Zen Buddhism

To Forget the Self
by Dōgen Zenji

[Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253) was the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism. This essay is part of a remarkable collection of essays called Shōbōgenzō, or “Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching.”]

Seeing forms with the whole body and mind, hearing sounds with the whole body and mind, one understands them intimately. Yet it is not like a mirror with reflections, nor like water under the moon. When one side is realized, the other side is dark.

To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas. To be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas is to free one's body and mind and those of others. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this traceless enlightenment is continued forever.

When one first seeks the truth, one separates oneself far from its environs. When one has already correctly transmitted the truth to oneself, one is one's original self at that moment. When riding on a boat, if one watches the shore one may assume that the shore is moving. But watching the boat directly, one knows that it is the boat that moves. If one examines the ten thousand dharmas with a deluded body and mind, one will suppose that one's mind and nature are permanent. But if one practices intimately and returns to the true self, it will be clear that the ten thousand dharmas are without self.

Firewood turns into ash and does not turn into firewood again. But do not suppose that the ash is after and the firewood is before. We must realize that firewood is in the state of being firewood and has its before and after. Yet having this before and after, it is independent of them. Ash is in the state of being ash and has its before and after. Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, so after one's death one does not return to life again. Thus, that life does not become death is a confirmed teaching of the buddha-dharma; for this reason, life is called the non-born. That death does not become life is a confirmed teaching of the buddha-dharma; therefore, death is called the non-extinguished.
Life is a period of itself.

Death is a period of itself.

For example, they are like winter and spring. We do not think that winter becomes spring, nor do we say that spring becomes summer. Gaining enlightenment is like the moon reflecting in the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water disturbed. Although its light is extensive and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch across. The whole moon and the whole sky are reflected in a dew-drop in the grass, in one drop of water. Enlightenment does not disturb the person, just as the moon does not disturb the water. A person does not hinder enlightenment, just as a dewdrop does not hinder the moon in the sky. The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. As for the duration of the reflection, you should examine the water's vastness or smallness. And you should discern the brightness or dimness of the heavenly moon.

When the truth does not fill our body and mind, we think that we have enough. When the truth fills our body and mind, we realize that something is missing. For example, when we view the four directions from a boat on the ocean where no land is in sight, we see only a circle and nothing else. No other aspects are apparent. However, this ocean is neither round nor square, and its qualities are infinite in variety. It is like a palace. It is like a jewel. It just seems circular as far as our eyes can reach at the time. The ten thousand dharmas are likewise like this. Although ordinary life and enlightened life assume many aspects, we only recognize and understand through practice what the penetrating power of our vision can reach. In order to appreciate the ten thousand dharmas, we should know that although they may look round or square, the other qualities of oceans and mountains are infinite in variety; furthermore, other universes lie in all quarters. It is so not only around ourselves but also right here, and in a single drop of water.

When a fish swims in the ocean, there is no limit to the water, no matter how far it swims. When a bird flies in the sky, there is no limit to the air, no matter how far it flies. However, no fish or bird has ever left its element since the beginning. When the need is large, it is used largely. When the need is small, it is used in a small way. Thus, no creature ever comes short of its own completeness. Wherever it stands, it does not fail to cover the ground. If a bird leaves the air, it will die at once. If a fish leaves the water, it will die at once. Know, then, that water is life. Know that air is life. Life is the bird and life is the fish. Beyond these, there are further implications and ramifications. In this way, there are practice and enlightenment, mortality and immortality.

Now if a bird or a fish tries to reach the limit of its element before moving in it, this bird or this fish will not find its way or its place. Attaining this place, one's daily life is the realization of ultimate reality [genjokoan]. Attaining this way, one's daily life is the realization of ultimate reality [genjokoan]. Since this place and this way are neither large nor small, neither self nor other, neither existing previously nor just arising now, they therefore exist thus. Thus, if one practices and realizes the buddha way, when one gains one dharma, one penetrates one dharma; when one encounters one action, one practices one action.

Since the place is here and the way leads everywhere, the reason the limits of the knowable are unknowable is simply that our knowledge arises with, and practices with, the absolute perfection of the buddha-dharma. Do not practice thinking that realization must become the object of one's knowledge and vision and be grasped conceptually. Even though the attainment of realization is immediately manifest, its intimate nature is not necessarily realized. Some may realize it and some may not.

Priest Pao-ch’e of Ma-ku shan was fanning himself. A monk approached and asked, "Sir, the nature of the wind is permanent, and there is no place it does not reach. Why, then, must you still fan yourself?"

"Although you understand that the nature of wind is permanent," the master replied, "you do not understand the meaning of its reaching everywhere."

"What is the meaning of its reaching everywhere?" asked the monk.
The master just fanned himself. The monk bowed with deep respect.

