

ENDOWED FROM THE START

HOW SHOULD WE SIT PROPERLY? Zazen, or sitting meditation, should be physically comfortable. At the same time, zazen is the practice and realization of manifesting our body as *bodhi*, as enlightenment. It is both the practice and the realization, for when we truly do zazen, there is no distinction between practice and realization. It is wisdom *as is*, as things are. This zazen, the practice of the Buddha Way, is none other than the practice of one's life.

The best way to practice is to forget the self. By forgetting the self, we can appreciate our life not in the narrow, restricted, isolated way

that we usually live but rather as a life of unity, a life that is unsurpassable. Another way to explain what we mean by forgetting the self is that we are transcending the subject-object relationship or the I-Other relationship. We are transcending duality.

So how can each of us really do the best zazen?

Our physical and mental postures are very important. The position of the hands, or mudra, symbolizes the unity of opposites. It reflects a sense of harmony, a kind of completeness or perfection. In the Soto school we have a special mudra of Maha Vairochana Buddha, the manifestation of formless forms.

There are two ways to form Vairochana's mudra. According to both Keizan Zenji and Dogen Zenji, the founders of Soto Zen, place your left hand on the right palm. There are different explanations for this. For instance, we say the right hand is the hand of yang, active, and the left hand is yin, quiet or passive. So when we do zazen we put the left hand on the right hand so that the less active left hand calms the active right hand, the activity of the body and mind. But when you see the statue of Maha Vairochana Buddha, the right hand is on the left palm, so there are two ways of forming this mudra.

The tips of the thumbs, lightly touching, are held evenly in a horizontal position. Some people tilt their hands without realizing it. Hold your hands like the surface of still water, calm and without tension. Sitting too tensely or too loosely is reflected in your mudra. If your thumbs are pressed tightly and rigidly together, or if your hands are apart and the thumbs don't meet, all these tell you something about your sitting. When sitting in the half lotus position,* your hands may rest on your foot. Let the mudra be well balanced. Even though you think that you are sitting correctly, it is not so simple to keep the mudra in the right position. It is very helpful to sit in front of a mirror and check your posture, or have someone check your posture for you.

It is also important to pay attention to our feet. When we sit in the half lotus or in the full lotus position, the tops of our feet rest on our

* To sit in the half lotus position, place the right foot under the left thigh, then place the left foot over the right thigh.—Eds.

thighs. I understand that there are about seven hundred acupuncture points and about sixteen meridians, all relating to one particular point in the sole. In putting the feet in the half or the full lotus position, the soles are nicely stimulated. The body settles down and we can physically sit very comfortably.

When you sit on a chair, be aware of these principles and place the soles of your feet firmly on the floor. The soles of the feet are like the roots of a tree. The roots are growing, penetrating into the ground—not necessarily pushing their way into the earth but naturally filling it. Have your body in the same way, solid and penetrating into the ground. We become strong by doing so, and we can sense the unity and harmony with the earth.

When you have settled your body, sway your upper body from side to side in large arcs, slowly decreasing the angle of swaying. As you decrease the angle of swaying, adjust your spine so that it is upright and let it settle in this upright position. Tuck in your chin and let your eyes settle half open, setting your gaze about three to four feet in front of you at a forty-five degree angle. Then start sitting. When you come out of zazen, sway your body again, but in reverse. Slowly start swaying in small arcs, increasing to large arcs. Sway not only your body but also your concentration, so that you can carry that concentration into standing and walking. This slow swaying is a very natural procedure. When your *samadhi* is strong, you can't immediately jump up from sitting. Standing very quickly indicates your *samadhi* is not very strong. Easing the body into and out of the sitting posture can help you focus your concentration.

When you are settled for zazen, take several deep breaths. In English we say inhale and exhale. In Japanese we say *kokyū*. *Ko* is exhalation and *kyū* is inhalation. It may seem more logical for your inhalation to come first, but after settling your body, exhale first. When you exhale, exhale as much air as possible through your mouth, not your nostrils. Our exhalations are usually very small, so open your mouth slightly and exhale completely so that you feel your lungs are squeezed. You can bend slightly forward when exhaling.

When you exhale through the mouth, you have a direct sensation of

exhaling toxins from the body, not just breathing out air. Then when you have to inhale, the air comes in quickly. Expand your lungs to breathe deeply. Then once again, exhale and inhale in the same way. While exhaling, you can squeeze and tighten the muscles in your butt, relaxing when you inhale. Then let your breathing return to normal. Let your breathing become relaxed.

