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Kuanyin at the Compassionate Friend Hermitage



Spring blossom at Redding Zen Buddhist Priory, US

Spring 2020 issue

Editor: Rev. Alina Burgess

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This Journal was compiled before the coronavirus outbreak became a pandemic. We offer merit to all who have died or have lost loved ones, for all those working on the frontlines for the benefit of others and for all of us, affected as we are by the worldwide effects of the virus.

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Introduction

The articles in this extended issue all address aspects of Serene Reflection Meditation; we hope it will be a helpful support your sitting practice.

A list of other resources is available on page 81.



Sitting in the Ceremony Hall at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey

Rules for Meditation

Great Master Dōgen

This text, Fukanzazengi, was believed to be the first work written by Great Master Dōgen in 1227 when he was aged 27. He refined it several times over many years. It is studied in detail and recited daily at Mid-day Service in temples and monasteries of the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition.

Why are training and enlightenment differentiated since the Truth is universal? Why study the means of attaining it since the supreme teaching is free? Since Truth is seen to be clearly apart from that which is unclean, why cling to a means of cleansing it? Since Truth is not separate from training, training is unnecessary—the separation will be as that between heaven and earth if even the slightest gap exists FOR, WHEN THE OPPOSITES ARISE, THE BUDDHA MIND IS LOST. However much you may be proud of your understanding, however much you maybe enlightened, whatever your attainment of wisdom and supernatural power, your finding of the way to mind illumination, your power to touch heaven and to enter into enlightenment, when the opposites arise you have almost lost the way to salvation. Although the Buddha had great wisdom at birth, He sat in

training for six years; although Bodhidharma Transmitted the Buddha Mind, we still hear the echoes of his nine years facing a wall. The Ancestors were very diligent and there is no reason why we people of the present day cannot understand. All you have to do is cease from erudition, withdraw within and reflect upon yourself. Should you be able to cast off body and mind naturally, the Buddha Mind will immediately manifest itself; if you want to find it quickly, you must start at once.

You should meditate in a quiet room, eat and drink moderately, cut all ties, give up everything, think of neither good nor evil, consider neither right nor wrong. Control mind function, will, consciousness, memory, perception and understanding; you must not strive thus to become Buddha. Cling to neither sitting nor lying down. When meditating, do not wear tight clothing. Rest the left hand in the palm of the right hand with the thumbs touching lightly; sit upright, leaning neither to left nor right, backwards nor forwards. The ears must be in line with the shoulders and the nose in line with the navel; the tongue must be held lightly against the back of the top teeth with the lips and teeth closed. Keep the eyes open, breathe in quickly, settle the body comfortably and breathe out sharply. Sway the body left and right then sit steadily, neither trying to think nor trying not to think; just sitting, with no deliberate thought, is the important aspect of serene reflection meditation.

This type of meditation is not something that is done in stages; it is simply the lawful gateway to carefree peace. To

train and enlighten ourselves is to become thoroughly wise; the koan appears naturally in daily life. If you become thus utterly free you will be as the water wherein the dragon dwells or as the mountain whereon the tiger roams. Understand clearly that the Truth appears naturally and then your mind will be free from doubts and vacillation. When you wish to arise from meditation, sway the body gently from side to side and arise quietly; the body must make no violent movement; I myself have seen that the ability to die whilst sitting and standing, which transcends both peasant and sage, is obtained through the power of serene reflection meditation. It is no more possible to understand natural activity with the judgemental mind than it is possible to understand the signs of enlightenment; nor is it possible to understand training and enlightenment by supernatural means; such understanding is outside the realm of speech and vision, such Truth is beyond personal opinions. Do not discuss the wise and the ignorant, there is only one thing – to train hard for this is true enlightenment; training and enlightenment are naturally undefiled; to live in this way is the same as to live an ordinary daily life. The Buddha Seal has been preserved by both the Buddhas in the present world and by those in the world of the Indian and Chinese Ancestors, they are thus always spreading the Truth—all activity is permeated with pure meditation—the means of training are thousandfold but pure meditation must be done. It is futile to travel to other dusty countries thus forsaking your own seat; if your first step is false, you will immediately stumble. Already you are in possession of the vital attributes of a human being – do not waste time with this and that –

you can possess the authority of Buddha. Of what use is it to merely enjoy this fleeting world? This body is as transient as dew on the grass, life passes as swiftly as a flash of lightning, quickly the body passes away, in a moment life is gone. O sincere trainees, do not doubt the true dragon, do not spend so much time in rubbing only a part of the elephant; look inwards and advance directly along the road that leads to the Mind, respect those who have reached the goal of goallessness, become one with the Buddhas, Transmit the wisdom of the Ancestors. If you do these things for some time you will become as herein described and then the Treasure House will open naturally and you will enjoy it fully.

How to Meditate

Rev. Master Kōten Benson

—Lions Gate Buddhist Priory, Lytton, BC—Canada—

Taken from the Booklet 'How to Meditate', a transcription of a series of talks offered in 2016. It was transcribed and edited by Tracy Kitagawa, Michelle Feist, Pierre Kohl and Rev. Master Aurelian, with minor revisions for ease of reading.

Part 2

In part one I talked about what the Buddha did underneath the Bodhi tree and how this is the basis for how and why we meditate in the Serene Refection tradition. I also talked about the relationship between what we practice and what the Buddha discovered for himself which he then taught to others. In this tradition what we practice is literally just sitting. I do mean, just sitting. However, it is not possible for most of us to fully comprehend what this actually means without undertaking the practice of it for a long period of time.

When we say that our meditation practice is not something that is done in stages we mean that we do not practice meditation as a progression of stages or steps. That is not to say that over time one's meditation practice does not deepen or that there isn't sometimes an arriving at an understanding or insight. As a matter of fact, such arriving at insight and understanding is absolutely necessary.

We just mean that in our tradition, when we sit, we are not trying to attain levels of jhanas or samadhis or various states of meditation. These various types of meditation states, particularly the more deeper ones, do occur in people who practice Serene Reflection Meditation.

However we are not deliberately trying to achieve any particular state. In essence, we are not trying to make anything happen. Rather, we are simply practicing the fundamental meditation of the Buddhist tradition – out of which all the other various types of skillful means come.

It is why Zen Master Dōgen in his *Rules for Meditation* says, “The means of training are thousandfold.” These thousandfold means of training are what the Buddha used and are still being taught to the present day. Thus, if somebody comes to the teacher with a very distracted mind, the teacher may very well recommend that they count the breath during meditation, or touch the earth during meditation to anchor themselves, or focus on their breathing to help calm down an agitated mind. All of these things are included in the various skillful means of training.

However, Dōgen also said, “but pure meditation must be done.” Pure meditation, in the sense of just sitting without adding anything to the practice, is the fundamental basis of all types of meditation in the Buddhist tradition. It is the fundamental basis of Shikantaza (Serene Reflection Meditation), of Vipassana and Shamata and of all the varieties of meditational practices found within the Tibetan tradition. Therefore, it is essential that people learn how to practice just sitting in order to understand how to engage with the Buddhist tradition, or undertake Buddhist training.

When we say just sitting, we do not mean a type of mindfulness on the act of sitting itself.

This is not to say that mindfulness cannot be practiced as one of the myriad means of training. By mindfulness I simply mean paying attention to what you are doing. I do not mean any other fancy state. Mindfulness, in the Buddhist tradition, is paying attention to what you are doing. Paying attention to what the mind is doing does not depend upon whether the mind is in a pleasant or unpleasant state. It is not dependent on whether one is serene or non-serene. It is about paying attention to what your mind is doing.

In the same way that mindfulness is a useful means of training so too are the various means of calming the mind. The various means of bringing the mind back from distraction are all excellent and should be practiced very much within the context of daily life. But one must realize that Shikantaza, Serene Reflection Meditation, the meditation

practiced by the Buddha underneath the Bodhi tree, is something much more fundamental than what we do with the mind.

The Buddha said that within this six-foot long body is to be found the entire universe of training. This means that within our body and mind right now is everything that we need to train ourselves and everything that we need to meditate effectively.

Meditation instruction can be like “fingers pointing at the moon” so it is important to understand what this phrase means. Think of it as a road sign telling us to go along a particular road to reach a particular town. If it weren’t for the road sign we would get lost and could wander about for some period of time without ever finding the town. However, it does not mean that we would never find the town if we didn’t have the road sign. And it also does not mean that the town does not exist until we find it. This is very important to ponder. The town exists already. The road sign simply points us towards it.

The same thing is true for learning to meditate in the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition. The Sōtō tradition agrees very much with the Dzogchen and the Mahamudra traditions as well as the basic Shamata and Vipassana traditions. In the earliest Buddhist scriptures, and this is something found within all of the above traditions - it says, “Our essence of mind is intrinsically pure.” This statement comes from the Pali Canon and can be found in the *Platform*

Sutra of the Sixth Zen Ancestor as well as in the aforementioned Great Perfection (Dzogchen) and Great Seal (Mahamudra) traditions. Our essence of mind is intrinsically pure. Our essence of mind is intrinsically pure.

Therefore, when sitting in meditation, let go of analyzing what meditation is or should be. Let go of speculating about the past. Let go of anticipating the future. That does not mean to say that you will not find yourselves thinking of the very things that you need to let go of. But that is not a problem. The essence of the practice of meditation is found in that letting go.

Do not look for a type of clarity as a state attained by you. Rather, get yourself out of the way. How do we get ourselves out of the way? We learn to see through, to look through our ideas, thoughts, and opinions rather than at them.

You must understand that meditation is not simply something that is done when sitting on one's cushion, bench or chair. An old master, Tōzan I believe, once said, "I practice what I cannot meditate and meditate what I cannot practice." This means that what you do throughout your daily life very much has an impact on your meditation practice, and the other way around. This is called movement and stillness. Or, going in and going out. Or, "Sometimes we raise the eyebrows of old Shakyamuni, and sometimes we do not."

If meditation is just something that you do once a week with others or even something that you do every morning, then it is not meditation in the Buddhist tradition unless one practices throughout all of one's daily life. This is because meditation in the Buddhist tradition is not something you simply do with your mind; it is something that you do with the body as well. Otherwise, meditation simply becomes like taking a yoga or macramé class or getting together for tea with people – all of which can become a means of reinforcing the self, of reinforcing selfishness.

Meditation in the Buddhist tradition cannot be divorced from practice. It cannot be divorced from your daily life. If meditation is simply something you do in the morning or the evening or both, or on a weekend, and has no impact on your daily life, then it is not meditation as the Buddha taught. What the Buddha taught was very much the importance of what we, ourselves, you as an individual do with our lives, what we do with our body and mind.

Part 3

Dōgen advises in *Fukanzazengi (Rules for Meditation, or Zazen Rules)* to “control mind function, will, consciousness, memory, perception and understanding.” By control he doesn't mean one should try to force anything. It is important to remember this. It is also helpful to remember that when we sit in formal meditation, either on our own or with others, we don't bring our “what is going on with us”

into the meditation; rather, we bring the meditation into what is going on with us.

One of the best descriptions on how to meditate is the following passage from the Buddhist tradition titled Six Words that Hit the Nail on the Head. It says that when we are sitting, “Don’t recall, don’t imagine, don’t think, don’t examine, don’t control, rest.”

When it says, “Don’t recall” it means let go of what is past. “Don’t imagine” – let go of what may come in the future. “Don’t think” – let go of what is happening now. “Don’t examine” – don’t try to figure anything out. “Don’t control” – don’t try to make anything happen. “Rest” it says. Relax *right now* and rest.

Now, about the past. When you are sitting in meditation there may be occasions when past memories arise and unfold in front of you, in your mind’s eye. Sometimes they might be a full recollection and sometimes they could be simply a flash, i.e. a fleeting glimpse of a past life. This is not a problem as long as you don’t try to force them to arise or stop them from happening. If and when they occur consider them as just natural thoughts and let them go.

Do the same with thoughts that arise about the future. While you are sitting in meditation, let go of planning. This does not mean however that from time to time a solution to a possible future difficulty will unfold in your mind without

you trying to force or suppress such thoughts. Again this is part of natural thought and not a problem.

The same holds true for thoughts that arise regarding one's current situation. Sometimes a solution to a difficulty that you are dealing with at the present time will propose itself in the middle of a sitting. This is not a problem either, as long as you do not seek after it or try to maintain it after it has passed, or try to dig it up again while you sit in meditation.

There is a distinction between mindfulness and meditation. Sitting in formal meditation, which is essential to the practice, is not exactly the same thing as mindfulness, because we are not trying to focus on what is in front of us. Mindfulness, that is paying attention to what we are doing and bringing our minds back from distraction, should be practiced throughout the day.

However, when we sit in meditation, we let go of the present moment. We do not try to do anything with the present. We do not try to control it or figure anything out. Nor do we analyze our state of mind or try to figure out what is going on. Let go of all the cogitation and for the period of the meditation simply rest.

The following passage from the Tibetan tradition is a good description of what we are trying to do during formal meditation:

Rest in the natural Great Peace.

This exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and
neurotic thought,
relentless in the infinite ocean of samsara,
rest in the natural Great Peace.

We do not rest in some sort of “mind state” because all states of mind are impermanent. We simply, as Dōgen says, literally just sit. Don’t try to accomplish anything by sitting, don’t try to be somebody else, don’t try to be somewhere else, don’t try to analyze anything – for the period of the meditation simply drop everything. When you are in the midst of the activities of daily life it is necessary to pay attention to what you are doing. Practice mindfulness and plan when you need to plan. Look at the past to see what was done with it and consider the future when you need to do so. However, when you are sitting in meditation let go of all of that. Then, as you practice meditation over a period of time, the stillness, that fundamental stillness, will begin to permeate your daily life. Signs that this is occurring may include becoming less agitated, less irritated, less angry or less distracted by or with other people and events. Sometimes it is others who notice such changes in us before we do.

