

How to Meditate:

The Classic *Zazen Manual*

For Today

In Zen Buddhism, a worthy student is never taught. Guided, inspired, challenged – yes. But not taught. Why?

It's essential that each of us directly realize it for ourselves. The real thing cannot be taught. It doesn't need to be.

A genuine “teacher” and Dharma friends, however, offer great support and inspiration on the way. Through mutual respect and trust, valuable guidance naturally emerges. And, when needed, also a real challenge.

But we are careful not to let anything get in the way of each one realizing themselves. Common obstacles include over-reliance on the teacher and obsession over perfecting meditation techniques in order to dwell in emptiness or have an enlightenment experience.

With this in mind, I will comment on the classic *Zazen Manual*. It has been used for many centuries and is still used today in Zen training. While its authorship is unclear, it is a Chinese work that took its present form about 1,000 years ago.

In Japan it is found in both the popular *Four Texts of the Zen School* and in the *Poison-Painted Drum*, the basic handbook for Rinzai monastic practice. It is **the** zazen manual; other, later writings on zazen, including those by the Japanese Zen master Dôgen (1200-1253), are largely based,

word for word, on it.

Brief and to the point, it covers the basics of *zazen* meditation, including physical posture, mental attitude, and problems that may arise. Let us look into this classic *Zazen Manual* and apply it so that it too can offer, like an old and trusted Dharma friend, the needed guidance, inspiration, and challenge for us today.

Zazen Manual

Bodhisattvas aspiring to prajna-wisdom should first arouse great compassion, take the Four Great Vows, and cultivate samadhi-concentration. Vowing to set all beings free, do not seek liberation for yourself alone.

Then let go of all conditions and put all concerns to rest, with body and mind one, and no separation between movement and stillness. Be moderate with food and drink, taking neither too much nor too little. Regulate sleep, neither depriving nor indulging.

For *zazen*, spread a thick mat in a quiet place, loosen your clothing but maintain proper bearing, and sit in full-lotus. First place right foot on left thigh, then left foot on right thigh. Or sit in half-lotus, placing left foot on right thigh.

Next, place right hand on left foot, left hand on right palm, thumbs touching. Raise torso and stretch it forward, rock side to side, then sit erect. Do not tilt to one side, forward or backward. Align hips, spine, and head like a stupa. But do not strain to make your body erect, as this will constrict breath and cause discomfort. Ears in line with shoulders, nose in line with navel, tongue resting on upper palate, mouth gently closed, eyes slightly open to prevent drowsiness.

This is best for sustaining the concentrated power of *dhyana*. In former times, eminent monks adept in this practice always sat with eyes open. Zen master Fayun Yuantong scolded those sitting with eyes closed, like a ghost cave in a dark mountain. There is good reason for this, which adepts know well.

With body settled, regulate breath and relax abdomen. Do not give rise to any thoughts, good or bad. If a thought does arise, be aware of it. Once you're aware of it, it disappears. Eventually conditions are

forgotten, and all is naturally unified. This is the essence of zazen.

Zazen really is the dharma gate of ease and joy. If people become ill from it, they are not doing it with proper care. Done properly, your whole body naturally becomes light and at ease, spirit fresh, mind clear. The flavor of dharma sustains, and you are calm, pure, and joyful.

If you've already had a realization, it is like a dragon entering water or a tiger roaming mountains. If you have yet to realize it, use the wind to fan the flame; great effort is not needed. Just confirm it yourself and you will not be deceived.

Where the path is lofty, however, demons abound and there are all sorts of experiences, agreeable and disagreeable. Just maintain mindfulness and none of this can obstruct you. *The Surangama Sutra*, Tiantai *Chih-kuan*, and Guifeng's *Manual for Cultivation and Realization* describe in detail these demonic states, so you can be prepared in advance.

Coming out of meditation, move slowly and rise calmly, without haste or roughness. Then at all times use appropriate means to protect and sustain the concentrated power of dhyana, as if caring for a babe in arms. Thus it develops easily.

This is the most urgent task. If you don't practice calmly and quietly, in the end you'll be completely lost. To search for the pearl, it's best to calm the waves. With the water of concentration still and clear, the mind-pearl reveals itself.

