

A Small Collection of Zen Teachings, Stories & Posters



Zen teaches nothing. Whatever teachings there are in Zen, they come out of one's own mind. We teach ourselves; Zen merely points the way.

(D. T. Suzuki — *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*)



What is Zen?

(<http://www.zen-buddhism.net>)

Defining Zen is like trying to describe the taste of honey to someone who has never tasted it before. You can try to explain the texture and scent of honey, or you can try to compare and correlate it with similar foods. However, honey is honey! As long as you have not tasted it, you are in the illusion of what honey is. The same goes with Zen because Zen Buddhism is a practice that needs to be experienced, not a concept that you can intellectualize or understand with your brain.

So, What is Buddhism?

At the heart of the Japanese culture lies Zen, a school of Mahayana Buddhism. Zen is, first and foremost, a practice that was uninterruptedly transmitted from master to disciple, and that goes back to the spiritual enlightenment of a man named Siddhārtha Gautama - The Buddha - 2500 years ago in India.

The practice of Zen meditation or Zazen, is the core of Zen Buddhism: without it, there is no Zen. Zen meditation is a way of vigilance and self-discovery. It is the experience of living from moment to moment, in the here and now. It is through the practice of Zazen that Gautama got enlightened and became the Buddha.

Zazen is an attitude of spiritual awakening, which when practiced, can become the source from which all the actions of daily life flow - eating, sleeping, breathing, walking, working, talking, thinking, and so on.

Zen Buddhism is not a theory, an idea, or a piece of knowledge. It is not a belief, dogma, or religion; but rather, it is a practical experience. We cannot intellectually grasp Zen because human intelligence and wisdom are too limited - the dojo (the hall where Zazen is practiced) is different from the university.

Based on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, Zen is not a moral teaching, and as it is without dogma, it does not require one to believe in anything. A true spiritual path does not tell people what to believe in; rather it shows them how to think; or, in the case of Zen - what not to think.

Zen Buddhism is not interested in metaphysical theories and rituals and focuses entirely on the mindful practice of Zazen. Zen is very simple. It is so simple, in fact, that it's very difficult to grasp.



The Four Noble Truths

After Buddha gave up worldly life and sat down for mediation under the Bodhi tree, he attained enlightenment. He laid down his teachings in easily understandable language for the common man in the form of Four Noble Truths.

The essence of Buddhism is summed up in the Four Noble Truths enunciated by the Buddha.

First Noble Truth - To live means to suffer

During Buddha's meditation, he realized that life is suffering. The reason for this being the fact that human beings are not perfect. Likewise, the world inhabited by them is also ridden with imperfections.

The Buddha realized that during their journey through life, a human being has to endure many sufferings - physical and psychological - in the form of old age, sickness, separation from beloved ones, deprivation, encounters with unpleasant situations and people, lamentation, sorrow and suffering.

All these misfortunes befall human beings because they are subject to desires and cravings. If they are able to get what they aspire for, they derive pleasure or satisfaction. But this joy or pleasure is also short lived and does not last too long. If it does tend to last too long, the pleasure associated with it becomes monotonous and fades away.

Second Noble Truth - The origin of suffering is attachment

The second noble truth tells us that the root of all suffering is attachment.

To avoid suffering, we need to understand what causes suffering and then weeding out these causes from our lives. According to Buddha, the basic cause of suffering is "*the attachment to the desire to have (craving) and the desire not to have (aversion)*".

All of us have desires and cravings. Since we cannot satisfy ALL our desires and cravings, we get disturbed and angry, which is but another manifestation of suffering. The same holds good for people who are overly ambitious and seek too much. As they achieve what they desire, they get lustful and want more of it. And so the vicious circle continues.

The other problem pointed out by Buddha here, which is very pertinent, is that denying desire (or depriving oneself) is like denying life itself. A person, he said, has to rise above attachments and for that, he need not deprive himself. The problem arises when he does not know where to put an end to his desires. And when he yields into his desires, he becomes a slave to them.

Third Noble Truth - The cessation of suffering is attainable

Buddha stated that to put an end to suffering, we need to control our desires or practice non-attachment. This may sound difficult but can be achieved through diligent practice. This liberation from attachment and sorrow frees the mind of all troubles and worries. The attainment of this liberation is called "Nirvana" in Sanskrit and "Satori" in Japanese.

Fourth Noble Truth - The path to the cessation of suffering

Buddha says that salvation (Nirvana/Satori) is a condition that can be attained by leading a balanced life. And to lead a balanced life, one needs to follow the Eightfold Path which is a “gradual path of self-improvement.”

The Eightfold Path

The Buddha laid down the Eightfold Path for his followers and enunciated that by following this path, they could put an end to their suffering.

Directly related to the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, as laid down by Buddha, helps an individual attain the state of Nirvana by freeing him from attachments and delusions and thereby helping him understand the innate truth of all things. This path, therefore, helps a person with his ethical and mental growth and development.

Buddha laid great emphasis on implementing the teachings since a higher level of existence can be attained only by putting translating thoughts into actions.

The Eightfold Path suggested by Buddha involves adherence to:

1. The Right View – The Right Understanding

By the right view or understanding, Buddha means seeing things in the right perspective. Seeing things as they really are, without any false illusions or pretenses. He wanted his followers to see and to understand the transient nature of worldly ideas and possessions and to understand that they can attain salvation only if they practiced the right karma.

2. The Right Thought

Buddha says that we are what we are because of what we think. What goes on inside our minds (our thought process) determines our course of action. It is, therefore, necessary to follow the path of Right Thought or Right Intention. To have the Right Intention or the Right Thought, a person should be aware of his purpose or role in life.

3. The Right Speech

Buddha asks his followers to speak truth, to avoid slander and malicious gossip and to refrain from abusive language. Harsh words that can cause distress or offend others should also be avoided while also staying clear of mindless idle chatter which lacks any depth.

4. The Right Action

Behaving peacefully and harmoniously; Right Action, according to Buddha, lies in adherence to the following guidelines:

- Staying in harmony with fellow human beings
- Behaving peacefully
- Not stealing
- Not killing anyone
- Avoiding overindulgence in sensual pleasure
- Abstaining from sexual misconduct
- Not indulging in fraudulent practices, deceitfulness and robbery

5. The Right Livelihood

By laying down this guideline, Buddha advises his followers to earn their bread and butter righteously, without resorting to illegal and nefarious activities. He does not expect his followers to exploit other human beings or animals or to trade in weapons or intoxicants.

