

Formless Forms: Embodying Awake Awareness

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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Very often, beginning students think that Zen practice is zazen. That's it, just sitting and nothing else matters. Zazen is the heart of Zen practice, but of course, we cannot sit 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. At some point we have to get up to walk to the kitchen and make a sandwich, go to the washroom, sleep, have a shower, clean up after ourselves and perhaps take care of other people. In the context of Zen practice, we speak of "forms" or "kata" and "standards of deportment" or the "Shingi" as the ways in which we sit, stand, walk, eat, chant, bow, and as well, how we as students interact with one another and interact with Teachers and the Dharma.

Our practice is the practice of the Buddha. What did the Buddha do? Well, of course, the most important thing he did was sit. He sat and he Woke Up. But after that, what did he do? He stood up; walked; sat down; ate, drank; he spoke to people. He didn't really want to Teach at first, but people implored him to Teach and so he did. Now that's interesting in itself because apparently without him saying much they were able to see that there was something different about him. And since he wasn't Teaching at that point, does it not make sense that the reason they recognized that there was something different about him was because of the ways in which he stood up, sat down, walked, and spoke?

The Buddha was the embodiment of Awake Awareness and his deportment was a continuous expression of his realization. This was very noticeable and others found themselves following his example. At first it may not have been all that clear to them as to why they felt it important to do as he did, but over time they realized that this alignment with their Teacher was in fact very, very important because he was communicating something in every gesture, every movement. And so it became a practice in itself to move as he moved, to take their seats as he did, to hold their bowls as he did, to speak with one another as he did, to align themselves with his movements. It became one of the ways in which Transmission from Teacher to student occurred.

But times have changed. We are not wandering about in the forests of India as the Buddha was. If the forms were merely a set of unbreakable rules and we had to do absolutely everything in exactly the same way that the Buddha did, monastics would most likely be knocking on your doors, begging for their one meal of the day. Well, no, we wouldn't. We would freeze to death. It's bloody cold here. And in China when the monks went on begging rounds they were regarded as no good moochers. So the forms and shingi were adapted.

The forms can be adapted to the times and circumstances in which we find ourselves. But this does not mean that we are just "making stuff up" as we go along. There is a set of guidelines in place called the "Shingi" and these guidelines are the rules of deportment for monastics. Our own rules of deportment are recorded in a text entitled "The Saijo Shingi: the Deportment of Radiance: The monastic Precepts of the Northern Mountain Order" which contains the rules of deportment specific to the monastics of our Lineage. These shingi are founded upon our environment and situation as a whole and so are open to change and growth and also to learning from the shingi, Vinaya, and rules of other Buddhist orders.

The shingi are rooted in the Teachings of our Founding Masters, Masters Eihei Dogen Kigen daiosho and Keizan Jokin daiosho and specifically in the Hakukaze shingi as taught by Joshu Dainen daiosho. The great

Master Dengyo Daishi or Saicho, the Founding Master of the Tendai school, originated the use of the Precepts which were Transmitted through Dogen zenji's Soto Lineage. Primary historical sources are the Eihei Gen Shingi and the various chapters on monastic practice in the Shobogenzo, the Brahmajala sutra, the chapters on the bodhisattva's conduct in the Avatamsaka sutra and so on. These shingi are based upon the all-embracing mind of bodaishin and are our bodying forth of the Way, the embodiment of our vows, the heart of compassion and wisdom right now.

So, as you can see, when I am speaking with you in the hallway about how you are doing gassho monjin, I am not just making this stuff up. The forms practised by associate and general students are based on these same centuries-old rules of deportment for monastics though they have been simplified for beginning students.

When we are first beginning our practice, the forms can seem like an endless array of "rules": stand this way, sit this way, don't put your hands in your pockets; straighten up; don't stick your backside out when you do gassho monjin; tuck your thumbs in when you do shashu; when to bow, when not to bow; don't rub your nose in the middle of the chants; put your feet together before you turn a corner in kinhin; And on and on and on. Most beginning students experience a period of confusion over all of this and sometimes some frustration because, of course, self-image always wants to feel that it knows how to do things before it actually knows how to do them. And so it hates being corrected. The only reasonable response to that kind of reactivity, of course, is to simply practice and let the process of learning unfold.

There are countless misunderstandings that can come up about forms, and so a lot of time and energy is spent in demonstrating, explaining and reviewing students' use of them. This morning I thought I would talk a little about some of these misunderstandings. But first of all we need to look into what distinguishes a Zen "form" from any other "form".

The word "form" comes from the Latin "forma" and refers to the shape and structure of something as distinguished from its material. The "form" of an activity stands out in contradistinction to the activity. For example, if someone were showing another person a "form" associated with golf, it might involve instructing them to hold the club just so; stand with the shoulders at a certain angle, feet placed apart and so forth. Good "form" makes for a good game of golf and the details that make up good "form" can be spoken about in a way that makes them clearly and distinctly stand out from other details that could be noticed; highlighting what is really relevant.

Over time and with a lot of practice one might become very, very good at golf and perhaps aspects of being a good golfer could carry over into other activities, but there would be limitations to the usefulness of these skills. It would, for instance, be more effective if someone also looked into how one should take the club out of the bag; or how to walk while holding a club. But in golf there isn't much concern about that sort of thing as in the end the whole point of doing it is to get a ball into a hole to win the game. Whatever "training" there is involved in golf is really about achieving that end result - the ball in the hole. That is its purpose and that focus will determine which details should be deemed important and which unimportant.

When learning Zen forms, students often draw parallels between the physical aspects of the forms and other activities they have engaged in. If they have practiced such things as yoga or some form of martial arts or have a background in military training, associations about those things will often come up and these associations need to be recognized and released. This is important because if we allow them to condition our use of the forms, they will prevent us from understanding what our use of the forms can show us. The only

thing that Zen practice has in common with any other activity we may have engaged in is that we have some experience of both of them and perhaps experience the same self-consciousness when we do them.

What the forms of Zen practice are about, what their purpose is, is quite different from anything else that we do. It is very difficult to talk about them without my being able to demonstrate them and for us to see one another, but to illustrate some of their uses I will draw upon an example that involves alignment.

