

zazen instruction

Shohaku Okumura

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The following is a written record of a zazen instruction class given by Shohaku Okumura to a group of students. Okumura Roshi has been sitting zazen for over 35 years and is an acclaimed Zen Buddhist teacher, translator and author. He is the head priest and founder of Sanshin Zen Community located in Bloomington, Indiana.

There are many traditions of Buddhism, and each tradition has its own approach to meditation practice. My practice was developed within the Japanese Soto Zen tradition, so what I will tell you about meditation is only from the perspective of that tradition. If you think my style of practice is not for you, you do not have to think that all types of meditation are not for you; there exist many other methods of meditation and spiritual paths that you can explore besides the one I will present to you.

In our tradition we call this meditation zazen. In Japanese za means “sitting” and zen means “meditation”. There are three important points of practice in sitting meditation. The first one is harmonizing the body, the second is harmonizing the breath, and the third is harmonizing the mind. Body, breath, and mind are the three most important points of practice in meditation.

The Body

First I will explain how to harmonize the body. In almost all Buddhist traditions one sits in a cross-legged posture during meditation. If you are able to sit in a cross-legged position during zazen that is fine, but if it is too painful for you it is alright, too; sitting cross-legged is not strictly necessary for meditation. For the half-lotus position, put either foot on top of the opposite thigh, and place the other foot on the floor underneath the other thigh. Please make sure that both knees are on the floor because this makes the posture stable. If possible, put each foot on the opposite thigh with the line of the toes matching the outer line of the thighs. This is called

the full lotus position and it is the most balanced and stable posture because the weight of the body, like a teapot's, is supported at three points: the two knees and the buttocks. This is the most stable position for sitting, though "most stable" does not mean "most comfortable" for many people. Sit in full lotus if you are able, but if that is too painful you may also sit in half lotus, with just one foot on the opposite thigh. Another sitting position you can use is called Burmese; in this position you put both feet on the floor. But still the important point is that both of the knees are on the floor. So whether in Burmese, half lotus, or full lotus, the important point is to make a solid stable foundation with the knees and buttocks that supports the upper part of the body.

If these cross-legged positions are difficult for you, you may wish to sit in the posture called *seiza*. In this posture you sit with both knees straight in front of your body and the buttocks rests on a cushion with the feet on either side of it. Seiza is the posture traditionally used in Japan for regular sitting in daily life. If that posture is too uncomfortable you can use a meditation bench or a chair.

After crossing your legs (if you are sitting in a cross-legged posture) and before adjusting your posture, sway your body several times from left to right, starting with a large movement that gradually decreases in size. We do this is to relax the muscles. Lean the upper body forward while keeping the legs in place, and return the torso to center without moving your lower back. This will create a natural curvature in the lower back. Then pull your chin in so your neck is straight. You should feel as if the top of your head and the center of your buttocks are within the same vertical line. The horizontal line connecting your ears and the horizontal line connecting your shoulders should be parallel, and the vertical line connecting your nose and belly should be straight. The important point of this posture is to keep the body upright and well balanced; try not to lean in any direction, neither right nor left, neither forward nor backward. If your body is not straight your back will be bent and sitting for a long time will create pain at the point where the spine is bent. It is important to find a natural position for yourself in sitting. The body should be thoroughly straight, yet the muscles should be relaxed, not tense. Finally, when your posture becomes really upright, be

still, take in one deep breath through your nose, and then exhale completely through your mouth to help you really settle into the posture. Adopting this posture is how we harmonize the body.

When we sit we keep the eyes open. In some traditions the eyes are closed in meditation, but in our tradition we keep the eyes open. Direct your vision about three feet in front of your body, and your eyes will naturally come to rest in position that is half opened and half closed. When doing zazen in the meditation hall, we sit facing the wall. Try not to focus on anything; just keep your eyes open without directing your gaze on any particular object.

