

BASICS OF ZEN PRACTICE: JUST BE ONE

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INTRODUCTION: Pith of the Practice

It's a great pleasure to be back here at Chestnut Hill College with friends old and new, and family. There on the wall is a picture of Valley Green, a place in the woods nearby where I often played as a child. And down the hill from here lies Harper's Meadow. It's very nice to be back.

It's one thing to talk about zazen. But quite another to actually go through it together. That is what we'll do tonight. It makes a lot more sense that way.

This approach is based, first of all, on my own practice, both inside and outside monastery walls. It includes many valuable experiences and exchanges with others around the world. I have the great good fortune to join in retreats in many countries with various groups. Mostly Zen, but other groups as well.

My approach is also based on carefully reading and putting into practice the instructions found in meditation manuals, especially Zen meditation manuals, but Buddhist and Taoist ones also. I've done this because there is a great need in the West today to learn and master the fundamentals of meditative discipline, even — perhaps especially — for those of us practicing Zen. I myself have learned a great deal from these precious manuals. Not just from reading them, but by putting them into practice to see what is useful for us today.

Doing this kind of retreat in Europe and the States has been of great benefit not only for Buddhists but also for Christians and people of other faiths — or no faith at all. Yet it's only natural, for I'm not promoting narrow, sectarian Zen. Rather, there's something much more basic and essential going on here. In a word, together we are getting to the very pith of spiritual practice, to the very heart of being human. After all, that's what any authentic religious tradition is about, isn't it? Anyway, feel free to use what is being offered. If you find it helpful, fine. If not, throw it away — don't wait for me to do so.

By the way, before leaving Japan I met and spoke with some Japanese Zen masters about what I am doing. To my surprise, they encouraged me by stating that it isn't just something for Westerners; they admitted that Japanese nowadays need instruction in this too. I'm afraid it's true: Japanese today are losing touch with their own spiritual traditions.

Posture

To begin: Why do we do sit zazen like this? Why do we wrap our legs up like pretzels and sit with our backs erect for several periods of time, focusing on our breath?

It becomes obvious as soon as we do it: Zazen is not just a mental discipline, not just something we do with our minds. It's physical. Zazen engages our total being. If you can sit in the full-lotus posture, or gradually develop the ability to do so by stretching and yoga, I strongly recommend it. It is a very effective way to quiet, focus, and unify body, breath, and mind. It is an ancient practice that goes back before the time of Gotama Buddha. They knew what they were doing.

But our bodies and lifestyles are not the same, so if it's too painful, there are many other positions. Try various ways of sitting and learn from your body what works for you. What you do with your legs is not so important as keeping your back naturally erect. Not straight like a pole, but naturally following the curvature of your spine with butt pressed back and down firm on the seat. With back erect like this, zazen can be done in a chair or on a bench.

Get to the Bottom of Yourself

Buddhist practice is, in a word, getting to the very bottom of who and what we are. Actually penetrating, seeing through, what we call self. Not thinking, feeling, or having profound ideas about it, but actually getting to the bottom of it. What's there? Get there and find out! It is full and final release, what Buddhism calls awakening.

This does not require going somewhere else, nor does it involve entering transcendent or blissful states of mind. Each one of you, right here and now, has all you need. A teacher is not necessary for this, nor are books. According to the records, Gotama Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree and got to the bottom of himself. He did it on his own. And that — not some doctrine or dogma — is the basis of Buddhist practice.

Gotama Buddha did nothing different than all of us right here and now can do: Get to the bottom of ourselves. You all have a sense of self, right? Then you've already got more than enough! Just once get to the very bottom of it. Then, knowing who you truly are, bring that to life. In a sense that's at least as important as awakening itself: Working it out in every aspect of our lives.

Breathe One, Be One

Now, how can we actually do this? Focusing on the breath is a natural entrance. Unifying body and mind through the breath is a natural and simple method. Usually we are not conscious of our breathing. Many meditation practices focus on the breath, remind us to be mindful of it.