This is the enlightened experience of buddha-dharma and, the vital way of its correct transmission. Those who say we should not use a fan because wind is permanent, and so we should know the existence of wind without using a fan, know neither permanency nor the nature of wind.

Because the nature of wind is eternally present, the wind of Buddhism actualizes the gold of the earth and ripens the cheese of the long river.

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**Zen Comments on the Mumonkan**

by Zenkei Shibayama

[For more than seven centuries *Mumonkan* has been used in Zen monasteries to train monks, and by lay Buddhists as a means of refining their religious experience. The *Mumonkan* is a thirteenth-century collection of the sayings and doings of Zen Masters in which they freely and directly express their Zen experience, together with commentary by Master Mumon. As guideposts to students in training, a Zen Master will often make his own comments, or teisho, on the *Mumonkan*.

After Shibayama Roshi, the Zen Master of Nanzenji Monastery (from 1948-1967) in Kyoto, gave his teisho (commentary) on passages from the *Mumonkan* to American college students, he was asked to supervise the translation of the *Mumonkan* into English and to write his comments based on the teisho he had been giving for a quarter-century to Zen Students in training in his monastery.—from the Preface by Kenneth W. Morgan. This first koan, “Joshu’s ‘Mu’” is undoubtedly the most famous of Zen koans. Here we have, first, the koan, Mumon’s 13th century commentary and poem, and then Shibayama Roshi’s teisho on the koan.]

**Joshu's "Mu"**

KOAN

A monk once asked Master Joshu, "Has a dog the Buddha Nature or not?" Joshu said, "Mu!"

MUMON’S COMMENTARY

In studying Zen, one must pass the barriers set up by ancient Zen Masters. For the attainment of incomparable satori, one has to cast away his discriminating mind. Those who have not passed the barrier and have not cast away the discriminating mind are all phantoms haunting trees and plants.

Now, tell me, what is the barrier of the Zen Masters? Just this "Mu"—it is the barrier of Zen. It is thus called "the gateless barrier of Zen." Those who have passed the barrier will not only see Joshu clearly, but will go hand in hand with all the Masters of the past, see them face to face. You will see with the same eye that they see with and hear with the same ear. Wouldn't it be wonderful? Don't you want to pass the barrier? Then concentrate yourself into this "Mu," with your 360 bones and 84,000 pores, making your whole body one great inquiry. Day and night work intently at it. Do not attempt nihilistic or dualistic interpretations. It is like having bolted a red hot iron ball. You try to vomit it but cannot.

Cast away your illusory discriminating knowledge and consciousness accumulated up to now, and keep on working harder. After a while, when your efforts come to fruition, all the oppositions (such as in and out) will...
naturally be identified. You will then be like a dumb person who has had a wonderful dream: he only knows it personally, within himself. Suddenly you break through the barrier; you will astonish heaven and shake the earth.

It is as if you have snatched the great sword of General Kan. You kill the Buddha if you meet him; you kill the ancient Masters if you meet them. On the brink of life and death you are utterly free, and in the six realms and the four modes of life you live, with great joy, a genuine life in complete freedom.

Now, how should one strive? With might and main work at this "Mu," and be "Mu." If you do not stop or waver in your striving, then behold, when the Dharma candle is lighted, darkness is at once enlightened.

MUMON'S POEM

The dog! The Buddha Nature!
The Truth is manifested in full.
A moment of yes-and-no:
Lost are your body and soul.

TEISHO ON THE KOAN

This koan is extremely short and simple. Because of this simplicity, it is uniquely valuable and is an excellent koan.

Joshu is the name of a place in northern China, and Master Junen (778–897) who lived in Kannon-in Temple at Joshu, is now generally known as Master Joshu. He was an exceptionally long-lived Zen Master who died at the age of one hundred and twenty years.

Joshu was fifty-seven years old when his teacher Nansen died. The great persecution of Buddhism by Emperor Bu-so (845) took place in Joshu's sixty-seventh year, Master Rinzai Gigen died (867) in Joshu's ninetieth year, and Master Gyozan died when he was in his one hundred and fifteenth year. This means that Joshu lived toward the end of the Tang dynasty when Zen with its creative spirits flourished in China. At that time Joshu was one of the leading figures in Zen circles. People who described his Zen said, "His lips give off light," and greatly respected him.

Joshu was born in a village near Soshuji in the southwestern part of Saritosho and entered a Buddhist temple when he was a young boy. Later, while he was still young, he came to Chishuto study under Master Nansen.

When he first met Nansen, the latter was resting in bed. Nansen asked him, "Where have you been recently?" "At Zuizo [literally "auspicious image"], Master," replied Joshu. "Did you then see the Auspicious Image?" the Master asked. Joshu said, "I did not see the Image, but I have seen a reclining Tathagata." Nansen then got up and asked, "Do you already have a Master to study under or not?" Joshu replied, "I have." Nansen asked, "Who is he?" At this, Joshu came closer to Nansen and, bowing to him, said, "I am glad to see you so well in spite of such a severe cold." Nansen recognized in him unusual character and allowed him to be his disciple. After that, Joshu steadily carried on his Zen studies under Nansen.