6. The Right Effort

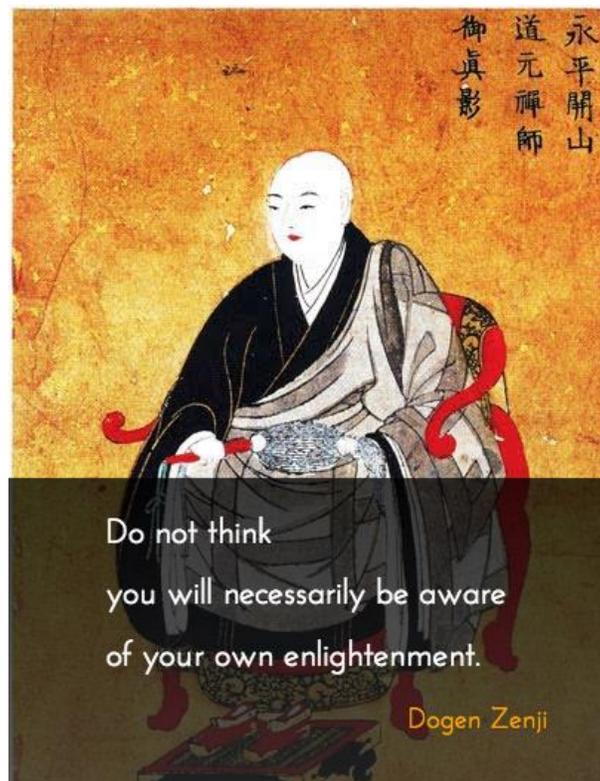
Buddha believed that human nature imposes undue restrictions on the mind at times, causing a person to harbor ill thoughts. So we have to train our mind to think in the right direction if we wish to become better human beings. Once we gain control over our thoughts and replace the unpleasant ones with positive ones, we shall be moving in the right direction.

7. The Right Mindfulness

The Right Mindfulness, together with the Right Concentration, forms the basis of Buddhist meditation. By proposing this, Buddha suggests his followers to focus mentally on their emotions, mental faculties, and capabilities while staying away from worldly desires and other distractions. It refers to the ability of the mind to see things as they are without being led astray by greed, avarice, anger and ignorance.

8. The Right Concentration

This eighth principle laid down by Buddha is fundamental for proper meditation. Zazen (or, Zen meditation) is the way used in Zen to reach the right concentration or "state of mind". Needless to add, this is the most vital of all the aspects stated in the Noble Eightfold path since, without proper meditation, an individual cannot move on to a higher level of well-being.



The Zen Art of Seeing Things As They Are

We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are.

(<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/divinelife/essays/zenstory01.asp>)

A Zen master, Dogen Zenji, returned to his homeland Japan after spending several years in a monastery practicing meditation under a Zen master. Someone asked what he learned from his practice. The Zen master replied with a serene face, "I have learned that my eye brows are horizontal and my nose is vertical." Those who heard this answer were surprised by his response. "What is new in that? Every knows it!" they exclaimed with a bit of disappointment and left.

The Zen master was speaking the truth. He admitted to the simple fact that after years of practice he learned to return to reality and see things clearly as they were. He confessed to everyone that he removed himself from the processes of perception and understanding by emptying his mind so that he could see the truth as it is. Those whose minds are filled with fear, anxieties, desires and expectations, find it hard to understand. They cannot see the truth because they are not ready for it. They do not understand it because they have become comfortable with the illusions that have become integral to their personalities.

Most of us take things for granted. We go through the motions of life as if we know everything about it already and as if we have gone through it already. We hardly see. We hardly pay attention. We rarely stay with the moment. We are stuck somewhere either in the past or in the future, with some notion, fear, fantasy, idea or illusion. We do not see things as they are, but according to our mental states. Our judging, calculating and measuring minds come in the way of our seeing and knowing.

Our thinking stands in between ourselves and the reality around us. Our perceptions, conclusions, knowledge and the so called wisdom we acquire through analysis and conditioning, may give us the satisfaction that we have achieved some erudition or intellectual superiority, but in truth we remain as ignorant as ever because we have not learned to open ourselves to the beauty and the truth that surrounds us. Through practice, the Zen master learned to see the truth as it was, in a simple and straightforward way. The complexity of life is an illusion we want to believe to justify whatever desires and ambition we entertain.

World's profound wisdom is hidden in the simple truths of life. Most of us go past it because we are preoccupied with our memories, feelings, beliefs, fears, anxieties and expectations. Our knowledge is an accumulation of memory. It is not rooted in the present. It is not based on the perception that is unadulterated by the conditioning, beliefs, authority, faith and comparison to which we are usually subject. We cannot go beyond it because we depend upon memory and authority and are reluctant to deviate from the paths our minds choose to translate our vision.

If we want to see truth as it is and return to the simplicity and purity of our perception, knowledge and understanding, we need to remain in the present, stop our interfering minds from their machinations and practice the art of pure observation that is not clouded by our judgment, preconceived notions, fears, anxieties and expectations. We have to return to the source, with which we have lost contact eons ago.



Seeing Things as They Are: Understanding the Three Marks of Existence

Tricycle Magazine

What's in it for me?

This is often the first question that lurks behind any new undertaking. But when it comes to spiritual practice—and Buddhist practice in particular—it's a question bathed in irony. One way to get at this irony is through an expression found in pretty much every Buddhist tradition: *seeing things as they are*. To “see things as they are” means, very simply, to see that all samsaric experience is stamped by what are known as the three marks: impermanence, no-self, and suffering.

The first thing we need to understand is that seeing these “marks” involves shifting attention away from the *content* of experience and toward its *structure*. To see things as they are is to unearth our hidden assumptions about ourselves and our world, to bring them into the light of full consciousness, and to notice how, on close inspection, these assumptions often contradict our actual experience.

Impermanence

For example, let's take the first mark: impermanence. Most of the time, change happens slowly enough that we are not fully aware of how everything around us is in a continuous state of flux. Things *look* stable—that is, they look like well-defined, solid “things”—but the fact is, they're not. My new shirt looks more or less the same from one day to the next. But what about from one *year* to the next? And what if we increase the interval to five years or ten? Over such long periods of time it's quite likely that I'll notice changes—like wear at the cuffs or collar—that were obviously happening all along, but slowly and below the level of normal perception. The shirt is, in effect, always leaving me, slipping away, though I don't generally notice. I see only an “object,” a “thing,” rather than a continuous flow of changing events.

On the other hand, change can happen very quickly as well—I can accidentally tear my sleeve on a nail, for instance—in which case it most often comes as a shock. The same holds true for our relationships with friends and family. We don't normally notice how people are continually aging, and when on occasion we do it catches us by surprise. I went away to India at the age of 25 and returned at 29. I still remember how startled I was when I first saw my parents again: they had mysteriously turned old. And then, not too many years later, my mother—who was, so far as any of us knew, entirely healthy—went to bed one night and died in her sleep.

Death is, of course, the paradigm of all change. People are dying all around us, but we don't see it happening; we don't *want* to see it, and for the most part we manage to keep it hidden. Back in the 1970s, the writer Ernest Becker won a Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*, in which he argued that American society is fundamentally committed to not seeing death. And yet, as I discovered while living in India, where dying and death are everywhere in full view, there is a sense of relief that comes from the direct encounter with a universal truth, no matter how unpleasant that truth might be.