It is very important, as I’ve already stated, not to think of meditation as an isolated practice divorced from the rest of one’s daily life. Formal meditation in the Buddhist tradition must be accompanied by the continual working on oneself - that is, considering one’s actions from an ethical

perspective, examining one's actions with respect to the Buddhist Precepts. It is essential to practice these things together. In fact, in the Buddhist tradition, without the practice of Precepts and working on oneself, it is impossible to understand what meditation is about. There has to be both the working on oneself in daily life and the sitting still. They go hand in hand. If one attempts to practice meditation and being still without doing something about oneself, then meditation will simply become a mental state to which you will become attached, because it will have become a distraction from the events of daily life. It is important that this not happen.

In Buddhism there are five kinds of preceptual behaviour. To briefly summarize, one should refrain from the following: killing or harming; lying or saying that which is not true, which includes engaging in harmful speech; taking that which is not given and the various forms of stealing; the various forms of what the Theravadans call sensual indulgence - that is, losing oneself in various aspects of the senses. Misuse of sexuality is emphasized, but the intended and broader meaning of this precept is to refrain from misusing the senses.

And then, what strikes many people as kind of funny, is the fifth Precept, which has to do with refraining from intoxicating oneself. On a mundane level it means to abstain from taking substances (e.g. alcohol and drugs) which cause one to become intoxicated. However, the real meaning of this particular Precept is to keep one's mind clear in order to

make ethical decisions, and not to do anything that will muddy one's thinking. This can include imbibing ideas as well as substances. It is to refrain from getting drunk on ideologies or getting caught up in other people's ideas and delusions.

This Precept is particularly applicable when it comes to politics. It is easy to become drunk on other people's ideas and opinions. To a degree, people who follow harmful teachers are doing the same thing. They are drinking somebody else's wine, and becoming intoxicated on somebody else's delusions. In such a case it can be extraordinarily difficult to break free.

It is important to remember that the various scriptures that are recited, particularly in our tradition, all have to do with meditation. They are all pointing towards what one is doing when one sits. This is particularly true of the Heart Sutra, i.e. the Scripture of Great Wisdom. Many, maybe even most people, looking at this scripture, think of it as a philosophical document. But in fact, it is talking about the practice of meditation.

The full booklet is available as a dana publication from Lions Gate Buddhist Priory, write to the Priory or email: lionsgatebuddhistpriory@gmail.com

Sitting Buddha

The Physical Aspects of Zazen

Rev. Master Daishin Morgan

—*Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, Northumberland –UK—*

This is an extract from Chapter 2 of Sitting Buddha

There are four positions for meditation described in the Buddhist sūtras—standing, sitting, walking and lying down. Wherever you are, whatever the circumstances, you can always do zazen, even if you are ill or dying. These recommended positions refer to the formal practice and learning them helps to facilitate the right attitude of mind, as well as deepen one's mindful awareness of the body. The sitting position is the primary one for formal practice but no matter which position you are in, it is essential to be grounded and focussed within your physical body. When Buddhists meet each other and wish to express respect, we put our palms together with the fingers pointing upwards in a gesture called the gasshō. As well as engendering respect and gratitude, it is an expressive way of bringing yourself

together. Mind and body are one, so being aware of your body gives you a basis for understanding the mind; it provides a starting point and a place of stability to which you can always return. If you are settled and grounded within your body, then your mind will have some stability too. If the mind is just trying to understand itself without reference to the body, it can spin off into abstraction and unreality, thus becoming divorced from the here and now.

The Standing Position

Although sitting is the primary posture for meditation, I have found the standing position to be the easiest one in which to learn what it means to be present within the body in a way that is relaxed and centred. You can try this by standing up straight with your heels about two fists apart and with your arms hanging loosely by your sides, while letting your shoulders and abdomen relax. Have your knees slightly bent, just enough so that they are not locked. Now feel the weight of your head being carried by your neck and shoulders and let them relax. In your mind, follow the weight down your body. Feel the weight passing down your arms, through your wrists and out through your fingers, relaxing you as it goes. Relax your shoulders and feel the weight of your torso resting on your pelvis; relax your buttocks and pelvis so your weight goes down your thighs and on through your knees and calves and then on into the floor. Feel how the floor absorbs your weight so that you and the floor are one. Stand there for a while like this with your attention focussed just on your physical presence.

When standing formally in meditation, as is done during a temple ceremony or for walking meditation, place your left hand with the thumb gently held within a fist at the level of the base of your sternum with the right hand covering it. The forearms should be level and parallel with the floor. This hand position is known as *shashu*. When you move your arms into this position, keep your shoulders relaxed. This may be hard at first, as the tendency is to stand rather stiffly, but as you become aware of tensions keep letting them go. As you relax, other muscles take over and your weight is held evenly by all of you. The body has a natural source of energy that will hold you once you learn to trust it. All the formal meditation positions have some aspect that requires a degree of muscle tone to maintain. Learning to maintain this tone is connected with remaining present in your body and is extremely helpful. It takes time to learn how to do it in a relaxed way.

Whenever you are standing, say waiting in a queue, you can take this position and be very grounded and centred (without the formal hand position which might feel a bit odd in the middle of an airport). This is extremely helpful in dealing with stress, worry and a host of other emotions and tensions. All the positions for meditation can be adapted to suit the situation you are in, once you get the idea of how they work.

Sitting Meditation

This is the best posture of all for meditation and its most important feature is to have your back in the right position.

To get an idea of the correct position, take the standing position described above only this time place your forearms in the small of your back. Feel around and notice how your back is, notice the degree of the lumbar curve in the small of your back when you stand straight. This is how it should feel when you are sitting.

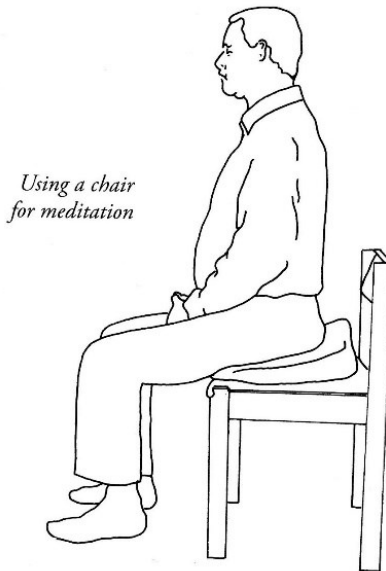
Using a Chair

I will begin with how to do zazen on a chair, as this position is one nearly everyone can manage right away without unnecessary discomfort. Whatever sitting position we adopt, the whole architecture of the zazen posture depends upon the “sitting bones” which are the lowest part of the pelvis. You can feel these knobby bones when you sit on your hands. To sit up straight without strain, these sitting bones need to be supported in such a way that the pelvis is tipped slightly forward. This in turn allows the lower back to assume a slight inward curve in the lumbar region and the upper body can then be comfortably supported with the shoulders relaxed and the chest open.

Sit on an upright chair with a flat seat or on something like a piano stool. It is important to avoid chairs that have a backward slope to the seat. Position your sitting bones in the middle of the seat; if the chair has a back, don't lean against it but sit up straight. Place your heels about two fists apart and make sure your feet are flat on the floor and more or less parallel with each other. Position your feet far enough forward so that your shins are approximately vertical; let your knees be apart as feels natural. To check that your back is in the right position, put your forearms in the small of your

back again. Your back should feel like it did when you were standing.

It will be important to have a chair that is the right height for you. If you look at the illustration below you can see the model's thighs are sloping slightly downward. You may need to add a cushion if the chair is too low, or place something under your feet if the chair is too high. It is worth taking a bit of time to get this right.



You may find that having a wedge-shaped cushion to sit on helps to achieve this forward curve. Alternatively, you can fold a towel or flat cushion to achieve the same effect as the wedge. An important point to watch is not to force your lumbar area to curve inwards too much. If the chair is too high for you and your thighs slope down too steeply, this may tend to happen. If in doubt about the correct lumbar

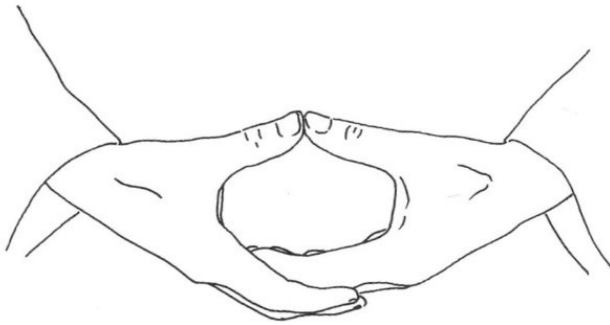
curve, stand up again and check how the curve should be in the way described above.

The abdomen should be allowed to relax; don't hold yourself in. Everyone experiences tension at times in meditation and this is often felt in the abdomen. Don't worry if it feels tense. The important thing is not to fight but to accept the presence of the tension and it will begin to relax in time.

You can find the right position for your head by imagining a string attached to the crown of your head. If the string were pulled gently upwards, your neck would lengthen and your chin would tuck in just slightly and this is what you want to achieve. The head should rest on your neck and shoulders in a relaxed way and feel weightless, *i.e.* there should be no strain in holding it there. Keep your eyes open and lower your gaze to about 45 degrees from the horizontal. If you normally wear glasses, it is best to keep them on. Your eyes should be in focus; however, do not pick out a point on the floor or wall in front of you and stare at it. Do not concern yourself with what you see—your attention needs to be inward. Keeping your eyes open helps to keep you grounded here, where you are, and is one means of countering dreamy states of mind that sap your energy. The teeth should be closed, not clamped shut. Breathe normally through your nose.

Place your hands in your lap so your arms are relaxed. If you find it difficult to relax your arms, a small cushion or other soft item placed under your hands may help. Place your hands as shown below with the thumbs lightly touching – so that you could just hold a piece of paper between them

without letting it fall. Don't press your thumbs together. This hand posture requires the maintenance of some muscle tone to keep your thumbs in place, in the same way that the pelvis and the back do. When people fall asleep or get drowsy in meditation, their thumbs usually droop.



The hand position

It is important not to lean off to one side, or backwards or forwards. To settle yourself into the right position, it helps to sway the body in a circular motion, gradually decreasing the size of the circles, until you have centred yourself. The idea is to sense from the inside what being centred feels like. Having done this, you should then sit steadily, letting go of thoughts as they arise by keeping your attention focussed on your physical presence.

To continue reading this chapter about the other postures of sitting – on a zafu (cushion), using a bench, lying down and walking meditation – follow this link:

<https://throssel.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/chaptertwo.pdf>

Chapter 6: Skilful Means in Zazen

“No method is easy and in the end it is not a matter of perfecting a technique. How do you sit still? Just sit still!”

Especially in the beginning, zazen can feel very confusing. There seems to be no handle by which we can grasp it. The best advice is to keep going, as in a very direct way you are dealing with some of the fundamental problems that have to be overcome to realize your true nature. We have to entrust ourselves to the primordial pure mind of zazen rather than continually seeking reassurances and explanations, for ultimately there are none. In the end, there can be no mediation between you and zazen. Even though you may be sitting there wondering what on earth you are supposed to be doing, just treat that thought like any other thought and let it pass by. Ground yourself again and again and keep going. It is like learning to paint a picture—you have to splash some paint about and make a bit of a mess, but then gradually you get the feel of it as your faculties develop.

In the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition, we teach the basics of zazen at the beginning, rather than starting people off with a separate preliminary practice. We do this because there are no “methods” or means for doing zazen. Zazen is the fundamental primordial mind itself and the Zen way of training and realization is to entrust oneself to it completely. It simply is; to approach it by any method is to add something to it and as soon as you attempt to do that,

you have missed the point. In so doing, you believe that you stand outside seeking the doorway, when you are already “inside”. To concern oneself with methods is not to trust the pure mind of zazen, a state Dōgen describes as the “dropping off of body and mind”. The essential point of zazen is also lost if one goes searching for the technique that is fastest, quickest, highest or whatever, for no technique can ever be zazen. I believe this point is important to understand at the outset so that one will use skilful means with discrimination and not let them obscure the real nature of zazen.

Yet within the Zen tradition, masters (including sometimes Dōgen himself) have always used skilful means to help awaken us to this fundamental mind. One of my favourite quotes attributed to Kohō Zenji¹ is, “The truth, the whole truth and anything else that works!” We all need a helping hand to get started, and as training unfolds we should not be too idealistic or too proud to accept help. My advice is to use skilful means when you need them and seek the advice of a teacher who can help you find the heart of zazen directly. As soon as the means have achieved their purpose, then return to the effort to do pure zazen and “just sit”.

Circular Breathing

This method was recommended by Rev. Master Jiyu. It is an imaginative exercise to begin with in which you picture your breath as starting at the base of your spine, then as you breathe in you picture the breath as rising up your spine to the top of your head. As you breathe out, picture the breath moving down the centre line of your front to the pubic bone

so that the “breath” forms a circle. Breathing in, up the back, breathing out, down the front. Keep this going for three or four breaths to start yourself off when beginning a period of zazen or when you find yourself getting lost or distracted. Breathe normally when doing this, i.e. not especially deeply but just as it comes. This practice is not designed to be used all the time, but just as a means of focusing yourself. It links in with the basic movement of chi within zazen and can be of great help. It can be used in conjunction with the grounding practice.

What to Do When Falling Asleep or Sitting Like a Pudding

A common difficulty is falling into drowsiness—not actually falling asleep but going into a drifting semi-anaesthetized fog. Your posture slumps and you rock forward and then catch yourself with a start, but usually not enough of a jerk to actually wake you up! This state is familiar territory to anyone who tries to meditate for very long. The best advice is to check your posture, open your eyes wide for a moment and take a deep breath and carry on sitting. Sometimes, however, nothing seems to work and although you may not be really exhausted, you find yourself dozing off again. Keeping going when this happens is really doing something useful, even though it may not seem like it; if you give in to drowsiness, it will never pass.

Laxity of mind is a problem related to drowsiness, although it may not be quite so noticeable. Zazen can reveal uncomfortable feelings and somewhat unconsciously we opt

for being only partly present. One can waste years of practice by not focussing on what you are doing. This is sitting like a pudding rather than like a mountain! You have to bring all of yourself to the party to meditate properly. It helps to ground yourself, as described in chapter two. If you still keep wandering in a dreamy way, then it may help to count your breaths as detailed below. Please remember, though, that the technique itself won't do it; you have to use the technique to focus your mind and really be present. If you do that, you can cure "pudding mind" right away.

