

# Entering the Gates of Practice



Zen is not just a “religion”, a “philosophy”, a “way of life”, or a “belief”. It is a practice. It is something that you do. Doing Zen practice under the guidance of a Zen Teacher means that you are entering into the practice and realization of the Buddha that has been transmitted directly from Teacher to student for two thousand six hundred years.

It is very rare to have the opportunity to begin such practice, difficult to be considered eligible to become a student, and very difficult to do and master the practice. This is not only because the sitting practice itself can be rigorous, but because the Teachers and the training ask us to put down our assumptions, philosophies and stories, and to enter directly into our experience of our life. Anzan roshi calls this “being interested in your life.” This is the most simple thing of all, but it is also the most difficult because we tend to think that our lives are the things that we are doing, the names that we bear, the family and friends that we have. This “life” that the Roshi calls us to live is the very fact of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, thinking and feeling. The point of Zen practice, what we refer to as the “Great Matter”, is to realize for ourselves “what this life is, and who it is that is living it”.

This means that we must put aside all of our ideas and begin to question ourselves thoroughly and with much more honesty than has ever been required of us. Whether we are an associate member who is only beginning to practice, or is only occasionally practising, or are a general student, a formal student, or a monk, the main issue of our practice is commitment to honesty and a deep questioning that does not settle for easy answers.

In order to make our commitment and the sharpening of such questioning clear to us, there have always been “gates” that we must enter and leave behind us throughout the long history of Zen practice. Before we discuss the details of the Gates of Practice of the White Wind Zen Community, it might be helpful for us to understand the traditional gates that have been used in China and Japan, the places in which Indian Buddhism developed into the distinctive and direct style that we can call “Zen.”

In approaching a traditional Japanese Zen monastery to begin practice, you would be expected to have abandoned everything that you hold dear so that you could face yourself unencumbered. You would have a few personal necessities in a backpack. In front of the monastery, there would be a high wall with a large, ornate and heavy gate called the Sanmon or Mountain Gate.

Beginning Zen is like climbing a mountain; it requires effort to clamber free of our illusions and beliefs, until we reach the clear air and vast vantage of the peak. Knocking on the gate, eventually the door would swing open to reveal the gatekeeper, usually a huge and unbelievably ferocious monk. Making your request for admittance, you would be politely but briefly told that the monastery was full, too poor to accept another student and that, in any case, you wouldn't like it. If you persist in knocking after the gatekeeper had closed the door on you the first time, the monk would return and begin to berate you for being too stupid to understand this simple statement, swear at you, and would most likely swat at your head a few times. After a while, the monk would refuse to answer your knock.

Now what will you do? Do you really want to do this after all? If you do, you would neatly lean your bundle against a step and sit with your knees up and your face against your knees. The angle of the posture would be silently noted in detail by the watching gatekeeper, who might intermittently chase you off a few more times. When night falls, you might have to remain seated on the steps until morning, or you might be allowed into the monastery to sleep in a hallway overnight and be given a small meal. In any case, the next morning would find you on the steps again, going through the same business. On the second night, you might be allowed to stay "overnight" in the tanga, a semi-open reception area. The next day you would be expected to sit in a lotus posture in the tanga, and to be found in that posture should anyone happen by. This excruciating and lonely experience is called tangaryo.

At the end of the day, you might be introduced to a monk, a senior student of the Teacher, who would question you closely about your background and your motives for coming to the monastery. If the monk feels that you are sincere, you would be given a place in the Zendo on a probationary basis and shown how to do zazen. It would be anywhere from several weeks to a year before you would be formally introduced to the Teacher and begin to actually practice Zen.

Anzan Hoshin roshi's own experience of entering the gates of Hakukaze-ji was much the same as this, even though it happened in Canada (you can read some of his recollections of this in Zanmai 7). In the very beginnings of the Zen Community over four decades ago, the Roshi would personally meet and interview all applicants for training, and use his own direct methods to help the person to question into their motivation and aspirations for practice. He would generally accept only one out of every 15 or so. As this is no longer practical, the Roshi and the Practice Council of the Zen Community have designed a format to help those interested in taking up Zen to become aware of the commitment necessary for strong or even occasional practice. Naturally our gates don't involve glowering gatekeepers or leaving everything behind. The point of Zen practice is that we must each endeavour to find a way to practice it in our own lives, our jobs, in the midst of our families and so on.

