

THE FIRST POINT OF ZEN mind training includes only one slogan:

1. Train in the preliminaries. You can understand and practice this slogan three ways. First, the preliminaries includes everything difficult that has happened in your life up until the moment you begin the training. The divorce you are going through or have gone through but never digested, the inexplicable breakup from out of the blue, the unexpected death of someone close to you that has shaken you to the core, a terrible childhood you might have thought you'd gotten over but now realize you haven't, an illness, a job loss, or some other present or past disaster may be the preliminaries for you. The difference between just suffering these things and trying to cope and "training" has to do with how you view them, with your sense of resolve and personal responsibility. Even if what happened to you was not your fault, taking responsibility for it now that it has happened, owning it as the stuff of your present life—rather than seeing it as a tragedy that shouldn't have happened and that therefore there's someone to blame (even if there is someone to blame) or bemoaning your sad fate and life's terrible injustice—is Training in the preliminaries. In other words, to Train in the preliminaries is to stop moaning and feeling sorry for yourself and to recognize instead that regardless of what has happened or why, this is your life and you are the only one equipped to deal with it. And then, based on that sense of personal responsibility, Training in the preliminaries involves reflecting on your life so that you can develop the resolve and courage to begin a new life path. Training in the preliminaries is the process of looking honestly at your life and making a firm decision to embark on a disciplined spiritual path.

A second way to understand Train in the preliminaries, and the way that a Zen student would be most likely to see it, is "practice zazen (Zen meditation)." Start a meditation practice, a daily practice if possible, and trust that sitting regularly on your cushion with your breathing and the feeling of your body will provide the spiritual inspiration and force necessary to set a new process in motion in your life.

A third way is to follow the set of traditional reflections given in Tibetan and Mahayana Buddhism, specifically as a way of Training in the preliminaries.

Deep and systematic reflection on these four points constitutes Training in the preliminaries: The rarity and preciousness of human life. The inevitability of death. The awesome and indelible power of our actions. The inescapability of suffering. With this reflection we'll realize that the only adequate response to the sober realities of our lives is some form of spiritual practice. I am not necessarily speaking of religion or spirituality in the conventional sense but, rather, that these reflections will cause us to appreciate the seriousness of our human condition and to recognize that we have to live as seriously as we possibly can in response to the gift and the problem that is our life.