If we are sitting on a stool in a hallway and see a senior monastic coming towards us, (a practice advisor, a Dharma Teacher or the Teacher) we should stand up and turn to face the monastic. When beginning students are told this, it will sometimes evoke some reactivity, something along the lines of “But I am resting, so why should I have to stand up just because you are coming down the hall?” Well, the reason you should stand up is because you should make yourself available to the situation. You need to be alert and ready to respond. You may be asked to do something or it may be that you should not be there at all. Whether that is the case or not, you should be ready to respond and the best way to do that is to be in a standing position as you can’t do anything while sitting on a stool.

Why should you turn towards the monastic? Because this is one of the ways in which you can make yourself available for interaction, should that be needed. There may be a verbal exchange or a gesture of some sort, if only to indicate that you need not do anything. It is simpler and easier for both of you to communicate verbally or non-verbally if you are facing one another. In addition, this is something that you can apply to other situations you find yourself in. If you go to a meeting at work, for example, and walk into a room full of people, most of whom you don’t know, what would be most effective is to find out who in the room knows what is going on and keep an eye on them. Regardless of what others think is going on, the one who is in authority is the one who is “calling the shots”, so it only makes sense to take cues from them.

When encountering a senior monastic, there will often be a bow and the junior student should always let the senior lead. I mention this because sometimes students will begin a bow when they think it appropriate instead of waiting for the monastic to lead the bow. It may be, for instance, that there is someone else approaching you that you can’t see but the monastic can and is waiting until everyone is gathered to begin the bow. Or it may be that he or she is simply waiting for you to let go of whatever agendas you might have, to make yourself fully available to this moment and this interaction, before beginning the bow.

Your timing should be in alignment with that of the senior through the beginning, middle and end of the bow. Your movements need to follow the movements of the monastic. There is always a slight delay as a small amount of time is needed to process visual information and respond, but the difference in timing between the movements of the senior and your own should be so slight as to be almost imperceptible. And this too, can evoke some reactivity for students who are just beginning to learn the forms.

Alignment is not a matter of imitating or mimicking or mirroring the movements of a senior as in “monkey see, monkey do”. There is much more to it than that. You can imitate or mirror what someone is doing very easily by focusing attention and copying their movements. Aligning with them is a different matter.

It is not possible to align with what someone is doing by focusing attention. It requires that you practice with open attention so that you can see more of the details of their movements; so that you can see the whole of their movements in context. It requires a more open, subtler, more flexible attention to do this well.

As our understanding of the forms deepens, this practice of alignment becomes more and more important.

What we begin to discover is that alignment begins to show us something about how to actually feel into the forms and beyond that, feel into how another person is experiencing. This is what the early students of the Buddha discovered when they aligned with his movements. There is something that is communicated and what it is that is being communicated by Teachers is the practice of recognition. The ability to feel into other people's movements also carries over into many, many things that we need to do in everyday life. I will give you a couple of examples of the practical applications of this:

To take a very simple example, that of driving: if you are focusing on the car in front of you, perhaps identifying with the feeling of being in a hurry and that is conditioning how you are driving, you may find yourself in a situation where the car in front of you seems to suddenly make a right turn without using turn signals and you almost rear-end them. Anyone who has driven for any length of time will likely have had that experience. However, if you are practicing with open attention what you will find is that it is often possible to notice more detail about how other people are driving. When attention is more open, there is more of a perception of the spaciousness of each moment and details stand out more clearly and distinctly. There are all kinds of subtle indications that someone is about to turn that you might not ordinarily notice, but they may stand out if attention is quite open and this, of course, is very useful.

Another example is that of being in a room with other people. If attention is open, it is possible to feel into the movements of other people in the same way that you practice feeling into the movements of a senior monastic. But in this instance, you are not moving with them, but are just observing them. Simply through observing and feeling into their movements, you can know more of how they are. If someone is angry, or laughing hysterically, or behaving in some way that mystifies you, you can feel into how they are and this can help you to understand more about the situation. Where you might ordinarily just react to someone who is acting out a state, you can not only see very clearly that it is simply a state, but you can know something of how that person is experiencing that state and how to respond to them. Perhaps you will say something; perhaps not. But in either case your response can be more accurate than it would be if attention were narrowed.

I could go on and on with different examples of this sort, but as important as these can be, they don't begin to touch on the depth and breadth of the forms.

The forms are not only practical, they are very intelligent. As Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi has said, "Our lives are not hidden from us; our lives are an open secret". Our practice of zazen and of the forms in sitting, standing, and walking reveal our lives to us. They align us with the inherent wisdom of bodymind by gently but continuously insisting that body and mind be in the same place, at the same time. Every form shows us how our attention is moving in this moment. They present the opportunity to practice opening past the constraints of association and habit, so that we can see, hear, feel, and know what is taking place in this moment directly and without interpretation.

The forms need to be practiced with the whole bodymind to really make use of them. When lifting your hands to gassho, it is not enough to just be concerned about where your hands are.

You also need to feel the breath, as the bow should be coordinated with the breath, exhaling as we bow forward, inhaling as we straighten. But in addition to feeling the breath we need to open attention to all of the sensations of the body from the soles of our feet to the top of our head, front of the body as well as the back. We need to know where all of our "bits" are, relative to each other and relative to everything around them to move well and to sit well.

When we bow with the whole bodymind, when attention is that open, then there is no “one” who is doing the bow. There is no sense of there being an “I” or a “me” who is at the centre of “my” experience doing the experiencing. Without any sense of struggle, without any sense of “trying to get it right” the bodymind bows into the space in which it arises and which it arises as.

The shingi or “standards of deportment” practiced by monastics are very detailed and nuanced. As Roshi has written in the Saijo Shingi:

Shingi are the ways in which we can embody the Way of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors as this very bodymind. These are the most intimate and precious of teachings because they are the means by which we may receive and offer the transmission of the mind of the Lineage. Through these rules of deportment we practice and realize our lives as the lives of all beings throughout all directions and all times and that all are just this life and that this life is free of Birth and Death.

There are even forms and chants for such activities as shaving and bathing. My grandfather in Dharma, Joshu Dainen zenji, composed a single verse that could be used in all of those situations. And in fact what it says is true of all situations and events or “dharmas”. It says,

Joshu Dainen’s Verse

Attention, attention.
All is always stainless,
each form is always formless.
Aligning ourselves with the Way,
each dharma is always Buddhadharma.