Counting Your Breaths

This is a concentration exercise that can be used now and again to help you focus your mind, but it is best not to let it become your main practice. To try this, keep your mind on the rise and fall of your abdomen as you breathe in and out and then count each out-breath. By developing a strong focus on this deliberate foreground of meditation, you exclude thoughts by concentrating on the breath count. You may notice thoughts passing through in the background and that is no problem, as long as you do not lose your place in the count. Count your out-breaths up to ten and then start again. If you lose your place in the count, then without giving rise to irritation, quietly go back to the beginning again. You may find it quite difficult to actually make it to ten. Don't worry about it, just keep going. After doing this for some time, a feeling of concentration begins to develop if you keep at it. There is also a degree of peacefulness that comes at the same time, because you are no longer scattered and are much

more in control of yourself. Familiarize yourself with this feeling of being centred, it is a helpful bench mark, then go back to just sitting in zazen. It is useful to count your breaths for a meditation period every now and again just as a diagnostic test for pudding mind! It can be a bit of a salutary shock! However, pudding mind can and does come and go in a moment. If you find you are caught up in a dreamy state, it is just another mental affliction to let go of.

It is easy to underestimate how long it takes to get the feel of zazen and to start casting about for alternatives; don't jump the gun and start counting the breaths when you may not need to. Regular contact with a teacher can help in this area. There are many other devices like these that a skilled teacher can show you when they are called for, but over the last thirty years I have been impressed with people's natural ability to find their way into the practice if they keep going. No method is easy and in the end it is not a matter of perfecting a technique. How do you sit still? Just sit still! Everyone finds it difficult to start with so do not underestimate your capacity.

Chapter 7: Some Mistakes to Avoid

“We have to be willing to fall apart...in the sense that we let go of all our self-images and come to a real spiritual poverty. It is in such a place that the true nature is found.”

People often have the idea that zazen is about experiencing blissful states and if they do not experience

such things, they think that either they are doing something wrong or else zazen doesn't work. Blissful states do arise from time to time, but they are not enlightenment. This is because they are fleeting and when one emerges from them, the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion can still arise again, as one has not yet cut their root. Mind you, there is nothing wrong with these states and they can be of enormous help in confirming that there are fruits to be experienced on the way—and all too easily we make them into another object of desire and find that our minds grasp after them.

If all the Buddhas come to greet you or all the devils come to pursue you—either way—the path of zazen is to sit still, not chasing after the one or fleeing the other. The true nature is beyond all appearances. We may “see” all kinds of things with the mind's eye; all such images are just images that appear, we should not hold on to them or push them away. Just treat them like another thought. They may contain good teaching or they may contain delusive teaching. If we do not hanker after them, time will put them into their proper perspective. We so much want confirmation that we can inadvertently make such things the object of our practice and that is a mistake.

To free ourselves from delusion involves seeing the nature of the delusions we are subject to. This is sometimes painful, yet to be able to see them is a real mark of progress. This means that if we try to assess our meditation according to whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, then we are likely to misjudge it.

People can sometimes approach Zen like a customer in a supermarket buying a product that should fix their

suffering. Unfortunately, sometimes this attitude is fostered by the way spiritual traditions try to sell themselves. Training is not a contract in which you can buy certain benefits. Often we can get caught in looking for the fix, the magic that will do it for us, whether we conceive it as a technique or a revelation. All these pitfalls miss the essential point: training is not about boosting the self; it is about letting the self fall away. Those who are very competent in their career and have a lot of valuable skills can come to the practice seeking to become an expert, just as they have successfully done in other areas of life. This will not work with meditation, although sometimes the appearance that is created can be deceptive. The “I” can seek an appearance of spiritual competence in which it can hide by imitating the true nature. We have to be willing to fall apart, not in the sense of a psychological disintegration, but in the sense that we let go of all our self-images and come to a real spiritual poverty. It is in such a place that the true nature is found.

It is possible to try too hard in meditation. The effort needed is to bring oneself to sit and to patiently and quietly accept what comes and let it flow on. If we are trying to make things happen, to force our way in, then, again, we obstruct ourselves. We have to do our part and let go and trust the true nature. Many people find that their practice oscillates between trying very hard and then giving up. Suffering brings them to training, then with practise the suffering eases a bit and so they stop before the root of the suffering has been truly seen. Regularity of meditation is a great help with this, especially if we let go of trying to assess our practice.

Although there are many mistakes, it is still necessary to trust that you are doing it right unless something shows you that you are not—in which case just take that on board and alter course accordingly. It may be that we each have to make our own mistakes along the path as part of the learning process, so we should not fear mistakes or we can paralyze ourselves. At the same time, it makes sense to seek help from those with enough experience to be able to help us see more clearly. A good teacher will not judge or condemn; in all likelihood, they will be able to spot the mistake because they have made it themselves.

If we should realize that we have made a mistake, one that perhaps has caused suffering to others, then it is important to acknowledge it and do what you can to put it right, but not to beat oneself up about it. All the great masters of the past have made their share of mistakes, some of them very serious indeed, yet they still went on to true realization and were able to be of great help to others. We cannot go back, but we can learn and accept the consequences of what we have done without complaint. Some of the simplest and best advice I have ever been given in the spiritual life is never give up.

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<https://throssel.org.uk/sitting-buddha-book/>

Meditation: Technique and no Technique

Paul Taylor

—Lancaster–UK—

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Why is it in our tradition, Sōtō Zen Buddhism, that practising meditation is not talked about in terms of mastering a technique? There can certainly be times of struggle with meditation and it is understandable at such times to look for an answer in technique. Sometimes we do indeed ask for and receive helpful technical suggestions which can ground and clarify our practice, for example, relating to our posture or our orientation of mind. Yet it may be helpful, particularly for newcomers and those not so familiar with a religious context, to get some sense of why many of our seeming problems with practice are not resolved through ‘technique’, and also how approaching meditation can be orientated differently from and yet not separate from technique.

Whilst a focus on technique necessarily is pre-meditated, a means, the focus of our meditation practice of

zazen, serene reflection meditation, fundamentally at heart is not, in my experience. In practicing zazen, we let meditation show us. Zazen itself needs no extras, and at the same time, whatever helps, helps, for a while or when needed – zazen does not exclude. For example, particularly for someone newer to practice, if our mind is wandering greatly this might be as a ‘reminder’ to be present, such as gently coming back to being in the body, the posture, or to following the breathing, or maybe to a general sense of our body touching the floor. And yet, this is not intended to be a substitute for zazen; always, just doing zazen itself is enough, and complete.^{[1](#)}

In Sōtō Zen, meditation is not considered as a means to an end. One way it can be explained is as a responding, now, to our deepest question in the way it is presenting itself, now. Such a question is often expressed paradoxically - the question we may not be aware of, or may only be dimly aware of when we deeply reflect.^{[2](#)} We may get some inkling of this in an everyday sense, for example, in situations where we see that what we thought we had wanted, was not what we really wanted. For others an explanation of our coming to meditation as such a responding may resonate deeply, even though it may not be understood with the head.

Meditation is a really effective way to listen deeply and open to our lives arising moment by moment. In one sense the ‘technical’ part is our continuing resolve to ‘come back’ to what we are experiencing, moment by moment, when we find ourselves lost or deflected from this. Such a resolve

when enacted, opens us again and again to ongoing meditative awareness. Whilst our brain may intellectually accept that we never leave the present moment, we experience our awareness of this as obscured by what seem to be unchosen distractions, like a smokescreen. Meditation as an activity can be seen more like realigning or re-attuning with what is already here, rather than building something totally new.

Such a resolve is expressed in our being willing to 'listen' to what is here, allowing it to be here, and not turning away from what arises, whether it may be anguish, confusion, or caught up-ness. In listening in this way we start to notice how we get locked into and loop around trains of thought, emotional upheavals, fantasies and fears, particular to us. While we are caught up they are as blind spots to awareness. And, when we notice we have stopped listening, we simply need to come back, without recrimination or regret. We find we are already here.

Our offering to painful patterns is simple and direct. As best we can we are willing to be open to what arises and passes without getting in the way; we accept and don't judge (not judging in the sense of not fixing as solid), over and over. We allow such patterns just to be present in meditative awareness, supported and held in the natural meditative process. Experienced meditators have described such painful patterns within the natural unfolding of meditation like knots and tangles untangling and loosening, like ice thawing, or like stains dissolving in the cleansing waters of compassion.

When we sit and are willing to acknowledge what is here, we let meditative awareness itself respond to the deepest question and to our confusion, and stop blocking its natural flow. We find we need to contribute our own willing effort, but at the same time it feels like something more than just our own wilful effort is going on.

It is easy to make things sound too ideal. Often, meditation feels lumpy and punctuated rather than smoothly flowing. All we can do is when we notice we are pushing things away, ignoring, repressing, trying to annihilate, is to do our best not to obstruct, to let be, to let be present, to be known. When we find ourselves looping round things we are attracted to, like being glued to them, we let go. We don't need to manufacture awareness. We only need to come back, to let unfold, to get out of the way.

Through persevering and continuing in meditation practice we may start to notice, often in small ways, that our perspective seems to have become more open, more inclusive, less obstructive, less defensive. For most of us such recognition occurs more in daily life than when sitting. Buddhism teaches that meditative awareness is accessible in each moment. We appreciate this the more our emotional clutter starts to settle and the driven quality arising from blind emotion starts to subside. We certainly don't become emotionless (for example we may experience empathy more). We also may start to notice that we discern more often, appropriate responses to the situations we encounter, and trust more often such a sense. In different ways each of

us may get inklings of a deeper perspective which encourages us to keep practising. But if we cling, this becomes part of the clutter. When we trust, meditation underpins everything. When we demand proof, we get in our own way.

It is not easy to be still and willing to ‘come back’ moment by moment without expectation. But we are not asked to throw out the intellect. Intellectual analysis can be extremely helpful in appropriate circumstances, and can complement the intuitive way of knowing of meditation when we know how to meditate. But if we use it to keep keeping an eye on our efforts in meditation, it can get in the way of meditative awareness and prevent it flourishing. Beating ourselves up when we feel our mind has wandered is counterproductive, causing what is fragile to shrivel rather than inviting it to be seen. To ‘come back’ is enough. There may be good reasons why our mind wanders off in particular ways. If we notice a pattern of beating ourselves up, this can be brought into meditative awareness and let be.

Applying meditation in our daily lives is equally significant, even though we seem to lose sight of what is fundamental, easily and often. Just as when we sit in meditation, in daily life too we resolve to come back to our present experience when we notice that our mind has wandered off and we listen to what is here, which might be agitation. Accepting and not judging it, whilst not easy, brings naturally a defusing quality. What seemed to be behind us and driving us is now in front of us within

meditative awareness. We are able to accept and respond even though our emotions and thoughts may be turbulent, even if things are not as clear as we would like. What is good to do right now? An appropriate response is often to act based in trust in meditative awareness and its inner compass. We listen deeply to the questions our life asks and trust the response that comes from meditative awareness. We see how it changes our lives for the better, and in profound ways. Sometimes seemingly insignificant situations point us to a deeper significance. We trust more and more that meditative awareness is always present when we get out of the way, and that sitting meditation and meditation in activity complement each other.

Meditation has different scenery on different days, though the need for willingness and appropriate effort does not change. Rather than seeking for a blank mind, meditation is rather staying with what is here, and trusting ourselves as best we know how, to the meditative process and to our deepest sense of what is needed. This may involve accepting how annoyed we feel, how attracted we feel, how scared we feel, or how meaningless it all feels. We continue in our resolve to come back when we notice we are lost, caught up, or find ourselves going round and round. We listen deeply to what is going on without clinging to, fighting against, or judging. Just this opens us to the compassionate process of meditation and we trust its bigger perspective, not obstructed by the fear, anger, or despair. We do the next thing flexibly, bowing but unbowed, just as we are, connected.

In relation to effort, suppose a person is asked to facilitate a group of people working together, each of its members having different personal styles and perspectives. If the facilitator³ takes no notice of what goes on, conflicting viewpoints and styles may clash and the group may pull itself in all directions and get nowhere. Similarly, when we don't pay attention in meditation, addictive loops will loop, difficult things will get pushed away, and our meditation will probably be scattered.

If the facilitator is too directive and controlling, members of the group will follow orders in a constricted way or rebel, and the group will not make use of the experience of its members effectively. When we monitor our meditation too closely or try too hard, we clamp things down, we do not trust our natural abilities and meditation does not flourish.

An experienced facilitator is both relaxed and focused, and reflects back to people what is heard, brings people into discussions and keeps the group on track, sometimes in such an unobtrusive and flowing way that he or she may seem almost invisible to the group. Such a facilitator will make regular, often very minor course corrections when they notice they are being slightly too controlling or when they sense they are not quite 'there' with the group. Such seemingly effortless facilitation is usually the result of much experience and perseverance. By learning from experience and perseverance in practice, a meditator may recognise in a sensitive and focused way when they are not putting in appropriate effort, which includes when they are trying too

hard or when they recognise that they are wanting to know too much what is going on in their meditation. In trusting the meditative process and letting go and letting be in accord with it, we cease to hold on so desperately to a solidified sense of ‘me’ doing the meditating. In this way we find that we incline quite naturally towards an already ongoing unfolding and fluidity.

Rather than mistakenly chasing a blank mind, we begin to appreciate the non-solidity of our thoughts and feelings arising and passing according to conditions. And to the best of our ability we take refuge in what is real⁴ as best we understand it now, in the ever bigger perspective which is always trustworthy.

“This type of meditation is not something that is done in stages; it is simply the lawful gateway to carefree peace. To train and enlighten ourselves is to become thoroughly wise; the koan appears *naturally* in daily life”.⁵

Notes

1. ...“The means of training are thousandfold but pure meditation must be done”, *Rules for Meditation*, Great Master Dōgen, translated by Rev. Master Jiyu Kennett. Available in several publications including the *Scriptures and Ceremonies* booklet available in all OBC temples and meditation groups.
2. Rev. Master Jiyu Kennett said, in some of her talks, that when a questioner came to a Zen master, they would come with three questions; the question they asked, the question at the back of their mind of which they were dimly aware, and the question of which they were not aware. She said it was the responsibility of the Zen master to respond to the third question.
3. The comparison between facilitator and meditator above is intended

here to give some flavour of the type of effort in meditation using the analogy of a more ‘external’ process. It is not meant to imply a correspondence between facilitation and meditation, which to me has more an ‘internal’ connotation, though there are maybe some fruitful parallels and helpful common qualities.