When Joshu was fifty-seven years old, his Master Nansen died, and four years later Joshu started on a pilgrimage with the determination: "Even a seven-year-old child, if he is greater than I am, I'll ask him to teach me. Even a hundred-year-old man, if I am greater than he is, I'll teach him." He continued on the pilgrimage to deepen and refine his Zen spirituality until he reached his eightieth year. Later he stayed at Kannon-in Temple, in Joshu, and was active as a leading Zen Master of the time in northern China, together with Rinzai.

In the biography of Joshu a series of mondo are recorded, from which this koan is extracted. There have been many attempts to interpret these mondo and to explain the koan in relation to them. We do not have to worry about such attempts here but should directly grip the koan itself. Knowing well its context, Master Mumon presents a simple, direct, and clear koan. Its simplicity plays an important role.

"A monk once asked Master Joshu, 'Has a dog the Buddha Nature or not?' " This monk was well aware that all sentient beings have the Buddha Nature without exception. This is therefore a piercingly effective and unapproachable question which would not be answered if the Master were to say Yes or No. The monk is demanding that Joshu show him the real Buddha Nature, and he is not asking for its interpretation or conceptual understanding. What a cutting question!
Joshu, like the genuine capable Master that he was, answered "Mu!" without the least hesitation. He threw himself—the whole universe—out as "Mu" in front of the questioner. Here is no Joshu, no world, but just "Mu." This is the koan of Joshu's "Mu."

The experience of the Buddha Nature itself is creatively expressed here by "Mu." Although literally "Mu" means No, in this case it points to the income parable satori which transcends both yes and no, to the religious experience of the Truth one can attain when he casts away his discriminating mind. It has nothing to do with the dualistic interpretation of yes and no, being and nonbeing. It is Truth itself, the Absolute itself.

Joshu, the questioning monk, and the dog are however only incidental to the story, and they do not have any vital significance in themselves. Unless one grasps the koan within himself as he lives here and now, it ceases to be a real koan. We should not read it as an old story; you yourself have to be directly "Mu" and make not only the monk, but Joshu as well, show the white feather. Then the Buddha Nature is "Mu"; Joshu is "Mu." Not only that, you yourself and the whole universe are nothing but "Mu." Further, "Mu" itself falls far short, it is ever the unnamable "it."

Master Daie says, "Joshu's 'Mu'—work directly at it. Be just it." He is telling us to be straightforwardly no-self, be "Mu," and present it right here. This is a very inviting instruction indeed.

Once my own teacher, Master Bukai, threw his nyoi (a stick about fifty centimeters long which a Zen Master always carries with him) in front of me and demanded, "Now, transcend the yes-and-no of this nyoi!" and he did not allow me even a moment's hesitation. Training in Zen aims at the direct experience of breaking through to concrete Reality. That breaking through to Reality has to be personally attained by oneself. Zen can never be an idea or knowledge, which are only shadows of Reality. You may reason out that "Mu" transcends both yes and no, that it is the Absolute Oneness where all dualistic discrimination is exhausted. While you are thus conceptualizing, real "Mu" is lost forever.

My teacher also asked me once, "Show me the form of 'Mu'!?" When I said, "It has no form whatsoever," he pressed me, saying "I want to see that form which has no-form." How cutting and drastic! Unless one can freely and clearly present the form of "Mu," it turns out to be a meaningless corpse.

In the biography of Master Hakuin we read the following moving story of his first encounter with his teacher, Master Shoju. Shoju asked Hakuin, "Tell me, what is Joshu's 'Mu'?" Hakuin elatedly replied, "Pervading the universe! Not a spot whatsoever to take hold of!" As soon as he had given that answer, Shoju took hold of Hakuin's nose and gave it a twist. "I am quite at ease to take hold of it," said Shoju, laughing aloud. The next moment he released it and abused Hakuin, "You! Dead monk in a cave! Are you self-satisfied with such 'Mu'!?" This completely put Hakuin out of countenance.

We have to realize that this one word "Mu" has such exhaustive depth and lucidity that once one has really grasped it as his own he has the ability to penetrate all Zen koans.

Often people remark that "Mu" is an initial koan for beginners, which is a great mistake. A koan in Zen is fundamentally different from questions and problems in general. Etymologically the term koan means "the place where the truth is." In actual training its role is to smash up our dualistic consciousness and open our inner spiritual eye to a new vista. In actual cases there may be differences in the depth of the spirituality and ability of Zen students who break through a koan. This is inevitable for human beings living in this world. For any koan, however, there should be no such discrimination or gradation as an initial koan for beginners or difficult ones for the advanced. An old Zen Master said, "If you break through one koan, hundreds and thousands of koan have all been penetrated at once." Another Master said, "It is like cutting a reel of thread: one cut, and all is cut."

