

Zazen Zoom Saturday 17 April 2021

After the last recommendations on how to eat, Master Keizan continues by addressing those concerning the practice of zazen:

"If you practice zazen, do not lean against a wall or a rigid support. Nor should you choose a place that is exposed to the wind or too high or too exposed, as this can become a cause of illness."

For us who have learned to practice zazen under the guidance of a master, these recommendations may seem superfluous. They are meant to tell us that zazen should be practiced in the best state of mind and that our behaviour should be in harmony with our desire for awakening. Creating the right environment for meditation is part of Zen practice. Putting your shoes away carefully at the entrance to the dojo, making a deep gassho in the direction of the Buddha as you enter, not walking with your arms flailing to get to your seat, not talking unnecessarily in the dojo, consciously bowing to your seat, i.e. your neighbours in the practice, and turning around to greet the other practitioners, is an expression of the spirit of awakening and is already meditation.

In Zen, meditation must be continuous so as not to neglect any aspect of life. No gesture should be trivial, neglected. Zen is to express the extraordinary in ordinary behaviour. It is creating the heart of our practice. In awakening, everything is commitment, and nothing is insignificant. The sickness of beings is rooted in the neglect and forgetfulness that everything is both essential and illusory. Practising mindfulness of every little thing we encounter is to put ourselves in the best possible condition to receive the gift of Awakening.

"During zazen," Master Keizan continues, "you may feel cold or hot, be ill-at-ease or comfortable, stiff or loose, heavy or light, or sometimes startled when you wake up. All these sensations arise because the mind is not in harmony with the energy of your breath. To achieve harmony, adjust your breathing in this way: at the beginning of zazen, start by breathing through your mouth, and accept that a deep breath is deep and a short breath is short. Follow this breathing for a moment and become really aware of it. Then breathe through the nose and everything will harmonize naturally."

Advice on breathing during zazen is plentiful and varies according to the teacher. Master Deshimaru advised practising a deep exhalation that goes down to the *Kikai Tanden*, the Hara, the belly, the intestines, but more simply the centre of the body.

Many practitioners tend to overdo this recommendation and as a result sometimes develop an excessive ego, but it is good when it is practised with benevolence and without feeling guilty for not being successful at it.

Let us listen to the Buddha's answer to which a disciple asked:

"What should I answer if I am asked what meditation the Buddha practiced during the rainy season?"

The Buddha replied:

"You must say that I spent the rainy season practising inhalation and exhalation attention meditation. With attention I inhaled and with attention I exhaled."

When taking a long in-breath, I was aware of its length; and when I breathed out, I knew I'm doing a long out-breath'. Similarly with the short breath, I was aware of the air coming in and the air going out. In mindfulness, I was aware of the whole process."

The Buddha does not teach a special way of breathing, but he insists on paying attention to the breath just as it is. In fact, he's talking about gathering [recollecting] oneself in the awareness of the present moment. This is what lets us extract ourselves from worldly affairs and leads to independence and freedom of the mind.

There is no good or bad zazen except for the practitioner who expects a result and who realises that he or she has been thinking or dozing a lot during zazen. Beyond any judgment of 'performance', our practice is one of attention. This means "to light up the gaze of consciousness", to open the Treasury of the Eye and notice things as they are, at the moment where they are - neither dwelling on them nor grasping anything with the mind.

In this gaze there is no selection, no grasping, no rejection. Each moment with its content just as it is, is the reality of Presence, the manifestation of Emptiness.

Breathe in all simplicity; live this breath fully and forget the rest. *Awakening* breathes!