4. An invaluable and indispensable resource in helping us refine and deepen our understanding of meditation and of what this involves is the time-honoured Buddhist practice of taking refuge in the Sangha, which for many of us involves keeping in regular contact with the monastic community (Sangha), for example through spiritual counselling on retreats or by telephone, or by training alongside more experienced meditators, for example at a meditation group. This is so helpful because meditation is an intuitive ‘path’ and it is easy to mislead oneself by confusing an intellectual-led understanding with one based in experience, or to become discouraged without the support and guidance of those more experienced in practice.
5. From *Rules for Meditation in the Scriptures and Ceremonies* booklet.

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*“Forget the selfish self for a little while
and allow the mind to remain natural for this
is very close to the mind that seeks the way.
When you are full of opinions just sit quietly
and watch how they arise.”*

Great Master Dōgen *Gakudo Yojinshu: Aspects of Zen*

Deliberate Thought

Rev. Sanshin Alexander

—Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, Northumberland –UK—

Often in our practice it is helpful to go back to basics, to see what it is we are doing in meditation. The aspect I'd like to draw out is 'deliberate thought'. I imagine that these words will remind you immediately of Dōgen's *Rules for Meditation*. This is one of the three scriptures that we recite every day, which also include the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* and the *Ancestral Line*. It is that important, and it is the heart of our practice. We recite it to remind ourselves each day of what we are doing in zazen.

The particular sentence that this phrase comes from has been called (by Rev. Master Daishin) "probably the most important sentence in the whole work."¹ It encapsulates what we are doing. It comes at the end of the description of our physical posture in meditation. So we are already grounded in what we are doing on a physical level. We are engaged in it with our bodies and minds. This is the foundation of our practice, which is 'just being':

“Sway the body left and right, then sit steadily, neither trying to think, nor trying not to think; just sitting, with no deliberate thought, is the important aspect of Serene Reflection Meditation.”²

What is important is that part of the sentence that says “Neither trying to think, nor trying not to think.” So, what is that? Some of you, or all of you, may be familiar with the analogy of sitting under a bridge that Rev. Master Jiyu used to describe the activity of meditation. We don’t wander off with the thought; we just sit. If there is traffic, we let it go by; if there are thoughts, we let them go by. If there is no traffic and no thought, we just sit:

“All that is required in meditation is that one sit with a positive attitude of mind, knowing that, if one does so, one will indeed find the True Buddha within oneself. I have often used the example of sitting under a bridge to illustrate the above. One sits beneath a bridge across which traffic is travelling in both directions. One does not climb upon the bridge to hitch a ride in one of the cars, nor does one chase after them; one also makes no attempt to push the cars off the bridge. One cannot ignore that the cars are there; one does not have to be bothered by them. If a person does get caught by his or her thoughts which, in the beginning, is quite likely, it is important not to worry about it. One merely accepts the fact that one was caught and continues to sit, without worrying about the fact that one was caught or being guilty about it.

No matter what one does, one cannot change the fact that one was caught and, if one worries about it, one just does not become peaceful enough to return to meditation. One should avoid guilt at all costs concerning this; there is nothing so destructive as guilt in this regard.”³

It’s not something you can pin down. It’s not graspable because it’s something fluid. This strikes me as a reasonable description of meditation in that it’s not something that you can necessarily define, but you can say what it isn’t. We *can* say that it is letting natural thought pass by, so it does help us to be clear in our minds what is natural thought and what is deliberate thought. In Rev. Master Daishin’s *Buddha Recognizes Buddha* he describes natural thought as those ‘thoughts that seem to occur unbidden.’⁴ We don’t invite the thoughts; we’re not looking for them. They’re just there, like any other phenomenon. This is our life, and it is the natural flow of life. If we find ourselves wandering off with the traffic, what are we doing?

When we are not content to dwell in just being, to dwell in reality as it is, at some level, are we trying to figure out a way of making our lives OK, of dreaming up a scenario which is better than the one we are faced with? It is very important that we don’t judge ourselves, but when we notice we are wandering off, it is an opportunity to remind ourselves that meditation is living our life as it is now, and we can bring ourselves back to the physical reality of just sitting, of just being.

Deliberate thought is also referred to as volitional thought. There is an act of will in this; there is a choice to wander off in our thoughts. To bring ourselves back to just sitting and observing natural thought is also a choice; choosing to dwell in the reality that is here now.

There is a chapter in Rev. Master Daishin's *Buddha Recognizes Buddha* entitled 'Asking "What is This?"'. When we notice what we are doing in meditation we can come back to this question. It is one that has been used traditionally in Zen practice to penetrate the reality of what we are doing, of what we are. When we notice that we are wandering off in our minds we can use that question as an inner sense, not necessarily as a formal verbal question, but as a way to see more deeply within. When we return to the deeper sense of what this is it may appear to be nothing, but we do need to spur ourselves on to look deeper. Rev. Master Daishin describes what we are doing when we are pursuing trains of deliberate thought:

“Essentially, fantasies, memories and projections that seem to be obstructions to meditation arise because we seek a refuge outside of ourselves. This becomes clearer when we see that our fantasies and wanderings are the product of either fear or desire. They arise through our aversion or attachment to those things we understand as other than ourselves. For example, maybe someone has ‘made’ you angry and, feeling slighted, you rehearse scenarios in your mind in which you get the upper hand. Your anger

stems from the fear of rejection. You want the other person to give you respect so you can respect yourself. This is to see the refuge as outside of yourself.”⁵

So, deliberate thought can become a projection; it can be a way of looking for something that isn't within us, to make things OK. This is not what we are trying to do in meditation. The refuge we are seeking is within ourselves; it is there already, and it is in opening up to our true being that we can find a true refuge.

If you read other translations of *Fukanzazengi* you won't find any reference to deliberate thought. Other translators are still pointing to the same thing, and it is helpful to look at their translations to explore more deeply what we are doing in zazen. In Tanahashi's version the sentence is as follows:

‘Having adjusted your body in this manner, take a breath and exhale fully, then sway your body to left and right. Now sit steadfastly and think not-thinking. How do you think not-thinking? Beyond thinking. This is the essential art of zazen.’⁶

Tanahashi is likewise drawing out the important aspect of Dōgen's *Rules for Meditation*, which is the ungraspable; that which can't be pinned down. Essentially it is the same teaching.

Waddell and Abe's translation is slightly different again; similar to Tanahashi's:

‘Once you have adjusted yourself into this posture, take a deep breath, inhale, exhale, rock your body to the right and left, and settle into a steady, unmoving sitting position. Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen.’⁷

There is a translation of that core sentence by Masunaga, and his version is:

‘Think the unthinkable. How do you think the unthinkable? Think beyond thinking and unthinking. This is the important aspect of sitting.’⁸

So we have these different translations of Dōgen's original to describe the essential activity of zazen: ‘Just sitting, with no deliberate thought’, ‘Beyond thinking’, ‘Nonthinking’, or ‘Think beyond thinking and unthinking.’ You could probably find even more ways of expressing this, but it is clear from reading these translations that here we are not considering ordinary patterns of habitual thought. What we do in zazen is not deliberate thought; it is something that penetrates beyond these things, and certainly, letting go of deliberate thought is fundamental to it.

In Rev. Master Jiyu's essay on ‘How to Sit’, contained in the volume entitled *The Art of Just Sitting*, and also in the

booklet *Serene Reflection Meditation* she is very clear on this subject:

“One must not deliberately try to think, nor deliberately try not to think. Thoughts come and go in our heads, and we can either play with them, or just sit there and allow them to pass. Too many of us allow ourselves to be hijacked by our thoughts, while some try to deliberately push them away; both of these activities are completely incorrect. The Japanese distinguish between deliberate thought and natural thought. There is absolutely nothing wrong with natural thought. Because our ears are not plugged up during meditation, it is normal for us to hear cars passing on the roads and birds singing; because our eyes are not closed, it is only reasonable that we will notice patterns on the carpet, floor or wall. These things will only disturb us if we permit ourselves to discuss them in our own minds. If one merely notices that a car is going by, there will be no problem. However, if one notices that a car is going by and becomes annoyed or pleased about it, then meditation has already ceased. All that is required in meditation is that one sit with a positive attitude of mind, knowing that if one does so one will indeed find the true Buddha within oneself.”

So there is absolutely no doubt in her mind of the importance of letting go of deliberate thought. The importance of this is made more clear when we extend the

activity of zazen into daily life. When we are driving a car or washing dishes or eating a meal and our thoughts are elsewhere, then what are we doing? Just to be, just to talk, just to walk, without following or fuelling the thoughts that arise and making them into a train of thought, is what we are trying to do. Otherwise we can be swimming around in distractions. This is a difficult challenge, and it is best not to get hung up on this question, but we can also catch a glimpse of the immeasurable depths of meditation when we rise to this challenge. In his *Instructions on How to do Pure Meditation*, Great Master Keizan speaks very powerfully and poetically of what meditation is at a deep level:

“Pure meditation opens us so that we may directly realize the Foundation of our minds and dwell content within our own Buddha Nature. This is called ‘displaying our Original Face’. It is also called ‘revealing the landscape of our Original Nature’. Body and Mind both drop off, with no clinging to sitting up or lying down. Hence, there are no discriminatory thoughts of ‘this is good’ or ‘this is bad’. You readily go beyond thoughts of ‘this is worldly’ or ‘this is saintly’. You penetrate into, and go on beyond, the multitude of notions and theories about delusion versus enlightenment. You leave far behind the boundary between ‘ordinary beings’ and ‘Buddhas’. Therefore, you cease to pant after the myriad phenomena and let go of all attachments to them.”⁹

Great Master Keizan is directly penetrating the deeper levels of what we are doing in meditation, which is ultimately to let go of everything, to go beyond deliberate thought and all notions, concepts and ideas of what that is. Deliberate thought is how we create the story of our separate self, wandering off in our minds and constructing ideas of how we think we are, how we think others are, how we think reality is or how we would like it to be. Keizan is referring to going beyond this completely. Letting go of deliberate thought is the starting point for letting go of all attachments.

Notes

1. Morgan, Rev. Master Daishin. *Buddha Recognizes Buddha* (Throssel Hole Press, 2010) p. 169.
2. Jiyu-Kennett, Rev. Master. Trans of Dōgen's *Fukanzazengi (Rules for Meditation)* in *Scriptures and Ceremonies* booklet available at OBC temples and groups and online here <https://www.shastaabbey.org/pdf/rules4md.pdf>.
3. Jiyu-Kennett, Rev. Master. *How to Sit in Serene Reflection Meditation* (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2016) p.11. and at <https://shastaabbey.org/pdf/SRM.pdf>
4. *Buddha Recognizes Buddha*, p. 169.
5. *Buddha Recognizes Buddha* p. 72.
6. Great Master Dōgen. *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, Vol. II Kazuaki Tanahashi ed. (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2010) p.98.
7. Waddell, Norman and Abe, Masao. *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, (State University of New York, Albany, 2002) p.4.
8. Masunaga, Prof. Reiho., *Sōtō Approach to Zen* (Layman Buddhist Society Press, Tokyo, 1958) Chapter 7, and at www.zenki.com
9. *Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice* (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1994) p.19.

Serene Reflection Meditation

Rev. Master Meian Elbert

— Shasta Abbey, Mt. Shasta, CA – USA —

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Today I'm going to talk a bit about meditation practice. We all know basically how to sit, and we all know more or less what we're supposed to be doing, and we all know that it's hard to do. Our form of meditation – Serene Reflection, *shikantaza*, just sitting – is difficult to describe. It's very simple, and yet it's subtle and it's not easy to grasp. When it comes down to it, we just allow ourselves to fall into it in a certain way – it's hard to do it too deliberately – and it's different for everybody: everybody meditates slightly differently. We all sit a little differently; we experience it *quite* differently. People who teach meditation each teach it a little differently. It's not a hard and fast thing; it's fluid and dynamic.

For some people meditation is simple: sit down, look at a wall – fine, they seem to get it right away. For others of us

– maybe for most of us – it’s hard. We can spend years trying to figure out what we’re supposed to be doing, or why we’re constantly distracted, or what we’re supposed to be doing with our mind: “And if I really want to meditate, why is it so hard and why do I keep getting distracted, or falling asleep, or why do I have pain ?” It’s just not an easy thing for many of us.

To practice Serene Reflection Meditation is really jumping in the deep end, because it’s formless. Most meditation practices have more structure: You count your breaths, or you have a mantra, or a kōan, or you visualize a Buddha or a Bodhisattva. Or you contemplate the parts of the body or you reflect on death. There are all kinds of things that many traditions do in their meditation practice. Strictly speaking we don’t do any of these things: we just sit.

However, sometimes it is useful to use some extra method to help us to anchor the mind. Because of the formlessness of our meditation it’s hard to grasp, so sometimes it’s helpful for some of us to count the breaths if we’re really distracted or we’re just beginning. Or maybe to do it occasionally when the mind’s all over the place, or regularly at the beginning of meditation. If it helps, it’s fine. Eventually, it’s nice if you can let go of counting breaths and just sit. For some of us, following the breath without counting works well. There are various other ways we can help to focus the mind, but fundamentally we just sit. Serene Reflection Meditation is “the Dharma Gate of repose and joy,” as Dōgen calls it. Actually, we’re lucky, because although it’s hard and subtle, it’s a wonderful practice; and

in fact many other forms of practice eventually come down to doing what we actually try to do from the start – to just sit.

So how do we ‘just sit?’ Where do we put our energy and our focus? I have found that the best thing for me is to sit wholeheartedly in the body: just sit in the body.