One preliminary method in modern Zen practice is to focus and concentrate with each out breath on a number. Just *be* that number. With each exhalation, *just be one*: "Oooooooooone." Exhaust your self with each out breath in just being one. In the beginning you may picture the number or say it to yourself in order to keep the focus. But eventually there shouldn't be any mental image or "trace" at all: Just "Oooooooooone" breathing itself.

Try it. It will take some time, patience, and determination. But if you persist, it will eventually become constant, no longer something that you must consciously raise and sustain. Nor will it be limited to zazen. You will find that you are naturally one even as you are engaged in various things.

In the meantime, when you go to sleep allow this one to gently settle below your navel. Eventually you will find that you don't need to arouse it after you wake up; it will already be there before a thought has arisen.

Breathing One & Counting Breaths

There are two basic ways to do this kind of breathing meditation. The first way is simply to be one with each out breath, as already mentioned. The second way is to count each out breath, beginning with one, then with the next exhalation, two, and so on up to ten. When you reach ten on the tenth exhalation, return to one and continue counting. If you find that you have been carried away by a thought, simply return to one and start the process over.

Both of these methods have their strengths and weaknesses. Counting from one to ten can give you the impression that you're getting somewhere, progressing toward a goal. This can interfere with the practice. So, the alternative is to just be one with each out breath; no need to be concerned with getting to ten.

You may find, however, that just focusing on one over and over can make your practice lose its sharpness. Oneness may get a bit fuzzy or dreamy. If that happens, then count from one to ten. This can help you to stay focused and alert.

Both methods have their value. But I think generally for Westerners, as long as it doesn't get fuzzy or stale, just breathing and being one is enough. Try it for a while, be patient and see what works for you. At one time, counting your breaths from one to ten might be most effective; at another time, just being one might be better.

Simple Practice for a Difficult Mind

In the beginning we are using our restless, seeking minds to try and just be one. This makes the sublimely simple seem difficult or even impossible. Be careful here; many people have come up against this initial difficulty in zazen and given up in frustration. They wrongly conclude that zazen is too difficult for them. But where exactly is the difficulty?

Japanese university students today face the same problem. After taking a few minutes just to sit with them and be one like this, I ask them how it went. They almost invariably answer that it was difficult or even impossible. So I ask them if they can ride their bikes, hold an umbrella and talk on their cell phone at the same time. You see them doing this often in Kyoto. *That's* no problem. But it's almost impossible just to be one with your breath for a few moments. Tell me: Where exactly is the difficulty?

Try it and see for yourself: The difficulty is not in the zazen; it's in your mind. Mind, especially the modern mind, is very complex, scattered and dispersed. We have virtually forgotten how to just be one. Remember, I'm not asking you, or my Japanese students, to do anything difficult. On the contrary, I'm just asking you to do one little thing! Only because it's so simple does it seem difficult. But it's not really hard at all. Fully give yourself up to it for a time and you will see. It does take time and discipline to master it. That doesn't mean you're doing it wrong, or you're not suited for zazen. Just patiently return to one and continue the practice. You've spent your whole life fragmenting and dispersing; isn't it worth taking some time to unify mind?

Dealing with Thoughts

If you're just beginning the practice of zazen, don't be dismayed. The first couple of times you try it you may find, on the contrary, that it seems even more thoughts come up! This can be very frustrating. Some meditation teachers state that it is not a matter of more thoughts coming up; rather, you are just becoming more aware of the thoughts that are always there, floating around the edges of consciousness. That may well be true. But it could also be that thoughts are generated in your very attempt to be one. The effort itself generates more obstacles. Why? Because simply being one is something we're not accustomed to. We are so used to dividing our attention between two, three, or more things at once. So, when we try to *just be one*, we find it impossible at first.

No problem. Simply continue with patience and diligence. Allow awareness to gradually gather itself together and become focused. If a thought, image or feeling comes up, no need to fight it: That is just creating more thoughts. When something comes up, one method is simply to be aware of it, then let it go. A thought comes up, notice it, then simply return to one. Patience. No need to get angry with yourself. There's no one there to get angry at anyway. Simply return to one.

Mind wanders again? Simply return to one. You're already learning a valuable lesson: You are clearly seeing, from your own experience, how mind wanders and thus the need for discipline and sustained practice. It does take discipline and patience, but each one of us can train our distracted and distracting minds to naturally return to the unadorned unity that is bare awareness.

