

# Begin Here: Five Styles of Zen

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[from the book, "Before Thinking"]

The way in which we view something defines for us what we're going to allow ourselves to see of it. A point of view is merely one degree out of the three hundred and sixty degrees of a circle; each point of view can see from that point only, and so is three hundred and fifty nine degrees blind. When we become fixated on our "point of view," our interpretations and expectations blind us. This is true of how we view our practice as well. Since our practice is about opening to our life as it is, opening to this moment as it is, and allowing this clear seeing to pervade our life, it is important that our view of practice also be open and clear. This requires honesty with ourselves and our own motives and a very open and clear investigation and recognition of the ways in which we might be approaching our practice as a means to try to grasp at things within our life, instead of opening to the vastness of our life itself.

One particular way of understanding various approaches to practice was taught by Kuei-feng Tsung-mi. Tsung-mi was a C'han master, and also the fifth Ancestor of the Hua Yen tradition in the Tang dynasty in China . He spoke of five different kinds of Zen, which are bompū zen or "usual zen," gedo zen or "Outside Way zen," shojo zen or "Hinayana practice," daijo zen or "Great Practice zen" and saijojo zen or "Easy and perfect" zen. In this sense, we could say that zen with a small "z" means simply a form of practising.

Zen practice is so vast that we can approach it from almost any angle and still gain something. However, if we can approach it from where we are, sitting directly in the midst of our life rather than coming at it from any particular angle, then all of its riches will begin to open for us. We will find that grasping at these riches pushes them away. Even if we are able to hold onto one thing, as soon as we close our hands around it and hold on, we can't pick up anything else, we can't use anything else. Every time we grasp at something, we limit ourselves. Yet, no matter how hard we grasp or clutch, we cannot hold on because everything and everyone is always changing and coming and going. It is not just a matter of not being able to hold onto things; the whole act of grasping is one of limiting.

If we sit and just sit, so that it isn't even a matter of "you" sitting or "me" sitting, but just sitting, then the practice begins to open for us. We will find that it is so simple, so profound, so ordinary, so vast and so limitless, that we can never encompass all of it. The more deeply we practice, the more we find that practice encompasses us.

## **Bompū zen**

Bompū zen, or "usual zen," means engaging in a meditation practice in order to procure the same kinds of things that one has always been looking for; that is to say health and happiness, some sense of well-being. There is nothing wrong with wanting to develop a sense of health and well being. We are not saying that any of these approaches to practice are "wrong"; it is just that some of them are more limiting than others. To limit oneself when it is not necessary is like tying your own hands.

We can obtain health and well being through our practice. The sitting posture itself allows the body to be as it is. It allows the body to sit in such a way that the spinal cord is erect, but not stiff. The shoulders allow

tension to fall away from them and the weight is evenly balanced. There is no pressure being placed upon any of the internal organs by scrunching them as we fall into some slouching posture, or as we try to draw ourselves in and hold our chest tight.

Since we practice with the body and with the mind, both body and mind gain great benefit from practice, simply because they can function freely. Our mind will become calmer. We become able to face whatever is arising for us without panicking, and without trying to hide from it. We begin to realize a sense of strength and confidence which is not based upon puffing ourselves up in any particular way, but is grounded in simply being as we are.

There is a certain unshakeability and confidence to our life as it is. When we see blue, it is blue. When we breathe in, the breath is this breath. When we speak, we can feel the tongue against our teeth and we know what we are saying. We don't need to be compelled by the impulse to overpower what the other person is saying, or by a feeling of rushing, or by the need to justify or to excuse ourselves. When we can just speak simply and clearly, there's a certainty to what we're saying. If we find that we're wrong about anything that we have said or done, that isn't any particular problem either. We might notice, perhaps, the feeling of wanting to eliminate something that we have done wrong. We notice this, and because we see all of it, we are not overcome by it. The seeing itself stands free from it. Even when we are shaken from our point of balance within our life, this itself is a signal, a reminder, to find a balance which doesn't depend upon anything.

In bompū zen, one practices to take a vacation from the grinding of the wheels of society and work, and also tries to build up a sense of calm. Traditionally, one might practice by trying to become absorbed or lost in the sensation of the breath and perhaps tighten the hara to strengthen it. Through this momentary and occasional dissociation with the things that make up one's daily experience, one can feel a sense of relief from the symptoms of one's own contraction and duality.