Regarding breathing, I am reminded of one of my teacher Koryu Roshi's favorite expressions. He said that when you breathe in, swallow the whole universe. When you breathe out, breathe out the whole universe. In and out. In and out. Eventually you forget about the division between breathing in and breathing out; even breathing is totally forgotten. You just sit with a sense of unity.

We put our mental concentration in the *hara*. The *hara* is a point in our body that generates *chi*, energy, and it is approximately two inches below the navel. If we sit in half or full lotus position and the soles of our feet are supported by our thighs, they are close to the *hara* and receive more stimulation from our concentration, and altogether the entire body functions better.

Having settled our body and breath, we next adjust the mind. In his *Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen (Fukanzazengi)*, Dogen Zenji writes, "Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Non-thinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen."* In other words, penetrate into one point, into the nondual state.

When we sit, we may have the experience of observing. Observing includes the observer and the object that is being observed. This is dualistic. As long as we are dualistic, we can't experience being, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. As long as there is a division between you and something else, there is a separation. You can make a conscious effort of seventy, eighty or even up to ninety percent to eliminate this gap. But as long as you are consciously trying and holding an object, you can't quite do it. The very last ten percent is the most important effort.

* Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, trans., "Fukanzazengi (The Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen) by Dogen Zenji," in *On Zen Practice II: Body, Breath and Mind*, ed. Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi and Bernard Tetsugen Glassman (Los Angeles: Zen Center of Los Angeles, 1976), 14.

The way to realize yourself one hundred percent is to penetrate into *samadhi*, the state of nonthinking. As long as we remain within the confines of the thinking mind, we can't experience the state of nonthinking. If we can't experience nonthinking, we will not understand what our life truly is. Please realize this for yourself. Just sit!

Just-sitting is perhaps the most difficult thing to do. For in order to just-sit, we have to forget the self. What does that mean? There are no thoughts because there is no thinker. Instead, we *are* the thoughts that come up. There are no bird songs because there are no concepts of bird songs. Instead, we *are* those sounds. In the same way we are the raindrops, we are the thunder and the lightning. In sitting, the whole universe is revealed and manifested.

In *zazen* we do not expect anything. *Zazen* is not a technique to achieve anything, it is much more natural. And yet, somehow the most natural thing is difficult to do. How come? Because we think. There is nothing wrong with thinking. Thinking is a very natural process, but we are so easily conditioned by our thinking and give too much value to it. We try to take care of ourselves, of our ego structures, by thinking. Thinking is an abstraction. It is not being, it is thinking about being. And since we are born and die seven thousand times in one second, the conditions that we think about are already gone. We are thinking about shadows rather than being this very life itself.

A famous koan states that mind is ungraspable. Since mind and body are not two, this body is ungraspable. And yet there is a way to appreciate the ungraspable. How? By *being* it. The whole, complete being manifesting *as is*. Everything is here right now. Nirvana is right here. But somehow we ignore that fact, and we start doing something else or looking for something else. All these expectations are unnecessary. There is no need to look for any further accomplishment or attainment of anything. Everything is already here.

Zazen is our life, the life of the Buddha Way, the way to practice the Buddha dharma. Dogen Zenji wrote: "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas." To study this life and to forget the self mean to truly be the Way. The Way is not a path or a

direction. The Way is everything. Each of us is the Way. At each moment, everything is all together liberated, manifesting as a whole. It is not one's own activity—for in zazen the one has disappeared—but the activity of all the buddhas. All phenomena of the entire universe are unified with one's own activity. This is the kind of zazen we should appreciate.

The experience of this body and mind *as is* is the plain, universal fact that all the ancient masters realized. It is the realization that the Way is complete. Everything is here. No artificial devices are needed. But the Way is difficult to realize because our conditioned mind creates a gap between Oneself and oneself. If we are always thinking, if we see our life only in dualistic terms, then we cannot forget the self. Therefore devices can sometimes be effective. Some devices are like surgical treatments, others more like herbal treatments. Removing the bad parts in surgery can be effective but sometimes drastic. Herbal treatments, on the other hand, are a more gradual process and are also effective. But even so, when we realize the Way, there is no quick and there is no gradual. How can we experience this Way?

There are many different kinds of aspects to our life and practice. I simply encourage you in one way or another to penetrate into this life and utilize any opportunity that is available. If you think it is necessary, you can try all sorts of schemes or devices. But do not forget that everything is with you to begin with. When you sit, please remind yourself how you can sit best. When you do that, all the buddhas and ancestors guarantee it is the right way. Have good trust in yourself—not in the one that you think you should be, but in the One that you are.