The first gate was in fact the interest that brought you into contact with the Zen Community in the first place. This usually takes a great deal of courage as it is.

The next gate involves meeting with practice advisors and Teachers to ask questions, discuss your background, and receive instruction in the beginning postures of body, breath, speech and mind. When you leave the Zen Centre or one of its branches, each time that you practice you are actually going through many small gates. If you are living too far from the monastery or one of its Branch Centers to commute, you can receive instruction through our "[Long-distance Training Program](#)."

If you have decided to return and receive further instruction and want to have the opportunity to deepen

your practice, you may, after several orientation interviews over a period of weeks, apply to become an associate student within the White Wind Zen Community. You would then write a brief letter to the Roshi regarding your background and your aspirations for practice; on the basis of all of this he may approve your entry into the Zen Community. As an associate student, you will have the opportunity to attend sittings designed for associate students, of borrowing recordings of Teachings by the Roshi and the Dharma Teachers and have access to our extensive Media Website, and study our books, such as *Four Gates of Zen Practice*, *The Heart of This Moment*, *Before Thinking* and *The Straight Path*. You will also receive practice interviews or daisan on a regular basis, to clarify questions about your practice as they arise, to deepen your practice and so that misunderstandings that might weaken or misdirect your practice can be addressed.

After a while, you might decide that you would like to have more opportunities to study and practice. If you establish a daily sitting schedule and have completed the basic curriculum of study for an associate student, you could speak to a Dharma Teacher or practice advisor about becoming a general student. This would mean writing a letter to the Roshi stating your intentions and aspirations, summarizing your practice to this point. As a general student, you will be required to maintain a strong practice at home and at the monastery. General students continue to receive daisan with Dharma Teachers and interviews with practice advisors, but can also write to request dokusan with the Roshi on matters that they feel are appropriate.

Upon being accepted as a general student, you should make a Temple Dana of \$108 as a recognition of your commitment and in the responsibility that each student within the Zen Community has to provide a strong practice environment for themselves and others.

Associate students may also belong to other traditions, or be studying under another Teacher. Nonetheless, when you come to the Zen Centre to sit, you should only do the practice you have been taught here. General students, however, have committed themselves to the Way of Zen as taught by the Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi, Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei and Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei

After a minimum a year of practice as a general student and having studied the Teachings designed for general students and after having engaged in regular monthly retreat practice, if you decide you would like to become a deshi or formal student of a Teacher you can apply as a probationary formal student. Students who are intending to eventually engage in monastic training (either as a lay monk or as a full monk) may apply to become formal students of the Roshi. Students who do not wish to engage in monastic training may apply as a student of a Dharma Teacher. This training will involve a period of at least one year or more of probationary practice during which you will receive frequent daisan or dokusan, so that you may establish the foundations for a strong Teacher-student relationship and develop a clear understanding of the radical challenges that your Zen practice will bring to you. Students who train under the direction of a Dharma Teacher meet with the Roshi from time to time, but receive the majority of their instruction from their Teacher.

Following at least a year or so of training as a probationary formal student, and having completed the curriculum of study designed for probationary formal students, you may request, or it may be suggested to you that you begin to train for jukai, receiving the Transmission of the Bodhisattva Precepts and a Dharma name. It should be mentioned here, for the benefit of new students, that the Dharma names that most formal students have are not signs that they are “enlightened”; rather, they indicate the particular style with which that person approaches practice, and are thus used as reminders.

Persons applying to become a branch student follow much the same procedure as that for associate students. Branch students who wish to deepen their practice can come to Dainen-ji for periods of residential training or retreat. Eventually, as their understanding of practice grows, they may also apply to become formal students.

Students receiving instruction through the Long-distance Training Program receive initial instruction as “preliminary students” from the Practice Council to clarify their understanding of Zen practice prior to applying at the first category of enrolment as a “public associate student” (“public” indicates that they are training at a distance from the monastery). As and if they deepen their practice sufficiently, they can apply as a “public general student”, a “public probationary formal student” or a “public formal student”. It is possible for students practising at a distance to deepen their practice further by training as laymonks if they are able to come to Dainen-ji at least once or twice a year to receive face-to-face instruction and Transmission. Full monastic training requires full-time residential training in the monastery for a period of years.

As our practice continues and deepens, whether as an associate or general student, a branch student, a public student, or a formal student, we begin to learn that each moment is always an open gate.