

WHY ZAZEN?

This question was commonly asked by Dogen Zenji's students. In *Shobogenzo Bendowa*, Dogen Zenji asks eighteen questions about zazen and answers them himself. Let us look at the first three questions.

The first question is: "We have now heard that the merit of zazen is lofty and great, but an ignorant person may be doubtful and say, 'There are many gates for Buddha dharma. Why do you recommend zazen exclusively?' " The answer: "Because this is the front gate for the Buddha dharma."

Many of you have this same question. There are so many different ways to appreciate the dharma. We study the dharma. Our life itself is dharma. Even without doing zazen we can practice, we can understand, maybe we can understand even better. So why is there so much emphasis on sitting? Because it is the front gate for penetrating the teachings of the Buddha.

The second question naturally follows: "Why do you regard zazen alone as the front gate?" Dogen Zenji answers: "The great master Shakyamuni correctly transmitted this splendid method of training in the Way. The Tathagatas of past, future, and present all attained the Way by doing zazen. For this reason it has been transmitted as the front gate. Not only that, but also all ancestors in India and China have attained the Way by doing zazen. Thus, I now teach this front gate to human beings and *devas* [gods]."

What does the Way mean? It could also be translated as enlightenment, or to enlighten. It means to gain the Way, to realize the Way, or to attain enlightenment. Dogen Zenji does not say just sit and do not expect to realize or to attain anything. Rather, he says, all buddhas and masters did zazen and attained the Way. From zazen, the Way emerges. Attainment is the natural function of zazen. So it is not a matter of do not attain enlightenment or do not seek after enlightenment. It happens! Just don't be too crazy about it happening.

Dogen Zenji says that great enlightenment is like eating meals or

drinking tea. In other words, enlightenment is as common as eating or drinking. So do not go chasing crazily after it. Just do zazen and make clear what the Buddha dharma, the One Body, is. This Buddha dharma is the treasury of the true dharma eye, which is no other than the life of each of us.

The third question is longer. “We understand that you have correctly transmitted the Tathagata’s excellent method and studied the tracks of the ancestors. It is beyond the reach of ordinary thought. However, reading sutras or chanting the Buddha’s name of itself must be a cause of enlightenment. How can zazen, just sitting uselessly and doing nothing, be depended upon for attaining enlightenment?” Some of you might have a similar question, too.

Dogen Zenji’s answer is also long, but let me quote part of it. I like this passage:

If you think that the samadhi of all buddhas, their unsurpassable great method, is just sitting uselessly and doing nothing, you’ll be one who slanders the Great Vehicle. Your delusion will be deep, like saying that there is no water when you are in the middle of the great ocean. Already, all buddhas graciously sit at ease in self-fulfilling samadhi. Is this not producing great merit? What a pity that your eyes are not yet open, that your mind is still intoxicated.

Now, the realm of all buddhas is inconceivable. It can’t be reached by consciousness. Much less can those who have no trust, who lack wisdom, know it. Only those who have right trust and great capacity can enter this realm. Those who have no trust will not accept it however much they are taught. Even at the assembly on Vulture Peak,* there were those who were told by Shakyamuni Buddha, “You may leave if you wish.”†

* Vulture Peak refers to the location where the Buddha preached the *Lotus Sutra*.—Eds.

† Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 147–148.

Studying the sutras intellectually is not quite enough. Dogen Zenji emphasizes the attaining of awareness. Zazen is not just idle sitting. If you say that is your practice, you slander the Great Vehicle.*

Dogen Zenji says, “Already all buddhas graciously sit at ease in self-fulfilling samadhi.” He urges us to practice zazen correctly and actualize this self-fulfilling samadhi of all the buddhas. In Japanese, the word for self-fulfilled samadhi is *jijuyu zanmai*. *Ji* means “self,” *ju* means “to receive,” and *yu* means “to use.” So, receive yourself and use yourself freely. What does it mean to receive and use oneself? *Zanmai* is samadhi, being this freely functioning life of the Buddhas.

Dogen Zenji talks about this in the first paragraph of *Bendowa*. Self-fulfilling samadhi is to realize the supreme wisdom that has been directly transmitted from Buddha to buddhas and ancestors. Verify this! Experience this supreme wisdom yourself as self-fulfilling samadhi, truly self-contained, truly content. This is given from buddha to buddha; there is no discrepancy there. And if you are not truly self-contained, then become that! Do zazen and close the gap between your life and the buddhas’ life. With the mind of no-separation, you yourself will emerge as that self-fulfilled samadhi.

Self-fulfilled samadhi is sometimes translated as self-joyous samadhi, but it does not matter whether samadhi is joyous, overwhelming, or whatever. This samadhi is Oneself. As thorough as Oneself. It is totally autonomous. How do we enjoy this samadhi? In one way or other we are in that samadhi, regardless of whether we recognize it or not, regardless of whether we struggle with it or not. So why not enjoy it as much as we can?

There is the famous koan of Daitso Chisho Buddha, who sat in the zendo for ten *kalpas*, or countless ages, and the Buddha dharma never appeared. Why not? No attainment was accomplished. What does this mean? You yourself are in the same sphere, living the same life as Daitso Chisho Buddha. For ten kalpas, you yourself have already been in this state of attainment. Regardless of how long Daitso Chisho Buddha sits,

* Mahayana Buddhism—Eds.

regardless of how long you sit, the Buddha dharma never appears because it is already here! Reveal it! Do not cover it up!

In order to reveal it, the best practice is zazen. Dogen Zenji says, "Right trust. Right faith. Great vessel. Great capacity." Those who have great capacity can believe this, and they can enjoy it. And those who have small capacity cannot believe it. Those with small capacity say, "No, I am no good. My life cannot be the life of the Buddha." Do you say this?

Only those who have right trust and great capacity can realize that we are already this! Let it reveal itself. You do not need to bring in anything from anyplace or anybody—this is shikantaza. You and zazen merge into one—this is the Buddha!

I encourage you to have a very basic understanding of zazen and of what we are practicing. We are revealing the life of each of us as self-fulfilling samadhi, as nothing other than the alive, vital activity of all the buddhas. When we reveal this, we will see that Shakyamuni is still alive. Please encourage yourself in this way so that you fully appreciate this transient, frenzied life as the self-contained, self-fulfilled life of all the buddhas. Appreciate this as *your* life!