Martial Arts, Taoist longevity practices, Noh theatre and all of the Zen Arts (if engaged in as ends in themselves), and most of the modern Western forms of meditation, would all be traditionally considered to be bompū zen. Fundamentally then, bompū zen is practice engaged in for what we might call "therapeutic" purposes. Bompū zen is an aspirin, a pain reliever.

Or it can focus on "character building," as it does for so many modern Japanese. Many huge corporations in Japan send their employees and executives to Zen temples or to places that teach Zen-inspired practices for a week or two, to "toughen them up," make them more resourceful and flexible and so on. Recently I had lunch with a young man from Japan who had spent two months at Mampaku-ji, the Obaku Zen-shū's main temple. He had felt some need for organizing his life and so had entered the monastery to "build character." He found the regularity and intensity of the zazen inspiring, the setting of the temple grounds and buildings aesthetically pleasing, and the emphasis on taking care of each grain of rice philosophically stimulating. He left the monastery fundamentally unchanged but pleased and soothed by this experience.

Bompū zen is concerned only with the issues of health and well-being and that's a fine place to start: starting to allow ourselves to recognize the richness of our own experience. It is a fine place to start, but we need not stop there.

## Gedo zen

The next kind of practice is called gedo zen, which means "Outside Way" zen. Tsung-mi composed this teaching during the Tang dynasty in China, and was viewing this whole issue in a manner defined by the times. In China, at that time, there were many power plays between various Buddhist Schools, Taoism, Confucianism, and so on. They were all competing to gain prestige and influence, and also, at the same time, trying to be present within the culture in order to benefit people. So, "Outside Way" in this case means a practice that isn't Buddhist practice as such.

I believe that true Buddhadharma is never "Buddhist." Buddhadharma means waking up to what is evident when we see clearly. This is the whole matter of Buddhadharma: the Great Matter of birth and death, the Great Matter of being alive and practising this life, realizing this life. That is what Buddhadharma is.

We should understand gedo zen not just as a form of practice that isn't "Buddhist," but as a form of practice that puts us outside of our life. That means viewing our practice as a way to feel "spiritual," a way to try to get something that is going to make us into a big "S" Self, something that cannot be assailed, something that cannot be brought into question, a big cosmic Self-image. We put ourselves outside of our life when we start to bring in all kinds of things that we might have heard of, all kinds of things that we might have some feeling for, but something that really is outside of our experience.

Gedo zen is religious in its intent and methods. In gedo zen, one's practice might consist of prayer and devotional attention to some entity or state of being which is separate from one, or related to one in some more or less parental fashion. Such practices might also involve the cultivation of various siddhis or "powers," whether real or imagined, in order to gain some control over the physics of day to day experience so that one can imagine oneself to be more "godlike." One pursues ecstasies of various mental and physical kinds hoping that the accumulation of these will add up to something. This "something" can then be added to one's personality to make it better, special, divine or whatever. Essentially, this is a matter of exploiting the mechanisms of the central nervous system, pushing buttons on the spinal cord, and claiming that the results have ontological meaning. Gedo zen is an intoxication. It is like alcohol or drugs, transporting you out of your own experience and life into a temporary state of ease.

Gedo zen would also be, for example, sitting and feeling some sense of calm, some sense of concentration and then some sense of lightness and stillness, which begins to show you that your experience is not a dense matter, it isn't heavy. You begin to notice that your experience is vibrant, is living, that things are constantly changing, coming and going. Then, you try to fit that experience into some cosmology. For example, you might say "this is an experience of the grace of God," or some other such statement, and you start to bring in things that have nothing at all to do with your experience. You start to throw your experience away in exchange for something that isn't even going on.

Whenever a cosmology arises, it begins to distort our experience and we place ourselves outside of the Way of our own life. If we say "well, this is Shiva," or "this is Jesus," or "this is this or that," that's fine, but these are just thoughts, these are just feelings. Recognize them as thoughts and feelings and don't guide your practice or your life by your thoughts or feelings, because they are a very small part of your life, they're just one thing going on within this process of being alive.

Allow your life to guide your life, your experience to be your experience. Please, don't assume anything, don't presume anything. Please don't predispose your experience in any way because then you're simply

lying to yourself about your experience. Allow your experience to speak for itself and listen to what it is telling you.