Thus *The Perfect Enlightenment Sutra* says that unhindered and pure wisdom arises from dhyana. *The Lotus Sutra* says that in a quiet place one should cultivate the mind and let it settle, so that it is as still as Mt. Sumeru. Thus, to transcend secular and sacred, quiet meditation is necessary; to freely pass away sitting or standing is dependent on the concentrated power of dhyana.

Even if you devote your life to it, be wary of falling short. And if you waste your time, how in the world will you overcome your karmic hindrances? Thus an ancient has said that without the concentrated power of dhyana, you will cower at death's door. With eyes covered, you end your life in vain like a vagabond.

Fortunate dharma friends! Please read this manual again and again. For the benefit of oneself as well as others, let us all together fully awaken.

This is a manual for spiritual practice, not a philosophical statement or theological treatise. Yet it opens with what may seem a rather vague and grand vista:

Bodhisattvas aspiring to prajna-wisdom should first arouse great compassion, take the Four Great Vows, and cultivate samadhi-concentration. Vowing to set all beings free, do not seek liberation for yourself alone.

This is how we begin? Yes. Let's take a look.

It is addressed to "Bodhisattvas aspiring to prajna-wisdom." A Bodhisattva is literally an awakening being. That is: you, me – nothing vague or abstract.

Prajna-wisdom is not mere knowledge or learning; it is wisdom that liberates, the wisdom of awakening. Great compassion is also already mentioned in this first sentence. It is where practice begins.

Does this sound daunting or confusing? Perhaps you doubt this great compassion in yourself, so how can you even get started?

Simply start where you are, that's enough. Through proper practice, soon enough it becomes clear: all – including your struggling practice – arises from great compassion. This compassion is sometimes spoken of as the goal of our practice – it is also the root that grounds and nourishes us.

This is not some vague ideal – where do you think you are right now? But no need to blindly believe my words. Give yourself to the practice and confirm it yourself.

Next mentioned is the Four Great Vows. Simply put: *Numberless beings, set free; endless delusion, let go; countless dharma, see through; peerless way, manifest!* Here, too, the first priority is on the compassionate vow that sets all beings free.

To "cultivate samadhi-concentration" points to the

required discipline. Especially, in the beginning, on the zazen cushion. Gathering all into one through patient and sustained meditative concentration, all falls naturally into place. As we will see, this is taken up in the next paragraph, and later in the text where this initial samadhi-concentration deepens into dhyana.

This first paragraph ends by repeating – warning – that we practice for all beings, not just for ourselves. Yet most of us, myself included, began practicing with ourselves in mind. Fine, start there – but continue, with mind and heart open.

Then let go of all conditions and put all concerns to rest, with body and mind one, and no separation between movement and stillness. Be moderate with food and drink, taking neither too much nor too little. Regulate sleep, neither depriving nor indulging.

Having prepared ourselves the best we can by putting into practice the introductory paragraph, we are then asked to “let go of all conditions and put all concerns to rest.” This refers to both external conditions and internal concerns. All is naturally laid to rest in zazen. Not ignored or repressed.

This is difficult to realize if we fixate on an external world out there and an internal world in our heads. After all, these two are not entirely separate worlds, are they? Who makes that distinction in the first place – and from where? In concentrated zazen all such divisions are naturally laid to rest.

Likewise, if we sit here thinking that our body is out there and our mind is in here. So we allow all our energy to be gathered into one: body and mind naturally concentrated into one.

But how? This will be explained several paragraphs below, after the physical posture has been settled. Practically speaking, first we settle the body; then it is easier to settle the

mind. In this paragraph just a general overview of the essentials is briefly given.

As practice deepens, it is not limited just to time on the meditation cushion. It comes to be the way that we are, both in the stillness of sitting and in activity. Thus, a practice like *kinhin*-walking meditation: continuing the concentration of sitting, but now in a simple action such as walking mindfully, following the foot of the person in front of us. Then when we return to our sitting cushion after a break, we don't **begin** our practice again – we simply and naturally **continue** our constant practice, now in the seated posture.

This section ends by reminding Bodhisattvas to get the nourishment and sleep needed, without indulging. A *sesshin*-retreat is carefully planned to do just that. Continue it in your daily life as well.

For zazen, spread a thick mat in a quiet place, loosen your clothing but maintain proper bearing, and sit in full-lotus. First place right foot on left thigh, then left foot on right thigh. Or sit in half-lotus, placing left foot on right thigh.