Almost everyone has a similar experience when they first begin doing zazen. They

are able to get some sense of being one, they sense there's something there. I think the dynamics of doing it together in a group like this promotes such a sense.

But waves of thought arise too, don't they? Maybe you heard a car go by and that gave rise to some thought. Maybe you thought for a moment about whether your sitting was deep enough, or perhaps you felt satisfied and this stirred up some feeling of satisfaction. Probably you were aware at some level that you weren't fully one, that there still was some discursive mental activity going on. Again, this is valuable: It reveals, through your own experience, what your mind is doing and the need for meditative discipline.

Our mind is an idol factory. Without sustained practice it tends to just go on and on proliferating, "mentally masturbating," hiding the oneness that's always there. Thoughts themselves are not bad or evil. There's nothing wrong with them. They have their place, though not during zazen.

A common mistake here is trying to cut off thought or suppress thought, although we may not even fully realize that that is what we are doing. When thoughts or emotions are suppressed they will eventually come out in another way, often distorted and misdirected. It doesn't work and only causes other problems. Look carefully at what you are doing: The very activity of suppressing is itself a kind of willful thought, isn't it? Once a thought has arisen, a thousand chariots can't bring it back. There's nothing you need to do about it but be aware that it has arisen, then let it go.

Nevertheless, we do need to work at being one, especially in the beginning of our practice. We can do that by becoming aware and working with what we are. Working with our mind as it is, as it naturally functions. As your sitting deepens and becomes fully unified, you'll find that discursive thoughts just dissolve — they melt of their own accord. They lose their hold. As your practice gets firm and settled, there will be less need for such thoughts to come up. It takes some patience and some discipline. But it is possible, and it's ultimately not even difficult at all. You'll find as you go on that thoughts arise less and less. They have no need to arise. The insecurity and restlessness that spawned them is gone.

It's good to see your practice deepening. But don't become preoccupied with this; don't get carried away with it. Don't turn it into something. It's not some fantastic feat you've accomplished. It's just the natural maturing process. Don't stop there. Continue on.

Being One & Being *Mu*

A common term in Japanese Zen is *mu*, which refers to all actually being empty of self. Many Zen students want to become *mu*, or *sunya(ta)* — the Sanskrit term for this emptiness. They yearn to become empty of self. But they don't even know how to consistently enter the oneness samadhi mentioned above and actually be one when they practice. No wonder they are unable to fully realize *mu* in their practice

and in their lives.

As a process, you may first work on being one or counting your breaths, then after becoming proficient in this breath samadhi, replace it with *mu*. This is a common method in contemporary Zen practice.

However, truly being one and being *mu* are not two different things! Really and fully *be* the one that I am talking about — not just the idea or concept of it. Then you will see that it is none other than living, breathing *mu*. The whole thing is right there. For Westerners, however, it's more approachable and less esoteric if we speak about it in terms of one rather than use the Japanese word *mu* or the Sanskrit.

It's all a matter of what we actually do with it. If we reflect on what *mu* might mean, or turn it into something, anything, then it's not really *mu*, is it? On the other hand, if we fully and directly enter into one, we can work and make decisions as a dynamic oneness that comes to life in each and every thing. This oneness doesn't even stick to being "one." It can do anything — or nothing — with ease. But if we stick to oneness, use it as an escape from the busyness of the world, then it's clearly not true oneness, is it? If oneness can be gained — or lost — then it's not true oneness. That's the dead oneness roundly condemned in Zen circles. Be careful.

Never Apart from It

There's nothing in the least bit mystical or transcendent here. On the contrary, it's true of anything really worth doing, isn't it? Doing our work, or an art project, playing sports, making music, making love, reading a book, watching a movie or talking with a friend — if we can't really be one, be totally there, where are we? If mind is split, we can't do *anything* thoroughly.

Ever had to act in a real emergency or life-threatening crisis? All of your discursive thoughts that seem so real and tangible — where do they go at that moment? And where does that clarity, concentration and strength arise from?