## **Shojo zen**

The third approach to Zen would be shojo zen, which means “Hinayana,” “Practice of Jhana,” or “Small Vehicle” zen. This is actually concerned with trying to realize the Buddhadharma. It is beginning to actually work with our life as it is, and to examine our own suffering and confusion in order to not only relieve us of the symptoms but to cure the cause. It is a profoundly vital investigation into perception and cognition, into how we experience our world and ourselves, and what this world and ourselves are. We want to make real that which has been realized by the Buddhas and Dharma Ancestors, the people who have passed on this Lineage of Transmission, and who have made this practice available to us through two-thousand five-hundred years of effort. We want to understand what they understood, but we want it to be our understanding. So we practice.

The Teachings tell us things like “just pay attention to what’s going on,” and that makes sense to us. But it also says things like “right from the beginning there is not one thing,” or “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” What does that mean? We can only understand these things directly through our own experience when we allow ourselves to very deeply experience our life.

“Buddha” means “one who has woken up from the dream of self-image.” We can’t really understand what waking up is until we wake up. We can talk about it but we can’t really describe it as such. Someone who is sleeping might dream about being awake, going to work, meeting friends and so on, but it is a dream. So, usual mind cannot encompass Awakened mind within itself. We can’t put a big box into a small box. Only Buddha can realize Buddha.

The Teachings say that “you are Buddha.” It is not a matter of “becoming” Buddha. It is a matter of realizing for yourself that you are Buddha and that there is a fundamental Awakened quality at the core of your experience. It is a matter of realizing for yourself that sanity, honesty, clarity, wisdom and compassion are your basic nature, that all conditions are inherently unconditioned, that Awareness is all that is ever going on and it is never limited. Awareness is boundless and always free. This unconditional freedom is your own Nature and you can realize this.

Shojo zen is an approach to practice which is based on trying to grasp at realization, trying to get it, which presumes that it is separate from us; and so we are running around trying to make something happen instead of attending to our experience as it is. It is only in our experience as it is that we can begin to contact the Nature of our experiencing; it is not something separate, not something underneath or above. Our own Nature is not something separate from us. It is what we are. But just as “I am not my hands, I am not my eyes, I am not my tongue, I am not my thoughts, I am not my feelings and I am not the sound of my voice, nor am I the total sum of these,” and that no “self” can be grasped in these, we also cannot grasp at our Nature. We simply have to realize this Nature, to experience it from within.

Often, shojo zen involves trying to practice concentration as something that will lead us to what is called “mushin-jo.” “Mu” means “no,” “shin” means “mind or heart,” and “jo” means “practice, a concentration state or a meditative state.” Mushin-jo means trying to get to some state in which you are free of your confusion because you’ve closed the door on it and it can’t contact you any more. This is a very conditional kind of freedom, because as soon as you let that door open a little bit, the confusion is going to come welling

in. Since you've held it under pressure, the pressure starts to build and it actually opens the door by itself. You can't keep it locked out. However, the attitude of jhana is one of thinking that we can, that if we just keep everything very, very quiet then nothing is going to bother us, and then everything is okay.

This kind of practice involves counting the breath and then trying to maintain a state of equanimity. When concentration on the breath is stable, one tries to "become one with the breath," and so on. We are searching for some kind of clear state of mind which is really only the absence of our usual states. We believe that there is some state of mind which is somehow inherently better or ultimate. The whole project of shojo zen is, at its root, based on how self-image usually is. Self-image thinks that freedom is something we can have, instead of realizing that freedom is who and what we are.

Nonetheless, shojo zen is somewhat more wakeful than the previous approaches to practice that we have described as bompū zen and gedo zen. It is something like drinking a strong cup of coffee in the morning when you are bleary-eyed.

## **Daijo zen**

The fourth mode of practice is daijo zen, or "Great Practice zen," which is the practice of the Mahayana or the "Great and Open Way ." This Way embraces everything that is arising for us and is not simply concerned with our own liberation, but recognizes that the liberation of all beings is inseparable from our own because we are inseparable from all beings, and works for that liberation.

The whole of the Mahayana is embodied in the Shi Gu Sei Gan, the Four Great Vows that we chant after formal sittings here in this temple:

*"All beings without number, I vow to liberate. Endless obsessions, I vow to release. Dharma Gates beyond measure, I vow to penetrate. Limitless Awakening, I vow to unfold."*

These are the Four Great Vows. The Mahayana is practice which is not only for your own benefit, but for the benefit of all beings, because you realize that the way in which you are affects everybody else, and the way in which everybody else is affects you. It can be very hard, sometimes, to find a clear line which truly divides you from others.