Zazen is not asceticism; use a mat thick enough but firm enough to support your body comfortably. Especially in the beginning a quiet place is conducive. Make sure belt is loosened and body is not tight or constrained. But don't slouch.

Full-lotus is recommended because it works. The hips are open, it is easy to remain with back naturally erect, and to breathe from the belly. If you can do it comfortably, or gradually get used to it through stretching and so forth, by all means do so. It is the best posture for sustained meditation.

If not, no problem. As mentioned, half-lotus is also fine. Don't worry about which leg goes on top; either one is fine. If you can, sometimes reverse the legs to prevent too much

pressure on one side of the body.

If neither full-lotus nor half-lotus works, there are many other postures, including Burmese (with both legs flat on the ground), and *seiza* (on your haunches with a bench or pillow underneath). A chair will also do, but don't lean against the back of it.

The essential point is for your back to be naturally erect so that you remain focused and alert for sustained meditation. Try various postures, and cushions under your butt, to see what works for you.

Next, place right hand on left foot, left hand on right palm, thumbs touching. Raise torso and stretch it forward, rock side to side, then sit erect. Do not tilt to one side, forward or backward. Align hips, spine, and head like a stupa. But do not strain to make your body erect, as this will constrict breath and cause discomfort. Ears in line with shoulders, nose in line with navel, tongue resting on upper palate, mouth gently closed, eyes slightly open to prevent drowsiness.

Placing hands on feet like this applies to sitting in full-lotus. However you sit, place hands below the navel, thumbs lightly touching at the navel. This is helpful to steady upper body and also to settle breath in the belly.

Raise torso, don't slouch. Stretch forward, then gently rock side to side so that you are sitting straight. The same can be done rocking forward and backward.

I find it helpful to stretch forward until forehead touches the floor, then slowly come up, feeling butt pressing down and back on the cushion, spine naturally erect. Feel back, neck and head naturally supporting each other.

Avoid strain or force. The guidelines given in this manual are the result of long trial and error. Try them and you'll see: resting tongue on upper palate with mouth gently closed, for example, is what naturally happens when we sit properly.

Eyes slightly open, however, is a problem for many. The next paragraph is devoted to it:

This is best for sustaining the concentrated power of dhyana. In former times, eminent monks adept in this practice always sat with eyes open. Zen master Fayun Yuantong scolded those sitting with eyes closed, like a ghost cave in a dark mountain. There is good reason for this, which adepts know well.

Here the samadhi-concentration of the first paragraph has deepened, settled, into the concentrated power of dhyana. And eyes slightly open is the way in Zen Buddhism.

But in our daily lives we are used to eyes either open or closed; slightly open does not seem natural or come easily to many.

And yet that is exactly what is called for here. Opening them all the way, we tend to look around and discursive consciousness is activated. Closing them, we tend to drift into a world of imagination, dreams, and so on.

Try it for a while and see: sitting properly, eyes naturally remain slightly open, looking downward but not fixated on anything. If after sustained sitting you are still not comfortable with eyes slightly open, close them – as long as the focus remains clear.

Other Buddhist traditions sit with eyes closed, so don't worry. However, there is good reason that we do not close the eyes in the Zen tradition. Confirm it for yourself: not only does it keep you from drifting off or from sinking into dead blankness – “like a ghost cave in a dark mountain.” It is also easier to then continue the concentration in daily activities, without gap or interruption.

With body settled, regulate breath and relax abdomen. Do not give rise to any thoughts, good or bad. If a thought does arise, be aware of it. Once you're aware of it, it disappears. Eventually conditions are

forgotten, and all is naturally unified. This is the essence of zazen.

First the body is settled; then the subtler settling of mind. Breathing from the abdomen or belly in a relaxed manner is the way.

Don't force it. Breath is the best way here, nothing added: no mantra, no mandala, no koan, no religious principle – nothing. Just what we are always already doing in order to live.

However, we are often unaware of our breathing. We are often lost in our heads, isolated from our physical body.

We are breathing whether we are aware of it or not. The point is not to **think** about breathing, but simply to **breathe**: to **be** fully one with, not separate from, the breath. Then we can confirm soon enough what it is to “not give rise to any thoughts, good or bad.”

