

What is Zazen?

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It is difficult today to know what to believe in. In the past people could put their trust in God, but today how many of us know how to enter a deep state of prayer in which we are truly able to trust and believe? Though most people put their faith in science, many of us sense a division between this and the world of religion. Religion presupposes something that is not measurable with our senses, something that is only an ideal or a belief, whereas science believes only in things that can be measured and proved. The difference between these two world views often causes a great sense of conflict.

Each of us is different. We have different hopes and plans, and different, unknowable states of mind. Although these things cannot be measured they are very real, giving each of us our own individuality. Through zazen we are each able to return to our own particular essence, to become completely who we are. This return to the quiet place within us, this letting go of all external distractions to return to our original inner space—this is zazen. It is very important to know that by practicing zazen we are not trying to become all alike. Instead, zazen allows each person to become who he or she truly is.

Because what we examine in zazen is our own self, the first thing we must focus on is aligning our physical body to achieve a balanced, stable posture. Once our physical posture is aligned we are able to go deeper within and align our breathing, which connects everything within us. Then, going one step further, we align our mind.

During our daily lives we use our bodies to perform whatever actions are appropriate for the various

activities we're engaged in. As we do this, however, most of the time we are out of touch with our own physical center. The more people use their heads in their work—the more they need to think and concentrate with their brains—the more likely it is that their *ki*, their energy, will rise to their heads. In addition, we all have various physical habits, ingrained ways in which we use our bodies, and set ideas about how things should be done. All of these habits and routines affect the way in which we center and balance our bodies as we move through the day.

During zazen, rather than directing our consciousness outward and engaging our bodies in external actions, we sit still and look inward at what we really are. For that reason the way in which we balance ourselves physically is very important.

It's easy to look at other people and see whether their posture is well aligned, but to know for yourself when your posture is correct you must be able to feel a sense of complete balance and centeredness, free of any heaviness. This is the most important aspect of the physical posture in zazen.

To express it another way, we can look at the human body in terms of two separate halves: from the waist up and from the waist down. In the top half of the body all of our senses and our thinking abilities are located; the nature of the top half of the body is to perceive things. The bottom half of the body, from the waist down, is the center of our life energy; the nature of the bottom half of the body is to be active and energetic.

There's a tale from olden times about a rich man who wanted a third-floor residence so that he could be higher than any of his neighbours. When the carpenters arrived they naturally began construction

2from the bottom floors. When the rich man saw this he became angry and said to the carpenters, "I said I wanted a third-floor residence, so I don't need anything else, just the third floor. Why should I waste my money building the bottom floors?"

We laugh at this story, but if we look closely we see that it refers to us. We want to have wisdom or clear sight, but we so easily ignore the bottom floor of that process: the proper alignment of the body that enables us to realize these things. The body is something we often don't want to deal with. Yet for the brain, our senses, our thoughts, and our perceptions to work correctly, the body—the locus of our life energy—must be thoroughly centered and balanced. Because proper posture is so critical, any explanation of zazen must begin with a description of its physical aspects.

As we sit on the ground with our legs folded in front of us, the lower back must be firmly curved inward. This is very important. If the lower back is slumped then the head will lean forward, burdening the back and neck muscles. When the lower back is curved inward then the head will be well balanced on top of the neck and will not feel heavy.

Turning the gaze downward, keep your eyes open. It might seem easier to concentrate with the eyes shut, but in fact closing the eyes encourages drowsiness and extraneous thinking. In turning the gaze downward, we need to be careful not to lower the chin but to keep the head well centered and balanced on the neck.

It is very important to completely let go of any tension in the upper half of the body. In order to do this sit so that you are sturdily centered in the lower half of your body. The easiest way to maintain a well-

centered posture is to sit in either the full-lotus or the half-lotus position, since these positions facilitate good balance. Sitting cross-legged is not the only possibility, however. It is also possible to remain balanced, with the center of gravity in the lower half of the body, when sitting in a chair or when standing. People who find it difficult to do zazen in a sitting or a standing position can even do it lying down. Whether lying on a bed or on the floor, keep your feet at shoulder's width apart and put your hands comfortably by your hips. If sitting in a chair, sit with your legs slightly separated. Don't lean against the back but keep your spine straight, supported from the center of the body rather than by the back of the chair.