So what distinguishes a Zen form from any other form, from the forms used in yoga or martial arts or dance or any other activity? What distinguishes a Zen form from the “forms” of other activities is its purpose. The practice is not at all concerned about making you fit and trim or successful. It doesn’t care if you are young and supple or old and infirm. It doesn’t care if you have “ninja moves” can sing in key, or that you can hit a hole in one.

To quote from Roshi’s translation of Dogen zenji’s text, the “Fukanzazengi”:

May I point out the one from Jetavana, the Buddha, who was himself Primordial Awareness and still sat for six years? And how about Bodhidharma transmitting the seal of Awareness through doing wall-gazing at Shaolin temple for nine years? The echo of those are heard even now. If this is how it was with the great ones and their diligence, then how about you in your own practice? You should stop chasing understanding through juggling words, allow the external seeking of your mind to collapse upon itself and light up your own nature. Doing this, the bodymind will drop through itself spontaneously revealing your Original Nature. If you wish to be realized in Suchness, immediately practice Suchness.

So what is their purpose? To show you how to immediately practice Suchness. If you do the forms thoroughly and completely, what they will show you is that there is no “you” and never has been. That “thing” that you think of as “you” dissolves into the open space of Awareness, as that which is this Space and all spaces and is the emptiness and vividness of all “things”.

Mondo

[Sensei]: So now what we are going to do is begin a mondo, which is a period during which we can discuss points that you would like to bring up about the forms. You can ask questions and so forth. One thing I will mention, though, is that there is a tendency to stray considerably during these discussions. They tend to go all over the place. If we start to stray into, let's say, something that is really more of a historical nature and not really directly relevant to our discussion of the forms as such, then what I will do is I will just simply say, "I'll send you an email about that if you send me one asking the question". Rather than explaining that each time, if I say, "I'll send you an email about that" or "You can send me an email about that", it doesn't mean that I'm dismissing your question. It's just that we have just a certain amount of time and we want to stay within the kind of framework that has to do with our actual practise of the forms. We can also, if need be, go into some demonstrations and so forth, if there are points about the forms that you are not clear about. So, does anyone have any questions about anything at all?

Student: Can we shut off the air conditioner because I can't hear?

[Sensei]: Yes.

[Sensei]: Can you hear me now, Valerie? [Laughter] It is a long way away to the other end of the room.

So what I was saying was that we can have a discussion about various aspects of the forms. If there are specific forms that you would like to know more about or would like a demonstration of, we can do that.

So, does anyone have any questions?

[Student]: Greetings between students, like walking through hallways in the monastery?

[Sensei] Well, in the context of the environment of practice, where we are really just gathered to do our practice, "hi-ya" really just doesn't work [laughter].

There will be a strong impulse to do that because, of course, we are very strongly programmed to do that. But it has nothing to do with our use of the forms and this is where the forms can sometimes get very blurry. People will often launch into a bow in place of "Hi-ya", "How ya doin?" "Nice to see you" and so forth. And that's not what they are. A bow is only done in acknowledgment of our being in the environment of practice. They are about opening our attention to the space of experiencing, to the space in which we arise and which we each arise as.

Social interactions have no place in that at all because it is not a social gathering. Does that answer your question?

[Student]: As in this morning, while everyone's gathering and we are all entering here, do we ignore each other or bow?

[Sensei]: It's not a matter of ignoring each other. There are some areas of the monastery where a bow is appropriate, for instance when entering and leaving certain areas. Sometimes if there are a lot of people moving through a hallway or something of that nature, it really is best for everybody to just move through the hallway and go where they are going, rather than everybody stopping and getting into a lot of "bobbing up and down". Roshi really doesn't like that kind of thing. He would much rather we keep things very simple, very straightforward.

Some of the areas of the monastery don't really work that well for us because there is, for example, downstairs, there are all of these doorways converging on one hallway. So that makes it very difficult for people to determine when it is appropriate to bow and when it isn't. In that instance what you often see monastics doing is just walking through - don't stop, just keep going, because otherwise you would be standing there for ten minutes bobbing up and down because there is an endless stream of people.

So in terms of just functionality, we need to look at what area are we talking about. If it tends to get very congested very easily, then most likely it would be more appropriate just to move through it as quickly as possible. Don't linger in doorways, don't linger in the Cloak Room for example, because there isn't enough space. And again, you have the staircase opening out onto that area, a doorway, a lot of people walking back and forth. It is not a good place to have a conversation, for example.

It's person, place, time and amount. It depends on what is going on. But in general we don't want to create more complexity than is needed.

Does that answer your question?

[Student]: Yes.

[Sensei]: Other than going on a tour of the building, I don't think I can be much more specific than that. Is there anything you would like to add to that, Angya?

[Chunen angya]: No.

[Sensei]: Any other questions?

[Student]: Can I have a demonstration of the Great Bows?

[Sensei]: That's a good question. So, I think for that, I think...Mishin godo, would you please demonstrate a Great Bow. You can talk about it as you are doing it, explain some of the details.

[Mishin godo]: Yes.

[Sensei]: I asked Mishin godo to do this because I do an adaptation of a Great Bow. I have one knee that won't let me do the forms as fully as she is able to do them so I would rather have her demonstrate them rather than do the demonstration myself.

This is an example of how the forms can be adapted. It doesn't matter if someone has some kind of physical problem; the forms can always be adapted to be used. But of course if you are able to work with certain details, as she will - the ways of pushing up from a bow and so forth, then if you can do that please do it. If you can't you can let one of us know and we will show you how to adapt the form so that you can stay in time.

[Mishin godo]: Should I stand at the back of the room?

[Sensei]: Yes, and behind Roshi's zabuton and you can face either way. Most of the people who are concerned are at that end of the room.

[Mishin godo]: Is it useful if I do it this way, so that....

[Sensei]: Maybe just do it from different directions so that everybody can see.

[Mishin godo]: Well I will try it this way first.

[Sensei]: Stand nearer Sensei's seat and go that way.

[Mishin godo]: So the hands come to gassho, a fist-distance from the end of the nose, level with the tip of the nose. Right knee, left knee, right elbow, left elbow; the hands. And there is a triangle-shape like there is in the kata, but they are not touching, Sensei, are they?

[Sensei]: No.

[Mishin godo] Did you want me to narrate through this?

[Sensei]: Sure.