When we're one with something, discursive thought is naturally absent. It's so, isn't it? Intuitively, we already know this truth and are touching it constantly. Far from being a confused or blurry state, it is total clarity. Unbound awareness — for a while. Unfettered freedom — while doing something that comes naturally. Further, we can spontaneously act, make decisions and so forth. Creative people know this instinctively and are often able to tap this source. Unfortunately, they often agonize over losing this oneness when doing other things, or have trouble integrating it into the rest of their lives. Patience, sustained practice, and a wholesome lifestyle cannot be emphasized enough.

Lose Yourself Naturally

After practicing wholeheartedly for some time, if you find it's still difficult to be one, I

would suggest first doing something that you are really good at, that you naturally lose yourself in. Everybody has such things. I could always do it with Frisbee. Ever since I can remember, when throwing and catching a Frisbee with another person, I could naturally be one with it. I don't know why. Everybody has something like that, whether it's a sport or playing an instrument or listening to music. Something they just naturally become one with. Some people feel it driving a car.

Whatever it is, do it before you do zazen. You don't want it to be a crutch, of course. You shouldn't get hung up on it, so that you feel you need to do it before doing zazen. But for struggling beginners, if you find that you naturally lose yourself that way, do it. Practically, it might be helpful as an entrance. Listen to a couple of songs, or to a particular one that really puts you at ease. And then sit. Maybe you won't be able to sit zazen quite as long, but the zazen might be more solid.

Am I talking heterodoxy here? It doesn't sound very Buddhist or Zen-like to just do something that will put you at ease if the sitting seems too hard. But done properly, it is kosher Buddhism. As a matter of fact, the memory of being totally at ease like this was an eye-opener for Gotama Buddha himself. According to ancient scriptures, it even provided precisely the spur that he needed to finally awaken!

Gotama's Groove

Perhaps many of you know the story. Gotama Buddha went through an enormous struggle. He studied meditation with two teachers, mastered their discipline, but realized he still wasn't free of self: The problems of old age, sickness and death still haunted him. He was still something. So he left those teachers and continued extreme austerities on his own. He tried to stop breathing. There's a long description in the Sutras, but basically what happened is he got a hell of a headache from it. Then he ate almost nothing until his bellybutton touched his spine. Exhausted, he realized that this is not the way; he's going to end up dead instead of enlightened. Something's wrong. He reached a dead end. Trying to get enlightened, he has taken self-effort all the way to the extreme of almost killing himself, yet he is still not one, he is still split. Now what?

Western commentaries tend to gloss over what is recorded next and simply say that he eventually realized the Middle Way and became the Buddha. But wait a minute! There was a crucial event at that point. In four different versions, both in the Pali and the Sanskrit texts, it states that what brought him to his next step was the recollection of a certain childhood experience where he had found himself totally at ease, totally calm. In the earlier Sutras it's an experience as a small child; in the Tibetan version he's already an adult. But the basic point is the same.

Simply put, he recalled sitting under the shade of a rose apple tree while his father, who was more or less a king, was having a kind of a plowing ceremony. The child Gotama was put under a covering and comfortably seated. There were people to take care of him and he was able to just watch and enjoy. Then he had a spontaneous insight. What exactly prompted it is not clear. One version tells of

small creatures being turned up by the plowing. But what is important is that he entered a kind of spontaneous samadhi. He wasn't meditating per se; he was just sitting there enjoying the ceremony as a child.

Of course it's legendary, but the significance is clear. It seems that in the depths of his despair, the adult Gotama just happened to recall this childhood experience. He remembers that it was extremely pleasant, though not in a sensuous, desiring way. He found himself totally calm and peaceful; at one. This memory struck him with force and he realized that maybe this is the way to overcome his present predicament.

That recollection motivates him to fundamentally change his whole approach: He stops torturing himself by sheer willpower. Instead, he now sees, thanks to that spontaneous experience as a child, that there is a more natural way. So he decides to take some nourishment by drinking milk, and refresh himself by bathing in the nearby river. *Then* comes the finale we all know: He sits under the Bodhi tree, has the great awakening and becomes the Buddha.