Next I will explain how to hold your hands in zazen. First put the top of your right hand on the palm of your left hand, overlapping the fingers. Now make an oval by touching the tips of the thumbs together at about the height of your navel. This is called the cosmic *mudra*. In this position the right hand and the left hand, the two sides, come together and become one. This is the meaning of the *mudra*; it is beyond duality, just as the body becomes truly one thing in zazen. If you place your hands too low or too high in making the *mudra*, you may experience tension in your shoulders or neck. It is therefore important to find the best height to hold the *mudra* for your particular body. If you find it helpful, you can put a towel on your lap and place your hands on it. In the same fashion, some practitioners that wear robes with big sleeves arrange those sleeves on their laps as a foundation for the *mudra*. When we see the shape of our hands in zazen as we make the *mudra*, we can see the condition of our minds. If your mind is somewhere else when you sit, naturally the shape of this oval becomes distorted. As a way to stay mindful, attempt to keep the hands stable with the *mudra* in tact.

In review, the important point is to make a stable foundation for zazen with the lower half of your body. Also, keep the back straight, lower your eyesight three feet in front of your body, and hold your hands in the cosmic *mudra*. This is how we sit in zazen.

The Breath

Next I will explain how to breathe in zazen; breathing is one of the most important points in any kind of meditation practice. When your posture is stable, first exhale from the mouth completely, letting the air inside your body completely out. When you have completely exhaled, you close your mouth, place your tongue on the roof of your mouth, and inhale through your nose. When you do this, you will feel the fresh air come in through your nose. Also, when you sit in meditation, breathe abdominally. Keeping your tongue on the roof of your mouth, breathe easily and naturally with the air coming into your body through your nose and down to your abdomen. When we breathe in this way, the belly moves as the air comes in and as it goes out. Keep the breath deep, smooth, and peaceful. It is best if the exhalation is longer than the inhalation in zazen. Just slowly and completely exhale all of the air, and then air will naturally come back into your lungs. It is not necessary to make any special effort to regulate your breathing; just keep breathing naturally through the nose, so naturally that you forget about breathing. In some traditions, sometimes even in the Zen tradition, some teachers teach the meditation technique of counting the breath. In this method the practitioner counts the breaths from one to ten, repeating the count over again after each series of ten breaths. Some teachers also teach watching the breath – paying special attention to the air as it comes in and goes out of the body. In my tradition we don't count or watch the breath, we just breathe naturally, deeply and quietly.

The Mind

Of course even when we sit breathing quietly in this posture many things happen within the mind. In zazen we simply allow any thought, feeling or emotion to come up and then we simply let them go away; we actually do nothing. In sitting, any thought or condition of mind is like a cloud in the sky. Somehow clouds appear in the sky, changing form as they stay for a while, and then they disappear. Similar to clouds in the sky, any thought that appears in zazen simply stays for a while and then disappears. I have been practicing this style of meditation for more than 35 years, and in my experience, no thought stays in the mind forever. Everything is coming and going, and we just let things come up freely and let them go away freely. We

don't try to fight against our thoughts or any other mental condition, and we don't try to interact with them, either. The intention is not to grasp what is coming up from your consciousness. We actually do nothing but let the things happening within the mind just flow. Yet when you become aware that you are interacting with what is happening in your mind, just stop interacting and return to the zazen posture while breathing with the eyes open. That means you let go of whatever thoughts come up, and you also don't sleep. This is the point in our sitting practice.

Yet if you try to sit in this way for just ten minutes, you will find it is really difficult. It is difficult for even ten minutes to continually keep this upright posture, keep your eyes open without focusing on anything, and keep letting go of whatever arises in your mind. It is exceedingly difficult to do nothing, and zazen is essentially doing nothing but sitting. The founder of our tradition, Zen master Eihei Dogen, called this practice *shikantaza*. Shikantaza means "just sitting" in Japanese, and to just sit means that we really only sit without doing anything else. This is a really simple practice; we do nothing but sit in the zazen posture breathing easily, keeping the eyes open, staying awake, and letting go. That's all we do in zazen; we do nothing else. Yet even if you try to sit just five minutes in this way you will find it really difficult. This practice is very simple but simple does not necessarily mean easy. So whenever we become aware that we have deviated from that point of upright posture, deep breathing, keeping the eyes open without focusing, and letting go of whatever comes up, we try to return to that point. In whatever condition we find ourselves in, we just return to posture, breathing, waking up, and letting go. That is what we do in meditation.

When we begin and when we finish zazen we do *gassho*. To do *gassho* is to put both hands together, at chest height, and bow. This expresses respect, friendship and gratitude.