[Mishin godo]: So the forehead goes on the ground and the palms lift up and they should remain fairly parallel to the ceiling. And then left hand, right hand; left elbow, right elbow. And then there is a moment here when it is really helpful to feel the body kneeling but straight. And this will really help, I've found, if you have trouble standing up after gassho monjin, to not to try to launch into getting up when you are still coming up from the floor.

Then left knee, right knee. And again, with as straight a posture as you can. Feet come together and hands are still a fist-distance from the tip of the nose. And then bow. And then you do it again two more times if we are doing it again if we are doing three Great Bows at the start of a sitting round. And then the hands part at the end and as always, this is what Jinmyo sensei calls "An invitation to open to peripheral vision" which I think is really helpful - a reminder that is not just like that, but actually opening to the space and then the hands coming back to shashu. Or, it depends on if you are standing at the doorway or this Great Bow is at the start of the sitting round.

Was that helpful?

[Student]: Yes. Can you turn so I can see where your feet are?

[Mishin godo]: Sure. So I can turn and face this way?

So my feet are touching with the left toe over the right toe and my knees are apart a little bit. They are not like this.

[Sensei]: There is breathing, as well, that goes along with the bow. There are many, many details to this that one learns as our practice deepens. We won't work, necessarily, with all of those all at once right at the beginning of things. The main thing to begin with that you need to be concerned about is getting down and getting up on time. So you need to align with whoever is leading the bowing round: down at the same time as they are and up.

There is a tendency for people to use the floor to push themselves up. Could you demonstrate how that will tend to come up.

[Mishin godo demonstrates]

[Sensei]: So this is the wrong way to do it.

[Much laughter]

[Mishin godo]: That's part of why. Because when you are doing that, then "Whoaa..... (inaudible)

[Much laughter]

[Mishin godo]: If we are using the form then we can see the room, although I know where the floor is. And then I guess the "getting up" is sort of like that.

[Sensei]: Yes, very ungainly way of getting up.

So that is to be avoided. The hands are on the floor, palm-down. Then you turn them so that the wrists are on the floor. Lift up towards the ceiling. Then they just come together on the way up. So you don't actually use the floor to push yourself up.

[Student]: I've noticed that when do forms they are never arbitrary in that each part of the form actually has a purpose. I was wondering, in the Great Bow, does the raising of the hands have a purpose?

[Sensei]: Well, when you are doing a Great Bow you are using the whole bodymind in the bow. That is the point of crossing the toes at the back, because you need to be aware of everything in the bow. Traditionally, the gesture of lifting the hands represented lifting the Buddhas feet above one's head, which was a common gesture of respect in ancient India . Lifting the hands up to the ceiling is a kind of a gesture of offering or opening, noticing the peripheral vision... and I'm not sure what else to say about it other than that.

[To Mishin godo] Has Roshi said anything to you about that specifically?

[Mishin godo]: No.

[Sensei]: This is how I have always understood it.

[Student]: Doesn't it have direction towards the Buddha, you're sort of...

[Sensei]: Well, in our practice we tend not to do a whole lot of thinking about the Buddha, especially when we are doing forms. It's more about feeling the body and using the forms as a way to open attention to where we are and what is going on. Because the fact of the matter is that [gesturing towards the student] there is the Buddha dressed up as you! So there is no point in thinking about "something" or "someone" else while doing the form because that will only make you abstracted. You're not being attentive to what is actually going on. You're kind of removing yourself from the situation to think about something that is very nebulous; it's a set of ideas or perhaps a feeling tone. So this is more a matter of...if you feel it as you are doing it, as you feel yourself lifting the hands, you don't need a lot of explanation about what that means or why you are doing it. The form itself shows you what the doing of it is.

Now, there is a legend that goes that when the Buddha Woke Up - he sat on a pile of kusha grass and he Woke Up and then he walked over to these people that knew him. Except that they realized that something very definitely had changed and they didn't know how to greet him in the usual way. It didn't feel appropriate to go "Aye! How ya doin?" Or anything remotely like that. They knew there was something about him that had changed so much that he was not the person that they knew before. And they could feel this really strongly. He emanated Dharma. And so it was a kind of spontaneous hands to gesture to bring the

hands together and bow.

Maybe that's true and maybe it's not. There's something I don't like about that explanation so much because it does veer into a kind of feeling tone or could be misconstrued as a feeling tone. Gassho monjin, especially the way that we practice it, is truly about just opening attention to the details of experiencing. If you are doing that, really doing that, you don't need to think about anything else [laughter] because you are doing everything humanly possible to open to experiencing and then everything else takes care of itself.

Does that make sense to you? Does it answer your question?

[Student]: yes.

[Sensei]: Any other questions?

[Student]: Just with the Great Bows - right elbow, left elbow - do you go vice-a-versa on the way up?

[Sensei]: Mishin godo?

[Mishin godo]: I think so.

[Sensei]: Why don't you do it because in the doing of it...there are a lot of things like this, when a question is asked about a sequence of movements and you are trying to remember something out of context without actually doing it, it is quite difficult. So it would probably be easier for you to actually do it.

[Mishin godo demonstrates and says "Yes"]

[Sensei]: Okay. Verified through experience - always the best way to go about things.

[Mishin godo]: Would you like me to sit down, Sensei, or stay here?

[Sensei]: You might as well stay there because something else might come up.

[Student]: Do you have anything to say about the use of mala?

[Sensei]: Use of mala? That's something that we go over privately with each student, as to how we actually practise with it. But in general practising with a mala is a way, you could say, of extending one's mindfulness. Usually you sit with your hands still, in the mudra, and you practice the mudra - the details of it. When you are using a mala you are still practising in the same way that you were previously, but you are feeling the movement of the beads together with the breath. There is this little tiny bit of activity going on at the same time that you are doing your sitting practice. So it is a way of extending your practice.

Sometimes people think that the only time they should use a mala is if they are in deep trouble.

[Much laughter]

Falling asleep or feeling overcome by a state or something of this nature, so they are going to "mala their way out of it".

[Much laughter]

That's actually not useful.

Most of the time when I use a mala, I use a mala because they're fun! I enjoy them. It's not because there is some kind of sense of problem going on. In fact, if there were something going on that I was having to really work with, I would probably be sitting with my hands in the mudra because if there is any kind of – how to say it – strategy about anything that you are doing in your practice, that only adds to the difficulty. So the first thing that you need to do is let go of all of the strategies.