The use of a koan in Zen training developed spontaneously in the southern Sung dynasty in China when a reminiscent, traditionalist tendency began to prevail in Zen circles. In the early period of the southern Sung, Joshu's "Mu" was already being used widely as a koan. Mumon himself was driven into the abyss of Great Doubt.
by this koan and finally had the experience of breaking through it. Out of his own training and experience, he must have extracted the most essential part from several mondo and presented it to his disciples as a simple, direct koan.

This koan is taken from a mondo between Joshu and a monk, and Joshu Zenji Goroku ("Sayings of Master Joshu") and a few other books record similar mondo. In the chapter "Joshu Junen" in Goto Egen, volume 4, we read, "A monk asked Joshu, 'Has a dog the Buddha Nature or not?' The Master said, 'Mu.' The monk asked, 'From Buddhas above down to creeping creatures like ants, all have the Buddha Nature. Why is it that a dog has not?' 'Because he has ignorance and attachment,' the Master replied."

Joshu Zenji Goroku has the following mondo: "A monk asked, 'Has a dog the Buddha Nature or not?' The Master said, 'Mu.' Monk: 'Even creeping creatures all have the Buddha Nature. Why is it that the dog has not?' Master: 'Because he has ignorance and attachment.'"

Another monk asked Joshu, "Has a dog the Buddha Nature or not?" The Master said, "U" (Yes). The monk asked, "Having the Buddha Nature, why is he in such a dog-body?" Master: "Knowingly he dared to be so."

Although generally Joshu is supposed to have originated this mondo on the Buddha Nature, we read the following mondo in the biography of Master Ikan (755-817) of Kozenji at Keicho: Monk: "Has a dog the Buddha Nature or not?" Master: "Yes" (U). Monk: "Have you, O Master, the Buddha Nature or not?" Master: "I have not." Monk: "All sentient beings have the Buddha Nature. Why is it that you alone, Master, have not?" Master: "I am not among all sentient beings." Monk: "If you are not among sentient beings, are you then a Buddha or not?" Master: "I am not a Buddha." Monk: "What kind of thing are you after all?" Master: "I am not a thing either." Monk: "Can it be seen and thought of?" Master: "Even if you try to think about it and know it, you are unable to do so. It is therefore called 'unknowable.'" (Keitoku Dento-roku, volume 7)

Let us put aside for the time being historical studies of the koan. "Mu" as a koan is to open our spiritual eye to Reality, to "Mu," that is, to Joshu's Zen—this is the sole task of this koan, and everything else is just complementary and not of primary importance. We may simply read about it for our information.

All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha Nature. This is the fundamental Truth of nondualism and equality. On the other hand, this actual world of ours is dualistic and full of discriminations. The above mondo presents to us the basic contradiction between the fundamental Truth of nondualism and actual phenomena. The ancient Masters made us face the fact that we human beings from the very beginning have been living in this fundamental contradiction. It was the compassion of the Masters that led them to try thus to intensify their disciples' Great Doubt, their spiritual quest, and finally lead them to satori by breaking through it. If here one really breaks through this koan, which uniquely presents before him the core of human contradiction, he can clearly see for himself with his genuine Zen eye what these mondo are trying to tell us.


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**Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind**

by Shunryu Suzuki

[SHUNRYU SUZUKI (1905-1971) was a Japanese Zen master of the Sōtō school who moved to the United States in 1958. He founded Zen Center in San Francisco and Zen Mountain Center in Tassajara, California, the first Soto monastery in the West. Suzuki Roshi had a quality of impeccable, spotless awareness. Any reader, whether familiar with Zen or not, can gain a luminous experience of this spotless awareness simply by reading a few pages of his talks to his students. The selection given here is on the right practice of zazen, or sitting meditation. It is a direct and lucid journey to the heart of actual practice, which is the beginning and conclusion of Zen.]

**Beginner’s Mind**

People say that practicing Zen is difficult, but there a misunderstanding as to why. It is not difficult because it is hard to sit in the cross-legged position, or to attain enlightenment. It is difficult because it is hard to keep our mind pure and our practice pure in its fundamental sense. The Zen school developed in many ways after it was established in China, but at the same time, it became more and more impure. But I do not want to talk about Chinese Zen or the history of Zen. I am interested in helping you keep your practice from becoming impure.

In Japan we have the phrase shoshin, which means "beginner's mind." The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner's mind. Suppose you recite the *Prajna Paramita Sutra* only once. It might be a very good recitation. But what would happen to you if you recited it twice, three times, four times, or more? You might easily lose your original attitude towards it. The same thing will happen in your other Zen practices. For a while you will keep your beginner's mind, but if you continue to practice one, two, three years or more, although you may improve some, you are liable to lose the limitless meaning of original mind.

