

Translating Zen: What We Do When We Do Zazen

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Once you have settled your posture and regulated your breathing, you should relax your abdomen. Do not think of any good or evil whatsoever. Whenever a thought occurs, be aware of it; as soon as you are aware of it, it will vanish. If you remain for a long period forgetful of objects, you will naturally become unified. This is the essential art of zazen 坐禪. Honestly speaking, zazen is the Dharma-gate of ease and joy 安樂法門.¹

Soon after Francis Xavier arrived in Kagoshima over 450 years ago, he was shown the *zendō* (monk's hall) of the Sōtō Zen monastery of Fukushō ji. Seeing the monks sitting in zazen, he asked the master what they were doing. With a smile, Master Ninshitsu responded through an interpreter, "Some of them are counting up how much they received during the past months from their faithful; others are thinking about where they can obtain better clothes and treatment for their persons; others are thinking about their recreations and their amusements; in short, none of them are thinking about anything that has any meaning at all."²

Contemporary Zen scholar Bernard Faure has described zazen as "a ritual leading to a type of trance induced by specific words or sounds" and "as a ritual reenactment of the Buddha's awakening."³

¹ With minor revisions, from Carl Bielefeldt's translation in "Ch'ang-lu Tsung-tse and Zen Meditation," in Gregory 1986, pp. 159-160. From the classic Chinese Zen meditation manual *Tso-ch'an i* (坐禪儀), attributed to Ch'ang-lu (長蘆) Tsung-tse (eleventh-twelfth centuries). Chinese text in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 48:1143a-b.

² Quoted in Schurhammer 1982, vol. 4, p. 74.

³ Faure 1991, pp. 295 and 296.

How can Zen Buddhism be described and introduced to an international audience? Take the practice of *zazen*: Can it be presented without either exaggerated claims and mystical jargon on the one hand, or trivializing it and thus losing sight of its true intent on the other? In attempting to translate, teach, research or write about Zen Buddhism, I'm afraid that many—myself included—have fallen prey to these excesses. Attempting to **correct** these errors, and in a mere fifteen to twenty minutes in front of this learned audience, is like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. Anyway, here goes. In this essay I would like to offer my take on “observing Japan from within” through a few of my thoughts and methods on presenting Zen practice to an international audience.

Perhaps the most common way of describing Zen practice nowadays, including *zazen*, is the Japanese expression *mu ni narikiru* 「無」になりきる. This can be rendered as “Just be *mu*!” *Mu* is the common character for negation, though in Mahayana Buddhism it often carries the positive sense of being free of ego-self, exemplified in the basic Buddhist teaching of *muga* (無我; P.: *anattā*; S.: *anātmā*) or “no-ego.”

A Zen master instructs his disciple to “Just be *mu*.” The student, however, may have no idea what the master is talking about. It's like telling the Japanese student who says he wants to speak English: “Just speak English.”

And yet, in saying, “Just be *mu*,” the Zen master is probably speaking quite accurately, based on his own experience. Then again, is it completely off the mark to respond to a Japanese university student who asks, **in Japanese**, about a chance to speak English: “Just speak English” i.e., make mistakes and muddle through if you must, but begin by using it.

Of course, being *mu* presents a different challenge than struggling to use a foreign language. What actually happens when foreigners (and not only foreigners) are instructed to “Just be *mu*”? Often we willfully suppress thought. This can create more thoughts, distorted and misdirected thoughts (even thoughts of “enlightenment”). This in turn can lead to mental dullness on the one hand, or flights of fancy on the other. In a word, much time may be wasted on so-called “mental masturbation in the name of *mu*.”

Unlike this feeble description of mine, in the Japanese Zen monastery today, monks learn by **doing** more than by book learning or explanation.

Two new monks might be ordered to pick weeds by hand in a remote part of the temple compound. No explanation is given other than, “Pull the weeds!” While both monks might be engaged in the same menial task for hours squatting down pulling up weeds, one might be fuming all the while: “What a stupid thing to do—nobody even **sees this place!** Besides, by the time we’re finished, the weeds will already be growing again.” The other monk simply gives himself to the task at hand. It is hoped that, eventually, through **doing**, both monks will have mind solidly on the task at hand. They will be cleaning the weeds of their mind as they weed the garden.