So using a mala becomes a way of extending your mindfulness into a small amount of movement. As your practice deepens, particularly if one is practising as a monastic, there are many other ways that we use malas. I am just referring right now to the way that associate and general students would use a mala. And this is why, to give you an example of this, when an associate or a general student is using a mala, they sit with the free hand resting palm-down on the knee. A monastic, you will almost always sitting with the hand upturned. But that is because this is associated – it is actually a mudra associated with another practice that they do. So they are actually doing a whole other practice at the same time that they are doing mindfulness practice and that is the reason for the difference.

There is a set of instructions that I wrote out some time ago that were published in the eMirror. If anyone wants a copy of that they are welcome to send me an email as a reminder and I will send you the article. It just contains basic information: how to use it, how to care for it, what to do when you are using a mala and you come to the tassel – which is that you should flip it around and go in the opposite direction. The big bead at the top with the tassel is called the “head bead” or the “Teacher bead” so when you are using a mala there are all these little details you need to know. You are going in a circle, right, so you come up to the tassel and the head bead; you don't just run over it. At that point you flip it around and go in the opposite direction. So it is good to know all of these little details before you actually start using one because there is a reason for them all as well.

Any other questions?

[Student]: Sensei, would you review what we do when we are on retreat and there is one or more people in the Hatto getting a meal and coming back in. What form should we follow before going to our seat?

[Sensei]: Okay. Well, you would most likely both be sitting on that side of the room and you end your sitting round when you hear the bell. You get up and the senior leads, whichever of you has been practising longer is leading the forms, basically. So you walk around the back of the Butsudan. Never cross between the Hoza, the Teacher's seat and the Butsudan, but circle around the back of it to the back door. The second person, the junior of the two, would need to just stand back and away from the door to make space for the first person to open the door, do a bow, retrieve their tray, do a bow holding the tray as they come back into the room. Then the second person can go out and do the same thing and then you just follow each other around the room.

Does that answer your question?

[Student]: Yes.

[Sensei]: Chiso anagarika?

[Student]: I would like to know if there is something inherent in the forms which helps practice because I feel like if I put my hands like this or like this and if I am mindful of the process, why it makes a difference if they are not aligned perfectly. For instance if I do a Great Bow and my hands are like this but I am mindful of that, it is still not good to be mindful of it. Is something within the posture itself that requires...

[Sensei]: In some ways that can be true, but in other ways it can be really misunderstood. And so it is a little tricky because it is something that we really need to look at almost form by form; how each person is doing the forms and why they are doing what they are doing. Very often there is a lot of blurriness that comes up in people's use of forms. So as I mentioned in my Dharma Talk, when bowing we need to bow with the whole bodymind. So when you bring your hands to gassho, it is not enough to just to feel your hands. You need to feel with the whole bodymind. If you are not you are broadcasting something that is very blurry and that happens all the time. How people's attention is arranged as they are doing that can really vary. With that form that you mentioned, that or any other form, there can be ways of moving that are very difficult for some people because there may have been some injury or something of that nature. So that needs to be looked into. But then once that is determined, if there is some adaptation of the form that is fine. If not, then you work with the details as they are.

There is nothing "magical" in any of the ways of arranging the body in the forms. It depends on how you make use of them. The mudra can be incredibly useful if people know how to make use of it. If they don't, they could sit like this with a perfect mudra and it would be absolutely useless to them because they would be mimicking an arrangement without really understanding what it's for. So there is a lot to look at. There is no one answer to that.

This is why we tend to do a lot of forms review in daisan and practice interviews and so forth, looking at how each person is making use of the mudra, the bows, how they understand kinhin, what they are misunderstanding and so on.

Mishin godo, is there anything you wanted to say about that?

[Sensei]: Any other questions?

[Student]: I found that forms are very useful but they are almost reserved for the monastery but when we get out, especially I have two children, it is very easy to get caught into what other people want us to - or how other people interact and it is easy to let go and lost attention. And you can't use forms because it freaks people out.

[Much laughter]

[Sensei]: Yes, indeed.

[Student]: I was wondering if you had anything to say on it, if there is a way to approach this using forms that are a bit more subtle or...

[Sensei]: Well, you know there is the form itself of say, walking with your hands in shashu during kinhin or doing a Great Bow or doing gassho monjin in a doorway and so forth. Then there are other things that you learn through doing the forms. For example, there is an example that I used recently. I was talking this morning about aligning with a student. Now, let's say there is a group of people downstairs and they are all

“yakkety-yakkety-yak” after a sitting and a monastic walks through. There will a very strong tendency for them to not notice that anyone else is there. But maybe one or two people might notice and so then they will almost intuitively know that they should stop, that they should just come to a complete stop. Other people might still continue to “yakkety-yak” but this one or two people will just know that this is not appropriate. That is incredibly useful because to be able to recognize what is going on, what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in any given situation and be able to take responsibility for that requires a bit of practice but is also very useful in other situations. You might find yourself, let’s say, with a group of friends and they are all caught up in their stuff and “Yakkety-yakkety-yak” and all of a sudden you don’t just think, you know that this is not appropriate and what you can do is you can stop. You don’t have to freeze and put your hands in shashu in order to stop. But you are making use of what is essential, what the form was conveying to you in the first place without using the outer form of it at all.

When you are walking you can do a speeded-up version of kinhin without putting your hands in shashu or doing anything that is going to draw attention to you at all. In fact, particularly for beginning students, associate and general students, we would much rather that people not do anything that makes them stand out. This is ordinary man on the street kind of stuff. So this is why beginning students generally don’t wear kunsu and jubon and so forth. This is why we don’t have everybody dressed up in robes and what-not. We are very careful about not doing that sort of thing, as it helps you to integrate your understanding of practice into other situations that you find yourself in.

I used to use the traffic lights as kaishaku: standing on the street with my hands in my pockets and that was the kaishaku. And when the light changed green I would step out with the left foot.

[Laughter]

[Sensei]: Nobody knew what I was doing. I did kinhin all over Ottawa .

So there are small ways that you can do it and not be particularly obtrusive about it.

Other questions?

[Student]: To review the mudra - hands during sitting.

[Sensei]: How about, Godo, if you sit a little further back from Sensei’s seat, scoot backwards just a bit. I will pull my zabuton forward and I will talk about this and Godo will do what I am doing so you can look either way.

