

## **My Zazen Sankyū**

(san = to participate humbly; kyu = to inquire or explore)

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Notebook (1)

### Foreword

Soon after I started practicing zazen, when I was reading the transcription of a Dharma talk by Kodo Sawaki Roshi, I came across the following words --“All sutras are footnotes to Zazen.” Although I could not understand the deep meaning of it at that time, I was impressed by the boldness of his words. Later, when I started to read the works of Dogen Zenji and found words declaring in essence that the Buddha Way = Zazen (as In India and China: Where there is Buddha Dharma transmitted, there is always sitting Buddha transmitted; Where there is Buddha Dharma transmitted, there is no zazen transmitted; The only correctly transmitted Dharma is the religion of zazen; and The Buddha way is just zazen), I realized that Sawaki Roshi had simply rephrased these in his own words. Dogen Zenji and Sawaki Roshi practiced zazen throughout their lives and recommended it to people widely. What is this zazen which is declared to be Shikantaza (just to sit), the only correctly transmitted genuine Dharma? What is this zazen recommended so strongly by both Dogen Zenji and Sawaki Roshi? Where in zazen is such an extraordinary thing hidden?

While I have been learning from various masters of the way directly and indirectly, and practicing zazen myself, I have been thinking about the real identity of zazen from various angles as my interests lead me. Even when I read books unrelated to Buddhism or Zen, there seems to be circuits formed in my brain that somehow relates those to issue surrounding zazen.

Dogen Zenji admonished us: Nothing can be gained by extensive study and wide reading. Give them up immediately. Just focus your mind on one thing -- Shobogenzo-zuimonki would scold me, I really enjoy wide and smattering learning/thinking centered around zazen. I have no intention of putting them into a unified system, nor do I have the skill to do so. I just record my fragmented thoughts and research in my zazen sankyu notebook, and reflect on them on my own occasionally.

As I was invited to write for Dharma Eye, the idea of explaining fragmentary thoughts scattered around in my zazen sankyu notebook in easily understandable manner came to my mind. Among the readers of Dharma Eye, there must be people who attained very deep understanding of zazen through long and continuous practice. I thought, if they check and critique my clumsy article, it will assist me to further develop my sankyu of zazen. Also, though this is rather presumptuous, I hope that some of my fragmentary

thoughts may contribute to the spread of zazen by being a good stimulus to zazen practitioners for their practice as well as invitation to non-practitioners to sit on a zafu.

With these objectives in mind, I present my fragmented thoughts surrounding zazen. I would like to respond to questions, criticism, and comments from readers. Please feel free to send me a letter in care of Dharma Eye.

### Fragmentary Thought 1 <Charm of Zazen>

By sheer coincidence or the quick of fate, I encountered zazen in a manner I never even imagined. Since then, being grabbed by zazen, I have been wandering in its world for about 15 years. Although I practice it myself, recommend and teach it to the others, I still ask What is zazen? repeatedly.

Although it has become my intuitive conviction that zazen is essential for my life, the true identity of zazen exists within myself as an un-penetrated koan. Whenever I present my understanding, it is always sent back to me for insufficient understanding. This koan can never be penetrated by discriminative thinking. As a right-angled hyperbola never intersects with the X-axis ( $x=0$ ) and the Y-axis ( $y=0$ ) although it gets closer to axes infinitely, zazen as zero (beyond thinking; non-discrimination) will probably never be able to be penetrated by non-zero (thinking; discrimination).

However, the reality of zazen is very simple, clear, and transparent. There is nothing complicated nor ambiguous in Zazen. Zazen is something everyone can do by just facing the wall and sitting with correct posture following the manner.

So-called zazen is to put one futon at the quiet place, sit on it with correct posture, do not move with the body, do not talk with the mouth, do not judge good or bad with the mind, and let days go by just sitting quietly facing the wall. There is nothing special other than this. (Sermon by Daichi Zenji)

With no exaggeration, zazen is nothing more or less than what Daichi Zenji described. However, the more I practice zazen, the more I feel that I will never reach the bottom of it because of its infinite depth. Zazen is like the clear and blue sky - because the sky is clear and limitless, we can never see the end of it. Sawaki Roshi calls this nature of zazen as *yusui* (subtle and elusive). Though zazen is something that can be realized by a very simple act - sitting, once we try to capture it with words or thoughts, zazen seems to be infinitely far away. To me, the charm of zazen seems to come from this nature.