I suppose you all have read something about Zen, perhaps done some research on it, maybe even taught it in a university course. Let’s take a moment now to taste it. I invite you if you would like, to briefly (about thirty seconds) experience simplified zazen. Sit as you are, but with back fairly erect and head straight, eyes open but looking down in front of you. Simply focus on breathing out and being “one” rather than *mu*. This avoids unnecessary esoteric connotations. I will exaggerate it with sound now so you can get a sense, but it should be done silently: “Ooooooooooone.” Just **be one**. Let’s begin.

Thank you. Just with that brief experience I trust you could get some sense of what zazen is “aiming at.” You may have had some sense of concentrated oneness. But you were probably also aware that your mind wandered a bit, perhaps disturbed by a sound around you or a thought arising. If so, you have already seen, through your own experience, the need for sustained practice and discipline.

But I trust you also got a sense that, far from mental dullness or willful suppression, zazen is **mind most clearly aware**—utterly free of discursive thought. Not just free of discursive thought either, but free of wandering emotions, images, expectations, memories and so on.

I trust you could also see that zazen is not some kind of transcendental bliss or otherworldly trance. Zazen is not seeking anything **over there**. Rather, it is finding the **real right here**. If Buddhism is correct in its teaching of *muga*, that there is no ego-self, then the very attempt to attain some other state or condition is clearly off the mark, isn’t it?

But rather than get involved in a detailed explanation of Buddhist concepts and methods, let us simply continue to look directly at our own

experience and see what is, and is not, there. You are proving the truth of *muga* right now. How? We are constantly losing ourselves. Ever read a book? We can't do it just by looking at the letters on the page—we do it by “being it,” by entering into the story. We are constantly losing ourselves in what we do, whether reading a book, watching a movie, playing a sport, or listening to a talk about Zen. Musicians, artists, sports enthusiasts often know this and are able to tap into it instinctively or intuitively. Is there anything in the least bit strange about a theater director urging a struggling actor to “Just be Macbeth”?

There's nothing in the least bit mystical or transcendent here. On the contrary, it's true of anything really worth doing, isn't it? Doing our work, or an art project, playing sports, making music, making love, reading a book, watching a movie or talking with a friend—if we aren't really one, totally there, where are we? If mind is split, we can't do **anything** thoroughly.

Ever had to act in a real emergency or life-threatening crisis? All of your discursive thoughts that seem so real and tangible—where do they go at that moment? And where does that clarity, concentration and strength arise from?

When we're one with something, discursive thought is absent. It's so, isn't it? Intuitively, we already know this truth and are touching it constantly. Far from being a confused or blurry state, it is total clarity. Unbound awareness—for a while. Unfettered freedom—while doing something that comes naturally. Further, within this state we can spontaneously act, make decisions and so forth.

The difference in all of this is that it remains a temporary, partial state and we eventually return to our “selves.” Zazen, in a word, is actually discovering the fact that there is no self to return to, then living that out in each and every moment.

Buddhism expresses this simple yet profound truth in ambiguous terms like “thinking without thinking”: Being clearly aware without the hindrance of discursive thoughts. This is completely different from not thinking at all, or from thinking about not having thoughts. Rather, it is more like those moments when, lost in the music or in the sport, we're completely there—yet **I** am not there at all. Everyday, in our lived

experience we are touching the truth of those ambiguous, apparently incomprehensible Buddhist statements. We might keep this in mind the next time we encounter them.

Why then does zazen seem so difficult, so esoteric and austere, so removed from our everyday world? Because in the beginning we use our restless, seeking minds to try and be one or be *mu*. This makes the sublimely simple seem difficult or even impossible. It's not uncommon for beginners to feel discursive thoughts **increase** at first. Many people have come up against this initial difficulty in zazen and given up in frustration. They wrongly conclude that zazen is too difficult for them or it doesn't work. But where exactly is the difficulty?

After sitting briefly in zazen with Japanese university students, I ask them about their experience. Almost invariably they respond that it was difficult or even impossible. (Yes, they have the same difficulties as we do.) But what had I asked them, and you just a moment ago, to do? Just one simple thing: Just be one. I then ask them whether they can ride their bicycles in the rain, hold an umbrella, and talk on their cell phones tucked in their shoulders all at the same time. No problem. But you can't just be one for even a moment. Tell me again where the difficulty is? Soon they start to see that the only real difficulty is their own minds. And that zazen takes time, patience, and discipline to **undo** our proliferating and discursive mentality.

