

Yaza 2004: Tonight

by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi
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Tonight, instead of getting drunk, or going to bed early, or staying up to watch a late late movie on television, or have an argument or read a book, you are going to do zazen throughout the night, past midnight and past dawn and into the morning.

Around thirteen-hundred years ago, the Fifth Ancestor of Zen in China, Hongren, passed the transmission at midnight to Huineng, who became the Sixth Ancestor. Since that time, in our Lineage, the Dharma is formally transmitted to a new teacher in a private ceremony at midnight. Before and after that time, practitioners have sat through the night.

Some such as the First Ancestor in India after the Buddha, Mahakasyapa, have even gone as far as practising nesajjika dhutanga, which is a vow to never lie down during the day or night, but to sit and, when sleepy, do kinhin. The Tenth Ancestor, Parshva, studied the sutras throughout the day and sat throughout the night. Shitou, who received Transmission from the Sixth Ancestor's Dharma-heir, Qingyuan, sat throughout the nights in his grass-thatched hut on a cliff's edge.

Dogen zenji wrote a verse,

*The Western Ancestor's Teaching is transplanted.
By moonlight, I fish, on cloudy days, I till.
Pure, clear. No dust touches this snow.
Cross-legged in this mountain hut,
Following the ancient Way of the Ancestors,
I sit the night through.*

So, yaza, the practice of sitting through the night, is an ancient tradition. We honour those who have passed on the realized-practice of Zen over these thousands of years with our own annual practice of yaza. The gift that we have received is too precious to be measured and cannot be contained in words, and so we honour them with our bodies and minds and by practising zazen.

Each moment of our lives, whether in the day or the night, whether we are awake or asleep or dreaming, is an opportunity to wake up to the richness of the luminosity of Experiencing. Here is a verse that is written by Xuedou that was quoted by Dogen zenji in the Tenzo Kyokun 十道歌:

*One, seven, three, five.
What you search for cannot be grasped.
As the night deepens,
the moon brightens over the ocean.
The black dragon's jewel
is found in every wave.
Looking for the moon,
it is here in this wave*

and the next.

The bright moon of our original and true nature shines in the coming and going of each moment. Tonight, let us sit within that brightness-within the open space of Experiencing, which presents itself as us.

Please, tonight, enjoy yourselves.