For Zen students the most important thing is not to be dualistic. Our "original mind" includes everything within itself. It is always rich and sufficient within itself. You should not lose your self-sufficient state of mind. This does not mean a closed mind, but actually an empty mind and a ready mind. If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.

If you discriminate too much, you limit yourself. If you are too demanding or too greedy, your mind is not rich and self sufficient. If we lose our original self-sufficient mind, we will lose all precepts. When your mind becomes demanding, when you long for something, you will end up violating your own precepts: not to tell lies, not to steal, not to kill, not to be immoral, and so forth. If you keep your original mind, the precepts will keep themselves.

In the beginner's mind there is no thought, "I have attained something." All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner's mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless. Dogen-zenji, the founder of our school, always emphasized how important it is to resume our boundless original mind. Then we are always true to ourselves, in sympathy with all beings, and can actually practice.

So the most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind. There is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen. Even though you read much Zen literature, you must read each sentence with a fresh mind. You should not say, "I know what Zen is," or "I have attained enlightenment." This is also the real secret of the
Posture

Now I would like to talk about our zazen posture. When you sit in the full lotus position, your left foot is on your right thigh, and your right foot is on your left thigh. When we cross our legs like this, even though we have a right leg and a left leg, they have become one. The position expresses the oneness of duality: not two, and not one. This is the most important teaching: not two, and not one. Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think that they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind are both two and one. We usually think that if something is not one, it is more than one; if it is not singular, it is plural. But in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular. Each one of us is both dependent and independent.

After some years we will die. If we just think that it is the end of our life, this will be the wrong understanding. But, on the other hand, if we think that we do not die, this is also wrong. We die, and we do not die. This is the right understanding. Some people may say that our mind or soul exists forever, and it is only our physical body which dies. But this is not exactly right, because both mind and body have their end. But at the same time it is also true that they exist externally. And even though we say mind and body, they are actually two sides of one coin. This is the right understanding. So when we take this posture it symbolizes this truth. When I have the left foot on the right side of my body, and the right foot on the left side of my body, I do not know which is which. So either may be the left or the right side.

The most important thing in taking the zazen posture is to keep your spine straight. Your ears and your shoulders should be on one line. Relax your shoulders, and push up towards the ceiling with the back of your head. And you should pull your chin in. When your chin is tilted up, you have no strength in your posture; you are probably dreaming. Also to gain strength in your posture, press your diaphragm down towards your hara, or lower abdomen. This will help you maintain your physical and mental balance. When you try to keep this posture, at first you may find some difficulty breathing naturally, but when you get accustomed to it you will be able to breathe naturally and deeply.

Your hands should form the "cosmic mudra." If you put your left hand on top of your right, middle joints of your middle fingers together, and touch your thumbs lightly together (as if you held a piece of paper between them), your hands will make a beautiful oval. You should keep this universal mudra with great care, as if you were holding something very precious in your hand. Your hands should be held against your body, with your thumbs at about the height of your navel. Hold your arms freely and easily, and slightly away from your body, as if you held an egg under each arm without breaking it.

You should not be tilted sideways, backwards, or forwards. You should be sitting straight up as if you were supporting the sky with your head. This is not just form or breathing. It expresses the key point of Buddhism. It is a perfect expression of your Buddha nature. If you want true understanding of Buddhism, you should practice this way. These forms are not a means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture itself is the purpose of our practice. When you have this posture, you have the right state of mind, so there is no need to try to attain some special state. When you try to attain something, your mind starts to wander about somewhere else. When you do not try to attain anything, you have your own body and mind right here. A Zen master would say, "Kill the Buddha!" Kill the Buddha if the Buddha exists somewhere else. Kill the Buddha, because you should resume your own Buddha nature.

Doing something is expressing our own nature. We do not exist for the sake of something else. We exist for the sake of ourselves. This is the fundamental teaching expressed in the forms we observe. Just as for sitting, when we stand in the zendo we have some rules. But the purpose of these rules is not to make everyone the same, but to allow each to express his own self most freely. For instance, each one of us has his own way of standing, so our standing posture is based on the proportions of our own bodies. When you stand, your heels should be as far apart as the width of your own fist, your big toes in line with the centers of your breasts. As in zazen, put some strength in your abdomen. Here also your hands should express your self. Hold your left hand against your chest with fingers encircling your thumb, and put your right hand over it. Holding your thumb pointing downward, and your
forearms parallel to the floor, you feel as if you have some round pillar in your grasp—a big round temple pillar—so you cannot be slumped or tilted to the side.