Most of us don't notice impermanence until it's shoved in our face. We're too busy, too focused on having and doing. It's an unusual person who senses the truth that underlies all our striving.

But at my back I always hear time's wingèd chariot hurrying near.

Poets notice things the rest of us miss, and they find words to bring what they notice to our attention, to overcome our blindness. Perhaps that's one reason some of us like reading poetry: it reminds us of fundamental truths we would otherwise miss, and helps us adjust our lives accordingly. In this sense, these lines from Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" operate a bit like time-lapse photography. If you had a series of photographs taken at appropriate intervals—of that favorite shirt, for example, or of the people you love—you could visually track an unbroken process that moves from new, to not so new, to old, wrinkled, and worn.

Impermanence means that the appearance of stability we take for granted in everyday life, for practical purposes, is ultimately an illusion, the construction of a mind infused with desire and fear. Behind the facade of language and conceptual thinking there are no stable, well-defined "things" or "people," only a ceaseless, ungraspable stream of events, like the flow of a river or like waves undulating on the surface of the ocean.

No-self

One way to begin to understand the second mark, no-self, is to view it as a particularly intimate encounter with impermanence. To see the lack of self is to notice that there is no stable, unified core to experience. Like all those other people and things out there in the world, I, too, am nothing but a mental construct, a phantom's mask covering the reality of change.

I grow old. It's happening all the time, right in front of my eyes, but I don't notice it because the changes are so gradual. From time to time, though, I'm jolted out of complacency by comparing the face in the mirror to old photographs, or to a memory of an earlier self. But the biggest change of all is the one that I can neither remember nor imagine. No photograph, no image in the mirror, nothing in memory or imagination suffices to conjure up the experience of my own death. It is inconceivable that this "I"—this peculiarly intimate experience of myself as an individual passing through time—could at any moment be snagged on the rough edge of time and ripped apart like the fabric of an old, treasured shirt. Torn beyond repair.

Gesturing toward this second mark of no-self is, then, a way of suggesting that something is seriously amiss in my assumptions about what it is to be a person in a world. My day-to-day perspective makes sense only in some limited fashion, because it fails to take into account the fact that there is nothing about me that isn't in motion, always *already* torn and lost.

But no-self is more than a recognition of my own impermanence. It's also a comment on what philosophers call the problem of "agency." At the center of our normal experience of self is the conviction that this "I" is an actor who makes things happen. I am an agent; namely, the agent of my own actions, the one who speaks and thinks. The feeling is as if there were a tiny man sitting somewhere in my head, just behind my eyes, perhaps, making decisions and choices, pulling levers and pushing buttons, causing my arms and legs to move, calling words and thoughts into being. It's a view of the self that we take for granted in everyday life. But does it hold up on closer examination? To not take things for granted is the essence of Buddhist spiritual practice.

Because I have a whole lot invested in this idea that I'm in control of, at the very least, my own body and mind, the mere suggestion that this sense of control might be illusory appears on the face of it to be absurd. Then again, at a certain level it's completely obvious that if I were in control of my body, I would probably not *choose* to make it vulnerable to old age, sickness, and death. And if I were in control of my mind, why would I choose to call up worries and regrets? So when it comes right down to it, who is this "I," this puppet master, presumed to be totally separate from the body and mind that it so effortlessly manipulates? Once again, there is some sort of problem here, some sort of unexamined contradiction in my assumptions. The preeminent Buddhist tool for unearthing such contradictions is meditation. Try this:

Begin by closing your eyes and focusing your attention on the sensation of breathing. When you're settled, notice how the sensations come and go spontaneously, how the process of breathing happens all by itself. Fortunately, I don't need to consciously control my respiration; all of this is managed quite nicely by the autonomic nervous system. The same can be said for the beating of my heart or the digestion of this morning's breakfast. All these metabolic functions take place on their own, without any intervention on my part. In this respect such "internal" processes are no different from things "out there" in the world, like the wind and rain, or the sound of a car passing outside my window. It all simply happens, without any assistance from me.

Notice, now, how the same is true for thoughts—memories, hopes, expectations, regrets—all of them coming and going on their own. I don't make them come and go, nor can I make them stop. It's all simply happening, spontaneously arising and passing away.

To take notice of sensations and thoughts in this way does not mean to *think* about how they come and go. It means, rather, to open a space of attention, a kind of watching that feels, in experience, separate from what is watched. Drawing a distinction in first-person, direct experience, between "watching" and "thinking," is a subtle undertaking, primarily because awareness is so easily and habitually conflated with thought; but with continued practice a line can be drawn. Or, to be precise, the line between "inner" and "outer" can be re-drawn in this peculiar way. Like all dividing lines, this new line, too, is ultimately false; but beyond its falseness there are no more words.

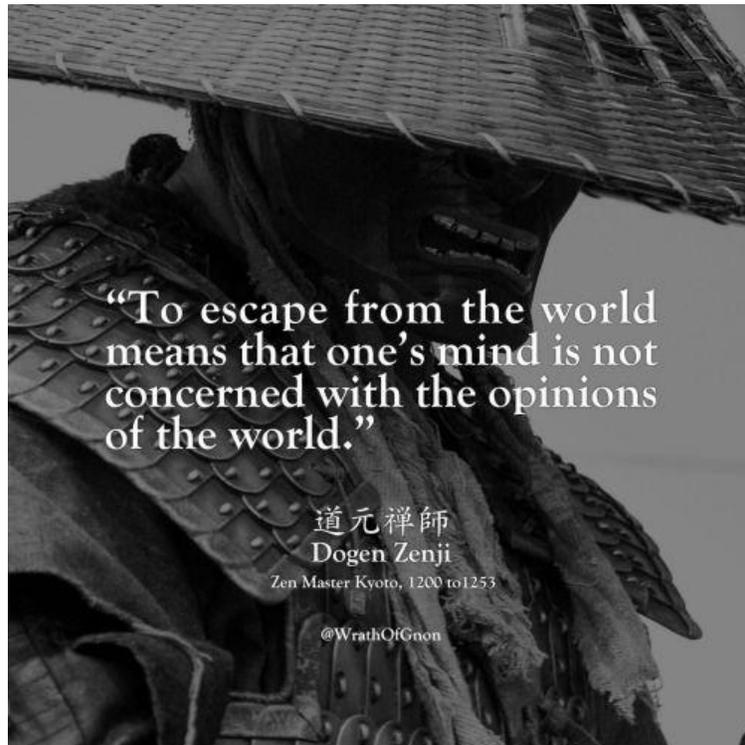
As a final exercise, try watching for the decision to open your eyes. Sit quietly, eyes closed, and observe, very carefully. See if you can catch yourself, as we say, *making* this decision. Or is it that, in direct experience, what we call a "decision" happens all by itself, like any other sensation or thought? After all, I never know in advance what I'm going to decide; I only know what *has been* decided after the fact. If I look very closely in this way, it's possible to see that I only imagine I make decisions.