There’s a phrase that Rev. Master Daishin Morgan uses in one of his books, “Fully occupy your body.”¹ I find this very helpful. Put your energy into just sitting there in the body, the *whole* of the body, not focusing on any part of the body. It’s a vital, dynamic practice. We’re not just sitting there passively, as if we were watching TV. We’re *sitting* there with energy and a certain kind of effort. It takes a while to get this — for it to mesh as it were. It’s not forcing, we’re not trying to get something or achieve something. We put our energy into just sitting fully in the body. To do this, we need to commit ourselves completely to just sitting, here, in this body, in this very moment. We have nothing to do; we have nowhere to go. All we have is this very moment, right now. And we need to invest in it fully, because this is our very life. At this moment right now, all we have is this moment, right here, in this body, in this breath.

Uchiyama Rōshi wrote a lovely book called *Opening the Hand of Thought*,² which has some good instructions on meditation, and he says, “Doing zazen [or meditation] means taking the correct posture and entrusting everything to it.” Entrusting everything to it: this doesn’t mean we have to have some perfect posture. We can sit on a cushion, on a bench, on a chair, we can lie down, we can stand, we can walk. All of these things are pure meditation, if we commit ourselves to it fully, entrusting ourselves to it.

It's this wholehearted commitment that is the point. We keep coming back to being here in this body: "Am I sitting up straight? Are my eyes open? Am I relaxed or am I knotted up in some way?" If there are things we habitually slide into – leaning over to one side or hunching our shoulders or closing our eyes – we just need to check now and then to make sure that we're upright, relaxed, alert, without constantly worrying about our posture. We can just be aware of what we're doing, that we *are* sitting up straight, awake, alert; and yet not tense, not forcing, not trying to get something. We put our whole vitality into it, and then relax ever so slightly so we're not striving against something; we're not trying to push our way through some door. We're just sitting, wholeheartedly, in this very body, in this very breath.

We put our energy into sitting in the *body*, and don't worry too much about what the mind is up to. This is why I think sitting in the body is so helpful, because we can get all wound up in our mind, "thinking about thinking about thinking." When we notice we're distracted, we just come back. We don't have to get all worried about what we're thinking about, or worried that we're thinking, or worried that we shouldn't be thinking. Just come back, just relinquish the grip and come back (this is easier said than done).

Sometimes we're in turmoil about something. We're upset about what someone's done, or what we've just done, or we're confused and afraid, or we just have a lot of emotion coming up. This is all fine, we don't have to fix it. We don't have to try to calm the mind. Don't try to calm the mind because it's like trying to smooth out pancake batter with

your hand – you just get it all sticky and everywhere and it makes it much worse. Just leave it be and let it settle of itself, even if it doesn't seem to settle down right away. Not pushing things away, or squashing them down, but just not stirring them up. Just let them come up and go through.

As I said, easier said than done, because sometimes turmoil just seems to go on and on. We're really upset about something and we chew it over and over and over, and we can't seem to let it go. Just be patient. Just let it come up, and try not to feed it with the mind. If we're angry it doesn't help to keep going over and over and over the event, thinking about what we're going to say to the person next time we see them, or justifying ourselves in some way. That just feeds it and makes it worse. Let the anger be there, without feeding it. Let it be there in the body, just feel it in the body. Accept it with kindness. It's not a problem that it has arisen. It's what we do with it that counts, neither holding on nor pushing away; neither gripping on and feeding it, nor trying to squash it down or get rid of it, thinking it's bad.

We sit in the body, with whatever is there, with patience and not with judgment; with kindness to ourselves and to others – patience, kindness, compassion. Not thinking, "I shouldn't be like this. I should be calm. I'm supposed to be meditating." We just let it all come and go – with kindness and acceptance – as best we can. It's not always easy; we just do our best and trust that that will work, that it is sufficient.

A lot of the time we simply have thoughts arise, not particularly emotional thoughts, but just thoughts, distracting thoughts, and we tend to follow them. "Oh, I

should have done this. Oh, I need to do that. Oh, this other thing that happened the other day.” We’re pulled off by the endless drooling mind. When we notice we’ve gotten distracted, we just come back. When our intention is just to sit, when this is the most important thing we are doing at this moment, our distraction vanishes in an instant. It just disappears, because it has no reality. It’s just a thought; it’s not a real thing. It’s just our thinking mind. When we notice: “Oh!” – just come back.

When we’re invested in our thinking it’s harder to let it go “I really need to remember to do such and such,” or, “I really must sort out this problem” – then it sticks to us. But if we can just trust that the most important thing, right now, is to sit here no matter what, and that we can attend to all these other things later, then we can come right back, and we aren’t pulled off so much.

This is partly a matter of will, and yet it’s not just will. It can be quite hard to relinquish something that we’ve just thought of and feel is really important. Then we ask, “What is really important?” – just sit, right here, right now, and let everything else fall into place after that. We commit ourselves to simply sitting, here in this body, not grasping after our thoughts — opening the hand of thought, as Uchiyama Rōshi calls it — relinquishing the grip. It’s gripping onto the thoughts that’s the problem; then we follow them and get pulled off. But if we just open that hand, and see that they are not the most important thing, then they just slide right through and we’re not pulled around by them.

I think the most important section in Great Master Dōgen’s *Rules for Meditation* is, “Sit steadily, neither trying

to think nor trying not to think; just sitting, with no deliberate thought, is the important aspect of serene reflection meditation.”³ This is just what we have been talking about: sitting steadily, “neither trying to think nor trying not to think.” That’s how Rev. Master Jiyu put it in her translation, and it’s a really helpful way to look at it. You’re not investing in your thoughts and you’re not trying to push them away. Sitting steadily in the body – wholeheartedly; just sitting, fully present, in this moment, with this breath, right now.

We’re not trying to attain some perfectly controlled state where we have no distracting thoughts. We tend to think we should be in some perfect samādhi where we’re just peaceful and blissful. But we’re not trying to get to some perfect place.

Our meditation is dynamic; we sit still and yet it’s constantly moving and flowing. As I sometimes have said, it’s like sailing a boat: we’re constantly moving, constantly adjusting to the wind, to the slight movement of the body and the mind. It’s something that we’re continually doing, coming back to the body, sitting still, sitting upright, entrusting ourselves to the posture, to the practice, to our own commitment, to our effort.

Someone I know who’s been meditating for many years, not in our Order but in a similar Sōtō Zen tradition said, “It seems I’m always going away and coming back.” He is not locked into some perfect static place. This person is deeply devoted to meditation, has been doing it for many many years, sits for long hours, and sits like a rock – impressive – and yet he’s always going away and always

coming back. Always distracting thoughts can arise and always the person brings themselves back. It's dynamic, constantly moving, you're never *there*: "Here I am, I've arrived." We're always "going on, going on, always becoming Buddha",⁴ always continuing our training: it's never perfect. We can't say: "I'm satisfied. This is fine, now I know what I'm doing and I can just lock down in this position and here we are." We're always having to make that effort, the adjustment to the wind.

Don't get discouraged if meditation seems really hard. I know all about meditation seeming really hard: *It still works*. Don't worry about the thoughts: "My meditation is terrible..." or, "I'm no good at this." Don't worry about it, it still works, this is the wonderful thing about it. Despite our best effort, despite our view, despite the ideals we may have, despite our expectations, it still works. It changes us in a profound and subtle way. We don't know how it works, it just does. We just have to get out of the way and let the meditation do its work. We set up the conditions, we try our best to do our part: something else does the rest. There is something that helps us. Sometimes it seems like we fall easily into meditation and sometimes we're just struggling to stay awake, or we're just constantly distracted, and we can get discouraged. But *do not* worry, because it still works, it still helps us. There *is* something that helps us that is more than just our little struggling self trying to do its best. There is something bigger that helps.

We need to let go of all expectation – of ourselves, of our meditation practice, all ideals, all standards. We're not trying to get something. We're not trying to get anything.

We're not trying to have experiences or get enlightenment. If we have experiences of insight, or blissful states, or anything else, it's fine. They can be very helpful, as long as we don't grab at them and try to hold onto them, or try to get them back. It never works, you never get back to it, because you're always moving forward. It's like trying to get back to that point on the sea you just left — it's gone. Just keep moving forward: we can't get back to the moment before. To try to get back or to grab onto some ideal is missing the point. All we can do is set up the conditions: do our part, try to do our best, and trust it. Have faith in the practice: the meditation does us, it's not us doing the meditation. It's bigger than us; it works in spite of us.

Our way is the gradual way. It's not a quick fix — there isn't a quick fix. Meditation can make a huge difference in our lives, and quite quickly. But its effects are subtle and profound, and they can take years to ripen. It's not the dramatic experiences and insights that help us most. They can take years to understand and make use of and incorporate into our lives.

That's done through our daily practice: our daily meditation, our daily training in sitting still, keeping to the Precepts — all the things we do. Many of us don't have dramatic experiences at all. We just keep on doing the training faithfully, and that is what counts; training without expecting something — just giving ourselves to it.

We're not trying to get something; we're giving ourselves to something — completely. The more we give ourselves to our practice, the more it rewards us; but we don't do it to get rewards. The other day I was talking to

somebody about their job and how rewarding it is to work just for the sake of doing the job well, and not for the sake of rewards – of getting a lot of money for it. Meditation and training are like this. We do it for its own sake, not to get something out of it. And there is joy in it. Yet we don't do it because of expectations or ideals, we do it because it is good to do. We do it because it is our true heart's desire: all of us know this. We train because we have to train, because it's what we need to do. It's the purpose of our life, fundamentally. We follow that true heart's desire, go where it leads us, without expectation, without ideals, without seeking some perfect static place. We keep on faithfully walking the way, because it is good to do, because it *is* our true heart's desire.

Serene Reflection Meditation, “the Dharma Gate of repose and joy.” May it be so for all of us, as we give ourselves to it.

Notes

- [1.](#) Morgan, Rev. Master Daishin, *Sitting Buddha: Zen Meditation for Everyone*, (Throssel Hole Press, UK: 2004).
- [2.](#) Uchiyama, Kōshō, *Opening the Hand of Thought*, (Wisdom publications, US: 2005).
- [3.](#) Dōgen, Great Master, *Rules for Meditation*, in *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, (Mt Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) pp. 97 – 100.
- [4.](#) *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*, Ibid. p. 73.

Meditation and Practice: Our Great Wish

Rev. Master Astor Douglas

—*Shasta Abbey, CA–US*—

A transcription of a talk given at the end of a retreat on 1st May 2011.

Homage to the Buddha

Homage to the Dharma

Homage to the Sangha

As most of you know we just finished up with our Meditation retreat, we had six and a half days of meditating, so I thought it would be very appropriate to talk about our meditation and practice. It's something that I feel is good to review for all of us now and again.

And as we do each time we have a monks retreat, we said a verse, a wishing for what we wish for to happen in our lives and in the retreat that we are about to start. I'd like to read part of that because it was inspiring. Here we are at 4:30 in the morning on the first day of the retreat; Rev. Master Daishin Yalon had a candle light and opened a book and in the darkness of the morning, part of what he read was:

Let each of us, for the sake of his or her parents, teachers, elders and past friends and foes, worship the Buddhas with all our hearts, and with prostrations. Let us pray to be reborn in the land of the Eternal. Like fish with little water, what joy is there when we do not know the Eternal? Let all of us endeavour during the searching of the heart retreat for seven days to make the greatest of progress as if we were fighting a fire that was burning on our heads.

So we weren't retreating from the world to get away from it, we were retreating from it so that we could give ourselves the chance to settle down and do some good meditation, and that's what we did. We meditated throughout the day and that was the focus of the retreat.

So our practice is called "Serene Reflection Meditation" and I looked up what that meant as a way to educate myself and hopefully to inform you what "Serene Reflection Meditation" is. The Chinese translation of the word 'Serene' comes out as something that is silent and quiet. The thing that I like about it, is that the lips are closed. Hmm! What does that mean? Well it says to me that instead of being outward so much with the words, it is to be silent – and it's not like buttoning up so we cannot say anything, but it's more to give ourselves a chance to quiet down so that we can start to see the serenity and the stillness that is within ourselves and is actually everywhere. This is why we meditate, so that we can give ourselves a chance to quiet

down and to learn to be still and see what's there as we are looking at a wall.

The second character in the Chinese translation means brightness of the sun or to illumine, to reflect light, and the whole character is silent illumination. You have to have both the stillness and serenity and the illumination because stillness alone, just by itself, leads to stagnation and it's really not that helpful. It is still, but it needs some energy and the energy is the illumination or the light. So the two of these together provides what our practice is and isn't that a beautiful way of looking at it? It indicates the potential for what we can see in our meditation – in this serene reflection meditation or silent illumination meditation. I found that the 'serene' – that's silent and still – and then the reflection comes across as the moon that is reflecting in water, in a pool of water – and that can be the stillness. When somebody throws something into the water, the waves in it mean you can't see the moon; we lose sight of the Eternal, but It's always there. It's always there even though it's in a way that we don't recognise it. We can always know that it's there and oftentimes that is enough to develop faith that it *is there*, and we don't have to think that it's ever lost because it's not, it's always right here.

You can't have illumination alone; if you have too much light then you're not grounded, you need to have something grounding in our practice. I feel like the stillness is the meditation which keeps us still so that when the light, the reflection of our own Buddha nature, is there then we can

bring an awareness to that and this is what we bring out into our daily life.

It's a high aspiration but there's a reason that we call our practice Serene Reflection Meditation; it's because it's something that we actually have within ourselves right now and that *is* tangible. It's hard to see that sometimes but it actually is there to give us hope and encouragement that we can find that place within our lives during the day. And what that's based on is that we all have the intuitive knowledge of the Buddha nature within ourselves, and what our meditation does is it harmonizes ourselves with that which is within ourselves. It's the deep reflective stillness, that pool of light that is always moving – the deep stillness.

And within that place we can learn to find contentment and that which we've always longed to find. However it's not what we think it is, by far, in fact that's the problem as we think that we know what it is - and it isn't! We can recognise that; that's a way of letting go so that we can open ourselves to that which is inside of ourselves. So why don't we see this all the time? What's the matter with us, anyway? Nothing actually; but we think there is and that's the motivation that we need to get us to start looking for a better way to live and a better place to operate from. I found a quote that points to what the problem is: "Outstanding is our failure to realise clearly that letting go of thoughts and distractions *is* the practice at all times."