As you attend to your experience more, you begin to meet things more intimately. You actually begin to come face to face with the people that you meet. You actually begin to hear what they tell you. You actually begin to feel what they are feeling when they tell you about their feelings. You actually begin to feel how others are, in a very intimate way.

You know that, when standing in line at the bank or something of this nature, you can look at somebody further on in the line and if you keep looking at them, they'll turn and look back at you. Somehow, they feel that you are looking at them. We are with each other to an extent that cannot be imagined by usual mind because it is beyond imagination; it is simply how it is. Since we are only looking at small parts of our experience, we don't see how our experience actually is.

Daijo zen is based on realizing your experience and practising it; realizing the vastness of your own Nature and realizing that it is the Nature of all beings. Then you see that all beings have not realized the vastness of their own Natures. You recognize the suffering that is inherent in limitation, in creating boundaries for

yourself. You then practice to further manifest being without boundary in your own experience, so that you can demonstrate that boundarylessness to others and show them how they can realize it. Your practice is everybody's practice and everybody's practice is your practice. You live your life, everybody lives their life, but all of this is arising within life itself. That is the attitude of daijo zen. Therefore, you're doing everything that you can to wake up. You're putting all of your effort, all of your strength into it, to realize being Buddha.

The Mahayana has taken many forms, from the Shin-shu and Tendai to the Vajrayana practices of Shingon and Tibetan Buddhism. The daijo practice of the Mahayana is like drinking a glass of orange juice in the depths of winter and feeling your very cells come alive. Or else, it is like drinking a medicine which heals the dis-ease of confusion about your Actual Nature, and then sharing this medicine with all of those who are yet ill with self-image.

When we speak of styles of Zen as such, daijo zen is traditionally associated with the Rinzai style, which concentrates on koan practice and which, at the end, opens into the practice of shikantaza, or just sitting. shikantaza is the starting point within Soto Zen practice, which is the practice of our Lineage, as Transmitted to us by Dogen zenji.

## **Saijojo zen**

The fifth kind of Zen is saijojo zen which means "Great and Perfect Practice." It is great and perfect practice because it is not based on trying to realize anything. It is based on practising practice. It is based on sitting the sitting. It is based on seeing what you see, hearing what you hear, not looking for Buddha in any way but simply realizing one's own looking to be Buddha.

shikantaza is known by many names and many different forms within the Buddhist Transmission: in the Tibetan schools it is called Mahamudra, Maha-ati or Chagya-chenpo and Dzog-chenpo; the Theravadin school calls it Mahavipassana; within Soto Zen it is shikantaza, and in Rinzai Zen as well, one practices shikantaza after finishing koan study. Since the saijojo is so simple and straight-forward, it also seems to be quite subtle. Therefore, many people seem to have become quite confused about what shikantaza really is. Some even consider just sitting quietly like a good little boy or girl and watching the breath, or just "being mindful," to be shikantaza. Dogen zenji exclaimed that shikantaza is "just sitting," it is "dropping the bodymind." This does not mean sitting in some state of dissociation from body and mind, nor does it mean that this dropping bodymind only happens when you sit. It means that when you experience each experience as it is, when you penetrate into your True Nature, when you realize that there is no body or mind, time or space, then your sitting is "just sitting." shikantaza is a wordless release of all gestures of grasping. It is like opening a fist or opening the eyes. It is not the closing away of attention from any state of experience. "Wordless" does not mean that one artificially induces a state of blankness, is holding one's tongue, or has gagged the mind. It is a questioning so subtle and penetrating that it occurs before and between, around and within all thoughts, impressions, sensations and differentiations, whatsoever.

Experiences and states arise freely as the activity of primordial Awareness itself. Awareness is effulgent with forms but is always formless. Nothing that arises, dwells or decays can, in itself, invite or provoke any confusion, or separation, or identification. In shikantaza, all worlds and all beings are always sitting as their own True Natures.