The record of his whole life, from birth to death, is full of superhuman occurrences. Isn't it amazing that the event which finally shows him the way turns out to be as mundane as recalling a childhood experience? But the recollection of this spontaneous experience, achieved without struggle or self-effort, clearly became the spur in his great awakening.

I'm *not* suggesting that we should now focus on recalling our childhood experiences, or that Buddhism is some kind of psychodrama. But it seems to me that even these early records are suggesting that what Gotama was looking for was always right there, under his very feet. And his willful attempts to grasp it were precisely what was keeping him from his final goal.

Okay, maybe I'm modernizing it a little by suggesting that you listen to music, but it's really not so strange, is it? Give yourself up completely to sustained sitting practice. You don't need music, the Sutras or anything. Just this. Just do it, to the end. It's not so easy, though. So, rather than give up in frustration because it seems too hard in the beginning, if you need a little help as a beginner to get you started, listen to a couple of songs, or shoot some hoops or whatever. Something that rekindles this oneness. And then sit. In a sense, that's what Gotama did too. They didn't have basketball courts back then, but I think his story comes to the same thing: To what was missing in his forced, willful efforts up to that time. Far from weakening or watering down his practice, it is what allowed him to enter into it completely.

There is No self — and that No-self is You

There's just one little thing to get straight: There is no self in all of this! As already mentioned, practice is actually getting to the bottom of that simple fact and living it. Here is the beginning, the middle, and the end of Buddhism.

Common Buddhist metaphors speak of cutting off the root of illusion, uprooting the illusion of self. But how do you cut off the root of something that's not there? When you actually break through self, you realize there really is not — has never been — a root to cut off. But as long as the delusive self-complex holds together, there are indeed all kinds of entanglements — self-delusions and delusions of self — that give the impression of a tightly tangled, knotted root. Anyone who has struggled with this knows that self can be a very tenacious tangle, a very frustrating web.

Speculating on these issues, people sometimes end up with preposterous misconceptions, needlessly extending the tangled web. For example, they take no-self quite literally and thus can make no sense of it at all, let alone put it into practice.

Since the beginning, however, Buddhism has been clear about this. For example, chapter twelve of the classic *Dhammapada* is about the self. There we find not a condemnation of the illusion of self, but a confirmation of its relative and practical importance. It speaks of self being the support and protector of self; who else could it be? It reminds us that evil is done by self and thus by self are we defiled; likewise, evil is left undone by self and thus by self are we purified.

Buddhist meditation instructions are clear about this too. Chapter eleven of Buddhaghosa's classic *Visuddhimagga* ("The Path of Purification") clearly states that meditation on *metta*-loving kindness should not begin with nurturing a feeling of compassion for one's enemies or even one's own teacher. Rather, it should begin with nurturing a feeling of compassion *toward oneself*.

In a sense, the only problem here is our lifetime of conditioned delusions. But they in fact are illusions. They are truly *insubstantial*; they have no real hold. So don't be preoccupied with speculative issues, standing back and wondering how no-self is possible. Just throw yourself into the practice and *be* it. From the outside, you can go round and round endlessly wondering how no-self could possibly be. Once inside this living truth, however, you will know that it is constantly being realized — how could you *not* realize it?!

One Mind

In a very fundamental sense, this is not *something* that *you* realize. There are a lot of wonderful Zen expressions that point this out. Since I haven't quoted any Zen stuff, let me throw this one in. It's from the opening sermon of the early Chinese Zen classic "Essentials of Mind Transmission" by Huang-po, the teacher of Lin-chi (Rinzai). Speaking of "one mind," he states that this mind "is not lacking in ordinary people, nor is it fully present in Buddhas."

In later Zen, to prevent it from becoming something to hold on to, "one mind" was replaced by typical Zen terms like "no mind." If oneness of mind is turned into something, anything, it must be broken through. But this one mind is much more

basic than that. It's not something that you could lack and that someone that you consider an enlightened person could have. If you consider yourself unenlightened — whatever that is — that doesn't mean you lack this mind. Needless to say, if you think you're enlightened, you're no better off. *It ain't that kind a' thing!*

If you turn it into something, then it may appear like that. But that's not one mind. Before a Buddha is a Buddha or an ignorant person is an ignorant person — that's one mind. That's why in a very real sense, *you* can't realize *it*. You don't have to realize it. Just let go of the illusion, and look — you're in water over your heads! Don't complain about being thirsty.