No-self means that the appearance of an unchanging, individual agent who makes things happen is *mere* appearance, the construction of a mind infused with desire and fear. Behind the facade there is no such self, only the ceaseless, ungraspable stream of events that spontaneously emerge and disappear.

Dukkha - Suffering – a Chronic Discontent

The third mark of all samsaric experience is usually translated as "suffering," but the truth is that no English word captures the full range of meaning of the Sanskrit word *dukkha*. *Dukkha* accompanies every form of physical and mental pain, but *dukkha* is not, in itself, identical to either physical or mental pain. *Dukkha* is something else, a far more subtle, all-pervasive dis-ease, a chronic discontent that underlies and infuses our constantly shifting experiences of pain and pleasure.

As it happens, the very things that bring us the most happiness in life are themselves causes of dukkha, because they are tenuous, fragile, and ultimately subject to loss. This includes not only material things but also and especially our genuine accomplishments, the successes that bring us recognition and social status. And, perhaps most significantly, the company of people we love brings us dukkha, because we know full well that each one of them may, one way or another, leave us at any time. (<https://tricycle.org/magazine/seeing-things-they-are/>)



A Bigger Container

Roshi Charlotte Joko Beck – *Everyday Zen*

In daily life we know what it means to stand back from a problem. For example, I've watched Laura make a beautiful flower arrangement: she'll fuss and fiddle with the flowers, then at some point she'll stand back and look, to see what she has done and how it balances out. If you're sewing a dress, at first you cut and arrange and sew, but finally you get in front of the mirror to see how it looks. Does it hang on the shoulders? How's the hem? Is it becoming? Is it a suitable dress? You stand back. Likewise, in order to put our lives into perspective, we stand back and take a look.

Now Zen practice is to do this. It develops the ability to stand back and look. Let's take a practical example, a quarrel. The overriding quality in any quarrel is pride. Suppose I'm married and I have a quarrel with my husband. He's done something that I don't like—perhaps he has spent the family savings on a new car—and I think our present car is fine. And I think—in fact I know—that I am right. I am angry, furious. I want to scream.

Now what can I do with my anger? What is the fruitful thing to do? First of all I think it's a good idea just to back away: to do and say as little as possible. As I retreat for a bit, I can remind myself that what I really want is to be what might be called A Bigger Container. To do this is to step into another dimension—the spiritual dimension, if we must give it a name.

Let's look at a series of practice steps, realizing that in the heat of anger it's impossible for most of us to practice as the drama occurs. But do try to step back; do and say very little; remove yourself. Then, when you're alone, just sit and observe. What do I mean by "observe"? Observe the soap opera going on in the mind: what he said, what he did, what I have to say about all that, what I should do about it...these are all a fantasy. They are not the reality of what's happening.

If we can (it's difficult to do when angry), label these thoughts. Why is it difficult? When we're angry there's a huge block that stands in the way of practice: the fact that we don't want to practice—we prefer to cherish our pride, to be "right" about the argument, the issue. And that's why the first step is to back away, say little.

It may take weeks of hard practice before we can see that what we want is not to be right, but to be A Bigger Container. Step back and observe. Label the thoughts of the drama: yes, he shouldn't do that; yes, I can't stand what he's doing; yes, I'll find some way to get even—all of which may be so on a superficial level, but still it is just a soap opera.

If we truly step back and observe—and as I said, it's extremely difficult to do when angry—we will be capable in time of seeing our thoughts as thoughts (unreal) and not as the truth. Sometimes I've gone through this process ten, twenty, thirty times before the thoughts finally subside. When they do I am left with what? I am left with the direct experience of the physical reaction in my body, the residue, so to speak. When I directly experience this residue (as tension, contraction), since there is no duality in direct experience, I will slowly enter the dimension (samadhi) which knows what to do, what action to take. It knows the best action, not just for me but for the other as well. In making A Bigger Container, I taste "oneness" in a direct way.

We can talk about “oneness” until the cows come home. But how do we actually separate ourselves from others? How? The pride out of which anger is born is what separates us. And the solution is a practice in which we experience this separating emotion as a definite bodily state. When we do, A Bigger Container is created.

What is created, what grows, is the amount of life I can hold without it upsetting me, dominating me. At first this space is quite restricted, then it’s a bit bigger, and then it’s bigger still. It need never cease to grow. And the enlightened state is that enormous and compassionate space. But as long as we live we find there is a limit to our container’s size and it is at that point that we must practice. And how do we know where this cut-off point is? We are at that point when we feel any degree of upset, of anger. It’s no mystery at all. And the strength of our practice is how big that container gets.

As we do this practice we need to be charitable with ourselves. We need to recognize when we’re unwilling to do it. No one is willing all the time. And it’s not bad when we don’t do it. We always do what we’re ready to do.

This practice of making A Bigger Container is essentially spiritual because it is essentially nothing at all. A Bigger Container isn’t a thing; awareness is not a thing; the witness is not a thing or a person. There is not somebody witnessing. Nevertheless that which can witness my mind and body must be other than my mind and body. If I can observe my mind and body in an angry state, who is this “I” who observes? It shows me that I am other than my anger, bigger than my anger, and this knowledge enables me to build A Bigger Container, to grow. So what must be increased is the ability to observe. What we observe is always secondary. It isn’t important that we are upset; what is important is the ability to observe the upset.

As the ability grows first to observe, and second to experience, two factors simultaneously increase: wisdom, the ability to see life as it is (not the way I want it to be) and compassion, the natural action which comes from seeing life as it is. We can’t have compassion for anyone or anything if our encounter with them is ensnared in pride and anger; it’s impossible. Compassion grows as we create A Bigger Container.



So the way of practice that I’ve found to be the most effective is to increase the power of the observer. Whenever we get upset we have lost it. We can’t get upset if we are observing, because the observer never gets upset. “Nothing” can’t get upset. So if we can be the observer, we watch any drama with interest and affection, but without being upset.



...when you find yourself in a crisis, then will you understand how to practice? Observing your thoughts, experiencing your body instead of getting carried away by the fearful thoughts, feeling the contraction in your stomach as just tight muscles, grounding yourself in the midst of crisis. What makes life so frightening is that we let ourselves be carried away in the garbage of our whirling minds. We don’t have to do that. (<http://www.slideshare.net/anken/charlotte-joko-beck-everyday-zen>)

The following stories demonstrate what the biggest containers look like.

Is That So?

The Zen Master Hakuin was praised by neighbors as one living a pure life.

A beautiful Japanese girl whose parents owned a food store lived near him. Suddenly without any warning, her parents discovered she was with child.

This made her parents angry. She would not confess who the man was, but after much harassment at last named Hakuin.

In great anger the parents went to the Master. “Is that so?” was all he would say.

