing.”
- ❑ To understand reality as a direct experience is the reason we practice zazen, and the reason we study Buddhism. Through the study of Buddhism, you will understand your human nature, your intellectual faculty, and the truth present in your human activity.
- ❑ Zen we put emphasis on demeanor, or behavior. By behavior we do not mean a particular way that you ought to behave, but rather the natural expression of yourself. We emphasize straightforwardness. You should be true to your feelings, and to your mind, expressing yourself without any reservations. This helps the listener to understand more easily.
- ❑ When you listen to someone, you should give up all your preconceived ideas and your subjective opinions; you should just listen to him, just observe what his way is. We put very little emphasis on right and wrong or good and bad. We just see things as they are with him, and accept them.
- ❑ Usually when you listen to some statement, you hear it as a kind of echo of yourself. You are actually listening to your own opinion. If it agrees with your opinion you may accept it, but if it does not, you will reject it or you may not even really hear it. That is one danger when you listen to someone.
- ❑ It is difficult to have good communication between parents and children because parents always have their own intentions. Their intentions are nearly always good, but the way they speak, or the way they express themselves, is often not so free; it is usually too one-sided and not realistic.
- ❑ True communication depends upon our being straightforward with one another. Zen masters are very straightforward. If you do not understand the reality directly through your master's words, he may use his staff on you.
- ❑ “Big mind is something to express, not something to figure out. Big mind is something you have, not something to seek for.”
- ❑ When we talk about our way, there is apt to be some misunderstanding, because the true way always has at least two sides, the negative and the positive. When we talk about the negative side, the positive side is missing, and when we talk about the positive side, the negative side is missing. We cannot speak in a positive and a negative way at the same time. So we do not know what to say. It is almost impossible to talk about Buddhism. So not to say anything, just to practice it, is the best way.
- ❑ Dogen-zenji said, “When you say something to someone, he may not accept it, but do not try to make him understand it intellectually. Do not argue with him; just listen to his objections until he himself finds something wrong with them.” This is very interesting. Try not to force your idea on someone, but rather think about it with him.
- ❑ “Our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death anymore, nor actual difficulty in our life.”

Right Understanding

- ❑ Our understanding of Buddhism is not just an intellectual understanding. True understanding is actual practice itself.
- ❑ The most important things in our practice are our physical posture and our way of breathing. We are not so concerned about a deep understanding of Buddhism. As a philosophy, Buddhism is a very deep, wide, and firm system of thought, but Zen is not concerned about philosophical understanding. We emphasize practice.
- ❑ “We should find perfect existence through imperfect existence.”
- ❑ The basic teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of transiency, or change. That everything changes is the basic truth for each existence.
- ❑ There is no special, separate self-nature for each existence. This is also called the teaching of Nirvana. When we realize the everlasting truth of “everything changes” and find our composure in it, we find ourselves in Nirvana.
- ❑ Pleasure is not different from difficulty. Good is not different from bad. Bad is good; good is bad.
- ❑ So to find pleasure in suffering is the only way to accept the truth of transiency.
- ❑ So until we become strong enough to accept difficulty as pleasure, we have to continue this effort.
- ❑ We say, “In calmness there should be activity; in activity there should be calmness.” Actually, they are the same thing; to say “calmness” or to say “activity” is just to express two different interpretations of one fact. There is harmony in our activity, and where there is harmony there is calmness. This harmony is the quality of being.
- ❑ Most people who come to us believe in some freedom or naturalness, but their understanding is what we call jinen ken gedo, or heretical naturalness. Jinen ken gedo means that there is no need to be formal—just a kind of “let-alone policy” or sloppiness. That is naturalness for most people. But that is not the naturalness we mean. It is rather difficult to explain, but naturalness is, I think, some feeling of being independent from everything, or some activity which is based on nothingness.
- ❑ The true practice of zazen is to sit as if drinking water when you are thirsty. There you have naturalness. It is quite natural for you to take a nap when you are very sleepy. But to take a nap just because you are lazy, as if it were the privilege of a human being to take a nap, is not naturalness.
- ❑ If you want to understand Buddhism it is necessary for you to forget all about your preconceived ideas. To begin with, you must give up the idea of substantiality or existence.
- ❑ We say that a view of life based on existence alone is heretical. If you take things too seriously, as if they existed substantially or permanently, you are called a heretic.
- ❑ We say true existence comes from emptiness and goes back again into emptiness. What appears from emptiness is true existence.
- ❑ As long as we have some definite idea about or some hope in the future, we cannot really be serious with the moment that exists right now. You may say, “I can do it tomorrow, or next year,”

believing that something that exists today will exist tomorrow. Even though you are not trying so hard, you expect that some promising thing will come, as long as you follow a certain way.