### Fragmentary Thought 2 <Invitation from Zazen>

Despite its simple posture, zazen has unlimited expanse, subtlety, and elusiveness. It is said that the entire Buddha Dharma is converged and condensed into Shikantaza.

Without knowing these deep reasons, I tried zazen for the first time by following instructions in sesshin at a Zen temple. Then I heard an internal voice saying, "At last, you came back here. I have been waiting for you a long time. From now on, continue to

wedge zazen deeply into the middle of your daily life and see what kind of life is realized using your life as its material.”

Though the voice was faint, it had a strength and certainty that I could not ignore. My zazen at that time was not something that could be called zazen - it was just a series of fights with sleepiness, hallucinations, boredom, and pains. What is the use of doing this? Isn't this a waste of time? Why not finish this quickly and go home, were the thoughts that occupied my mind. However, maybe because a part of me might have been touching zazen in a totally different dimension, the voice inviting me was coming from what seemed to be a point of contact. I felt some, mysterious peacefulness gushing out from there. I was flustered - What is going on here?

In Vimalakirti Sutra, there is a phrase “a lotus in the fire” (= the lotus flower blooming in the fire). This is the metaphor to describe something that seldom happens. The quiet voice of invitation from zazen, which happened to be heard within myself struggling and suffering, was indeed a lotus in the fire for me. Finally, being led by this, I converted the direction of my life.

From where did that voice of invitation reach my consciousness? I can only say that it is from the strange place infinitely far away as well as infinitely close - the place infinitely far away if I try to find it with my consciousness, but also the place present in my existence. By practicing zazen for the first time, did I happen to touch the invitation from there? Had the voice been calling me “Come home--- this is the place you end up coming back to, since long before that time?” “Come to me, all whose work is heard, whose load is heavy; and I will give you relief. Bend your neck to my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and your souls will find relief.” (Matthew 11-28/29) Zazen is also called *kika-onza* (returning home and sitting in peace).

### Fragmentary Thought 3 <Footnotes to Zazen>

Kodo Sawaki Roshi said Zazen is to do what we cannot say in words and to practice what we cannot think. Dharma, which we can never reach by words or thoughts does always realize before us when we throw our body and mind into zazen. To try to make sense with the mind is useless and a waste of time. Therefore, in Zen, it has been traditionally said, “Just sit first without saying anything. That sit when we sit.” -there is no room here for human “cleverness” to dominate.

However, for a living human being with mind to practice zazen correctly, I believe that efforts to shed some light with our intelligence on zazen which is to do what we cannot say in words and to practice what we cannot think? as much as we can, are also important. “All sutras are footnotes to zazen” also means that all sutras are the footsteps of many predecessors’ efforts. Many literary gems were created from the tensions between their efforts to describe zazen with words as accurately as possible and that zazen which cannot be described thoroughly with words. It is as if a beautiful hyperbola cannot be arise without the tension between zero and non-zero as the hyperbola gets infinitely close to the X- and Y-axes although they will never intersect.

These might seem superfluous to zazen itself, because the body of text called zazen is independent from these footnotes. On the contrary, footnotes without the body of text do not have much value. (Can't we say that Bodhidharma's arrival in China was to bring in the "body of text" to where there were only "footnotes" until then?)

However, in order for zazen as the "body of text" to be "read" (practiced) correctly, excellent "footnotes") are always in need. At least, I would have interpreted the body of text my own selfish way and practiced zazen outrageously if there were no excellent footnotes by predecessors. The "body of text" (practice) and "footnotes" (understanding) stimulating each other, each deepened dynamically, while seeking interaction and unison, is the way it is supposed to be.