The most important point is to own your own physical body. If you slump, you will lose your self. Your mind will be wandering about somewhere else; you will not be in your body. This is 'not the way. We must exist right here, right now! This is the key point. You must have your own body and mind. Everything should exist in the right place, in the right way. Then there is no problem. If the microphone I use when I speak exists somewhere else, it will not serve its purpose. When we have our body and mind in order, everything else will exist in the right place, in the right way.

But usually, without being aware of it, we try to change something other than ourselves, we try to order things outside us. But it is impossible to organize things if you yourself are not in order. When you do things in the right way, at the right time, everything else will be organized. You are the "boss." When the boss is sleeping, everyone is sleeping. When the boss does something right, everyone will do everything right, and at the right time. That is the secret of Buddhism.

So try always to keep the right posture, not only when you practice zazen, but in all your activities. Take the right posture when you are driving your car, and when you are reading. If you read in a slumped position, you cannot stay awake long. Try. You will discover how important it is to keep the right posture. This is the true teaching. The teaching which is written on paper is not the true teaching. Written teaching is a kind of food for your brain. Of course it is necessary to take some food for your brain, but it is more important to be yourself by practicing the right way of life.

That is why Buddha could not accept the religions existing at his time. He studied many religions, but he was not satisfied with their practices. He could not find the answer in asceticism or in philosophies. He was not interested in some metaphysical existence, but in his own body and mind, here and now. And when he found himself, he found that everything that exists has Buddha nature. That was his enlightenment. Enlightenment is not some good feeling or some particular state of mind. The state of mind that exists when you sit in the right posture is, itself, enlightenment. If you cannot be satisfied with the state of mind you have in zazen, it means your mind is still wandering about. Our body and mind should not be wobbling or wandering about. In this posture there is no need to talk about the right state of mind. You already have it. This is the conclusion of Buddhism.

Breathing

When we practice zazen our mind always follows our breathing. When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say "inner world" or "outer world," but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think, "I breathe," the "I" is extra. There is no you to say "I." What we call "I" is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all. When your mind is pure and calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing: no "I," no world, no mind nor body; just a swinging door.

So when we practice zazen, all that exists is the movement of the breathing, but we are aware of this movement. You should not be absent-minded. But to be aware of the movement does not mean to be aware of your small self, but rather of your universal nature, or Buddha nature. This kind of awareness is very important, because we are usually so one-sided. Our usual understanding of life is dualistic: you and I, this and that, good and bad. But actually these discriminations are themselves the awareness of the universal existence. "You" means to be aware of the universe in the form of you, and "I" means to be aware of it in the form of I. You and I are just swinging doors. This kind of understanding is necessary. This should not even be called understanding; it is actually the true experience of life through Zen practice.

So when you practice zazen, there is no idea of time or space. You may say, "We started sitting at a quarter to six in this room." Thus you have some idea of time (a quarter to six), and some idea of space (in this room). Actually what you are doing, however, is just sitting and being aware of the universal activity. That is all. This moment the swinging door is opening in one direction, and the next moment the swinging door will be opening in the opposite direction. Moment after moment each one of us repeats this activity. Here there is no idea of time or space. Time and space are one. You may say, "I must do something this afternoon," but actually there is no "this afternoon." We do things one after the other. That is all. There is no such time as "this afternoon" or "one o'clock" or "two o'clock." At one o'clock you will eat your lunch. To eat lunch is itself one o'clock. You will be somewhere,
but that place cannot be separated from one o'clock. For someone who actually appreciates out life, they are the same. But when we become tired of our life we may say, "I shouldn't have come to this place. It may have been much better to have gone to some other place for lunch. This place is not so good." In your mind you create an idea of place separate from an actual time.

Or you may say, "This is bad, so I should not do this." Actually, when you say, "I should not do this," you are doing not-doing in that moment. So there is no choice for you. When you separate the idea of time and space, you feel as if you have some choice, but actually, you have to do something, or you have to do not-doing. Not-to-do something is doing something. Good and bad are only in your mind. So we should not say, "This is good," or "This is bad." Instead of saying bad, you should say, "not-to-do"! If you think, "This is bad," it will create some confusion for you. So in the realm of pure religion there is no confusion of time and space, or good or bad. All that we should do is just do something as it comes. Do something! Whatever it is, we should do it, even if it is not-doing something. We should live in this moment. So when we sit we concentrate on our breathing, and we become a swinging door, and we do something we should do, something we must do. This is Zen practice. In this practice there is no confusion. If you establish this kind of life you have no confusion whatsoever.

Tozan, a famous Zen master, said, "The blue mountain is the father of the white cloud. The white cloud is the son of the blue mountain. All day long they depend on each other, without being dependent on each other. The white cloud is always the white cloud. The blue mountain is always the blue mountain." This is a pure, clear interpretation of life. There may be many things like the white cloud and blue mountain: man and woman, teacher and disciple. They depend on each other. But the white cloud should not be bothered by the blue mountain. The blue mountain should not be bothered by the white cloud. They are quite independent, but yet dependent. This is how we live, and how we practice zazen.