Although it isn't necessary to sit in full lotus, this position is the best way to maintain a stable posture for long periods of time. For sitting in a balanced way it's preferable to place both feet, rather than just one, on top of the thighs. When sitting in full lotus it is important that the soles of the feet face upward. Ordinarily our feet face downward and touch the ground, whether we're standing, walking, or sitting in a chair. In order to feel the fullness of the universe, however, it is important at times to turn the feet toward the heavens. The Japanese word for the full lotus posture can be literally translated as the position where the soles of the feet upward and give off ki. When the position of our feet is correct we can feel the ki coming forth from them; when it is wrong the flow of ki will be disturbed. (In order to assist the flow of ki at ordinary times, many people recommend walking as much as possible with bare feet, since direct contact with the ground promotes the movement of ki through us).

When I sit in full lotus I use a low cushion. After

sitting I first curve my lower back inwards, then shift my body forward so as to center my weight between my legs. If I don't make this action of moving my body forward it's difficult to get my legs into the full lotus position. When sitting in half lotus it's better to use slightly higher cushions. Then, just as in full lotus, push your rear out and then bring it back in again. Putting the body forward, set your abdomen out in front of you so it has a good, sturdy place to do its breathing. One more important point is that we should slightly tense the anal sphincter muscles, not pulling them in tight, but keeping the area below the tailbone slightly taut. This is a key point to imparting a proper sense of tautness to the whole body. When the body is positioned correctly it feels taut yet fully relaxed.

It is essential to have a straight back. We all have different habits of posture, but sitting with a slumped back makes it difficult for the ki to flow smoothly. You'll see this very clearly if you sit for a long time and notice where you feel pain. If your lower back hurts, it means that this part of the back is slumped outward rather than being curved in. If your shoulders are tense it's because your neck and head are bent forwards. If your upper back behind your lungs is painful it's because your ki is stuck there, which, in turn, indicates that you are not applying your energy vividly enough in zazen. To be vivid in applying your energy means, physically, to be solid, clear, and correct in your posture, and, mentally, to be lucidly aware of what you are doing.

The particular method that I often use to achieve this is first to sit in the way I described above, curving my back inward and pushing my abdomen forward so that my weight is centered between my legs and a very firm posture is established. I then bring

awareness to the great flow of ki that moves from the tailbone at the bottom of the back up to the top of the head. This I stimulate with ki, which has the effect of increasing the energy flow. Just hearing about this doesn't necessarily mean that you will be able to do it immediately; you will probably have to learn for yourself how it is done. But if you persevere, without fail you will succeed.

We are living between the ki of the earth and the ki of the heavens, and it is to our benefit to make as much use as possible of the ki of the heavens. Straighten your spine by raising one vertebrae above the next, keeping the energy moving upward. You don't even have to align your spine all the way; if you just begin this movement, the energy moving upward aligns the spine of itself. If you practice this you'll be able to do it quite quickly and easily.

As you align your back in this way, you get the feeling that you're being pulled up into the heavens by your backbone. And then a very curious thing happens. Your spine naturally assumes its proper alignment, in which all of the tightness in your shoulders, the stiffness in your neck, and the pain in your back spontaneously releases. All of this tension—the upper back pain, the tight shoulders, the stiff neck—comes from the stagnation of ki in the body. When you align your back and stretch it upwards then that stagnant ki is able to flow freely, allowing your body to relax.

Sometimes in your sitting you're leaning to the left or to the right without being aware of it. When you sit as if you're being pulled up by your backbone your body will naturally align itself with your center of balance, and leaning to one side or the other will no longer be a problem.

This is why I always keep an awareness of my spine

when beginning a period of zazen. I've never weighed myself at this particular time so I can't be certain, but I have a definite sense of getting lighter. In addition, I have found that if I do this upward stretching of my backbone several times all of the pain in my legs disappears.