So whether we are walking or eating or talking to people, it is that looking for, finding, something that is more important than what's outside of us, that is inside of us, is something that we need to do – and that is to let go over and over again, of our thoughts and things that come up – but to do it with a gentle and firm focus. This is Serene Reflection Meditation after all, this is not clubbing ourselves or being hard on ourselves.

There is a gentleness and a focus that we can bring to our daily life that will help us find that place that we're looking for. And we find this by letting go of thoughts and things that arise. In my mind it's a misguided direction to attach our thoughts and feelings to ideas that haven't really helped us out a whole lot anyway. Learning to simply let go, maybe we can find something that works better. If we talk about it too much, we're missing the point – we're not talking about something we really know. To get to the point where we know what we are talking about, we have to experience it. Without experiencing it, we really don't know the richness of our practice. The effort is to develop meditation so we can bring it into our daily practice, gently and with awareness. It changes our perspective, because we let go of what we know (or even if we don't know) and look at life with a more open mind. How do we do that? Through the practice of our meditation; it is *the* pillar of our practice, there is no getting around it. That's how we find a deeper place within ourselves, it's through the meditation practice and the reason is because meditation is actually experience: it's not outside of ourselves but it's something that we learn

out of our experience. We're the ones that have to do the work, we're the ones that have to change our perspective, nobody else can do it for us.

I found a good story in this book: *Zen Seeds*, it's a great book by a female Zen priest, Shundo Aoyama, who is still living I believe, and has a Japanese monastery. It's called "Follow the flow of the stream."

"A priest once strayed from the mountain path and by chance came upon Ta-mei's grass hut. When he asked for the path leading to the village, Ta-Mei replied "Follow the flow of the stream," which means that, if you simply follow the stream you will find your way out of the mountains. An essayist Wariko Kai, wrote this poem:

Although there are rocks and tree roots,
Rippling along, just rippling along.
The water runs.

If our ordinary self-centered viewpoint is dominant, rocks and tree roots are undesirable. But if we change our point of view, then the very fact that there are rocks and tree roots makes the valley stream more beautiful and the sight of waves breaking upon them beyond description. When we perceive joy, anger, happiness, and sorrow as enriching our lives, just as rocks and tree roots and water spray embellish nature, then we are able to accept whatever happens and live like flowing water, without clinging to anything."

If any of you ever tried to walk down a stream that has a lot of rocks and tree roots you know it's not easy going, in fact it's really tough going. However, there's something to be said for the rocks and tree roots because they have a tendency, for me anyway, to slow me down and take a look at what's going on that I otherwise might have missed. I find that it's a good way to practice patience; not being way off down the stream but actually where I am, right there, because it really does take that kind of concentration to be where you are to find your way safely.

I feel that that is the same with our spiritual practice; to be where we are is how we are going to find our way spiritually in a safer way, because we're bringing patience and mindfulness to what we are doing at the moment, not being so far off down the stream. It's also saying too that we're not wrestling with the rocks, you know: "I wish that rock weren't there, I wish that tree root weren't there. Whoa! My goodness! Another tree I have to climb over." You know that sort of stuff, just simply let that go and take the task at hand and wholeheartedly do what needs to be done at the moment.

What we are doing with our meditation is finding a way that we can do *our* way to practice. We are finding a way to take what we know in the Meditation hall, our Buddhist experience, our Buddhist teachings, and manifest it in our lives. We're all very different and we all have to find that which we need to do. What our practice is oftentimes is a way of discovery; it's not that everything's set out and we

know what to do or where we are going, but the way we find our way to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha is to take what we have learned and test it out, put it into practice. What that does is it makes it our own experience and it gets it out from an idea into something that we actually know something about.

I'll give you an example: compassion for me has always been a very big word and has a lot of different meanings that I can't say that I understand very well all the time. However, I have learned that by turning the stream of compassion within myself – and that's also a big lofty idea – however, just by doing that in a way that is in the moment and is turning kindness toward myself, or kind thoughts. But really what it is too, is letting in the meditation and the awareness, in allowing that kindness to be there towards myself, in a gentle and beneficent way of looking at things. And what that does then is that it allows me to naturally be more outflowing with compassion. It's a way to learn and it's always there and a good way for us to learn to take something out of our Buddhist practice and turn it so that it becomes experience. Takes it out of the head and puts it into the body – into the heart.

As we take our practice and test it out and explore what we do in our daily life and use what we have as the testing ground, what we can do is right in front of us and oftentimes the steps are very simple and not super complicated, not heroic. And that's where we can start to build a foundation; so that we can then build it stronger and stronger, and are

then able to handle situations that cause us more problems, that are more inflammatory. But a simple step is very tangible – something we can all do, and it is not reserved for special people; it's for all of us, it's very doable, very normal, very down to earth. It's not something lofty or intangible that we are trying to aspire towards, an idea, but simply right here we can do something for ourselves and for others by simply doing what needs to be done next. And that can be done with meditation and with mindfulness, so instead of taking a simple task and doing it in a way that is harmful, we can maybe change our mind, change our perspective and say “Well, I'm ready to try this in a different way.” This is what we can explore, do it in a way that is taking into account the meditation, Instead of doing something in a hurry, to slow down and to do it patiently and quietly.

One of the big things that I have also looked into is acceptance and I have found that when I am not accepting, there is an element of tension and that when I can simply relax within a situation and let things go, I can begin to see a way that things truly are. And again I don't feel that that is a big deal, for years I wondered what that meant, it is to look at things in a way that is not born out of self interest, but is born out of meditation practice. We can do all these things, put the Buddha's teaching into practice, make them our own and not feel that we are bound by what other people think or others have written, but to take that as an opportunity to see if what the Buddha taught is what we want to pursue. It's up to us and in a lot of ways it's not a big deal.

So I'm going to close with this poem:
Full seventy years and more have I beheld the clash and roar
of human life and felt upon my breast the weight of right at
war with wrong.
'Til now my mind is weary and my spirit cries for rest,
This night the darkness deepens and the snow -
Like some kind minister to my troubled soul, falls softly
Holding close in the sleep the noises of the outside world.
No sound of any footstep comes this way to mar the stillness
of this midnight hour.
Only my spirit moves as, bowed down before the burning
incense which lifts its curl of smoke beneath my window,
I lose myself in silent meditation and touch the great wide
world with prayer.

By the Buddhist monk Ryokan from *Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf* by Jakob Fischer (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1954).

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“When we are practising zazen, we are sitting in reality itself. We can recognise this, we can see that the external world is not external at all but something which includes and unfolds us. To practice zazen is to return to a simple and harmonised state, a state beyond the opposing fixations of body and mind.”

Nishijima ‘To Meet the Real Dragon’

Sitting Still

Rev. Master Seikai Luebke

—*Pine Mountain Buddhist Temple, Ventura County, CA–USA*—

Chapter Six from Rev. Master Seikai's book Depth Spirituality, first printed in May 2017 and republished here with thanks.

There are many very excellent books on the subject of meditation, so there is really no need for me to add to that extensive body of literature. The essence of meditation practice is, of course, sitting still. There are dozens of objects of meditation, dozens of themes on which to contemplate, and dozens of different ways to try to bring the mind into focus; one way or another it takes persistent effort. Zen meditation is difficult in that it gives the mind nothing to hold on to: it is just the cultivation of pure awareness, pure mindfulness.

Over 35 years ago, when I had joined the monastery of Shasta Abbey and been ordained a monk, I was assigned to one of the senior monks who would oversee my training as a novice. Being a novice monk is not easy and everyone who takes this path in training has their difficulties, has

challenges, and needs occasional reassurance that they are doing OK. When I would talk about my training and my problems, my senior would almost always say, “Well, just sit still with that. See what happens.” At times I was frustrated with this answer and felt a little cheated, because I thought there ought to be some more profound answer that was going to go to the heart of the matter and solve my problems.

It was only some years later that I saw clearly for myself that the answer I had been given, “just sit still with that,” was actually a truly profound answer. It was an answer that did not make any attempt to solve my problem or give me anything to chew on intellectually. But it did point me directly to what I really needed to do, and it was that simple. I consider myself fortunate that, at the time, I had a wise and compassionate monk to help me let go of one of the biggest obstacles to making progress in the path of spiritual training: the attempt to rationalize or think one’s way through difficulties in life, rather than to take refuge in the actual practice.

This problem is not one that we can let go of all in one big drop – it is let go of bit by bit over a period of time, which will vary from one individual to the next. By actually sitting still in meditation, we engage in the practice that will lead us out of our desperation to find answers to our suffering. But most of us are reluctant to do this at first; we doggedly hold onto the idea that there *must* be an answer, if only someone would give it to us. So it requires a little leap of faith to

practice, “just sitting still” in the middle of all our problems, which is just about the last thing we would normally do to get over them.

This faith, that to just sit still is sufficient, has to be built up one little bit at a time, in the same way that a house made of bricks is built one brick at a time. Our problems will not necessarily just go away when we engage in this practice, but they will definitely change over time. They change in a way that is suited to us as individuals – what one needs to work on and let go of is what presents itself from one day to the next.

A little while after the above situation, my suffering had grown more intense in nature, which is indicative, in the context of being a novice monk, that I was actually doing something about myself and looking at the nature of my suffering. At that time, I asked Rev. Master Jiyu how it would be possible for me to tame my “hell hounds” and find true peace of heart. This question was asked in a public question-answer ceremony in front of all the other monks in the monastery. In reply she said, “Sit still in the place where you ask this question and its meaning will become apparent to you.”

My master had the same answer as my senior monk friend, pointing me inwards to finding the answer within myself, not looking for a solution from outside, like in a book. Her answer gave me the faith to persevere in my just sitting still, not to look elsewhere, and to stick with it. Things

did get better. The unfolding of the Dharma arises from that place of just sitting still, and that process continues in me to this day. The faith that I am OK, whole and sufficient as a human being, lacking for nothing, continues to deepen. And it is because of my faith in the efficacy of just sitting still that I can let suffering just be suffering, an experience which arises and passes away.

In the years that have passed since the time I was a novice monk, our world has become all the more fast paced, complicated and frenetic. If anything, there is even more reason today to learn to just sit still. Taking 20 or 30 minutes out of a normal day to just be physically still, sitting upright with good posture, watching your breath come and go, watching thoughts and feelings come and go, is vital to sanity.

Sitting still has to do with how we respond to stimuli that enter through our senses, and the stimuli of thoughts that run through our heads. It is possible to take up an observation post a step or two removed from the immediacy of experiencing stressful events, loud emotions, loud feelings, rage, ordinary anger, despair, frustration and irritation. All these things are like the foam on the surface of the ocean as it crashes and surges against the shore – the human experience. But the human experience also includes the ability to meditate, to sit still underneath the noise and confusion on the surface of things. It is not to say that you do not feel things, it is also not an attempt to escape from the noise and confusion. To attempt that is what we call the

mistake of quietism. True sitting still is to just accept fully that *things are the way they are*.

Why should we struggle mightily against the way things are? Just maybe things are OK the way they are and it is our habitual responses that need to change. A habitual response of acceptance and relaxation is what we need to cultivate within ourselves. This is what we can actually do to change things for the better; to change our habitual responses is another way of talking about what it means to purify our karma-the karma of habit energy. Learning to accept deeply and to relax within the craziness of our own minds creates merit which helps everyone around us, not just ourselves.

I come back to just sitting still uncountable thousands of times – it is the nature of Buddhist training and the nature of human existence. Accept that there is suffering, accept things as they are, and sit still right in the middle of all of it. There are causes to suffering, and they are rooted in our clinging and aversion to things; we can change it for the better by letting go. We can cultivate faith and create merit for all beings. Look up, as my master would say, towards the light of wisdom that comes from taking one step at a time into the unknown of letting go of an imaginary self that is made up of habitual reactions, hardened opinions, ideas and ideals. Buddhism is a religion, a road map for finding one's way across unknown territory, the territory of no hard-and-fast self, the real world. Sitting still is one of our guides, and the prime mover in this.

*To receive a copy of the book, write to Pine Mountain
Buddhist Temple or email:*

<https://pinemtnbuddhisttemple.org/contact/>

*

*“Pure meditation opens us so that we
may directly realize the Foundation of our
minds and dwell content within our own
Buddha Nature.”*

*Great Master Keizan: Instructions on
How to Do Pure Meditation*

Other OBC Resources for the Practice of Serene Reflection Meditation

Shasta Abbey Website offers a wide range of publications, Dharma talks and articles:

<https://shastaabbey.org/publications/>

<https://shastaabbey.org/teachings/>

including an additional resource on meditation instruction <https://shastaabbey.org/meditation-instruction/>

Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey website also has a range of materials, talks, downloads, videos and access to a bookshop at the *Dharma Teaching* drop down of the website: <https://throssel.org.uk/>

There are four videos of meditation instruction on:

<https://throssel.org.uk/videos/>

and a guided meditation here: [Guided meditation](#)

The OBC website: has a list of all Temples of the Order many of which have websites with more teaching and information: <https://obcon.org/>

This site also houses this Journal with access to previous issues: <https://journal.obcon.org/>

News of the Order

This news was gathered from temples earlier in the year, before coronavirus became a pandemic, and so does not reflect the current situation of all our temples being closed, or describe the work of ongoing support to their congregations.

UK and Europe

Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey

—Northumberland, England—UK—

Monastic News: Rev. Master Haryo departed for Shasta Abbey on 28th January after a long stay with us. We enjoyed a farewell meal with him at which we presented him with a token of our esteem and affection and thanked him for all he has offered us during his stay. Our gratitude and warmest wishes go with him.

On 4th February, Rev. Master Leandra ordained Will Dee, who was given the monastic name Hōun Kōun. His mother Catherine, who used to be a member of the Sheffield group, introduced him to our practice. She and other members of Rev. Kōun's family were present for the ceremony as witnesses to his taking this significant step in training. The photograph below shows Rev. Kōun with Master Leandra after the ceremony.



