

Vow and Repentance

excerpts from *Living By Vow: A Practical Introduction to Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts*
by Shohaku Okumura

[Okumura Roshi's teacher] Uchiyama Roshi often used the expression *ichiza nigyō sanshin*. The first word, *ichiza*, means "one sitting," referring, of course, to our practice of zazen. *Nigyō* means "two practices," vow and repentance. *Sanshin*, "three minds," refers to three mental attitudes described by Dogen Zenji: joyful mind, parental mind, and magnanimous mind. "One sitting," Uchiyama Roshi says, is the centre of our zazen practice. By "one sitting" he doesn't mean one of many. In this context "one" means absolute.

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According to Uchiyama Roshi zazen has two aspects. One is vow and the other is repentance. In this context "aspect" doesn't mean that there are two parts to our zazen. It means that the whole of sitting is the practice of vow and, at the same time, the practice of repentance. Whether or not we are aware of it, we are living out the reality of life. Unfortunately, we lose sight of this reality. Our life is like a hand. When we see it as a hand, there is no distinction between the fingers. But when we see it as a collection of fingers, each finger is independent and has its own name and characteristics. Each has a unique shape and function. They can act independently and are not interchangeable.

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Although this is the reality of our life, we are almost always unaware of it. We think of this person which is ourself as most important, as the center of the universe. We need to return to the reality that exists before egocentricity arises, before the separation of this body and mind from the rest of the world. This is what Uchiyama Roshi meant when he said we are living at the intersection of the universal self and the ego-centred self.

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Each of the bodhisattva vows is a kind of paradox or contradiction. It is impossible to accomplish or completely achieve the vows. Since we are working at something infinite or absolute, it's important to reflect on the fact that we can never accomplish it. We cannot be perfect. This awakening to our own imperfection is repentance . . . Vow and repentance are two kinds of energy that enable us to continue our practice. Zazen is itself the practice of vow. Zazen is itself the practice of repentance.