If we have a lot of stagnation in our physical body and tight places where the energy is caught, then it's only to be expected that we'll have many stuck places in our mind as well. Much of our extraneous thinking comes from our energy not flowing smoothly. If you tense the upper half of your body then all of your energy will go into that effort. However, if you keep centered in your lower half and properly align your back, your energy will flow freely and you'll feel the upper half of your body becoming loose and relaxed. Thus it's important to always keep your spine straight and let go of the tension in the upper part of your body. When you get rid of that stagnation and relax the places that are tense, you discover that many of the blockages in your mind also become looser and more fluid.

Once the body is properly aligned, we can turn our attention to our breathing. Breathing, of course, is something we are always doing—if we stop for even a few minutes we die. During zazen our breathing must be open, expansive, and relaxed. We want to lengthen our exhalation, but without creating any tightness or tension in the diaphragm and without restricting our breathing to the chest.

How do we go about breathing in this deep and expansive way? First of all, it helps to wear loose-fitting clothing that does not constrict the body or your circulation in any way. Next, when you exhale let your breath out completely until your belly is flat.

In the beginning you can put your hand on your abdomen in order to get a better sense of this flattening process, but this isn't really necessary since the abdomen will flatten naturally as you fully exhale. At the very end of the exhalation give two small, gentle pushes. This is not a forcing, but a gentle pushing to make sure that all of the air is out. After exhaling completely there's no need to consciously begin the inhalation—your body will naturally desire oxygen, and the inhalation will occur naturally.

When we breathe we're simply connecting the air outside our body and the air inside our body—it's the same air that is moving in and out. As we become more familiar with breathing like this the connection between the outer air and the inner air is no longer simply a mental image, and we directly experience how we are being given life. In order to breathe in this way it is necessary to relax and open up the diaphragm, open up the chest, and open up the neck. Breathe as if your body was an empty pipe. Start by opening your mouth, which loosens your neck muscles. You can then consciously open up the area of your chest, the area of your diaphragm, and the area of your abdomen. If you open all of these areas when you breathe you will feel the connection between the air in your body, the air of the atmosphere, and the air of the entire world. Then the body truly is like an empty pipe.

It can be helpful to keep the mouth open for the first few breaths, but after that it should be kept closed. Of course we naturally tend to inhale through the nose anyway, which is preferable since our nasal passages are designed to moisten the air and keep impurities out.

If we can allow the exhalation to go out to its final

point we don't need to push or force in any way; the breath flows out of its own accord. Because the body is like an empty pipe our abdomen becomes flat when we exhale to the very end, and then we naturally inhale. When this breathing is fully developed it can take up to a minute for every last bit of air to go completely out and then another minute to naturally inhale, although it does not have to be this long.

There's no need to make some kind of special practice out of this. Just let your exhalation out completely, and then allow the inhalation in again. Open your nose. Open your throat. Open your chest. Keep your sense of being empty and become like a pipe. When you try it for yourself you'll understand the feeling. Then when you inhale you will begin to notice a feeling of tautness in your lower abdomen as it fills. And as you continue with your breathing, carefully exhaling completely and inhaling naturally, you'll discover that your abdomen feels fuller and fuller and tauter and tauter, and that your center, your tanden, is becoming very firm and steady.

It's very important to feel this taut fullness in your tanden. The tanden is one of the centers of the nervous system that affects the distribution of hormones in the body, and thus can affect the balance of the entire physical body. Among other things, breathing into the tanden stimulates the hormones in the brain that help with concentration. The more you practice this complete exhalation and maintain an energetic and attentive focus on your breathing, the clearer and more concentrated you become.

When we experience this feeling of being centered in the tanden we awaken to a deep sense of being settled, of being where we're supposed to be. It is a

very grounded, deeply peaceful feeling—a quiet, all-embracing, abundant state of mind in which we can forgive and accept all people. We experience this not because of a conscious effort to live in a compassionate way, but because this kind of deep compassion comes naturally when we're stable and centered. We realize a clarity of mind that enables us to perceive things directly and receive everything that comes along just as it is. It's no longer as if we're observing reflections in a looking glass. Rather, we see everything directly.

