

**Question:**

How does practising zazen help other people?

Mokuho Guy Mercier replies:

In all the dojos of our sangha, after zazen the practitioners chant the Shigu seigan mon, the four vows of the bodhisattva. The first of these vows expresses the desire and commitment of practitioners of Buddhism, lay practitioners as well as monks and nuns, to 'save all beings'. This seems utopian and unachievable and yet it is the reality taught by the Buddha. None of us is separate or isolated from the others and what each of us does sinks into the great reservoir of human consciousness and affects all beings.

Essence is One and, without the shadow of a doubt, in the dojo everyone has the experience of unity with all beings if he or she is not devoid of all sensitivity. This is expressed in one's own body, in one's own mind, in one's aware presence.

In order to fulfil this vow it is essential to act and live this life in the direction of a greater collective welfare rather than to follow personal, egoistic objectives as most people do, stuck in a world that is purely virtual, the world of the ego, the illusory 'me'.

The mentality or personal consciousness (the ego living in the mentality) creates the illusion that we are separate from others.

Wanting to help, motivated by the 'me', maintains this separation and increases suffering. The 'me' gives itself the pleasure of pleasing others which allows it to believe that it is generous and out of the ordinary. The 'me' uses other people's needs or deprivations to feel that it is useful to them and to rid itself of the guilt it feels for not having those needs itself. Thus a large part of the help that is given to others allows people to avoid having a 'bad conscience'. Even spiritual people are not always aware of their false involvement in the suffering of others. Charity is sometimes nothing but personal interest hiding under a cloak of altruism.

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This does not mean that we should not do anything for other people, care about our neighbours or participate in humanitarian aid, but please see your motivation clearly.

Buddha said in the Surangama sutra, 'You should inquire deeply and directly into the distress of the mind and find out what has been created and who is the self that is suffering. Without this understanding, you can't develop clarity and the ability to help others. A person may be expert at undoing knots, but if he never sees that there is a knot in front of him, how will he undo it?'

So what is true help?

It can only emerge from the 'space' that is not controlled by the 'me', from the silence that appears spontaneously when the mentality grows calm and disappears. This is the fruit of meditation which has no object or aim, disinterested meditation, which is sufficient unto itself. In order to lose the profiteering mind characteristic of the 'me' we must understand how it is expressed in the body, in the thoughts, emotions and reactions, and how it hides the reality of Buddha nature.

'Subhuti,' said Buddha to his disciple, 'How does a person first feel a need to save beings? He becomes aware of that kind of wise insight which shows him beings as on their way to destroying themselves. Great compassion then takes hold of him... So such a person radiates great friendliness and compassion over all these beings and gives his attention to them, thinking, "I would like to save these beings, I would like to

release them from all their sufferings." But he does not make this desire into an attachment, for he never turns his back on full enlightenment. For he knows that only when his thoughts are supported by perfect wisdom (Maka Hannya) will they bear fruit. Only from the realm of perfect wisdom can he point out the path, shed light in darkness, set people free, and cleanse the organs of vision of all beings.'

Zazen is the heart of this Great Wisdom which leads to a vision that is profound and wise, and gives birth to right compassion. If the practice is without goal, that means that it will lead practitioners out of their egoism and make them aware that they are already awakened and that they

were never separate from others. In realising this, the bodhisattva puts an end to the illusion of 'me' and this is how he or she helps all beings.

The last word is given to Master Dogen, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen:

'The descendants, children and grandchildren of the buddhas and the patriarchs must always consider seated meditation, Shikantaza, as the most important thing in their lives. This is the authentic seal of the Way transmitted in its purity.'

Translation by Rosemary Cottis