After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin. By this time he had lost his reputation, which did not trouble him, but he took very good care of the child. He obtained milk from his neighbors and everything else the little one needed.

A year later the girl-mother could stand it no longer. She told her parents the truth – that the real father of the child was a young man who worked in the fish market.

The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask his forgiveness, to apologize at length, and to get the child back again.

Hakuin was willing. In yielding the child, all he said was: “Is that so?”



Without Batting an Eye

During a time of civil war in Korea, a certain general led his troops through province after province, overrunning whatever stood in his path.

The people of one town, knowing that he was coming and having heard tales of his cruelty, all fled into the mountains.

The general arrived in the empty town with his troops and sent them out to search the town.

Some of the soldiers came back and reported that only one person remained, a Zen priest.

The general strode over to the temple, walked in, pulled out his sword, and said, “Don’t you know who I am? I am the one who can run through you without batting an eye.”

The Zen master looked back and calmly responded, “And I, sir, am one who can be run through without batting an eye.”

The general, hearing this, bowed and left.



Maybe

Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer whose horse ran away, and all the neighbors came around to offer their sympathy that evening, saying, “So sorry to hear your horse has run away. That’s too bad.”

And the farmer said, “Maybe.”

The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it and everybody came around that evening and said, “Oh, isn’t that lucky! What a wonderful turn of events, you now have eight horses!”

And the farmer said, “Maybe.”

The next day the farmer’s son tried to break one of these horses to ride, but was thrown off and broke his leg. And all the neighbors came around and said, “Oh, dear, that’s too bad.”

And the farmer said, “Maybe.”

The following day the conscription officers came around to draft people into the army and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg.

All the people came around again and said, “Isn’t that just great!”

And the farmer said, “Maybe.”



Drawing Water and Carrying Wood

Master Pang lived a simple life with his wife, son, and daughter, earning his living by making and selling bamboo utensils. Renowned for the depth of his spiritual insight, Pang refused to engage in philosophical speculation or debate. In response to a taunt by a scriptural scholar, Pang responded:

“Let go of longing and aversion and everything will be perfectly clear. Because you select and reject, you can’t perceive things as they are. My daily affairs are quite ordinary; but I’m in total harmony with them. I don’t hold on to anything, don’t reject anything; nowhere an obstacle or conflict. Who cares about wealth and honor? Even the poorest thing shines. My miraculous power and spiritual activity: drawing water and carrying wood. Immersed in the wonder of Tao, I can deal with whatever life brings me, and when death comes, I am ready.”



Be Content with Your Time

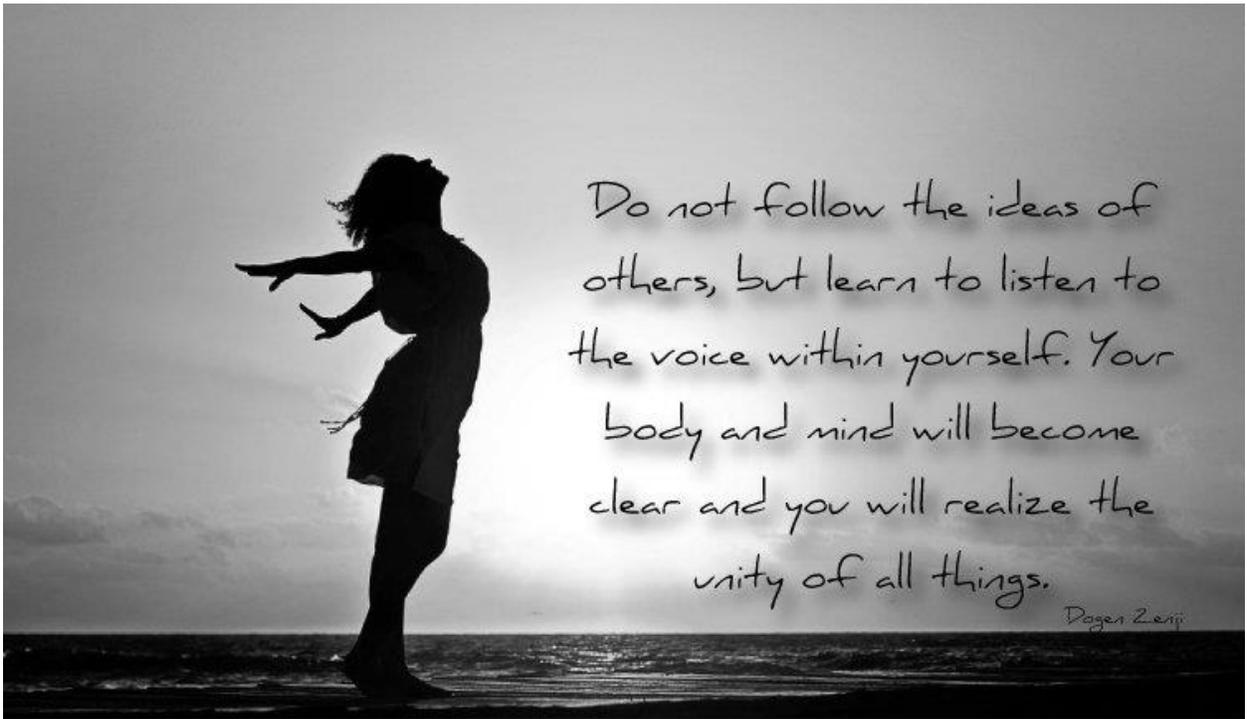
Master Yu fell sick one day, and a friend paid a call to cheer him. The friend found the master lying on his cot in an awkward position. “It is simply amazing,” master Yu said after the greetings had been observed. “The Creator has made me crooked. My back is hunched and my vital organs are on top of me. My chin is hidden in my navel, and my shoulders are higher than my head, and my pigtail points to the sky. There must be some dislocation of the great balancing forces of nature, the yin and the yang.”

Yet, master Yu was smiling as he spoke, and his eyes were calm with his unconcern.

“Do you resent what is happening?” his friend asked.

“Why, no,” master Yu said. “Why should I resent it? I received life because my time had come. I will lose it when my time passes on. Be content with your time, dwell in your time, and neither sorrow nor joy will touch you. In ancient times, this was called ‘freedom from bondage’. There are those who cannot free themselves because they are bound by things of the world. But there is no point to that. Nothing can win out against the Creator. That’s the way it has always been. So what is there to resent?”





Do not follow the ideas of others, but learn to listen to the voice within yourself. Your body and mind will become clear and you will realize the unity of all things.

Dogen Zenji

Chuang-tzu's Equanimity

Chuang-tzu, the Chinese Taoist sage of the fourth century B.C., was visited after the death of his wife by his friend Hui-tzu, who came to express his condolences. The latter arrived to find the master sitting on the ground with his legs spread wide apart. The widower was singing away and whacking out a tune on the back of a wooden bowl.

