

Just sitting – quotations

Ta-I Tao-hsin (Dayi Daoxin) (580-651) 4. patriarch

Question: How can we be enlightened to the nature of things and our minds attain lucid purity? Tao-hsin replies: Neither by [trying to] meditate on the Buddha, nor by [trying to] grab hold of the mind, nor by seeing the mind, nor by analyzing the mind, nor by reflection, nor by discernment, nor by dispersing confusion, but through identification with the natural rhythms of things. Don't force anything to go. Don't force anything to stay. Finally abiding in the one sole purity, the mind spontaneously becomes lucid and pure.

Some people can see clearly that the mind is lucid and pure like a bright mirror. Some need a year [of practice] and then the mind becomes lucid and pure. Others need three or five years and then the mind is lucid and pure. Or some can attain enlightenment without ever being taught by someone else. The Nirvana Sutra says: "The nature of the mind of beings is like a pearl that falls into the water. The water is muddy so the pearl becomes hidden. When the water is pure, the pearl is revealed."

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Therefore, we should know that there are four kinds of students [of Buddhism]. Those who do practice, have understanding, and attain enlightenment are the highest group. Those who do not practice but have understanding and attain enlightenment are the middle-upper group. Those who do practice and have understanding but have not attained enlightenment are in the middle-lower group. Those who neither practice nor have understanding nor have attained enlightenment are in the lowest group.

Question: The moment we are going to begin practice, how should we contemplate? Tao-hsin replies: "We must identify with the natural rhythms of things."

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First you should understand the source of the mind and the various essences and functions [of things], and then the truth will be seen lucidly and purely with complete understanding and discernment without any doubts. Then afterwards meritorious work can be accomplished. A thousand things comply if you understand but once, whereas a single deception [brings] ten thousand doubts. To miss by the slightest hair-breadth is to err by a thousand li.

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Although the sea of the Dharma is unlimited, in actual practice it is contained in a single word. When you get the idea, you can dispense with words, for then even one word is useless. When you understand completely in this way, you have obtained the mind of the Buddha.

Daman Hongren (602 – 674) 5. patriarch

Question: Why do you call the mind the fundamental teacher? Answer: The true mind exists of itself and does not come from outside [oneself. As teacher] it does not even require any tuition fee! Nothing in all the three periods of time is more dear [to a person] than one's mind. If you discern the suchness [inherent in the mind] and maintain awareness of it, you will reach the other shore [of nirvana]. The deluded forsake it and fall into the three lower modes of existence (i.e., animals, hungry ghosts, and residents of the hells). Therefore, it is known that the Buddhas of the three periods of time take their own true mind as teacher.

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Do not let time pass in vain while only wasting energy. The sutra says: "[Foolish sentient beings] will reside forever in hell as if pleasantly relaxing in a garden. There are no modes of existence worse than their present state." We sentient beings fit this description. Having no idea how horribly terrifying [this world really] is, we never have the least intention of leaving! How awful!

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To be able to discern one's own inherent mind and improve [the ability to maintain awareness of it] with every moment of thought is equivalent to constantly making pious offerings to the entire Buddhist canon and to all the Buddhas in the ten directions of space, who are as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges. It is equivalent to constantly turning the wheel of the Dharma with every moment of thought.

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He who comprehends the mind that is the source of all dharmas always understands everything. All his wishes are fulfilled and all his religious practices completed. He accomplishes all [that he sets out to do] and will not be reborn again [in the realm of samsara]. If you can stop generating false thoughts and the illusion of personal possession and completely discard [your preoccupation with] the body, then you will certainly achieve birthlessness (i.e., nirvana). How inconceivably [wonderful]!

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“Sentient beings discern the mind and cross over [to the other shore of enlightenment] by themselves. The Buddhas cannot make sentient beings cross over [to the other shore].” If the Buddhas were able to make sentient beings cross over [to the other shore of enlightenment], then why—the Buddhas of the past being as incalculable as the sands of the River Ganges—have we sentient beings not yet achieved buddhahood? We are drowning in the seas of suffering simply because we are not completely sincere about seeking enlightenment.-

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Question: What do you mean by the “illusion of personal possession”? Answer: When only slightly superior to someone else [in some way], one may think that this [superiority] is due to one's own achievement. To feel this way is to be sick even while in nirvana.

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Gently quiet your mind. I will teach you [how to do this] once again: Make your body and mind pure and peaceful, without any discriminative thinking at all. Sit properly with the body erect. Regulate the breath and concentrate the mind so it is not within you, not outside of you, and not in any intermediate location. Do this carefully and naturally. View your own consciousness tranquilly and attentively, so that you can see how it is always moving, like flowing water or a glittering mirage. After you have perceived this consciousness, simply continue to view it gently and naturally, without [the consciousness assuming any fixed position] inside or outside of yourself. Do this tranquilly and attentively, until its fluctuations dissolve into peaceful stability. This flowing consciousness will disappear like a gust of wind.

Keizan Jokin (1885 – 1973)

If you want to clarify the mind-ground, give up your jumble of limited knowledge and interpretation, cut off thoughts of usualness and holiness, abandon all delusive feelings. When the true mind of reality manifests, the clouds of delusion dissipate and the moon of the mind shines bright. The Buddha said, “Listening and thinking about it are like being shut out by a door. Zazen is like coming home and sitting at ease.”