I'm just an ignorant fool from Philly, so why believe me? Let me quote Huang-po's sermon in context. Then you can see for yourself that all of us — you, me, Huang-po — are indeed, of *one mind*. Though I wouldn't blindly trust him either! Rather, use his words simply to verify what you yourself are:

All Buddhas and all humans are nothing but this one mind. There is nothing apart from it. This mind is without beginning, without birth, without death. Neither green nor yellow, without form or appearance, it does not adhere to being or non-being... It is right here, just as it is — yet as soon as discursive thoughts are produced you fall into error. Like the boundless void, it is beyond measure or calculation. This one mind itself is Buddha and there is no distinction between Buddhas and humans. It is just that humans are attached to external forms and thus seek outside themselves. The more you seek after it, the more you lose sight of it. You are a Buddha seeking vainly for some "Buddha," mind trying to grasp onto mind. Try with all your might for aeons, but you will never attain it. Just put all discursive thoughts to rest and forget vain concerns, then Buddha is manifest right here. Mind just as it is, is Buddha. And Buddha just as it is, is mind. *It is not lacking in ordinary people, nor is it fully present in Buddhas.*

You Have Everything You Need

I trust it's now clear, from your own practice, that to whatever extent you now realize it, you already have everything you need. Everyone here has everything they need to fully realize Buddhism. In a sense we've got too much! So we need a bit of fine-tuning, which is what this retreat is about. Be one in your practice and you'll see for yourself that this one does not come and go. In Buddhism it's called unborn and undying. It's not something we create. We don't have to. Now, making full use of this retreat, let's confirm this for ourselves in our own practice.

Question: *Jeff, are you saying that you can find a way to get and keep this serendipitous moment of oneness, of clarity, whenever you want?*

It is not something that you go into and come out of. Give yourself up to your practice and you'll find that you are one not just in your practice, but in your life. It is your way of being. You are it. It's not serendipitous, nor is it some state you need to control or maintain.

The oneness I'm talking about is not a state or condition of any sort, though in the beginning it may seem like that. As a process, we can speak about it that way, and we may actually become aware of it through serendipitous moments or seem to approach it through disciplined practice. But *this* is clearly not a state or condition! Don't turn it into one.

Give yourself up fully to zazen practice and you'll find that you don't go in and out of it. Zazen didn't begin when I put my feet up in the full-lotus posture. Zazen will not end when I bring my legs down. It's true.

To actually realize that, however, I spent years and years "aarrggh!" — struggling. That's because I'm a stupid, ignorant fool. I don't think you'll need to do that. This is why I do what I do — to help prevent you from going round and round in vain and painful circles.

It's really not that difficult to be one in sustained practice. But there may well be certain occasions, certain situations, certain people that you bump up against and thus lose your supposed oneness. Someone you just can't seem to get along with, or something that shocks or disgusts you. These are all your precious teachers.

Even if you find yourself getting angry, let that anger be your oneness at the moment. And when it's over, let it go. Maybe you think that Buddhas can't get angry. I know plenty of Buddhas, and they can all get angry, every one of them. And they should. There are times to get angry. No-self can get angry; but no-self doesn't get angry about getting angry. There is anger and then it's gone. But we tend to get angry about our anger, don't we? And we get a little too happy about our happiness. We can even get angry because we're not happy enough, we're not as "fulfilled" as we were, or think we should be. Please don't be preoccupied with getting and keeping such momentary states of mind.

Question: *Some people have an insight, then they seek or grasp for another insight. I find the opposite happening: Having seen that we are one, the actual struggle is to maintain the illusion, so to speak. I find that I have a fear of oneness, a fear of nothingness. [So what do you do?] I don't know. Sometimes I feel that I'm letting go of the delusion, but then this fear comes over me that I will have nothing left. It's as if I've removed almost everything, but then I put it back on.*

You're a very astute person. What you are talking about is there, but people are often unaware of it. On the surface, people very much want to have this

"enlightenment experience," because they naively assume that it will solve all their problems. They don't realize what you have realized: Namely, that they are, at the same time, scared shitless. Why?