Hui-tzu said to him, "You've lived all these years with your loving wife and watched your eldest boy grow to manhood. For you not to shed a tear over her remains would have been bad enough. But singing and drumming away on a bowl – this is just too much!"

"Not so," the master replied. "I am a normal man and grieved when she died. But then I remembered that she had existed before this birth. At that time she was without a body. Eventually, matter was added to that spirit and, taking form, she was born. It is clear to me that the same process of change which brought my wife to birth eventually brought her to death, in a way as natural as the progression of the seasons. Winter follows autumn. Summer follows spring. To wail and groan while my wife is sleeping peacefully in the great chamber between heaven and earth would be to deny these natural laws, of which I cannot claim ignorance. So I refrain."



The ancient masters slept without dreams and woke up without worries. Their food was plain. Their breath came from deep inside them. They didn't cling to life, weren't anxious about death. They emerged without desire and reentered without resistance. They came easily; they went easily. They didn't forget where they were from; they didn't ask where they were going. They took everything as it came, gladly, and walked into death without fear. They accepted life as a gift, and they handed it back gratefully. (Chuang-Tzu)



The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the Truth then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. (Seng Tsan)



*No matter how bad a state
of mind you may get into,
if you keep strong and
hold out, eventually the
floating clouds must
vanish and the withering
wind must cease.*

- Dogen Zenji -

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Thoughts

Joseph Goldstein

What are thoughts? What is this phenomenon that so powerfully conditions our lives when we remain unaware of it, yet dissolves so completely as soon as we pay attention? What is our proper relationship to that endless display of thoughts parading through our mind?

The Buddha said that we are shaped, created, and led by our thoughts. If he was right, then it is important for us to watch our thought process closely to see where we get hooked, where we are seduced through identification into creating something that brings us unhappiness.

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They can drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and the impact they have on our destiny, depend on our understanding of things.

If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arising and passing, then it does not matter what species of thinking appears in the mind; they are all essentially empty of any substance at all, and we can see them for the passing show that they are.

These all-powerful movers and shakers of the world that create us and lead us become little energy blips in our mind, with hardly enough power to create even a ripple. They seem like transparent dewdrops evaporating in the sun.

But there are many times when we are not simply watching thoughts come and go, either because we are lost in them or because we choose to think something through, perhaps as a precursor to action.

In both these cases it is crucial for us to discern wholesome from unwholesome thoughts in order to know which to give our energy to, because these thoughts do have a karmic impact; they lead us.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. Which thoughts will we invest in? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which to act on and which simply to let be.



You have to be careful not to criticize or fight the mind, since it is normal to think, hear sounds, and feel sensations. The trick is not to grasp or reject them.

Just leave them alone and let them come and go lightly.

(Martine Batchelor)

Thoughts are often one-sided and untrue.

Learn to be mindful of thought instead of being lost in it.

(Jack Kornfield)

Just as the salivary glands secrete saliva, the mind secretes thoughts.

The thoughts think themselves. This thought production is not bad; it's simply what minds do.

(Jack Kornfield)

Repetitive Thought Patterns

Joseph Goldstein

Probably you are plagued by recurring thoughts like everyone else. If so, you may find it helpful to remember that our emphasis in Dharma practice is less on changing the pattern than on changing our relationship to it.

Instead of fighting or struggling with repetitive thought patterns, instead of trying to make them stop coming, we can learn how not to react, how not to make them the cause of actions, how not to be bothered by them.

When we dispassionately observe our repetitive thoughts, we come to realize the thoughts are empty; they don't belong to anybody; they are not rooted in self. What feeds them is our relationship to them. We do not like them, and precisely because we do not like them, they keep coming back. At a certain point we stop not liking them. Then it is no problem.

We need not be judgmental or discouraged by a repetitive thought pattern when it occurs. Since this pattern will be around for a while in our mind, we might as well make friends with it. When a repetitive pattern arises, we can just see it – “Oh, here it is again” – without being surprised. We begin to work with it in an accepting way.

I have watched some of the most appalling scenarios in my mind. Okay, there they are, arising and passing. If we relate to them in a non-reactive, non-identified way, their content does not matter. Tremendous freedom comes when we realize that from the perspective of mindful awareness the content is irrelevant.

Without getting caught, without identifying with them, they simply become other empty, ephemeral thoughts, which we neither condemn nor believe as they pass through like leaves blowing in the wind. The mind stays free.



A Guiding Life's Purpose

One of the fundamental principles of the spiritual life is to know one's purpose. When we have a clear purpose in life, we can move directly toward accomplishing it. Our life's purpose provides a blueprint for discriminating between wholesome and unwholesome thoughts. Our life's purpose helps us choose which thoughts to act on and which to let pass.

Restraint

It is important to understand restraint.

With wisdom and awareness we can see that there are skillful activities that are conducive to greater happiness and understanding, and there are unskillful ones that lead to further suffering and conflict.

Restraint is the capacity we have to discriminate one from the other, and the strength and composure of mind to pursue the skillful course.

It is possible to develop restraint, the gentle discipline of settling back and allowing the desires to arise and pass without always feeling the need or compulsion to act on them.

True restraint is not cultivated through aversion and suppression. It come from simply seeing what is harmonious and what isn't, and then acting accordingly, bringing our actions of speech and body into alignment with what we know to be true.

As we work with the quality of restraint, we find it to be a source of tremendous power and energy.

The Power of No

What is the attitude of no in practice? What is the wisdom of no? No means letting go of all conditioning, all phenomena, letting go of the thought of selfhood. No also means restraint.

There is great wisdom and power in saying no to unskillful impulses and desires. Following habitual desires and impulses that lead to suffering is not freedom. It is simply being carried away on a wave of conditioning.

Practicing the no of skillful restraint is the expression of a free mind. (Joseph Goldstein)





Discipline

Henepola Gunaratana

Discipline is a difficult word for most of us. It conjures up images of somebody standing over you with a stick, telling you that you are wrong. But self-discipline is different. It's the skill of seeing through the hollow shouting of your own impulses and piercing their secret.

They have no power over you. It's all a show, a deception. Your urges scream and bluster at you; they cajole; they coax; they threaten; but they really carry no stick at all. You give in out of habit. You give in because you never really bother to look beyond the threat. It is all empty back there. There is only one way to learn this lesson though. The words on this page won't do it.

But look within and watch the stuff coming up – restlessness, anxiety, impatience, pain – just watch it come up and don't get involved. Much to your surprise, it will simply go away. It rises, it passes away. As simple as that.

There is another word for self-discipline. It is patience.



Our Fragmented Mental State

Steve Hagen, *Buddhism Plain and Simple*

Most of the time our mental state is fragmented, filled with countless desires and cravings for this or that experience. To drive off such thoughts is useless. The more we try to push them away, the more we feed them, and the more they grow in strength and staying power.

If we simply observe our fragmented mental state, seeing it for what it is rather than feeding it – whether by judging it, indulging in it, or trying to shoo it away – then it collects into full awareness of its own accord.

