

Yaza 2011

by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi
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Through each moment of zazen, the body-mind learns to sit up straight. Sitting up straight in zazen, we sit as and wake up as this whole moment of the whole body-mind as complete zazen. Through learning how to sit up straight in zazen, we learn how to sit up straight in each moment, whether sitting, walking, standing or lying down. Throughout the day and throughout the night, throughout the waking, sleeping and dreaming states, we learn how to sit up straight.

In Zen and in the various Buddhisms as a whole, we very commonly speak of “waking up”. The Buddha is one who has “woken up”. Now, it can seem to some sometimes that the waking up of Zen is not only in contrast to, but perhaps opposed to, sleeping. While metaphorically we can speak of sleep and dream as the internalized activity of self-image throughout its lifetime, actual Zen is of course not actually opposed to sleep.

Sleeping with the whole body-mind as the whole moment is wonderful. Unfortunately, most people never truly sleep because they collapse and contract and fold into what they understand to be sleep and dreams. When we sit up straight in sleep and in dreams, we can see just how open, how vivid, how luminous each moment of day and each moment of night actually is.

Nonetheless, in the tradition, we find various masters of the past, such as Parsva, Shitou [Xiqian] 希迁 and [Dayi] Daoxin 道信, who are said to have sat throughout the night, never lying down to sleep. In fact, there is a kind of cousin of our Lineage named Shishuang Qingzhu (or Qingju) 清珠 whose community of monastics was noted for never lying down to sleep and was called the “Hall of Dead Trees”.

But sleep is wonderful.

So why do we do Yaza? Why do we sit throughout the night?

We sit throughout the night because zazen is even more wonderful than sleep. Zazen is opening to the whole moment – the whole field of the presencing of experience. As did Bodhidharma, we sit facing the wall. And yet, if we love zazen, sometimes we might sit outside, we might sit in a forest, we might sit by a river, we might sit on top of a hill, because it is wonderful to sit. We learn how to sit not only at a red light in traffic, but while driving. Sitting through even the most boring meetings, we find that we can sit and enjoy each moment of that boredom.

Throughout the day and throughout the night, there are many cycles and changes that rise and fall, that sweep and fade. Ten o'clock in the morning does not feel like ten o'clock at night does. And certainly two o'clock in the morning does not feel like two o'clock in the afternoon. And so we sit throughout the night to feel how the body-mind is, how the moment is, at times that we are usually asleep.

Some of you might know that historically, human beings went to sleep as the night fell and darkened and then got up with the dawn. But you might not know that throughout the night there would be various times when one would get up and talk, get up and do some work, perhaps preparing the morning meal. In many cultures even now, it is very common for people to live together in large halls or small rooms, and when

someone goes to sleep, many other people are still awake and talking. Some of them might lie down at some point and sleep while others walk about and talk.

Through the economics that we have developed throughout our history, we have learned to sell ourselves: our energy, our attention, our muscles, our labour, our time. And so we have over time packaged our time, not only into minutes and hours and days and weeks and months, but blocks that are bought and sold. Our days are for the most part sold to our employers, and so our time to sleep is gathered together into another block; rather than sleeping in the afternoon, which is quite natural to us as we are biphasic physiologically, all of our sleep is contained in one period. We do not want to have this interrupted. It needs to begin by a certain time, and it needs to end at a certain time. And if it is broken throughout, we can become very upset about that.

But each moment in its rising and falling is not contained within any kind of block or structure that can be bought or sold: it is priceless. And it is a moment of your life — of your actual life. All of those moments — each and any moment — can only be this moment. And so this moment is priceless.

Throughout each moment of this night, please, sit up straight and enjoy yourselves.