I myself recently had such an experience, of losing myself, where I really thought that if I lost myself completely I would die.

Exactly: You are. [Yes.] That's why it's so frightening. Any genuinely religious experience, as far as I can see, involves death of the ego-self, the self-centered self. Christianity and other religions — especially the mystical traditions — are just as clear about it as Buddhism. The delusion must die. And that is frightening as hell — for the delusion. Look at St. John's "dark night of the soul." To paraphrase a verse from his "Ascent of Mount Carmel":

To possess all, desire to possess nothing.
To be all, desire to be nothing...
To come to where you are not, you must go to where you are not.
To come from all to all, you must leave it all.
And when you have come to have all,
You must have it without wanting anything.

You already know to some extent that it is a delusion and you must let it go. But as long as some ego-delusion remains, you hold desperately onto that last thread, no matter how tenuous it is. Because that would be the end of your whole world.

Take your time. Be patient. Give yourself up to your sitting practice. When you're ready, that last little thread will dissolve. No need for you to try and hasten it. When you're ready. No one is here to force you. It's up to your own integrity. But remember: It is just an illusion. Trust yourself to let go of the illusion. I assure you: When you do let go you will see that it is an illusion. All genuine religious traditions speak with one voice here: Rebirth comes only through the death of the old.

Question: *Could this be spoken of as being in the moment, being in the present, as some teachers put it? It seems so important because you can always bring yourself back to that.*

I don't speak that way because people then tend to hold onto the present moment. You're right, though: In beginning your practice, it's certainly better to focus on the present than on the past or future. But beware of holding onto the present. Buddhism is clear: There is no past to hold onto, there is no future to hold onto. And there is no present to hold onto either! It's in *The Diamond Sutra*, *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, and so on.

If you speak of it as the present moment, it must be boundless: The eternal now at this moment, so to speak. Where does *this* begin and end? The entire past, present, and future are effortlessly embraced in the true present.

Look carefully: "Being in the present moment" can conceal an attachment to itself, can't it? It's not a matter of right now, right now, right now: "Grabbing for all the gusto you can," as the commercial said. That's just tiring yourself out trying to always be in some preconceived "present," binding yourself with your own chains. The same holds for "being one," of course.

Question: *I think from the point of view of practice it doesn't really matter, but there is oneness in the sense of the many in opposition to the one, that is, multiplicity and unity, and there is also numerical multiplicity and one. Does this matter in your usage?*

In the beginning I would simply focus on being one. But you will find that that oneness must be called forth to work in the world of multiplicity. That oneness, that unity, cannot stick to itself. You are called forth to act: to feel, to think, to move, to respond. A oneness in opposition to multiplicity, a oneness holding onto itself, will break down or fizzle out. Genuine, living oneness — how to say it? — No matter how much you break this up, it's no smaller. No matter how much you expand it, it's no bigger. This is so important for people doing retreats because, due to the sustained practice schedule, they tend to develop a pretty big, focussed oneness. But then a few days after the retreat they feel their samadhi power getting weaker. They feel they're losing that oneness and they want to go back to it. It's so tragic because it's not something you need to return to! We turn it into something, and then we chase after this something that we have created. In our busy lives we naturally cannot maintain a retreat schedule all the time. But we don't need to. Nor do we need to struggle to get back to some clear and calm state of mind. We just end up causing more distress that way. Doing a retreat, as we are now, is a precious opportunity. When you can, by all means do it. But there's no need to try and imitate it in your everyday life.

It's important to be able to carry out the practice so that this one can truly work in the world. That is what sustained practice is all about. "I can't be one now — I have to cook dinner!" — in the beginning there will likely be some struggle. That's okay; work it through. Cook a good dinner.