The effort involved in gathering your scattered mind isn't an effort directly applied to a particular situation through your force of will. It doesn't follow from thinking, "I see my unwholesome state of mind. Now I have to cut it off." That isn't going to work.

Simply by seeing your state of mind, by seeing your inclinations toward this and away from that, you are awake. All you have to do is continue bringing yourself back to seeing. To see is to heal an otherwise fragmented mind and to prevent further scattering of mind from occurring.



Nature has its checks and balances. We tend to override them with our thought. We can, however, make a conscious effort to see, and let the balance restore itself. With seeing, restoring balance is no more problematic and sacrificial than not putting our hand in a flame. When we see what the act entails, we just don't have the urge to do it anymore.



Over time we may notice that each thought we experience is transitory and impermanent. Eventually, through simple observation, our thoughts, while no less vivid, will become less urgent, and will cease to have such a firm hold on our emotions and actions. We will be able to see each thought as it arises without feeling compelled to act on it.



Our unobserved mind is the source of a great deal of confusion and suffering for us. We habitually act out of our thoughts and assumptions – most of which we're only vaguely aware of – rather than out of full engagement with the moment. To make matters worse, we often identify with our thoughts, as if substantiality could somehow be found in what we think or believe. When we carefully observe our minds we cannot help but note that our thoughts and mental states are just as fleeting as the sensations of our bodies.

Just watch your mind. When you learn to see what is painful and not conducive to awakening you'll stop doing unwholesome behaviors very naturally.



Attention!

One day a man of the people said to Zen Master Ikkyu, “Master, will you please write for me some maxims of the highest wisdom?”

Ikkyu immediately took his brush and wrote the word “Attention.”

“Is that all?” asked the man. “Will you not add something more?”

Ikkyu then wrote twice running, “Attention. Attention.”

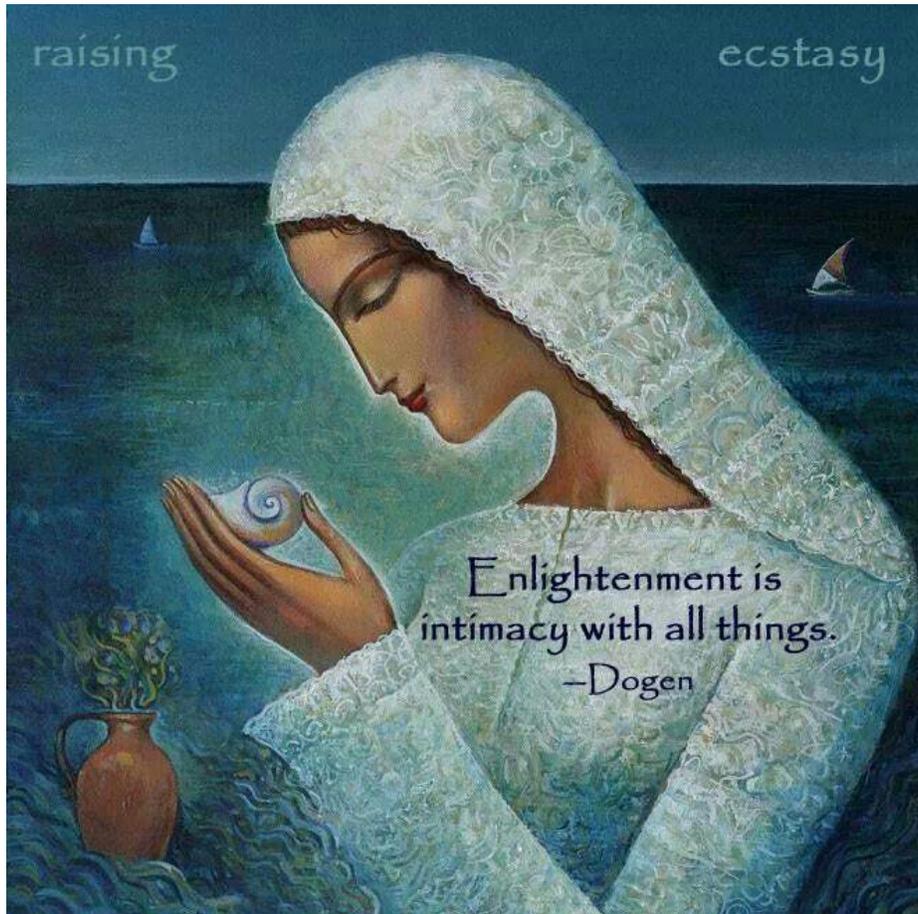
“Well,” remarked the man rather irritably. “I really don’t see much depth or subtlety in what you have just written.”

Then Ikkyu wrote the same word three times running, “Attention. Attention. Attention.”

Half-angered, the man demanded, “What does that word ‘Attention’ mean anyway?”

And Ikkyu answered gently, “Attention means attention.”





raising

ecstasy

Enlightenment is
intimacy with all things.
-Dogen

Every Minute Zen

Zen students are with their masters at least ten years before they presume to teach others. Nan-in was visited by Tenno, who, having passed his apprenticeship, had become a teacher. The day happened to be rainy, so Tenno wore wooden clogs and carried an umbrella. After greeting him Nan-in remarked: "I suppose you left your wooden clogs in the vestibule. I want to know if your umbrella is on the right or left side of the clogs."

Tenno, confused, had no instant answer. He realized that he was unable to carry his Zen every minute. He became Nan-in's pupil, and he studied six more years to accomplish his every-minute Zen.



A Samurai's Lesson

A big, tough samurai once went to see a little monk. "Monk," he said, in a voice accustomed to instant obedience, "teach me about heaven and hell!"

The monk looked up at this mighty warrior and replied with utter disdain, "Teach you about heaven and hell? I couldn't teach you about anything. You're dirty. You smell. Your blade is rusty. You're a disgrace, an embarrassment to the samurai class. Get out of my sight. I can't stand you."