When we become truly ourselves, we just become a swinging door, and we are purely independent of, and at the same time, dependent upon everything. Without air, we cannot breathe. Each one of us is in the midst of myriads of worlds. We are in the center of the world always, moment after moment. So we are completely dependent and independent. If you have this kind of experience; this kind of existence, you have absolute independence; you will not be bothered by anything. So when you practice zazen, your mind should be concentrated on your breathing. This kind of activity is the fundamental activity of the universal being. Without this experience, this practice, it is impossible to attain absolute freedom.

Control

To live in the realm of Buddha nature means to die as a small being, moment after moment. When we lose our balance we die, but at the same time we also develop ourselves, we grow. Whatever we see is changing, losing its balance. The reason everything looks beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its background is always in perfect harmony. This is how everything exists in the realm of Buddha nature, losing its balance against a background of perfect balance. So if you see things without realizing the background of Buddha nature, everything appears to be in the form of suffering. But if you understand the background of existence, you realize that suffering itself is how we live, and how we extend our life. So in Zen sometimes we emphasize the imbalance or disorder of life.

Nowadays traditional Japanese painting has become pretty formal and lifeless. That is why modern art has developed. Ancient painters used to practice putting dots on paper in artistic disorder. This is rather difficult. Even though you try to do it, usually what you do is arranged in some order. You think you can control it, but you cannot; it is almost impossible to arrange your dots out of order. It is the same with taking care of your everyday life. Even though you try to put people under some control, it is impossible. You cannot do it. The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous. Then they will be in control in its wider sense. To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him. So it is with people: first let them do what they want, and watch them. This is the best policy. To ignore them is not good; that is the worst policy. The second worst is trying to control them. The best one is to watch them, just to watch them, without trying to control them.

The same way works for you yourself as well. If you want to obtain perfect calmness in your zazen, you should not be bothered by the various images you find in your mind. Let them come, and let them go. Then they will be under control. But this policy is not so easy. It sounds easy, but it requires some special effort. How to make this kind of effort is the secret of practice. Suppose you are sitting under some extraordinary circumstances. If you try to calm your mind you will be unable to sit, and if you try not to be disturbed, your effort will not be the right effort.
The only effort that will help you is to count your breathing, or to concentrate on your inhaling and exhaling. We say concentration, but to concentrate your mind on something is not the true purpose of Zen. The true purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes. This is to put everything under control in its widest sense. Zen practice is to open up our small mind. So concentrating is just an aid to help you realize "big mind," or the mind that is everything. If you want to discover the true meaning of Zen in your everyday life, you have to understand the meaning of keeping your mind on your breathing and your body in the right posture in zazen. You should follow the rules of practice and your study should become more subtle and careful. Only in this way can you experience the vital freedom of Zen.

Dogen-zenji said, "Time goes from present to past." This is absurd, but in our practice sometimes it is true. Instead of time progressing from past to present, it goes backwards from present to past. Yoshitsune was a famous warrior who lived in medieval Japan. Because of the situation of the country at that time, he was sent to the northern provinces, where he was killed. Before he left he bade farewell to his wife, and soon after she wrote in a poem, "Just as you unreel the thread from a spool, I want the past to become present." When she said this, actually she made past time present. In her mind the past became alive and was the present. So as Dogen said, "Time goes from present to past." This is not true in our logical mind, but it is in the actual experience of making past time present. There we have poetry, and there we have human life.

When we experience this kind of truth it means we have found the true meaning of time. Time constantly goes from past to present and from present to future. This is true, but it is also true that time goes from future to present and from present to past. A Zen master once said, "To go eastward one mile is to go westward one mile." This is vital freedom. We should acquire this kind of perfect freedom.

But perfect freedom is not found without some rules. People, especially young people, think that freedom is to do just what they want, that in Zen there is no need for rules. But it is absolutely necessary for us to have some rules. But this does not mean always to be under control. As long as you have rules, you have a chance for freedom. To try to obtain freedom without being aware of the rules means nothing. It is to acquire this perfect freedom that we practice Zen.

Mind Waves

When you are practicing zazen, do not try to stop your thinking. Let it stop by itself. If something comes into your mind, let it come in, and let it go out. It will not stay long. When you try to stop your thinking, it means you are bothered by it. Do not be bothered by anything. It appears as if something comes from outside your mind, but actually it is only the waves of your mind, and if you are not bothered by the waves, gradually they will become calmer and calmer. In five or at most ten minutes, your mind will be completely serene and calm. At that time your breathing will become quite slow, while your pulse will become a little faster.

