



ZEN STUDIES SOCIETY
INTRODUCTION TO ZEN

■ WHAT IS ZEN?

Zen is both something you do: a disciplined practice through which you can realize the joy of being—and something you are: your true nature expressing itself moment by moment. It is not a belief system to which one converts. It is not based on any dogma or doctrine. Rather, it is a spiritual way of life that fosters the direct experience of fundamental reality.

Although it originated in India and moved to Asia many centuries ago, Zen has become very much a part of Western culture. Indeed, the historian Arnold Toynbee said that one of the most significant events of the twentieth century was the movement of Buddhism from East to West. At the heart of Buddhism is Zen (Ch'an in Chinese, Dhyana in Sanskrit). The term refers to the deep absorption that led to the enlightenment, nearly 2,600 years ago, of the Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as Shakyamuni Buddha.

“Buddha” means “awakened one.” His great teaching was that we can all awaken; that fundamentally, we are all buddhas—Jewish buddhas, Christian buddhas, Hindu buddhas, Islamic buddhas, Ashanti buddhas, Haudenasaunee buddhas, secular buddhas—and that through regular and consistent meditation, we can realize our buddha-nature. This transforms our lives and all our interactions.

When the Dalai Lama was asked about Buddhism, he simply said, “My religion is kindness.”

Zen Buddhism is not a theory, not a concept. It is a simple yet profound practice that can liberate us from the myth of our separateness, and through which we can see that the bundle of conditioned views and traits we call the “self” has no intrinsic or unchanging substance.

Realizing our interconnectedness with all other beings, quite naturally we care for the environment, starting with our own actions: not wasting the earth's precious resources, understanding that every act has consequences. Thus we respond to the challenges of daily life naturally, with intuitive wisdom and compassion. We vow to live with attention, integrity, and authenticity; we vow to free all beings from suffering.



■ HOW TO PRACTICE

Formal Zen practice begins—and continues—with sitting still and focusing on the breath. That awareness is then extended to walking, chanting, eating, working, and interacting with others: to every aspect of daily life.

In zazen, seated meditation, it is important to have an erect and well-grounded posture, supported by a cushion on a thick mat. The legs may be in full lotus, half lotus, Burmese, or kneeling position, depending on one's flexibility (which can be increased over time through various yoga stretches). Both knees should make firm contact with the mat, for a stable, triangular base. If needed, a support cushion can be placed under one or both knees, but then you'll also need to raise your seat, using a thicker cushion or adding a square support cushion under the round one. Sit on the first third of your cushion, with the hips pulled back a little, so that you are on your "sitting bones." This gently accentuates the natural curve of the lower back and allows the breath to come and go freely from the lower abdomen. A meditation bench or chair can be used if you cannot sit on the floor. Follow the same principles: on a bench, be mindful of the lower back; on a chair, place both feet on the floor and elongate the spine by sitting forward rather than slouching.

Eyes are slightly open; let your gaze soften and rest on the floor in front of you. The head is straight, the chin pulled in just enough to elongate the cervical spine. The ears line up perpendicular to the shoulders. All of these posture points help root the body in the earth, while the upper torso is elongated and the crown of the head reaches toward the heavens.

The hands are held in one of two positions, or mudras. In the *shashu* mudra, used in many Rinzai centers, the right hand grasps the left thumb, and the left hand covers the right. In the *cosmic* mudra, the left hand rests on the palm of the right hand, palms facing up. The thumbs barely touch at the tips, forming a circle. With either mudra, if you are sitting in full- or half-lotus, the hands rest on the natural "shelf" of the sole of the upper foot; elbows are held slightly away from the trunk. To avoid shoulder tension, if one is sitting in Burmese posture, (one leg in front of the other), or on a bench or chair, the mudra can rest in the lap.

During zazen, allow the breath to flow softly, silently, and naturally. Breathe through your nose, paying attention to the full duration of each exhalation. Counting exhalations from one to ten, returning to one when the mind wanders or when you reach ten, can greatly support your concentration. Returning to one, we are returning to our original oneness with all life.



Full Lotus



Half Lotus



Burmese



Cushion



Bench

Breathe in with awareness. Breathe out, slowly, with full attention and appreciation. Give it all away; hold onto nothing. Breathe in with gratitude; breathe out with love. Receiving and offering—this is what we are doing each time we inhale and exhale. This is the transformative practice of Zen.

Thoughts are natural. Do not fight them, but do not entertain them or get ensnared by them. Once you notice them, return your focus to your exhalation. Zazen is not for figuring things out. With each exhalation, we just allow our conditioned patterns to fall away, and relax into the spacious mind of pure awareness.

After a period of zazen, which may last from half an hour to forty-five minutes, bring the same attentive presence to walking meditation, called *kinhin*. We walk single file, fairly close to the person in front of us, forming a line of beings moving as One. Hands are held in *shashu*: at waist level, the right hand holding the left thumb and the left hand covering the right, as in the first mudra, above. The elbows are slightly lifted so that the lower arms form a line parallel to the floor. *Kinhin* is a way of bringing the stillness of zazen into the movement of everyday life, so that you can bring focused attention to whatever activity you are engaged in.

ON THE PATH

The path of Zen is long, demanding, and deeply rewarding. It requires motivation, patience, discipline, dedication, and consistency, as well as the thirst to find out what this existence is all about. It is best done under the guidance of an authentic, awakened teacher, who draws on personal experience to address the challenges that may arise and to help you loosen the bonds of conditioned patterns and behaviors. The teacher sees students individually on a regular basis in *dokusan* (private, practice-oriented meetings).