Endnote

Revised version of lectures in 2002 in Kyoto for the Study Abroad Program of Luther College on January 9; in the USA for the Buddhist Sangha of Bucks County at the Yardley Friends (Quaker) Meeting

House in Pennsylvania on January 14; in the Netherlands for *Zen onder de Dom* in Utrecht on February 15; for *Zendo de Kern* in Eersel on February 18; for *Zendo 't Hool* in Eindhoven on February 19; in Belgium for *Zen-groep Romaanse Poort* in Leuven on February 21; in Italy for *Sangha il monte interiore* in Rome at the Biblical Institute on February 24; in the USA for the Philadelphia Buddhist Association at Chestnut Hill College on July 26-28; again for the Buddhist Sangha of Bucks County at the Yardley Friends Meeting House in Pennsylvania on July 29; for the Zen Buddhist Center of Washington D. C. (*Kashin Zendo*) in Chevy Chase, Maryland on August 3; in Colorado for the Springs Mountain Sangha at the Susan B. Anthony Annex of All Souls Unitarian Church in Colorado Springs on August 17; in Arkansas for the Ecumenical Buddhist Society at the Fletcher Branch of Central Arkansas Library, Little Rock on August 23; and in Canada at a colloquium for the Department of Religion at the University of Calgary on October 22.

Introduction: Pith of the Practice

For English translations of some classic meditation manuals, see the Descriptive Bibliography at the end of "Principles of Zen Practice." In Japanese, zazen manuals are commonly known as *Zazen-gi*, *Zazen-ron*, and *Zazen-shin*.

Breathe One, Be One

On the practice of breathing and being one in Zen, see my interview with Nanrei Kobori in *FAS Newsletter* Autumn 1984, pp. 29-40, especially pp. 37-38.

Gotama's Groove

For Gotama's experience, see Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975; first published in 1927), pp. 44-66. Thomas provides extensive excerpts from various sutras and commentaries; here are some extracts from his translation of the relevant sections of the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikaya* 36):

Then I thought, what if I now practise trance without breathing. So I restrained breathing in and out from mouth and nose. And as I did so, there was a violent

sound of winds issuing from my ears. ...violent winds disturbed my head. Just as if a strong man were to crush one's head with the point of a sword, even so did violent winds disturb my head...

Then I thought, what if I were to take food only in small amounts, as much as my hollowed palm would hold... When I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach, I actually took hold of my spine, and when I thought I would touch my spine, I took hold of the skin of my stomach, so much did the skin of my stomach cling to my spine through the little food...

Then I thought, those ascetics and brahmins in the past, who have suffered sudden, sharp, keen, severe pains, at the most have not suffered more than this. (Similarly of those in the future and present.) But by this severe mortification I do not attain superhuman truly noble knowledge and insight. Perhaps there is another way to enlightenment. Then I thought, now I realise that when my father the Sakyan was working, I was seated under the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, and without sensual desires, without evil ideas, I attained and abode in the first trance of joy and pleasure [*sukha*: the opposite of *dukkha* or "suffering"] arising from seclusion, and combined with reasoning and investigation. Perhaps this is the way to enlightenment. Then arose in conformity with mindfulness the consciousness that this was the way to enlightenment. Then I thought, why should I fear the happy state that is without sensual desires and without evil ideas? And I thought, I do not fear that happy state which is without sensual desires and without evil ideas.

Then I thought, it is not easy to gain that happy state while my body is so very lean. What if I now take solid food, rice and sour milk...

One Mind

Huang-po quote from John Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind* (New York: Grove Press, 1958) pp. 29-30, with major revisions. Chinese text in *T* 48:379c18-27.

Questions

Paraphrase from the verse of St John of the Cross, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" book 1, chapter 13.

See, for example, the end of chapter 18 of *The Diamond Sutra*, where Buddha says to Subhuti that it is impossible to hold onto past mind, present mind, or future mind. See *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, for example chapter 7 where it states that Buddhas are not of the past, present, or future since awakening transcends those three time periods; chapter 9 where it states that past, present, and future are all of the nature of empty space; chapter 12 where Vimalakirti states that since the Buddha has attained the unattainable, Vimalakirti does not see the Buddha born in the past, pass into the future, or abide in the present.

One of the classic Zen statements on this:

Destroy that muddy hell called "self and other both empty,"
Squash the varmint's dead-end alley of "the present moment".

(Translation from Victor Sogen Hori, *Zen Sand* p. 613, with revisions.)