When you put your hands in the mudra, you need to put the right hand on the bottom, left hand on top. The fingers of both hands need to be basically flat. Not arced, but flat. They should be parallel to the ceiling so that they are not angled towards the body like this, or away from the body like that.

If you look down, basically the middle knuckle of the index finger lines up over the middle knuckle of the other index finger. Right where your finger bends, here. Right.

And then the thumbs arc up and form a soft arc. When you look down at your hands the thumbs and the index finger will more or less line up. The thumb will either be over the index finger or slightly over the one next to it, but it is basically over it. Our tendency will sometimes be to let the thumbs rotate back like that or again, forward. Or just squash it altogether. And all of that is significant.

The reason for taking that arced shape is because if you take one hand and you shake it really, really vigorously, I mean really shake it and then let go, your hand will naturally form that shape. So this is the shape of your hand when it is completely relaxed. This is the shape of your hand when it is tense. So what you need to do is take that posture and keep it like that throughout your sitting. If your thumbs start to go like this [Sensei makes the sound of an airplane crashing], then the reason for that is because there is some sinking, literally, going on. There is a mental state that is forming and it is taking your thumbs with it. So you can use that, the noticing of it, to reinitiate your practice: to realign the mudra, feel the breath, feel the tanden, start your practice over again. It becomes incredibly useful.

So that's one aspect of it. The other thing that may happen is that the thumbs may push up like that. That will often come up when there is a quality of aggression or a sense of struggle that's coming up. In actual fact it is just the tips of the thumbs that touch and it should be very, very light.

So Valerie, your mudra right now needs to be – fingers more in contact and the centre knuckles of the index fingers one over the other. That's it. And then just the tips of the thumbs touching.

The hands should not be allowed to sink down, forward, slide down like this. They should be resting; the wrists rest on the upper thighs so that the hands are supported. The blades of the hands rest against the belly wall. If you let them go, if they start to do this [demonstrates sliding] everything starts to become very, very blurry, very quickly and it will tend to put you to sleep as well.

So, again, all of these forms, every form that you use, is about seeing how your attention is in each and every moment. So this is the mudra as it should be. If it's not like this, if you are doing something different, it is because you are letting something else take over.

So again, if your thumbs start to droop, you need to catch that in the first 1/8 th of an inch because what is happening is that there is some sinking occurring and if you catch it early it is really easy to correct it. If you don't catch it then it will continue and the whole mudra will start to go. If it continues and you still aren't getting it, your hands will start to separate and perhaps the rest of the posture will start to collapse. And if you're still not getting it, well you're really into it now.

[Much laughter]

You could keep going like this until your head hits the floor. And then you'll get it. But at that point, when you are like this [Sensei demonstrates a soggy posture] it's a really long climb back up the hill to get things back on track again. It's much easier if you correct it in the first quarter inch.

I know this to be true.

[Much laughter]

Did that answer your question?

So while we are continuing to talk, Godo, if you could go around and adjust people's mudras if you notice anything. If not, that's fine. Just leave them be.

Other questions?

[Student]: Inaudible

[Sensei]: That's probably something that is best discussed on an individual basis because we would check your posture. Something like how far back you are sitting on the zafu can change many, many things about your posture. So rather than just going too generally into it I think it would be better to do it in person.

The elbows shouldn't be "held out" from the body because that will set up strain. If your hands are here, if they are actually resting on the tops of your thighs and the blades of the hands are resting on the belly wall, then this is defined, this is the ending point (the hands); the starting point is the shoulders. If you've got your posture arranged properly then the weight of the arm just falls from the shoulder and you are not "holding" anything anywhere. The whole skeletal frame is just resting on itself and you are not having to "muscle" your way through the posture.

Other questions?

[Student]: When you have a zafu and it is really uncomfortably large?

[Much laughter]

[Student]: What is the correct way to deal with that? I tend to slide forward and my knees end up over the edge (of the zabuton) because...

[Sensei] So, Saigyo ino, perhaps you could answer that one. The reason I picked on you...

[Laughter]

[Sensei]: Poor Saigyo ino has done much zafu de-stuffing. He goes around and he keeps pulling wads of kapok out of zafu to make them a little bit lower. If you keep getting them and they're way too high, he's the complaint desk because he can do something about it.

Aside from that, if you are attending a sitting and it's the first round and you've got one of those bullet-hard enormous zafu that are really uncomfortable, you're pretty much stuck with it until the end of the first round when kinhin starts. At that point you can swap it. So you just pick up your zafu, head to the back of the room if there are empty seats. If there are empty seats - can't nick somebody else's zafu.

[Laughter]

What you could do is go down to the Zendo and swap it for one there; or I think there are even some in the Undo. And leave the old one there and bring the new one. BUT at the end of the sitting don't forget to go and put it back because chances are that there is somebody else who hates a really small, soft zafu and they're going to be looking for their big bullet-hard zafu which you've left in the basement.

Sometimes before the first round, before everything starts, you can kind of look around and know "Uh oh, I'm the sixth from the front of the room and number six zafu is not going to work for me". So then again, if there are empty seats you can just zoom to the back of the room with your zafu and pick one really quickly that is going to work for you. Other than that the only suggestion I can make is that you sit in seiza if you can, rather than cross-legged. Do what you need to do to make it work.

For years of course, there were no assigned seats, so I have had my fair share of strange and wonderful zafu

as well and that is what I used to do.

Does that answer your question?

Other questions?

If you need to move, by the way, you may. This is informal. You don't need to hold the posture if your knees hurt.

[Student]: Just about the bows and the two portraits on the wall. Who are the portraits of on the walls?

[Sensei pointing]: That's Dogen zenji and that's Bodhidharma. And that calligraphy (of Bodhidharma) was done by Roshi. The last bow is done towards the Teacher if he is here or towards the Teacher's seat if he is not because he is the representative of the whole Lineage so we address everybody, you could say.

Does everybody know what all of the objects on the Butsudan are about?

[Student]: I don't know what the stick is for.

[Sensei]: The stick is called a "hansaku" and this is Roshi's hansaku. Traditionally, as you can see, it has a thin end and a thick end. Some of you might have seen film clips of certain monasteries where you have a big burley monk walking around with a stick? Right. That is a form that has lost a lot of details over the years, over centuries in fact. So, just to explain what that's about. If you are sitting for a long period of time, say a week, an O-sesshin or something like that, if you are sitting for many, many hours a day what can happen is that you can get some tension in your shoulders. And when that really builds up it can become quite painful.