“Thoughts” here refers not only to discursive thinking, but to memories and expectations, emotions and feelings as well.

And when a thought does arise? Simply recognize it – but don't do anything with it: don't take it up and go with it. Or condemn yourself for having it. Don't even congratulate yourself for having no thought – that too is just another thought.

In sustained concentration, if you simply let mind (and body) be as it is, thoughts eventually disappear of their own accord.

If thoughts instead proliferate, see what is wrong. Here proper guidance is most helpful. If you feed your thoughts, they will continue. See clearly what you're doing. Indulging in thoughts, you feed them. But trying to get away from them is also a way of feeding them.

You don't need to **do** anything with them. Just recognize them, then let them be as they are; they cannot exist on their

own.

“Eventually conditions are forgotten, and all is naturally unified.” This refines the opening of the second paragraph: “Then let go of all conditions and put all concerns to rest, with body and mind one, and no separation between movement and stillness.”

The term “forgotten” is used, but it does not refer to being absentminded. Not at all. On the contrary, all is gathered into one, unified.

And when this reaches completion, what happens? Not a thing: rather, it dawns on us that it has always been this way. It’s just that now it is actualized, realized. Indeed: “...all **is** naturally unified. This is the essence of zazen.” I would put it: “This is the entrance of zazen.” Continue on and see why.

Zazen really is the dharma gate of ease and joy. If people become ill from it, they are not doing it with proper care. Done properly, your whole body naturally becomes light and at ease, spirit fresh, mind clear. The flavor of dharma sustains, and you are calm, pure, and joyful.

If your sitting is unsettled, zazen is **not** the dharma gate of ease and joy! And yet it’s true: “Zazen really is the dharma gate of ease and joy.” The only way to discover this is to sit through until it’s confirmed in your own body.

In the meantime, if a problem arises in your sitting, see what is wrong and correct it. Do a retreat; digest this *Zazen Manual* again; share your concern with Dharma friends.

You’ll know when you’re getting the knack of it. Instead of feeling tired and painful after sustained zazen, you’ll feel fresh, light and free in body and mind. Continue on.

If you’ve already had a realization, it is like a dragon entering water or a tiger roaming mountains. If you’ve yet to realize it, use the wind to fan the flame; great effort is not needed. Just confirm it yourself and you will not be deceived.

In Chinese lore, the dragon dwells in water and often symbolizes wisdom. “Like a dragon entering water or a tiger roaming mountains” refers to being completely content, in one’s element, back home at last. This is how it is. Now the real practice begins.

And if you haven’t realized it? No problem: simply continue giving all of yourself in a natural manner, without forcing it through willpower. Freed from such self-effort, far from becoming weak or losing power, there’s nothing to hold you back or get in the way. Compared with this, mere willpower is utterly powerless; one instant of inattention and it’s gone.

Instead of being stuck going in circles in your head, the practice becomes embodied: firmly and directly grounded in that which nourishes. Now you can confirm it in your bones.

Where the path is lofty, however, demons abound and there are all sorts of experiences, agreeable and disagreeable. Just maintain mindfulness and none of this can obstruct you. *The Surangama Sutra*, Tiantai *Chih-kuan*, and Guifeng’s *Manual for Cultivation and Realization* describe in detail these demonic states, so you can be prepared in advance.

Whether you’ve had a realization or not, all kinds of experiences, visions, and so forth may arise. Maintain right mindfulness and you’ll continue on through without being disturbed.

Just in case, several writings are mentioned. But they are rather abstruse works nowadays, including *The Surangama Sutra*, a work by the sixth-century Chinese Tiantai master Zhiyi, and a work by the brilliant scholar-monk Guifeng Zongmi (780-841). In previous retreats we went through Boshan’s straight-shooting *Exhortations*. Taking them to

heart, we are well prepared.

Coming out of meditation, move slowly and rise calmly, without haste or roughness. Then at all times use appropriate means to protect and sustain the concentrated power of dhyana, as if caring for a babe in arms. Thus it develops easily.

This is proper advice as we patiently and carefully work it through. And yet, in daily life we need to apply ourselves and pay attention to various things. This is where our focus naturally turns.

As practice matures, the concentrated power of dhyana remains as a kind of undercurrent through it all. Although some Zen teachers insist that, once we have worked it through, no matter how we jump up or even leap out of our zazen, it cannot be lost.