Zazen cannot be satisfied by all the sutras written in the past. Zazen as the body of text is always seeking to be re-read with new footnotes under the renewed light of the present age. Those who practice zazen in this modern society are being requested from zazen to bring their own unique words to it.

#### Fragmentary Thought 4 <Zazen and Meditation>

Many people seem to be caught in a simple belief that zazen is to reach the state of no thought by unifying one's mind. However, I think that here is a confusion with meditation, the objective of which is to reach a certain state of mind with manipulations, techniques, or methods. This tendency is especially strong among the western nations where zazen is translated as "Zen meditation" or "sitting meditation." It is also reported that psychotherapists and doctors have applied the eastern meditation methods to the therapies of the "mind" and attained reasonable success. Under these circumstances, various meditation methods to attain objectives such as mind/body health and skill development, peaceful mind, resolution of various problems in life, are on the rise. Zazen is often described as one of these practice methods.

In the tradition of Buddhism, there are many meditation practice methods of this kind. I believe that we should learn from deep observation and effective therapies addressing various mental problems in this long-lasting tradition, and apply them to the present society.

However, if zazen is understood solely in this context, we fail to capture the true nature of zazen by over-simplification and over-specialization. Zazen, and Shikantaza (just sitting) taught by Dogen Zenji in particular, has the nature which cannot be categorized as meditation. In conclusion, I do believe that zazen is different from so-called meditation. Then, what is the difference?

Zazen's characteristics and meaning highlighted in comparison with various kinds of meditation methods originated in the west and the east, is one of the major themes in my sankyu of zazen.

#### Fragmentary Thought 5 <Difference in Full-Lotus Position between Zazen and Meditation>

Dogen Zenji tends to describe zazen simply by sitting body postures such as shoshin-tanza (just sitting in correct posture), *taza* (just sitting), *gotsu-za* (sitting immovable like a bold mountain; “*gotsu*” means a bold mountain). This should not be coincidental. In his view, the main point of zazen must be, the first and foremost, the holistic body posture (sitting posture), not the state of our minds.

Although so-called “*kekka-fuza*” (full-lotus position) is regarded as the best sitting posture in other meditation methods as well, there seems to be a huge difference in how sitting posture is positioned in meditation and zazen

In meditation, practitioners start a certain method of meditation after sitting in full-lotus position. In other words, it is *kekka-fuza* plus meditation. *Kekka-fuza* here is the means of conditioning the body and mind optimized for mental exercises called meditation, not the objective as itself. The practice is structured in somewhat dualistic manner that body sitting is a container and the mind meditating is the content. And the emphasis is always on meditation as mental exercises.

On the other hand, the objective of zazen is just to sit in *kekka-fuza* correctly, and there is nothing to add to it. That is to say, it is *kekka-fuza* plus zero. (Sawaki Roshi's famous quote: “Just sit zazen, and that's the end of it.”) Here there is no dualistic structure that the body sits while the mind does something else such as chanting sacred words in the heart, visualizing sacred images, concentrating the mind on a certain thought or sensation, counting breaths, etc. In zazen, both the body and mind are simultaneously used up completely just by the act of sitting. In other words, the mind-body as one is just sitting zazen. In the volume of samadhi-king-samadhi of Shobogenzo, Dogen Zenji said, “*Kekka-fuza* is upright mind, upright body, upright body-mind.” and “Sit in *kekka-fuza* with body, sit in *kekka-fuza* with mind, sit in *kekka-fuza* of body-mind falling off.”

If we compare *kekka-fuza* of a person who is meditating and that of a person who is doing zazen, they are rather different. Aside from detailed difference such as whether or not eyes are closed, or how both hands are maintained, subtle impressions from the whole postures are different. At the posture of the former, obviously, the fact that a person is engaging in mental exercises manifested externally. Even famous masters of meditation tend to sit in *kekka-fuza* posture which would be corrected at a zazen dojo in Japan. I am not saying they are wrong. It is not the matter of value judgment or which is superior. All I am saying here is that zazen and meditation are activities with different natures.