This is the point of commonality that exists between zazen and all of the Japanese martial arts and various artistic paths. Among the various practices that are taught to help students excel at these arts, one that is always present is that of developing, through breathing, the full, taut state in the lower abdomen that I described. Proper breathing provides pure air for our brain and our whole being and develops an abundant state in which we realize where our talents lie and how best to employ them. With the development of a stable centeredness we see the most appropriate way to relate to each situation and each person. The best way to approach each task and the most efficient way to employ each tool become increasingly clear. Our work is greatly improved, and we're able to function with a greater clarity than ever before.

In this way, being able to breathe in a relaxed and open manner fosters a sense of spaciousness. We receive the things that come to us with an openness of mind and see clearly how best to respond to everything that comes along with a feeling of centeredness free of all tension. We no longer try so hard that we stiffen up, making everything more difficult.

As the center of your being settles lower in your body and your mind becomes more open you will start noticing the endless thoughts that arise in your mind. It is no use trying to suppress them. A better approach is to focus on counting your breaths (a practice known as *susokkan*), which will help you maintain concentration and not get caught up in ideas. With each out-breath count a single number, going from one to ten and then returning to one again. Eventually the numbers will become part of the flow of your breathing and you will no longer need to count. But in the beginning, counting your breaths will help you keep your energy gathered, your mind clear, and your attention focused on your breathing.

Keeping concentrated on each number, breathe out, exhaling completely, and then inhale naturally. Keep your focus on the counting without allowing any spaces or gaps between the numbers where thoughts can spontaneously rush in. As you keep that relaxed yet concentrated focus on *susokkan*, you'll find your mind becoming quieter and less inclined to cling to anything external. The fastest and most direct way to becoming centered and quiet is to carefully and attentively keep your awareness on each breath and not allow it to go elsewhere. If you do that and only that, without allowing any gaps between the breaths and without clinging to them in a tense and rigid way, you'll quickly come to know a deep, quiet place.

At the same time, as my teacher would always tell me, we cannot be in a hurry. It's like filling up a bucket with water, drop after drop after drop, or blowing up a huge balloon one breath after another. Breath counting mustn't be done in a mechanical or automatic way. Applying our attention with great care to each and every breath and each and every number, the bucket gradually fills up until it reaches

the point that one tiny drop will break the surface tension and spill the water out. Or the balloon gets larger and tighter with each breath until finally it bursts. You must maintain awareness of the breathing to this point.

This is something that anyone can do, since it's basically the natural result of a physical activity. If we apply the body in this way, this is what will always happen. It is not something abstract, or an activity that only certain people are capable of. It is more like a mathematical equation: if we apply attention to the breath long enough, the "bucket" will eventually spill over.

In this way, we must realize that full, taut state of mind in which it is almost impossible for extraneous thinking to enter. We become totally, thoroughly present. Because this taut energy fills us so completely, there is no place in our awareness for any idea of a past or a future to exist. We are just one moment of the present after another. When we're in this deep state of mind there's no need to think about doing good and avoiding evil, or to entertain notions like the universal nature of suffering. We become so thoroughly, totally absorbed in the present moment that no discursive thinking can possibly enter.

In the end, nothing is necessary but the direct perception of this essence. Zazen is not a matter of thinking about mind, but of knowing the experience of mind itself. Drifting along with the random ideas that enter our mind one after the other, or with the thoughts of the past and future that continually arise, is not zazen. Some people come to zazen with a fixed image of what "quiet" or "nothingness" is, and then attempt to sit in accordance with that image. Since such images is simply more ideas, this approach leads

nowhere. Since our minds are from the origin quiet, if we produce any idea of what quiet is we've already put an extra layer on top of our original quiet, and this can never be true quiet. Likewise, from the origin there is no permanent existence of a physical body. If we entertain any concept of a physical body, that is already one step away from what we truly are.