Chanting and prostrations are an integral part of formal Zen practice. We chant sutras, mantras, and dharani—Buddhist teachings and mystical recitations—some in English, some in Sanskrit or Pali, some in Sino-Japanese. Rather than reflecting intellectually on what the words mean, try to engage directly in the sounds themselves, with a full voice; just give yourself over to the act of chanting. After the service ends, there are prostrations, not in homage to an idol, not to an external object or doctrine, but with awareness of and gratitude to your own Buddha-nature.

Zen centers, temples, and monasteries offer an environment that is conducive to communal practice. Each person feels the silent encouragement of others. Roles are clear, and everyone follows the formal structure, thereby letting go of the preferential mind. Silence not only supports meditative inquiry, but is absolutely essential to it. Regular, consistent practice with a trusted teacher and spiritual friends, as well as sitting on your own, can help you develop the inner freedom that manifests as loving-kindness and discernment in your thoughts, words, and deeds.

The Four Great Vows:

*However innumerable all beings are
I vow to save them all.*

*However inexhaustible delusions are
I vow to extinguish them all.*

*However immeasurable Dharma teachings are
I vow to master them all.*

*However endless the Buddha's Way is
I vow to follow it.*

THE SIXTEEN PRECEPTS

The Three Refuges, Fundamental Precepts and Ten Important Precepts are the basis of Zen Buddhist practice, creating a strong and supportive environment for all. It is each person's responsibility to follow and honor these.

TISARANA: THE THREE-FOLD REFUGE

BUDDHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI
DHAMMAM SARANAM GACCHAMI
SANGHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI

We take refuge in Buddha, our own true nature.

We take refuge in Dharma, the reality of being.

We take refuge in Sangha, the community of all life.

FUNDAMENTAL PRECEPTS

1. Do not engage in any harmful action.
2. Do engage in beneficial actions as much as possible.
3. Keep your mind always pure.

This is the everlasting teaching of all the Buddhas.

TEN IMPORTANT PRECEPTS

1. Honor all life; do not kill.
2. Respect others' property; do not steal.
3. Be faithful and loving in your relationships; do not succumb to lust.
4. Be truthful; do not deceive yourself or others.
5. Keep your mind clear; do not abuse intoxicants.
6. Remember that silence is precious; do not gossip or engage in frivolous conversation.
7. Be humble; do not be arrogant or impose your views on others.
8. Be grateful and cooperative; do not fall into envy or jealousy.
9. Practice inner peace and harmony; do not give way to anger.
10. Be guided by the Three Treasures: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; do not defame them.

NAMU DAI BOSA

A mantra composed by Soen Nakagawa Roshi when he was a young monk practicing in a hut on Mt. Dai Bosatsu, near Mt. Fuji, Japan. Unlike most other mantras that have meaning only in the context of the repetition of their sounds, these words carry special significance.

NAMU is a salutation best translated into English as homage to, uniting with, or having devotion toward.

DAI means vast; boundless. From the ordinary point of view, we consider the sun great and of utmost significance; a particle of dust small and inconsequential. This is true, but not completely true. As the Lankavatara Sutra says: "Things are not what they seem—nor are they otherwise." Fundamentally, DAI means absolute; unconditional. From the enlightened point of view, all phenomena—the sun, planets, mountains and rivers, trash and dirt, humans and animals—have absolute nature of their own. Likewise, greed, anger, and delusion are as absolute as compassion and wisdom. Only when we understand the interrelated reality of these two aspects are we able to realize the true nature of the universe, which is none other than the true nature of our very being.

It is this very being that is called BOSA, from "Bodhisattva" in Sanskrit. Literally, "Bodhi" means enlightened and "sattva" means being.



■ THE SONG OF ZAZEN *BY HAKUIN EKAKU ZENJI*

Sentient beings are fundamentally Buddhas.
It is like ice and water:
Apart from water, no ice can exist;
Outside sentient beings,
Where do we find the Buddhas?
Not knowing how near the Truth is,
We seek it far away--what a pity!
We are like one who, in the midst of water,
Cries in thirst so imploringly.
We are like the rich man's son
Who wandered away among the poor.
The reason why we transmigrate
Through the six worlds is that we are lost
In the darkness of ignorance.
Going astray further and further in the darkness,
When are we able to be free from birth and death?
As for zazen practice in the Mahayana,
We have no words to praise it fully.
The virtues of perfection, such as charity, morality,
And the invocation of the Buddha's name,
Confession, and ascetic discipline,
And many other good deeds of merit—
All these return into THIS!
Even those who have practiced it
For just one sitting
Will see all their harmful karma erased;
Nowhere will they find deluded paths;
The Pure Land will be near at hand.
With a reverential heart,
If we listen to this truth even once,
And praise it, and gladly embrace it,
We will surely be blessed most infinitely.
But if we concentrate within,
And testify to the truth that Self-nature is no-nature,
We have really gone beyond foolish talk.

The gate of the oneness
Of cause and effect is open;
The path of non-duality runs straight ahead.
To regard the form of no-form as form,
Whether going or returning,
We cannot be any place else.
To regard the thought of no-thought as thought,
Whether singing or dancing,
We are the voice of the Dharma.
How boundless the cleared sky of Samadhi!
How transparent the perfect moonlight
Of the Fourfold Wisdom.
At this moment, what more need we seek?
As the truth eternally reveals itself,
This very place is the lotus land of purity,
This very body is the body of the Buddha.