The day we reopened after our Winter Sangha retreat, Rev. Kanshin Lucas entered the monks' meditation hall as head novice. He formally asked Rev Master Leandra as abbot if he '...may sit beside you and learn from you' and accepted the wide range of organisational responsibilities of 'leading all the trainees.' Rev. Kōjō Bailey was appointed as assistant head novice to support him and take on a range of other duties around the monastery herself.



Rev. Kanshin

On these joyful events, we offer all three novices our congratulations and good wishes as their training unfolds.

Boz: Rev. Master Daishin's dog Boz died in February after an illness. A rescue dog who joined us in 2011, he became a friendly companion to all the community.



Boz

Rev. Master Oriana leaves: We have enjoyed a five month visit from Rev. Master Oriana from Eugene Buddhist Priory in Oregon. Many of you will know she trained at the monastery from 1997 until 2012. Before she left on February 14th, she was celebrant for the Maitreya Festival. After the ceremony, Rev. Master Oriana gave a talk which was recorded, and also videotaped. This is now on the Throssel website; <https://throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks/this-is-the-dwelling-place-by-rev-oriana-lachance/>

The Buddha's Enlightenment retreat was lead this year by Rev. Master Olwen, culminating in the Festival for the Buddha's Enlightenment. After this celebratory event, we closed for our winter monastic retreat, followed by rest time over the holiday season.

New Year Retreat: We reopened and welcomed retreatants for our New Year retreat. This was led by Rev. Master Berwyn and Rev. Kyōsei . Their talks can be found on our website here: <https://throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks/new-year-retreat-talks/> We celebrate the Birth of our Founder in a festival ceremony on 1st January every year. Rev. Kyōsei, as celebrant, offered deepest gratitude on behalf of us all to our Founder Great Master Hōun Jiyu for her limitless compassion.

Winter Sangha Retreat: We were heartened at the support we received during our January retreat which enabled the monastic community to step back and focus more on retreat time in the way most suitable for each individual. Throughout the month a group of lay friends organised themselves with good spirit and cooperation to help provide meals for us all. We had a social meal to end the month where Rev. Master Leandra thanked everyone for a most warm hearted and generous offering, which was much appreciated.



Mid-morning tea in the kitchen

Feb Intensive Weekend Retreat: One of the themes of this retreat was seeing the reading and writing of poetry as a potential ‘path of awareness’. In finding ways to express what seems unsayable, poetry can sometimes reveal and clarify our

understanding of ourselves. Alex Reed gave a talk about his experience in writing poetry and practice and there was a workshop by Kathleen Madigan exploring contemplative writing. This aspect of the retreat was much appreciated, integrated as it was within our usual retreat schedule with teaching by Rev. Master Berwyn. We held our annual Festival of the Buddha's Death on Saturday evening.

March Festival of Bhaisajyaguru Tathagata: Rev. Master Finnān led the weekend meditation, centred around the Medicine Buddha or Buddha of Healing and, after the Festival ceremony, gave a moving talk to the monks and lay trainees present.

Reducing our fuel costs: Over several months, our Bursar, Rev. Sanshin has been looking to identify ways to reduce our fuel costs. Just recently the fruits of his efforts have resulted in a new gas tank being installed to enable a different gas company to supply us at a much reduced rate. We hope to save several thousands of pounds over the coming years due to this. We are also grateful to the engineers who braved rather bleak wintry weather to change over the tanks.

—*Rev. Alina*

De Dharmatoevlucht

—*Apeldoorn, The Netherlands*—

Relocation of the temple: The temple has moved to a new location within the city of Apeldoorn. Although the building doesn't have the grandeur and beautiful surroundings the previous one had - we are now located in a business and office park - the inside is very quiet and spacious with lots of light due to the many large windows. This property has a large hallway, zendo, office space, common room with kitchen, and toilets. The zendo can easily seat 16 persons and the table in the common room, when extended, can also.



The Common room



Zendo

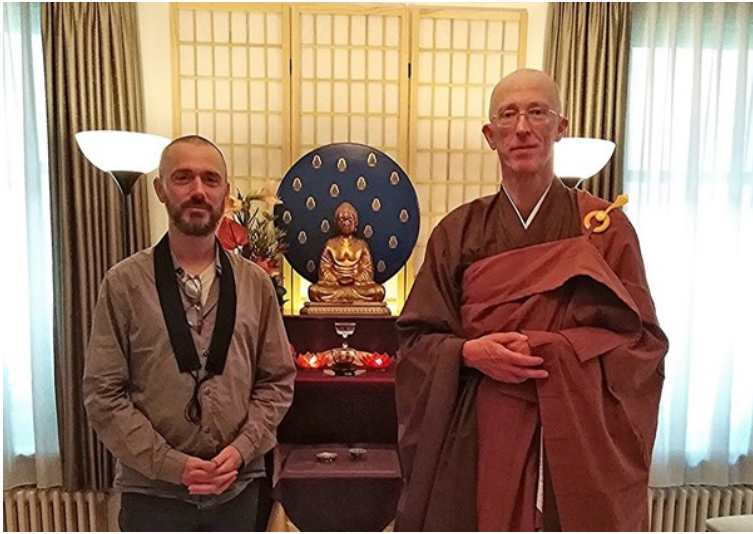
We were very fortunate to be given a large donation that not only covered the cost of a professional removal company to take care of the move, but also covered the expenditure of new floor carpets and laminate, curtains, of installing a kitchen and buying new furniture for the common room. Many sangha members have helped painting the walls, assembling Ikea cabinets and unpacking the many boxes of office, sacristy and kitchen items and library books. It is wonderful to see that when the need is there, help in is given so many ways.

Although the new temple will serve the congregation well, it unfortunately doesn't offer any facilities for an overnight stay. The Prior's residence will for the coming years be De Dharmatoevlucht hermitage, located at a distance of a 15 minute drive by car. Within the foreseeable future we hope to take the next step and buy a plot of land on which we can build a new temple where the prior, monks and lay trainees can stay overnight. The donations we received a few years ago for buying the old fire station will now be used for this purpose.

Celebration of Rev. Baldwin's ordination anniversary:

On Friday the 3rd of January a surprise party was organised by the Dutch sangha to celebrate Rev. Baldwin's 30th ordination anniversary. This happened in a lovely restaurant in Apeldoorn where more than 40 sangha members had gathered to celebrate the occasion with a wonderful vegetarian 5-course menu. We filled the restaurant's top floor. Rev. Baldwin was presented with a gift of almost 2000 euro to spend on the upkeep of a new temple dog. Later this year we will start looking for one.

Lay Ordination: On the 24th of November of last year Remko Mooij received the Precepts in the temple, with many of his family, friends and sangha members present. It was a joyous occasion and we wish Remko all the best in deepening his training.



Remko with Rev. Baldwin

—Rev. Master Baldwin

Norwich Zen Buddhist Priory

—Norwich—UK—

Move to new premises: This has been a time of great change for Norwich Zen Buddhist Priory, as we have had to move from the rented property that was our home since 2013. We have been fortunate to find a new home, a short distance away. This will be temporary and allow us to pursue our aim of purchasing a property later in the year. We are able to rent a lovely first-floor flat that is owned by a member of our Sangha. It is not as large a property as our previous one, but it is working well as a place for the Sangha to continue meeting together and as a prior's residence. This will give us an opportunity to take stock and plan our next steps, which will hopefully lead to us finding a long-term home.

We moved into our new Priory on 25th January. In the days leading up to the move and just after, there was a lovely sense of the Sangha working together and making whatever offerings of

help they could. A big “thank you” goes to everyone who contributed to making the transition from one Priory to another happen so smoothly. I was very touched by how many people offered help in all sorts of ways. I’m extremely grateful to everybody who assisted with packing, moving, unpacking and cleaning, as well as offering storage facilities, use of a van, meals and general support.

The move was able to happen quickly and with minimal disruption, so that we can now carry on as before, offering virtually the same schedule, just in a different setting. Now that we’ve had our first events, it’s apparent that the Priory is functioning well in its new home. Below are photos of the new Priory, showing the Meditation Room and tea in the Common Room.



Meditation Room



Common Room

It has been a pleasure to welcome plenty of people already to our new place of meditation and practice. I look forward to having more of our Sangha come along to sit with us as our life of training continues.

—*Rev. Master Leoma*

Reading Buddhist Priory

—*Reading, England–UK—*

This winter, the familiar round of festivals and ceremonies took place, with the Priory's annual four day retreat and evening Celebration of the Secular New Year Festival ushering in 2020. Before the ceremony a memorial was held for Arne Hansson, Mia Livingstone's father who had recently died. A special ceremony, in conjunction with the Festival of the Birth of Our Founder, was held on the 5th January to mark the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Priory doors for the first time.

Although the winter has been mild here in the south of England, we have felt the effects of several storms, and two of Reverend Gareth's regular outside group visits had to be

postponed. Locally, a lay member visited a cub group on Reverend Gareth's behalf.

This year, there have been a few revisions and innovations to the calendar. Monthly Introductory sessions were moved from an evening to a Saturday morning slot, giving a more expansive 'feel' to the event, and allowing Reverend Gareth to add more context around our practice. This has worked well – attendance was good and feedback has been positive.

Monthly Saturday Meditation Mornings have been introduced, providing a block of time not only for regulars, but also for those who wish to sit, or to read and reflect, but who cannot always make it to regular group sessions.

Reverend Gareth has started up a monthly Study Group, and the first meeting was held in February. We are reading the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng's *Platform Sutra*, with excursions into the complementary *Diamond Sutra*. The study group has generated a lot of interest and was well attended.

Socially, sangha members met at the Priory for a Film Night, enjoying Woody Allen's tragi-comedy 'Blue Jasmine' (2013) exploring class, gender and corporate criminality and their consequences.

Recently, the Priory received from two lay sangha members (who have returned from living in China), a generous donation of a large Chinese picture and a Chinese cabinet. These will add another dimension to the Priory's iconography.

For your diary. On June 21st we will be holding, (in association with the ceremony held in January), a day of celebration to mark the 30th anniversary of the Priory, as well as the move to our present address in the summer of 1990. So if you would like to meet up with old friends, on the day there will be visiting monks including ex-priors. Further details will be posted on our website and newsletter.

—Gina Bovan

Turning Wheel Buddhist Temple

—East Midlands—UK—

Recent Festivals: It was very nice to be joined by Sangha members from far and near for our first festival of the year, the Festival of Maitreya Bodhisattva on New Year's Day. At the beginning of February we had a good gathering for the Festival of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and in mid-February we held the Festival of the Buddha's Parinirvana at one of our regular evening meetings.

Plans for Building Modifications: We have been at the new temple property for two years now, and it is working very well as a place of practice. There are a few things about the layout of the downstairs rooms that could be improved, however, and since we moved in we have been hoping to make some modifications to the building to help with this. The main issue is that the stairs and the kitchen are both accessed via the main room of the property, but as this is our Meditation Hall we would prefer it not to be used as an access to get to other areas.

Over the last year or so we have been drawing up plans that include adding a porch at the front of the property and changing where the stairs are. We also plan to convert the garage to give a couple of additional bedrooms, an accessible bathroom and a utility room.

Late last year we applied for planning permission for the changes, and I'm pleased to say that these have now been approved. We still have a few steps to go before we can appoint the builders, but we hope that the work will be started some time over the summer. We think we will have sufficient funds to carry out the first couple of phases of the work, and we plan to try to raise some additional funds to complete the work, once we have a better idea of what the full cost is going to be.

New Bowing Seat: Towards the end of last year we were offered a Bowing Seat for our Meditation Hall by Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey. We are grateful to Throssel for offering it, and also to those who kindly helped transport it to the temple.



The new Bowing Seat in the Meditation Hall

It is used by the celebrant for ceremonies and provides a focal point in the middle of the room, pointing towards the main altar, which is of course the main focus of the room. We haven't had a Bowing Seat for the last five plus years, so it is very nice to have one.

Wolk-en-Water Hermitage

—*Vinkeven—The Netherlands—*

In February Rev. Master. Hakuun did a full Buddhist funeral for Simon van Hagen-Bil.

He became interested in Buddhism when he, while in Thailand on vacation, stayed in a Buddhist monastery for some time. He received lay-ordination in July 2018, in the care-home where he recently passed away.

—*Rev. Master Hakuun*

News of the Order

This news was gathered from temples earlier in the year, before coronavirus became a pandemic, and so does not reflect the current situation of all temples being closed, or describe the work of ongoing support to their congregations.

USA and Canada

Shasta Abbey

—*Shasta Abbey, CA–USA*—

Precepts Ceremony: On November 23rd, long-time lay resident Adam Heller received the Precepts from Rev. Master Daishin. We were very happy to see Adam take this step in his training.

Monastic Guests: On November 28th, Rev. Caitlin Clark of Great Ocean Dharma Refuge in Wales arrived for a year and a half stay. We are very grateful to have her help in the kitchen. Then on January 6th Rev. Master Kōten of the Lions Gate Buddhist Priory in British Columbia began a stay of several months. As a more senior disciple of Rev. Master Jiyu, we appreciate his sharing of teaching connected with her. We also welcomed Ven. Yan Jiao for five weeks on February 3rd—she is a monk at Dharma Drum Monastery in Taiwan. Lastly, we were happy to host short stays by Rev. Master Leon and Rev. Veronica during our closed period in January.

Closed period: During January we were closed to guests and had an uneventful time of quiet rest. A highlight was a meal offering by a monk's grandparents. We all enjoyed the deep-dish pizza and cheesecake.



Monks receiving meal offering

Animal Funerals & Memorials: We celebrated several animal memorials and funerals this past winter – in November, for Simba, Caroline Burke’s horse, and in December, for Cleo and Kay See, Allie Romanow’s cats. In February we said farewell to Miss Marple, the monastery’s feline matriarch. After a long life she died peacefully on February 6th, and Rev. Master Jishō conducted her ceremony the next day.



Miss Marple

—*Rev. Master Oswin*

Lions Gate Buddhist Priory

—*Lytton, British Columbia—Canada—*



Segaki Point this winter

This winter we have had a fair amount of snow and some very cold temperatures, but we have managed to keep our road clear and deal with the various challenges that we encountered, such as keeping warm enough, frozen water pipes, vehicles in the ditch, plowing snow, and trucks not starting.