It will take quite a long time before you find your calm, serene mind in your practice. Many sensations come, many thoughts or images arise, but they are just waves of your own mind. Nothing comes from outside your mind. Usually we think of our mind as receiving impressions and experiences from outside, but that is not a true understanding of our mind. The true understanding is that the mind includes everything; when you think something comes from outside it means only that something appears in your mind. Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind. If you leave your mind as it is, it will become calm. This mind is called big mind.

If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is a small mind, a limited mind. If your mind is not related to anything else, then there is no dualistic understanding in the activity of your mind. You understand activity as just waves of your mind. Big mind experiences everything within itself. Do you understand the difference between the two minds: the mind which includes everything, and the mind which is related to something? Actually they are the same thing, but the understanding is different, and your attitude towards your life will be different according to which understanding you have.

That everything is included within your mind is the essence of mind. To experience this is to have religious feeling. Even though waves arise, the essence of mind is pure; it is just like clear water with a few waves. Actually water always has waves. Waves are the practice of the water. To speak of waves apart from water or water apart from waves is a delusion. Water and waves are one. Big mind and small mind are one. When you understand your mind in this way, you have some security in your feeling. As your mind does not expect anything from outside, it is
always filled. A mind with waves in it is not a disturbed mind, but actually an amplified one. Whatever you experience is an expression of big mind.

The activity of big mind is to amplify itself through various experiences. In one sense our experiences coming one by one are always fresh and new, but in another sense they are nothing but a continuous or repeated unfolding of the one big mind. For instance, if you have some-thing good for breakfast, you will say, "This is good." "Good" is supplied as something experienced some time long ago, even though you may not remember when. With big mind we accept each of our experiences as if recognizing the face we see in a mirror as our own. For us there is no fear of losing this mind. There is nowhere to come or to go; there is no fear of death, no suffering from old age or sickness. Because we enjoy all aspects of life as an unfolding of big mind, we do not care for any excessive joy. So we have imperturbable composure, and it is with this imperturbable composure of big mind that we practice zazen.

Mind Weeds

When the alarm rings early in the morning, and you get up, I think you do not feel so good. It is not easy to go and sit, and even after you arrive at the zendo and begin zazen you have to encourage yourself to sit well. These are just waves of your mind. In pure zazen there should not be any waves in your mind. While you are sitting these waves will become smaller and smaller, and your effort will change into some subtle feeling.

We say, "Pulling out the weeds we give nourishment to the plant." We pull the weeds and bury them near the plant to give it nourishment. So even though you have some difficulty in your practice, even though you have some waves while you are sitting, those waves themselves will help you. So you should not be bothered by your mind. You should rather be grateful for the weeds, because eventually they will enrich your practice. If you have some experience of how the weeds in your mind change into mental nourishment, your practice will make remarkable progress. You will feel the progress. You will feel how they change into self-nourishment. Of course it is not so difficult to give some philosophical or psychological interpretation of our practice, but that is not enough. We must have the actual experience of how our weeds change into nourishment.

Strictly speaking, any effort we make is not good for our practice because it creates waves in our mind. It is impossible, however, to attain absolute calmness of our mind without any effort. We must make some effort, but we must forget ourselves in the effort we make. In this realm there is no subjectivity or objectivity. Our mind is just calm, without even any awareness. In this unawareness, every effort and every idea and thought will vanish. So it is necessary for us to encourage ourselves and to make an effort up to the last moment, when all effort disappears. You should keep your mind on your breathing until you are not aware of your breathing.

We should try to continue our effort forever, but we should not expect to reach some stage when we will forget all about it. We should just try to keep our mind on our breathing. That is our actual practice. That effort will be refined more and more while you are sitting. At first the effort you make is quite rough and impure, but by the power of practice the effort will become purer and purer. When your effort becomes pure, your body and mind become pure. This is the way we practice Zen. Once you understand your innate power to purify ourselves and our surroundings, you can act properly, and you will learn from those around you, and you will become friendly with others. This is the merit of Zen practice. But the way of practice is just to be concentrated on your breathing with the right posture and with great, pure effort. This is how we practice Zen.

KEY TERMS

禅
Zen

坐禅
Zazen

公案
Kōan

悟り
Satori

見性
Kenshō

無
Mu

QUESTIONS
1. Who was Saicho and what was his role in the development of Buddhism in Japan?

2. Who was Eisei and what was his role in the development of Buddhism in Japan?

3. What are some of the differences between Rinzai and Soto Zen?

4. Who was Dogen and why did he emphasize zazen practice? What innovation did Dogen bring to meditation practice?

5. Who was Hakuin and what did he mean by the “Great Doubt” and the “Great Dying”? Why did Hakuin emphasize koan practice as way of responding to the “Great Doubt”?

6. Why does Shunryu Suzuki emphasize the importance of maintaining a beginner’s mind in Zen practice?