- ❑ Some idea of perfection, or some perfect way which is set up by someone else, is not the true way for us.
- ❑ When you try to understand everything, you will not understand anything.
- ❑ Our way is not always to go in one direction. Sometimes we go east; sometimes we go west. To go one mile to the west means to go back one mile to the east. Usually if you go one mile to the east it is the opposite of going one mile to the west. But if it is possible to go one mile to the east, that means it is possible to go one mile to the west. This is freedom. Without this freedom you cannot be concentrated on what you do. You may think you are concentrated on something, but before you obtain this freedom, you will have some uneasiness in what you are doing. Because you are bound by some idea of going east or west, your activity is in dichotomy or duality.
- ❑ Concentration is not to try hard to watch something. In zazen if you try to look at one spot you will be tired in about five minutes. This is not concentration. Concentration means freedom. So your effort should be directed at nothing. You should be concentrated on nothing. In zazen practice we say your mind should be concentrated on your breathing, but the way to keep your mind on your breathing is to forget all about yourself and just to sit and feel your breathing.
- ❑ In the Prajna Paramita Sutra the most important point, of course, is the idea of emptiness. Before we understand the idea of emptiness, everything seems to exist substantially. But after we realize the emptiness of things, everything becomes real—not substantial. When we realize that everything we see is a part of emptiness, we can have no attachment to any existence; we realize that everything is just a tentative form and color.
- ❑ The important thing in our understanding is to have a smooth, free-thinking way of observation. We have to think and to observe things without stagnation. We should accept things as they are without difficulty. Our mind should be soft and open enough to understand things as they are. When our thinking is soft, it is called imperturbable thinking. This kind of thinking is always stable. It is called mindfulness. Thinking which is divided in many ways is not true thinking. Concentration should be present in our thinking. This is mindfulness.
- ❑ I discovered that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing. That is, we have to believe in something which has no form and no color—something which exists before all forms and colors appear. This is a very important point. No matter what god or doctrine you believe in, if you become attached to it, your belief will be based more or less on a self-centered idea.
- ❑ So it is absolutely necessary for everyone to believe in nothing. But I do not mean voidness. There is something, but that something is something which is always prepared for taking some particular form, and it has some rules, or theory, or truth in its activity. This is called Buddha nature, or Buddha himself. When this existence is personified we call it Buddha; when we understand it as the ultimate truth we call it Dharma; and when we accept the truth and act as a part of the Buddha, or according to the theory, we call ourselves Sangha.

- ❑ So in activity there should be calmness, and in calmness there should be activity. Calmness and activity are not different.
- ❑ Dogen said, "To learn something is to know yourself; to study Buddhism is to study yourself." To learn something is not to acquire something which you did not know before. You know something before you learn it. There is no gap between the "I" before you know something and the "I" after you know something. There is no gap between the ignorant and the wise. A foolish person is a wise person; a wise person is a foolish person.
- ❑ Nevertheless, as Dogen said, "A flower falls, even though we love it; and a weed grows, even though we do not love it."
- ❑ "For Zen students a weed is a treasure."
- ❑ A Zen poem says, "After the wind stops I see a flower falling. Because of the singing bird I find the mountain calmness."
- ❑ When you practice zazen you should not try to attain anything. You should just sit in the complete calmness of your mind and not rely on anything. Just keep your body straight without leaning over or against something. To keep your body straight means not to rely on anything. In this way, physically and mentally, you will obtain complete calmness. But to rely on something or to try to do something in zazen is dualistic and not complete calmness.
- ❑ Those who are attached only to the result of their effort will not have any chance to appreciate it, because the result will never come. But if moment by moment your effort arises from its pure origin, all you do will be good, and you will be satisfied with whatever you do.
- ❑ Zazen practice is the practice in which we resume our pure way of life, beyond any gaining idea, and beyond fame and profit.
- ❑ When you have something in your consciousness you do not have perfect composure. The best way towards perfect composure is to forget everything. Then your mind is calm, and it is wide and clear enough to see and feel things as they are without any effort.
- ❑ Dogen-zenji said, "You should establish your practice in your delusion." Even though you think you are in delusion, your pure mind is there. To realize pure mind in your delusion is practice. If you have pure mind, essential mind in your delusion, the delusion will vanish.
- ❑ "Before the rain stops we can hear a bird. Even under the heavy snow we see snowdrops and some new growth."