Zazen is not really difficult at all. Only when we bring, and hold onto, our discursive minds does it seem difficult. Recall the two monks engaged in pulling the weeds. Isn't returning to and discovering this unified simplicity, this settled wholeness of mind worth some effort on our part? Of course, zazen is not the only way to realize it.

Nor is that all zazen is about. Zazen, as a form of Buddhist discipline or praxis, is actually getting to the bottom of our "selves"—discovering what is, and is not, there.

Would you like a touchstone for this in your daily life? Boredom. That's right: Boredom. The illusion of ego-self can be seen in its continual instability, wavering back and forth between, for example, boredom and over-stimulation. When too much stress or anxiety is felt, we seek to escape it into calm and quiet. But too much quiet leaves us feeling ennui and

boredom. Back and forth on the karmic wheel of misfortune we go.

If zazen is ever boring, it's not zazen. I would even go so far as to say that if **anything** is ever boring, we're not really experiencing it. When we feel bored, instead of blaming that which we are bored with, take that opportunity to see the illusion of ego at work. Only ego feels boredom (not to mention the anxiety of over-stimulation). What is really boring, dull, tedious, monotonous and wearisome other than the illusion of ego? **See what your mind is doing when boredom arises.** Instead of experiencing what is there in front of us, are we not separating ourselves from that experience through the intervention of our unmet expectations and desires? You might keep that in mind the next time your bus is late—or you have to listen to a talk like this.

To sum up: Once, a few centuries back, there was a young Arkansas fiddler out in his field. A well-to-do man approaches in his buggy, tells the boy that he has gotten lost trying to get to such-and-such a town nearby. He asks the boy the quickest way to get there. Putting his hand to his thin jaw and looking one way down the road, then the other, the boy finally answers: "Sir, ya' can't git there from here." This goes on for some time—the man asks, for example, "Then can you at least tell me where this road goes to?" "It don't go nowhere. I get up every mornin' and it's still there." The flustered man finally exclaims: "You don't know **anything**. You must be the dumbest boy I've ever met!" The boy responds: "Maybe so, sir. But I ain't lost."

Zen practice **is** a matter of "Just being *mu*." But it took the Zen master who says that many years of disciplined and sustained practice to realize it, and make it real, in every aspect of his life. It's no different for us.

In the beginning, due to our restlessly seeking minds, we turn zazen into something to do, to accomplish, to attain—we try to "get there." After our practice matures, spontaneously and effortlessly we find that we have always been that which we vainly sought. An important turning point, though not an end in itself.

Ego is an illusion. But a deep-seated, tangled web of an illusion it is. Anyone who has honestly struggled with it knows that for sure.

The difficulty of Zen practice, however, is largely of our own making. In the most literal sense of the term, we are struggling with ourselves. That

practice is not completely worthless, however. I have tried here to suggest, in my own clumsy way, what that practice is, how it works, and how we can express it.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND TRANSLATING

In Zen dialogues or *mondō* (問答), to get the sense, it is often helpful to read terms like “hear,” “see,” etc., as “be.”

Instead of using terms like “attain” or “achieve” when translating terms like *satori* (悟り), try “realize” or even “actualize.”

Instead of translating the technical term *ton* (頓; used in contrast to *zen* 漸 or “gradual”) as “sudden” (wrong because it is not a matter of speed or quickness) or subitism (even worse), try “immediate” in the original sense of “un-mediated.”

Free rendering and brief commentary of a quatrain attributed to Bodhidharma. Considered a succinct expression of the essentials of Zen Buddhism:

不立文字 **Without relying on words or letters.** Not denying or ignoring the written word; rather, not taking written statements (or other things) as the basis. Instead, one’s own realization must be the basis.

教外別伝 **Separately transmitted apart from any teachings.** Partly repeats the message of the first line. These first two lines are sometimes reversed. Commonly confused with “transmitting mind with mind” (以心伝心) and mistaken for referring to the master transmitting his mind to the disciple.

直指人心 **Directly revealing our self.** Cf. “Directly pointing to the soul of man.”

見性成佛 **Realizing nature and awakening.** Cf. “Seeing the nature and becoming Buddha.” “Nature” in the sense of the egoless nature of ourselves and of everything. Literally “becoming Buddha” but “become” suggests changing from one form to another. Buddha here refers to *an* awakened one—not *the* awakened one Gotama.

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