[We should definitely not be leaning against the wall - to a student]

[Student]: I was just stretching my back.

[Sensei]: Okay.

So, some tension can build up in the shoulders and that becomes painful. Now, if someone knows how to use one these things properly, they'll say something like, "If anyone wants to receive the hansaku, please bring your hands to gassho." So then you would be facing the wall and bring your hands up like this and bow forward, then remain like that. And the Teacher walks behind you and strikes three times on one shoulder, three strikes on the other shoulder. It's not quite on the shoulder, it's below, on the surface of the shoulder blade. The reason for doing that is because there are ligaments that run through here and where the ligaments attach to the bone, if those are struck in exactly the right place, and this is key, it has to be done properly and with exactly the right amount of force, the ligament will release and so you have this almost immediate experience of relief from pain. So this form involving the stick is actually about relieving pain. It is not about inflicting pain and it is not about beating people into Wakefulness. So, for that reason you don't actually see people here doing this form.

Roshi, years ago used to do this and I have received the hansaku and that is why I can speak about it in the way that I am. He hasn't done that in many years because at this point the students that he is working with know how to practise for long stretches of time with tension and so forth, they know how to release it. So it isn't necessary. Other Teachers such as Shikai O-sensei, myself, practice advisors do not do this. In some monasteries it is all the time, it is very, very common, but that is not the case here. So it does require a very

specific kind of training to know how to do that properly. Until I know how to do it, I wouldn't do it.

[Laughter]

[Sensei] I have a little stick and I use it for adjusting postures and that's all. I certainly wouldn't hit anybody with it. So that's what the hansaku is here for. Roshi, if he uses it at all now he uses it when he's presenting teisho. When you hear the three strikes in the recordings, he uses this to do the three strikes. Traditionally that would be done with a nyoi staff, which is a very long staff. Roshi has one in the Kaisando but obviously there is no space here for anything that big so he uses the hansaku for that. Once in a while he might use it to adjust postures, but that's all.

The whole Butsudan is here because it is like the 12 on a clock. It shows you which is the front of the room and which is the back. Traditionally, in a big monastery you would circumambulate around the Butsudan so that is why it is out in the middle of the floor. A Butsudan, by the way, is not the same thing as an altar. The word "Butsudan" itself, just means "raised platform" so this is a place where we put things that remind us of our practice.

The rupa, or "form" is there not as a religious icon. He's there because he is representative of someone just sitting in a very aligned posture. In fact, if I were to turn him sideways you would see that he has a very nice, straight spine. Hard to find in a rupa and often rupas that you will find will be very misshapen - 18 inch waist and arms that are 12 feet long and so forth. His proportions are actually quite nice. So the only reason he is there is because he represents someone who is sitting, which is what our practice is.

The candles are used because they represent the flickering of mind, something that anyone who does even a few minutes of sitting can attest to; the mind in fact does flicker. They also evoke the seeing.

The incense is used to evoke the sense of smell and the incense stick itself represents impermanence. It burns down and is gone just as we "burn down" and vanish.

The water is there because it evokes the seeing but also it represents the clarity of mind and is used as a kind of offering of our practice. If you are going to put something there, you may as well put something that is nice. Water is very nice. There's also a little bit of a joke about the water. We tend to be really stingy about offering things. When we offer something what we will almost always do is offer it and then a few moments later go [Sensei demonstrates grasping] "Oh...I don't know, I want to take that back because I might need it later".

[Laughter]

[Sensei]: So there is this very basic stingy quality that we all tend to get into, and so the water offering is there with a touch of humor because water, to us, seems to be in vast abundance and it's free. We can offer it and we have this sense that it doesn't cost us anything and yet it is a most precious commodity. It is actually very, very valuable and without it human life would not be possible. So there is a little bit of play there. Roshi has quite a sense of humor

Are there any other questions about the Butsudan or anything else?

[Student]: A lot of rupas in Zen have the hands in this position - with the left under. Is there a...

[Sensei]: Well, you'll notice with this rupa, his thumbs aren't even touching. You'll get all kinds of variations on mudras and so forth. One of the reasons for that is because very often, the people who make them don't actually sit.

[Laughter]

[Sensei]: Don't have a clue what they're making, really, except it kind of looks like this. I think that in some traditions of training it may be that the hands are reversed from the way we do them but it doesn't really matter as long as you decide which way you are going to do things and then are consistent about that.

So again, there is nothing "magical" about the forms, but I don't know of any other reasons for placing the right hand on the bottom and the left hand on the top except that that's how somebody sat at some point and then their students learned to sit that way and here we all are today, learning the forms of this Lineage and this is how we do things.

Mudras can really vary from one tradition to another. In some places the shashu is done in an entirely different way. It is left hand formed into a fist and the right hand wraps around it. It is called "diamond fist" or something like that. But it feels completely different and if you actually do that you will see that it doesn't feel at all like shashu as we do it and it is not just because we are not used to holding our hands that way. It has a completely different "meaning", conveys something different to bodymind. So that's kind of interesting but this is how we do things so that's that.

Do you know anything further about that, Godo? That is all that I remember having encountered about it.

[Mishin godo]: No.

[Sensei]: Have you anything to add?

[Chunen angya]: The Roshi said that it's arbitrary, the position, but we need to be consistent.

[Sensei]: Yes. Sometimes people will say, "Well, I am left-handed, so I should be able to sit with the left hand on the bottom and the right hand on top."

Well no, because when you are sitting you don't need one hand to lead. Being left handed or right handed is about which hand leads when you are doing things. But when you are sitting you are not actually doing anything. You are just sitting with one hand on top of the other. So we all sit with the right hand on the bottom and the left on top. If someone is left handed and we are doing oryoki then they do all of the forms of oryoki in reverse. It's all backwards (from the perspective of someone who is right handed) and that's fine. It all works out.

[Student]: The block of wood on the wall? What is that for?