Hajuun Yasutani (1268 – 1325)

In doing shikantaza you must maintain mental alertness, which is of particular importance to beginners—and even those who have been practicing ten years could still be called beginners! Often due to weak concentration, one becomes self-conscious or falls into a sort of trance or ecstatic state of mind. Such practice might be useful to relax yourself, but it will never lead to enlightenment and is not the practice of the Buddha Way.

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To do shikantaza does not mean to become without thoughts, yet, doing shikantaza, do not let your mind wander. Do not even contemplate enlightenment or becoming Buddha. As soon as

such thoughts arise, you have stopped doing shikantaza. Dogen says very clearly: “Do not attempt to become Buddha.”

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However, to practice in this manner can require a long time to attain enlightenment, and such practice should never be discontinued until one fully realizes enlightenment. Even after attaining great enlightenment and even if one becomes a roshi (Zen master), one must continue to do shikantaza forever, simply because shikantaza is the actualization of enlightenment itself.

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Trying to get rid of our thoughts is just another form of fantasy. Zazen, understood as mind being innately one with all phenomena, is a means of seeing all things from the foundation of pure life, wherein we give up both pursuing thought and trying to chase it away. Then we see everything that arises as the scenery of our lives. We let arise whatever arises and allow to fall away whatever falls away.

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The basis for silent illumination is to entrust everything to the posture of zazen, letting go of all that comes up without trying to work out solutions for what we ought to do about this or that. This is what is called shikantaza. When we do zazen with this attitude, it is no longer sitting for the purpose of fulfilling some artificial fantasy such as gaining enlightenment or improving our minds.

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Ehei Dogen (1200 – 1253)

Since those who receive and use this water and fire extend the buddha influence of original enlightenment, all who live and talk with these people also share and universally unfold the boundless buddha virtue and they circulate the inexhaustible, ceaseless, incomprehensible, and immeasurable buddha-dharma within and without the whole dharma world.

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Therefore, even if only one person sits for a short time, because this zazen is one with all existence and completely permeates all time, it performs everlasting buddha guidance within the inexhaustible dharma world in the past, present, and future. [Zazen] is equally the same practice and the same enlightenment for both the person sitting and for all dharmas. The melodious sound continues to resonate as it echoes, not only during sitting practice, but before and after striking shunyata, which continues endlessly before and after a hammer hits it. Not only that, but all things are endowed with original practice within the original face, which is impossible to measure. You should know that even if all the buddhas in the ten directions, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River, together engage the full power of the buddha wisdom, they could never reach the limit, or measure or comprehend the virtue, of one person's zazen.

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Shunryu Suzuki

We say our practice should be without gaining ideas, without any expectations, even of enlightenment. This does not mean, however, just to sit without any purpose. This practice free from gaining ideas is based on the Prajnaparamita Sutra. However, if you are not careful, the sutra itself will give you a gaining idea [an idea of gaining something]. It says, “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” But if you attach to that statement, you are liable to be involved in dualistic ideas: here is you, form, and here is emptiness, which you are trying to realize through your form. So “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” is still dualistic. But fortunately, our teaching goes on to say, “Form is form and emptiness is emptiness.” Here there is no dualism.

When you find it difficult to stop your mind while you are sitting and when you are still trying to stop your mind, this is the stage of “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” But while

you are practicing in this dualistic way, more and more you will have oneness with your goal. And when your practice becomes effortless, you can stop your mind. This is the stage of “form is form and emptiness is emptiness.”

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At first you will have various problems, and it is necessary for you to make some effort to continue your practice. For the beginner, practice without effort is not true practice. For the beginner, the practice needs great effort. Especially for young people, it is necessary to try very hard to achieve something. You must stretch out your arms and legs as wide as they will go. Form is form. You must be true to your own way until at last you actually come to the point where you see it is necessary to forget all about yourself. Until you come to this point, it is completely mistaken to think that whatever you do is Zen or that it does not matter whether you practice or not. But if you make your best effort just to continue your practice with your whole mind and body, without gaining ideas, then whatever you do will be true practice. Just to continue should be your purpose. When you do something, just to do it should be your purpose. Form is form and you are you, and true emptiness will be realized in your practice.

Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi (1932 – 1995)

Do you see? It's not a matter of dusting off, or of shining or polishing. Our original self, our original nature, buddha-nature – that is the Way. The Way, the whole being, is complete, perfect, free, all-pervading. Never is it apart from this very place; what is the use of a pilgrimage to practice it? This is very important: The Way is always here; always right here and right now. Always, wherever you go, wherever you are, it's right here and right now, complete, free, all-pervading. Isn't it wonderful? That is our life. Just be so, be so. Don't defile it or stain this moment, right here and right now.

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The point of our practice is not to become something other than what we already are, such as a buddha or enlightened person, but to realize or become aware of the fact that we are intrinsically, originally the Way itself, free and complete. If we practice to become something else, we simply put another head on top of our own, making ourselves ghosts. One head is enough!

So then, how do we realize that our life is complete and free? Or, if we realize it, how clearly do we realize that point? Clarifying this matter is why we practice.

Dogen Zenji says, “To study the enlightened Way is to study the self. And to study the self is to forget the self.” To forget the self is not to create any distance between oneself and the Way. Then what creates our experience of separateness?

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In a way it seems contradictory, for Dogen Zenji has written that it's not really a matter of practice or enlightenment. If this is true, then why do we have to practice? But again that goes back to the two aspects of our practice: Speaking from the intrinsic perspective, of course, we say that fundamentally we are all buddhas and there is no need for anything such as practice or enlightenment since that is our true nature anyway. But the problem is that we may only believe that theoretically; we don't know it firsthand. To become directly aware of it and know it fully is why we practice.