In Soto Zen, shikantaza is the root of all practice and so, although we might have to work our way through these other four orientations to some extent, some realization of shikantaza is necessary for us to actually

begin practising, if we are going to practice Soto Zen. This means having some sense of being Buddha, even if only on a feeling or intellectual level, a deep sense that no matter how screwed up you can be, you are basically sane after all. No matter how you might find yourself getting caught up in things, there is still a basic clarity that's available to you.

Opening further and further to that clarity is the basis of saijojo zen practice. This practice flowers into simply manifesting that clarity in everything that is arising. We recognize clarity to be all that is ever, in fact, going on; that no matter what point of view we might momentarily take, that all these are just orientations within a greater view of just seeing. Kensho (seeing into one's own nature) is, in some ways, actually where practice begins within Soto Zen. It is not just having some experience of kensho, some particular experience of kensho, but the whole orientation of kensho forms the basis of one's practice.

Within Soto Zen, when one is practising as a formal student, there is an interaction between Teacher and student which is based on the Teacher working to show his or her mind to the student so that the student can recognize the Original or Primordial Nature of his or her own mind. When these two minds can meet openly, then there is Transmission. This is Buddha meeting Buddha. This is that which is before, within, behind and all around, all of your thoughts, feelings and experiences. It is that which is giving rise to your thoughts, feelings and experiences expressing themselves. The Teacher is always trying to give some taste, some flavour of this Original Mind to students, so that the students can then practice that realization to whatever extent they are able. Through that, the form of practice that student will engage in becomes clear. Soto Zen might involve koan practice, anapanasati and many different forms of practice, but they are all grounded within shikantaza. They are grounded in some way within our realization that we are Buddha.

In the Transmission of this Lineage which was passed from my master to me, and through me to you, the Teacher calls the student to take up and realize shikantaza, to practice the great and perfect ease of saijojo. While I call you to do this, you practice bompū, gedo, shojo, or daijo zen and occasionally, from time to time, you glimpse saijojo. I will continue to call you to this until that glimpse becomes clear seeing and present experience of yourself as you are, "before body and mind, beyond sight and sound." Saijojo zen is like the taste of water: cool, clear, flavourless and the very source of all life. It is tasting water, it is entering into the flow of life, going past the play of the waves and plunging into the heart of the ocean.

Whether we're practising as formal students, as general, public or associate students, let's please try, as much as is possible, to approach our practice with the open view of not trying to get anything from it but just practising and seeing what's present for us. To hear what we hear. To feel what it is like to stand, to take a step and to take that step firmly. See how the room moves as you move. See how the movement of the room and your movement are the same movement. See how your experiences actually are and allow your clarity to manifest itself.

You can't grab at clarity. You can't make yourself be clear. Clarity simply opens when you get out of your own way. It is something that begins to pervade your experience more and more. It bubbles up. It wells up. Even though you are lost in some particular state, you find yourself becoming aware of that, being able to straighten up, stand free within that state and watch the state change, watch it start to open. When you get lost in a thought, you come back. You don't choose to wake up from the thought, but somehow that just happens. Somehow you find yourself back here, facing the wall, breathing in and out. Since you find yourself here, facing the wall, breathing in and out, you might as well sit there, breath in and out, and be aware of what's actually going on for you.

The time that you spend in your formal practice is a matter of practising that time. In your informal practice, when you're working, eating, talking, going to sleep and waking up in the morning, more and more you can find yourself also practising that time. You can find that each moment manifests some quality of practice, of clarity, of compassion, of wisdom, of openness so that you are practising and realizing your own dignity at more and more intimate levels. You are realizing what it means to be a human being. All of the things that we have expected it to mean have nothing at all to do with being a human being. Being human does not mean to be petty, to be afraid, to be proud, to be jealous, to make our way in the midst of a cruel world. Being human means dignity, compassion, realizing that one's life is the life of all beings. It is realizing the unshakeability, the certainty, the sheer sanity of our own experience.

So with that we will end.

And perhaps we can begin again with each breath, with the coming and going of each breath, the coming and going of each thought, the coming and going of each experience. Can we penetrate this coming and going? Can we come so close to this coming and going that there's no longer any barrier, no longer any separation? We've passed through it. We realize that this coming and going of our experience shows us how open our life is. Despite the fact that we can't hold on to our happiness, that we can't hold on to the things that we like, we find that we don't need to. There is always something happening. There is always something arising for us. There is always the freshness of the moment and the moment is beginning and ending continually. We will end here and we will begin here.