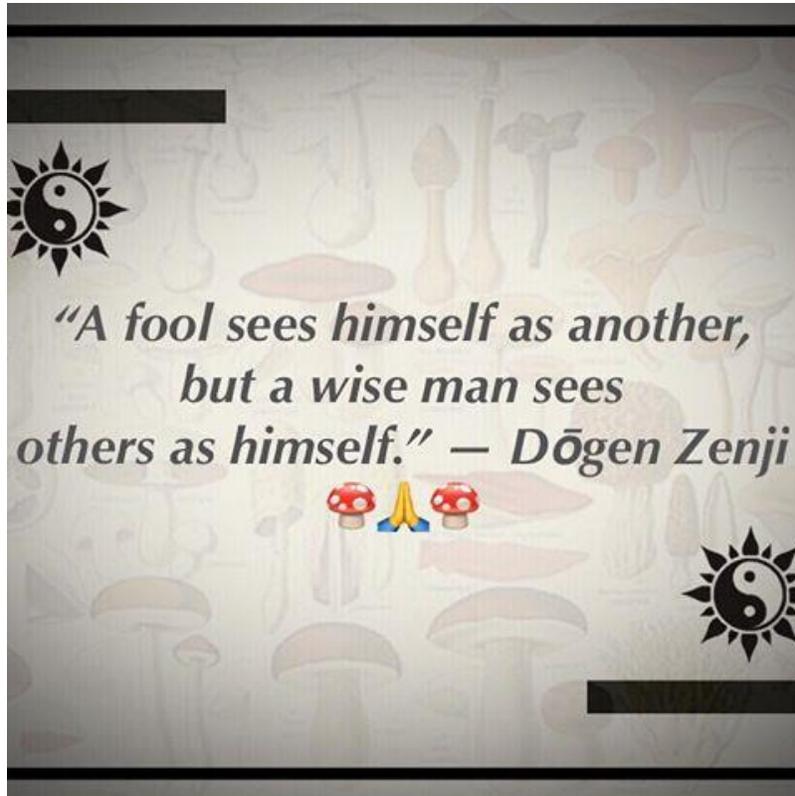
The samurai was furious. He shook, got all red in the face and was speechless with rage. He pulled out his sword and raised it above him, preparing to slay the monk.

"That's hell," said the monk softly.

The samurai was overwhelmed with the compassion and surrender of this little man who had offered his life to give this teaching to show him hell! He slowly put down his sword, filled with gratitude, and suddenly peaceful.

"And that's heaven," said the monk softly.





*“A fool sees himself as another,
but a wise man sees
others as himself.” — Dōgen Zenji*



A Lesson with Chess

A young man who had a bitter disappointment in life went to a remote monastery and said to the abbot: "I am disillusioned with life and wish to attain enlightenment to be freed from these sufferings. But I have no capacity for sticking long at anything. I could never do long years of meditation and study and austerity; I should relapse and be drawn back to the world again, painful though I know it to be. Is there any short way for people like me?"

"There is", said the abbot, "if you are really determined. Tell me, what have you studied, what have you concentrated on most in your life?"

"Why, nothing really. We were rich, and I did not have to work. I suppose the thing I was really interested in was chess. I spent most of my time at that."

The abbot thought for a moment, and then said to his attendant: "Call such and such a monk, and tell him to bring a chessboard and men." The monk came with the board and the abbot set up the men. He sent for a sword and showed it to the two.

"O monk," he said, "you have vowed obedience to me as your abbot, and now I require it of you. You will play a game of chess with this youth, and if you lose I shall cut off your head with this sword. But I promise that you will be reborn in paradise. If you win, I shall cut off the head of this man. Chess is the only thing he has ever tried hard at, and if he loses he deserves to lose his head also."

They looked at the abbot's face and saw that he meant it – he would cut off the head of the loser!

They began to play. With the opening moves the youth felt the sweat trickling down to his heels as he played for his life. The chessboard became the whole world; he was entirely concentrated on it. At first he had somewhat the worst of it, but then the other made an inferior move and he seized his chance to launch a strong attack. As his opponent's position crumbled, he looked covertly at him. He saw a face of intelligence and sincerity, worn with years of austerity and effort. He thought of his own worthless life, and a wave of compassion came over him. He deliberately made a blunder and then another blunder, ruining his position and leaving himself defenseless.

The abbot suddenly leant forward and upset the board. The two contestants sat stupefied. "There is no winner and no loser," said the abbot slowly, "there is no head to fall here. Only two things are required," and he turned to the young man, "complete concentration, and compassion. You have today learnt them both. You were completely concentrated on the game, but then in that concentration you could feel compassion and sacrifice your life for it. Now stay here a few months and pursue our graining in this spirit and your enlightenment is sure."

The young man pursued his training and eventually achieved the enlightenment he was seeking.



Details

Joko-Sensei, a teacher at the Zen Center of San Diego, tells that one morning she was working putting finishing touches on a remodeled kitchen at the Zen Center of Los Angeles, when the teacher Maezumi-roshi walked in to see how things were going.

“Everything’s going fine,” she said, “There are only a few details to finish up.”

At this point the roshi scratched his head, “Only a few details?” he asked, looking puzzled. “But details are all there are.”



“TO BE IN HARMONY WITH
THE WHOLENESS OF THINGS IS
NOT TO HAVE ANXIETY OVER
IMPERFECTIONS”

Dogen Zenji



From: Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind Shunryu Suzuki

After you have practiced for a while, you will realize that it is not possible to make rapid, extraordinary progress. Even though you try very hard, the progress you make is always little by little.

It is not like going out in a shower in which you know when you get wet. In a fog, you do not know you are getting wet, but as you keep walking you get wet little by little.

If your mind has ideas of progress, you may say, "Oh, this pace is terrible!"

But actually it is not. When you get wet in a fog it is very difficult to dry yourself. So there is no need to worry about progress.

It is like studying a foreign language; you cannot do it all of a sudden, but by repeating it over and over you will master it.

We can say either that we make progress little by little, or that we do not even expect to make progress. Just to be sincere and make our full effort in each moment is enough.

There is no Nirvana outside our practice.



Meditation is the expression of your true nature;
it is the activity which appeases your inmost desire.
(Shunryu Suzuki)

Repetition, for no special purpose and without end, is the way to follow the cosmic order. The point is not to look for something, but to practice. Continue until you reach your coffin.

If you practice every day, after a while you no longer have to think about practicing or decide or want to practice. So repetition is very important.
(Shunryu Suzuki)



Pure Meditation Practice

From: *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*
Shunryu Susuki

In Hinayana Buddhism, practice is classified in four ways:

The best way is just to do it without having any joy in it, not even spiritual joy. This way is just to do it, forgetting your physical and mental feeling, forgetting all about yourself in your practice. This is the fourth stage, or the highest stage.

The next highest stage is to have just physical joy in your practice. At this stage you find some pleasure in practice, and you will practice because of the pleasure you find in it.

In the second stage you have both mental and physical joy, or good feeling. These two middle stages are stages in which you practice meditation because you feel good in your practice.

The first stage is when you have no thinking and no curiosity in your practice.

When you are tired of sitting, or when you are disgusted with your practice, you should recognize this as a warning signal. You become discouraged with your practice when your practice has been idealistic. You have some gaining idea in your practice, and it is not pure enough. It is when your practice is rather greedy that you become discouraged with it.

When we practice meditation we just practice it, and whether we find joy in our practice or not, we just do it.

We can say either that we make progress little by little, or that we do not even expect to make progress. Just to be sincere and make our full effort in each moment is enough.

Repetition, for no special purpose and without end, is the way to follow the cosmic order. The point is not to look for something, but to practice. Continue until you reach your coffin. If you practice every day, after a while you no longer have to think about practicing or decide or want to practice. So repetition is very important.

Meditation...is the expression of your true nature; it is the activity which appeases your inmost desire.