[Sensei]: That is like a drum that is used to signal various things in the monastery. So when you hear the bell downstairs and you hear the umpan in the hallway sometimes, it is because they are talking to each other. It lets everyone in the building know what is about to happen. Sometimes before more formal occasions the "han" (gesturing) is included. That is very traditional. And the characters on it mean "Great Matter". It comes from the verse,

The great matter is birth and death,
Life slips past and time is gone.
Right now, Wake Up! Wake Up!
Do not waste time.

So you will find one of these in every monastery – Zen monastery that is.
Does that answer your question?
Yes, Cesar?

[Cesar]: Why do we chant in Japanese?

[Sensei]: Ah, because – very good question – because there are certain things that cannot be adequately translated into English. When you look at the actual meaning of certain Japanese words, there is no easy translation for them. Like, even say the word “sesshin”, if you really look at the meaning of it, it means “gathering of the heart”. So we say “sesshin” and we all agree that we think we know what it is, but it means a lot more than that. And the chants that are in Japanese, many of them have meanings, when we look at the literal translations and so forth, that English can’t begin to touch on the meanings.

The other reason is that the origins of this practice are India , China and so forth. So we have Sanskrit and Pali, Japanese chants and we have kept some of those. Some of them are in English but there are a few that are in Sanskrit, Japanese and Pali. We want to keep some of the origins of our practice intact so this is a way of honoring them and we keep them unadulterated. They are as they are and they can be quite a mouthful when you are first learning them.

[Laughter]

[Student]: It doesn’t sound like Japanese anymore, what I do.

[Laughter]

[Sensei]: You learn them through simply being exposed to them and hearing them over and over again, learning bits and pieces of phrases. And over time it all comes together.

[Ian]: When we are practising at home is there any one check-in point which you can follow that your back is sitting straight?

[Sensei]: [Long pause] I’m stuck on the phrase, “check-in”.

[Much laughter]

I don’t know what that means, exactly.

Okay, when you take your posture, you take your posture and as much as possible it is straight, it’s aligned. You do the forms: bowing forward, emptying the lungs of all of the stale air; straightening, inhaling; with the third exhalation let the whole bodymind relax and it will tend to move back just a tad, into balance point. From that point on you should be feeling the breath, feeling the tanden, feeling all of the sensations of the body and you should be noticing if something is changing. So you might be sitting there and if you notice that you are starting to do this [Sensei moves head to one side] that should stand out. If you are not noticing

that and it is five minutes later and you kind of wake up from it and think “Why am I like this?” you’ve missed a whole lot of detail in between. So what you need to do is pay more attention to the sensations of the body and use the noticing of changes as a reminder to reinitiate your practice, to bring things into alignment. It’s not a matter of struggling with the posture but of letting it relax and settle. Basically we let the mind fall into the body and we are not struggling with anything at all, just letting the whole thing settle.

“Check-in” kind of implies that at a certain point we go “Wha? Whoa! So where am I? What’s going on with the meat?” But you should be feeling into the sensations of the body from the beginning of the practice all the way through. If you’re not it’s because – what we will tend to do – is screen things out. So we are not feeling the breath, we are not feeling the tanden. We might think “Oh, woopdy-do I’m feeling my thumbs. I’m being all mindful of my thumbs, aren’t I?” But if we are not feeling the rest of the sensations then we have this very partial version of mindfulness going on. It needs to be the whole thing.

Does that answer your question?

[Student]: Well, I guess it does. I think if I used the word “reference” it might be better because very often Shikai O-sensei will pull us up and you get a very different sensation if you tell yourself to sit up straight. It usually sets up a lot of tension. Is that something that you can sort of do on your own? Imagine yourself being pulled up?

[Sensei] No.

I mean you can, as a rough guide it is good to bring the top of the head up towards the ceiling because it will elongate the spine and the neck and so forth, but when someone else is adjusting your posture they are seeing you from a brand new angle and they will make certain adjustments and the bodymind will go, “Oooh! That’s different!” and then within even a couple of minutes it will start to revert back to its habitual posture is...but not quite. A postural adjustment is not meant to be written in stone. It’s not meant to be taken as ‘THAT’S IT, HOLD THIS. DON’T BREATHE, DON’T MOVE BECAUSE IF YOU MOVE AWAY FROM THIS POSTURE AT ALL, YOU ARE WRONG’. That’s a very mistaken way of thinking about things. They’re just an indication.

What’s more, what you need to do is feel into the sensations of the body, feel into the balance of it. If you actually feel into it, and particularly if you are sitting at home, don’t move. This is so important. Because if you don’t move and you really feel into the posture and work with it, what will happen is that the posture itself will show you how to sit. But if you fidget and you are constantly in there with a screwdriver trying to fix everything, you are not giving the bodymind a chance to practice sitting as bodymind. There is too much fiddling going on and that just makes things more difficult.

So you don’t have to feel “Well, I had this sensation once, it was aligned in a certain way and it felt good, how can I duplicate that?” Just let go of it. It was something that occurred because someone was helping you in a certain way and now is now and the bodymind is as it is and you practice with things as they are in this moment.

If you think about it, what would happen if someone were, say, hurt in an accident or something and they have a lot of physical stuff going on and everything is really wonky. That would mean that that person could not practice and that, of course, is not true. There is no such thing as a straight line; there is no such thing as a perfect posture. It’s all crooked. It always will be. That is the way that it is. We live on a round ball

floating in space and we are all under the effects of crushing gravity and this thing is made of meat and bones and stuff. So there is no such thing as a straight line. Does that make sense to you?

[Student]: yes, it does.

[Sensei] Otherwise things can just become very tense.

[Student]: The use of the phrase “balance point” for example, the only way you can be in a state if you are out of balance point or...

[Sensei]: Oh, no, you could be in balance point and be in a rip-roaring state.

[Much laughter]

[Student]: I have heard that said so I am wondering if it's...balance point is referring to something beyond angles...

[Sensei]: When we are talking about “balance point” we are talking about the physical posture of the body. But through practising and learning balance and alignment there are ways in which that information carries over into other things that we do. So it becomes integrated into other things that we do. You start to recognize when you are “off balance” when you are interacting with other people, when you are deciding what to buy on eBay...whatever. You can recognize more and more clearly when there is something that is off about how you are because you recognize some things through your practice of sitting. You know what it is to feel really balanced and for things to be very open. So when things start to get very contracted and it all goes “off”, that will really stand out. That is as closely as I can answer your question right now, but I think that it is something we could discuss further another time.

I think we will end now and it is time for a round of kinhin.