Despite the colder weather, we have welcomed a steady stream of visitors from the local area and from Vancouver, Kelowna, and Edmonton. Visitors are always welcome, whether it's "just for tea" or for longer stays.

Our festival ceremonies continue to be held on Sunday mornings. In early February we started to hold the Sunday morning activities on the Priory property, with meditation, a ceremony and Dharma Talk at Prajnatarā Hall, followed by lunch at Bodhidharma Hall. In December, we held an animal funeral for Misty, a cat which we encountered on the highway that had just been hit by a car and died a few minutes later. We buried her in the Animal Cemetery. On New Year's Eve we had a meditation vigil and ceremony at Prajnatarā Hall, during which Rev. Master Kōten revolved the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* and we recited the *Kojin Shingon Dharani* 21 times. Rev. Master Kōten offered a short Dharma Talk when the ceremony ended. The evening, though cold, was well attended by members of the local and Vancouver congregations. Afterwards, we all went up to Bodhidharma Hall for festive snacks, and people rang the temple bell to welcome in the New Year.

On February 23 we celebrated the winter Kwan Yin Festival ceremony at the Lytton Chinese History Museum. Twelve people attended, despite the heavy snowfall. Afterwards we enjoyed a festive potluck lunch.

We held our annual Winter Monastic Retreat from December 8 to December 15. Although it was very cold, we did most of our sitting meditation at Prajnatarā Hall. Rev. Master Kōten offered Dharma Talks and informal discussions throughout

the week. We are grateful for this opportunity to be still during the quietness of winter.

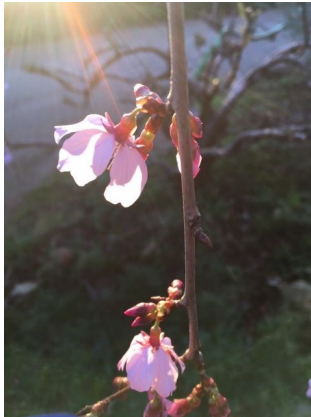
Rev. Master Kōten left for Shasta Abbey in early January for a three-month visit, and we wanted to celebrate his 65th birthday and wish him a good trip before he departed, so we held an “early birthday party” for him on December 29. A total of 13 people came, including folks from Vancouver and friends from Lytton. It was a festive and lively celebration with good food and cheerful company. Thank you to Sherron for organising this!

We continue to visit the Vancouver meditation group regularly on the last Sunday of the month, and we meet regularly on Sunday mornings and Tuesday evening in the Lytton area. We also attend a local interfaith meeting on the last Sunday of each month. For information, please contact us.

—*Rev. Master Aurelian*

Redding Zen Buddhist Priory

—*Redding, CA–US—*



Cherry blossom outside the Priory

The life of the Priory is blossoming. The weeping cherries are blooming and the schedule provides opportunities for quiet meditation, as well as for deepening practice, taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

We were delighted to welcome Rev. Master Meian, Abbess of Shasta Abbey, to stay overnight with us at Redding Zen. On Friday evening, February 14, nearly 60 people came to hear her offer teaching on *Buddhism and Our Practice of Serene Reflection Meditation* in a public talk given at Redding's Center for Spiritual Living. The next day she offered a retreat here at the Priory for 19 of us on *The Precepts - What It Means to Take Them, What It Means to Keep Them*.

The Priory calendar has had a full offering of Dharma offerings this year including our Embodying Intention Retreat, as well as the Precepts Class and a class on *The History of Our Tradition through Our Ancestral Line*. As part of that class Rev. Master Kōten visited the Priory to offer his insight into female Ancestors in the Ancestral Line. In March Rev. Andō Mueller visited the Priory to offer teaching on the importance of ceremony in our practice, as well as instruction in chanting our Morning Service Scriptures and other ceremonial music. She also gave instruction in the use of gongs, clappers, and inkens. The measure of the day was that two Sangha members chanted - yes, chanted - the offertory for the next day's Transfer of Merit Ceremony.

—Rev. Helen

Still Flowing Water Hermitage,

—Meadow Vista, CA-US—

Still Flowing Water Hermitage was incorporated in the state of California as a religious non-profit in December of 2019. Rev. Vivian is the resident monk and is currently living in a small guest house on the property of two members of the Bear River Meditation Group. For now the chief work of the Hermitage is to

provide the presence of a monk and teachings to the Bear River Meditation Group. We have just completed a seven-part study of the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, and will be studying the Precepts as a number of the group prepare to go up to Shasta Abbey for Jukai. In January we held our Intensive Practice Period for the fifth year in a row. This includes daily morning meditation and Morning Service, evening meditation and Vespers, two Monday evening gatherings of the group with Dharma talks, and several morning gatherings for discussions. This year we chose Rev. Kōten's "*Five Diamond Points*" for the topic of discussion.

On 23 February the meditation group sponsored a public talk given by Rev. Vivian entitled "Practicing Kindness: Mindfulness, Meditation, Non-harming, and Kindness - Tools for Living in Today's World," held at the Auburn Public Library. The talk was attended by sixty people and was enthusiastically received. On 26 February Rev. Vivian gave a session of the Asian Humanities class at Sierra College, a local community college, on the topic of how Buddhism has changed as it has been integrated into American culture.

Rev. Vivian would like to express her gratitude for twenty-two years of training at Shasta Abbey which has enabled her to begin this new undertaking and explore what it may have to offer. She is also deeply appreciative of all the offers of support she has received in her new role financially, in the form of time and help offered, and especially through the training and participation of those who have devoted themselves to the Bear River Meditation Group with such depth of commitment for so many years.

—Rev. Vivian Gruenenfelder

Wallowa Buddhist Temple

—Joseph, Oregon – USA –

Winter weather here in the mountains has been comparatively gentle this year. Fortunately, our immediate area

did not experience flooding from recent sudden snowmelt as happened elsewhere in our county and region.

Ceremonial: Rev. Master Meidō revolved *The Scripture of Great Wisdom* during a “daylight” New Year’s Eve Ceremony, for which we were joined by over a dozen of the congregation and friends of the temple. This event was held mid-afternoon to allow for safer travel on icy roads for those attending. On New Year’s Day, the temple hosted a well-attended open house for our community, neighbors, and friends and family of the congregation who welcomed in the New Year by ringing the temple bell, enjoying several hours of relaxed time in each other’s company, and partaking in a bounty of refreshments and treats.



Wallowa Buddhist Temple in snow (photo by Rev. Clairissa)

Retreat Guests: Despite the challenges of winter travel in our region, four retreat guests joined us, individually, for short stays during this winter season. Two were from the local area, two others from Montana and California, respectively.

Individual Retreats: One of the Wallowa Buddhist Temple’s main purposes is to offer a place where both monks and congregation from our wider Sangha can come for individual retreats. Those interested in arranging such a retreat are welcome to call or write for more information.

—Rev. Master Meidō and Rev. Clairissa

TEMPLES OF THE ORDER—USA / CANADA

Shasta Abbey

Rev. Master Meian Elbert, Abbess
3724 Summit Drive
Mt. Shasta, CA 96067-9102
Ph: (530) 926-4208 [Fax: -0428]
shastaabbey@shastaabbey.org
www.shastaabbey.org

Berkeley Buddhist Priory

Rev. Master Kinrei Bassis
1358 Marin Ave.
Albany, CA 94706
Ph: (510) 528-1876 [Fax: -2139]
prior@berkeleybuddhistpriory.org
www.berkeleybuddhistpriory.org

Columbia Zen Buddhist Priory

Rev. Master Rokuzan Kroenke
426 Arrowwood Road
Columbia, SC 29210-7508
Ph: (803)772-7552
www.columbiazen.org

Eugene Buddhist Priory

Rev. Master Oriana LaChance
85415 Teague Loop
Eugene, OR 97405-9536
Ph: (541) 344-7377
info@eugenebuddhistpriory.org
www.eugenebuddhistpriory.org

Idaho Panhandle area and Sandpoint Meditation Group

Rev. Master Zensho Roberson
P. O. Box 74
Saint Maries, ID 83861
Ph: (208) 245-4950
RevZenshoR@gmail.com

Pine Mountain Buddhist Temple

Rev. Master Phoebe van Woerden
941 Lockwood Valley Road
Maricopa, CA 93252
Ph: (805) 633 1143
pmbt@pinemtnbuddhisttemple.org
www.pinemtnbuddhisttemple.org

Portland Buddhist Priory

Rev. Master Leon Kackman
3642 SE Milwaukie Avenue
Portland, OR 97202
Ph: (503) 238-1123
prior1@portlandbuddhistpriory.org
www.portlandbuddhistpriory.org

Redding Zen Buddhist Priory

Rev. Helen Cummings
1190 South Street,
Redding CA 96001
www.reddingzen.org/
Ph: (530) 962-0317
reddingzen@gmail.com

Still Flowing Water Hermitage

Rev. Vivian Gruenfelder
PO Box 1374, Meadow Vista,
CA 95722-1374
stillflowingwaterhermitage@gmail.com

Wallowa Buddhist Temple

Rev. Master Meidō Tuttle
62916 Hurricane Creek Road
Joseph, OR 97846
Ph: (541) 432-6129
temple@wallowabuddhisttemple.org
www.wallowabuddhisttemple.org

CANADA

Lions Gate Buddhist Priory

Rev. Master Kōten Benson
P. O. Box 701
Lytton, B.C. V0K 1Z0
Ph: 250-999-3911
lionsgatebuddhistpriory@gmail.com
www.lionsgatebuddhistpriory.ca

Affiliated Meditation Groups

CA: Auburn, Chico, Morro Bay,
Ventura

ID: Sandpoint

MT: Whitefish

CANADA:

Edmonton, Alberta, Lytton BC
Vancouver BC

TEMPLES OF THE ORDER—EUROPE

UK

Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey
Rev. Master Leandra Robertshaw,
Abbot
Carrshield, HEXHAM
Northumberland NE47 8AL
Ph: 01434 345 204
gd@throssel.org.uk
www.throssel.org.uk

Dragon Bell Temple
Rev. Master Myfanwy McCorry
17 Angel Hill
Tiverton, Devon, EX16 6PE
Ph: 01884 - 257-532
dragonbelltemple@gmail.com
www.dragonbelltemple.org.uk

Great Ocean Dharma Refuge
Rev. Master Mokugen Kublicki
Penwern
Felindre Farchog
CRYMYCH, Pembrokeshire
SA41 3XF
Ph: 01239 891 360

Norwich Zen Buddhist Priory
Rev. Master Leoma Hague
NORWICH,
Ph: 01603 457933
info@norwichzen.org.uk
www.norwichzen.org.uk

The Place of Peace Dharma House
Rev. Master Myōhō Harris
P. O. Box 207
ABERYSTWYTH
SY23 1WY
Ph: 01970 625402
www.placeofpeacewales.org.uk

Portobello Buddhist Priory
Rev. Master Favian Straughan
27 Brighton Place, Portobello
EDINBURGH EH15 1LL
Ph: 0131 669 9622
favian.straughan@homecall.co.uk
www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk

Reading Buddhist Priory
Rev. Gareth Milliken
176 Cressingham Road
READING RG2 7LW
Ph: 0118 986 0750
rpriory@yahoo.co.uk
www.readingbuddhistpriory.org.uk

Rochdale Zen Retreat
Rev. Master Peter Bonati
The Briars, Grange Lane
Hutton
PRESTON
PR4 5JE
Ph: 01772 612 112

Sitting Buddha Hermitage
Rev. Master Alicia Rowe
CROMFORD
Derbyshire
Ph: 01629 821813.
alicia@fieldofmerit.org
www.sittingbuddhaheritage.fieldofmerit.org

Telford Buddhist Priory
49 The Rock
TELFORD TF3 5BH
Ph/Fax: 01952 615 574
www.tbpriory.org.uk

Turning Wheel Buddhist Temple
Rev. Master Aiden Hall
7 Chadderton Close
West Knighton
LEICESTER
LE2 6GZ
Ph. 0116 210 3870
www.turningwheel.org.uk

Affiliated Meditation Groups:
UK: Aberdeen, Aberfeldy,
Birmingham, Cambridge,
Carmarthen, Cirencester, Cornwall,
Dundee, Galloway, Hexham,
Huddersfield, Inverness, Jersey,
Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester,
London, Milton Keynes,
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North
Lakes, Norwich, Nottingham,
Sheffield, Teesside

GERMANY

Dharmazuflucht Schwarzwald

Rev. Master Fuden Nessi
Wonnenbach 4
77793 GUTACH
Germany
Ph. +49 (0)7833 - 96 56 408
www.dharmazuflucht.info

LATVIA

Sōtō Zen Riga

Rev. Bridin Rūšins
Sōtō Zen Riga
Tomsona Street 30-8
Riga LV1013
Latvia
Ph: 1-215-666-5634 (direct line as if in US)
Ph: 011-371-259-563-40. (Latvia)
www.sotozenriga.lv
elgarusins@gmail.com

THE NETHERLANDS

De Dharmatoevlucht (Dharma Refuge)

Rev. Master Baldwin Schreurs
De Dharmatoevlucht
Jean Monnetpark 73, 7336 BB
Apeldoorn, The Netherlands
Ph: (0031) (0)6 372 68 541
www.dharmatoevlucht.nl

Wolk-en-Water Hermitage

Rev. Master Hakuun Barnhard
Kerkeweg 81, 8484 KB Langelille
The Netherlands.
Ph. 0031 561 475 306
<https://www.wolkenwater.nl/en/>

Affiliated Meditation Groups:

The Netherlands:

Groningen, Utrecht.

For details of meditation groups, your nearest priory, contact the Guestmaster at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, or in the US, Shasta Abbey

Further Information

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As Buddhism grows in the West, we wish to share the Buddha's Teaching through our Journal; we also share our experience of practicing the Buddha's Way, thus encouraging and supporting each other's training. Lastly, the Journal helps to keep friends and members informed of activities and events.

The views expressed in these pages are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Order as a whole.

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