At the end of a period of meditation, unfold your legs and notice how they feel before you get up. If your legs have fallen asleep, take your time standing up until you feel comfortable doing so.

When we sit more than one period of zazen, between periods we do a walking meditation for ten minutes that is called *kinhin* in Japanese.

Some questions given by those receiving zazen instruction:

How long do you usually sit?

In our zendo we sit two 50-minute periods in the early morning, with ten minutes of walking meditation between periods. We usually sit from 5AM to 7AM six days a week. But five times a year we have a kind of a intensive retreat called *sesshin*. During sesshin we sit fourteen of these 50-minute periods a day, from 4 in the morning until 9 in the evening, for five days. There is a short break after each of the three meals, but other than that we just keep repeating the periods of sitting and walking meditation fourteen times a day. It is very quiet, and for some people it is very boring.

What do you notice changes in your life after practicing?

When I started practicing I was nineteen years old, so I don't really know what difference the practice has made. Everything was changing in my life as I was growing as teenager and becoming an adult. I changed a lot, but I don't know whether this change was a result of my meditation practice or a result of something else, so I cannot really tell you. I will tell you a very famous saying of my teacher's teacher, Kodo Sawaki-roshi. He said that zazen is good for nothing. I hope you like that statement.

As one progresses in their practice how does their awareness change?

Awareness? Well in our practice the point of sitting is being right here, right now. Often, though we are sitting in the zazen posture, in that moment of sitting the mind is somewhere else. Being mindful means that both the body and the mind are present right here, right now. Our practice is returning to this moment, right now, right here, with both the body and the mind. Depth or progress of awareness is not important in our practice. Depending upon the age of the person and how long he or she has been sitting, of course,

mental conditions are different, but that is not important in our practice. In our practice the most important point is being fully present, right now, right here. That's all. So our goal is coming back to this moment, to this place.

In the process of doing meditation do you notice special things in your mind?

Like what you can see because you meditate, something beyond just thoughts? When we sit for long periods of time, of course we experience all different kinds of mental conditions. Sometimes we experience some really weird things, or sometimes it seems as if we are in a daydream. Sometimes, especially when first beginning this sitting practice, we struggle with pain. Sometimes we may be extremely sleepy, and sleeping in this posture is something very different from sleeping in a bed. This is because when we are sitting zazen we try to stay awake when we are sleepy, though the body wants to sleep. This is a struggle between body and mind. The depths of sleepiness and awakening vary a lot. Sometimes we are one hundred percent sleeping, sitting in this posture. Sometimes we are half-awake and half-asleep; other times we are very awake. Within this sleepiness we experience many different kinds of mental conditions. So it may be dangerous if we interpret any particular mental condition as enlightenment. Sometimes this world becomes very bright, and sometimes a person may feel he or she understands everything. It may seem at this time that there is no doubt or question remaining about anything; everything is okay as it is. But that is just a condition arising from the states of the body, mind, temperature, humidity and all other conditions of our lives. These conditions are not the important point of our practice. Our practice is to keep an upright posture in any condition; we just go through all conditions. As I said earlier, the conditions of our minds while sitting are like clouds in the sky. Sometimes we have no clouds at all with a completely blue sky, and this is very beautiful. More often we have different kinds of clouds coming and going. Sometimes more than half of the sky is covered with clouds, and sometimes the entire sky is completely covered with clouds, or even storms arise. There are many different kinds of conditions we must sit through in zazen, but the purpose of our practice does not include controlling the weather. The important point is to maintain this upright posture in whatever conditions

we encounter. To do so we need a kind of faith. We must live beneath the clouds, but above the clouds the sun is always shining and the sky is always blue. We cannot live up in the sky; we must go through all the different conditions of weather we encounter. The important point is to maintain this upright posture and go through all conditions.

How does getting rid of attachment effect your lifestyle? Do you try to live very frugally or how does it effect your day to day life?

Being free from attachment is a very important point in all Buddhist teachings. When we sit zazen, many different kinds of thoughts come up. We may think some thoughts are really good ideas, yet in zazen we have to let go of them; we open the hand of thought. Whether we like our ideas or whether we experience negative feelings about something, we try to let go because that is zazen. I think this letting go is the way we are free from our clinging, our preferences, our systems of value, and our ways of thinking. This zazen itself is freedom from attachment.

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