Fine; now return to your practice with patience, care and attention.

This is the most urgent task. If you don't practice calmly and quietly, in the end you'll be completely lost. To search for the pearl, it's best to calm the waves. With the water of concentration still and clear, the mind-pearl reveals itself.

The great matter of life and death is indeed the most urgent task. Conjure up all the pleasant fantasies you will – they'll be of no use when you're facing death or a real tragedy in life.

The pearl metaphor describes sustained practice to still the waves of mind and all sense experience. It also states that what we are searching for reveals itself.

Calm the waves until there are none – then **see** what's there. That is not a fantasy conjured up, nor some insight, state of mind, or sensuous experience.

Thus *The Perfect Enlightenment Sutra* says that unhindered and pure wisdom arises from dhyana. *The Lotus Sutra* says that in a quiet place one should cultivate the mind and let it settle, so that it is as still as Mt. Sumeru. Thus, to transcend secular and sacred, quiet meditation is necessary; to freely pass away sitting or standing is dependent on the concentrated power of dhyana.

Slowing down the mind-train through the concentrated power of dhyana is most helpful; it is going in the right direction. But the mind-train and all sense experience must not just slow down; it must once come to a full and complete stop so that we can **see** what's there. **This** is the essence of zazen.

Otherwise, the concentrated power of dhyana tends to degenerate into no more than a temporary salve, at worst an unhealthy escape from turmoil. Beware of half-assed practice.

Allow sense experience itself to come to its own end. Then see what's there. Now where is the division between secular and sacred? Who divides life and death? Death itself is not apart from this: when the time comes, sit and calmly pass away, or die standing if you wish.

Without the concentrated power of dhyana – and living a wholesome life – any glimpse gained is likely to do more harm than good. By all means, give yourself fully to the moment-to-moment practice, without thinking about when, where, or how.

In what sense, though, are things “**dependent** on the concentrated power of dhyana”? Consider well.

Even if you devote your life to it, be wary of falling short. And if you waste your time, how in the world will you overcome your karmic hindrances? Thus an ancient has said that without the concentrated power of dhyana, you will cower at death's door. With eyes covered, you end your life in vain like a vagabond.

A striking contrast with the previous paragraph. The author seems eager to warn us not to be lax, and to make best use of this precious life. What are you waiting for?

“Karmic hindrances” might sound a bit vague or strange. Once we give ourselves to the practice, however, the stubborn force of habitual attitudes becomes crystal clear.

Such entrenched tendencies don’t disappear as easily as discursive thought does. **Dependent** on circumstances, they may return again and again. Thus, we live a wholesome life and patiently maintain our practice. Whether anything is “dependent” on it or not, the concentrated power of dhyana continues.

Fortunate dharma friends! Please read this manual again and again. For the benefit of oneself as well as others, let us all together fully awaken.

The *Zazen Manual* ends where it begins: compassion awakening all. Seeing what really is, the prajna-wisdom which we aspired to in the beginning is not separate from compassion. This is our actual ground; it is also what we ceaselessly aspire to.

How fortunate we are! If you have not already, please confirm it yourself. And if you have, by all means continue on.

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Endnote

Revised lecture transcripts from retreats given throughout Europe in February-March 2015, and in the USA in May 2015.

Legend ascribes the *Zazen Manual* to the Chinese Zen master Baizhang Huaihai (720-814), renowned as the forefather of the Zen monastic codes and for his saying: "A day without work is a day without eating."

A more likely author, at least of the *Zazen Manual* in its present form, is the Chinese Zen master Changlu Zongze (Sung Dynasty), known also for his

writings on the Pure Land. Changlu Zongze ordained under Fayun Yuantong (1027-1090), mentioned in the fifth paragraph of the *Zazen Manual*. Changlu's honorific title literally reads "Zen Master of Compassion Awakening."

Earlier English translations and studies of the *Zazen Manual* were helpful in my attempt here. They include: Carl Bielefeldt's chapter in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, (edited by Peter N. Gregory, University of Hawaii Press, 1986); Carl Bielefeldt's *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation* (University of California Press, 1988); Thomas Cleary's *Minding Mind: A Course in Basic Meditation* (Shambhala, 1995), pp. 16 -19.

Frank feedback always appreciated.