Zen Master Takuan was the Zen teacher of Yagyu Munenori, one of the greatest masters of the sword. In the letters that Takuan wrote to Yagyu he expressed his profound teachings on what swordsmanship and zazen have in common. These letters are called *The Profound Teachings of the Unmoved Mind* ("the unmoved mind" is sometimes rendered in English as "the unfettered mind"). An unmoved mind does not mean a mind that doesn't move. It is not a mind that is stagnant and fixed, or one that is immobile like a tree or a rock. Rather, an unmoved mind is a mind that is not fixed anywhere, that doesn't stop and linger in any one place. This mind is always in motion because it never attaches to anything. This, paradoxically, is the true meaning of an "unmoving" mind.

When we hear this, we may think that having a mind that is never stopped by anything, that never adheres to anything, is nearly impossible. In fact, it's very simple and very straightforward. If we look at it clearly, we'll see that even a baby has this type of mind.

In the mind of a baby there is no fear of being killed, or of something terrible happening. In the mind of a baby there's no extra layer of expectation added on to what is perceived. I'm not saying that a baby is the same thing as a kendo master, or that a baby is a master of life. But what is it that allows a baby to

perceive each thing directly? What is it that makes us unable to live in this state of mind? It's not that we've acquired a new mind as we've grown older—that is not possible. We're all endowed with this mind of a baby, but we've accumulated so much extraneous baggage that it is no longer accessible to us. We've gathered conceptual ideas, layers of conditioning, various experiences, and rational interpretations of those experiences. To know our original mind we must completely let of all this clutter.

Rinzai Zenji, the great Zen master who lived in the ninth century in China, describes this mind as a baby's face surrounded by white hair three thousand feet long. This is Rinzai's description of someone who is able to manifest the purity and clear-mindedness of a baby while at the same time having a deep experience of society. Such a person directly experiences his or her original mind but has seen enough of life to know how to act with responsibility.

Kufu is a word much used in Japanese to talk about practice, but it is a difficult word to translate into English. We usually translate it as "creative invention." *Kufu* describes, for example, what craftspeople do when they come up with inventive and creative new ways to accomplish their work, not so much by going through a rational planning process but by naturally and spontaneously working things out as they do them. For example, in the olden days firemen, in order to keep a fire from burning out of control, would sometimes have to get up on the roof of a neighboring house and break down all the tiles—or often intentionally destroy the entire house—in order to keep the fire from spreading through the neighborhood. What one does in a situation like this, when one has to decide in the moment how to go about doing something, is *kufu*. To not have the

slightest extraneous thought in our mind but to do what we're doing with everything we are and with our life on the line, this is *kufu*.

In the same way, it is not true practice if you are vague and fuzzy in the way you do zazen. Practice is not about sitting in a compromised way, half focusing and half thinking about something else. Practice is about throwing yourself into whatever you are doing totally and thoroughly and giving it everything you have. We don't use our rational, divisive brain—thinking about good and bad and loss and gain and separating between self and other—when doing this kind of creative and inventive *kufu*, or when doing wholehearted zazen.

In this sense, the state of mind of a baby could be considered a religious state of mind. Science tells us that, when a baby reaches sixteen months, for the first time it's able to know what "one" means. And then at twenty-three months it's able to perceive what "two" means. When it knows what "one" means, it still sees everything as Amida, as a Buddha. No matter how terrible or how good a person is, no matter what he or she might have done, a baby sees each person as part of that "one." But when the baby can perceive two, everything becomes separate. When this happens children start to become conditioned and have rational thoughts about things. The work of zazen is to return us to that mind of one, where we see everything equally and without any sense of things being divided into two, without our rational mind thinking in a dualistic way. From there zazen returns us even further back to the original mind of zero.

It's often said in Buddhism that we are all originally endowed with a great, round, bright mirror mind, a

mind that reflects everything. The essence of the great bright mirror mind is the same as the essence of a newborn baby's mind, which reflects everything exactly as it is, just as a mirror reflects everything that comes before it without judgments, views, or expectations.

I can imagine people thinking, "What's so good about having the mind of a baby? What use is that for accomplishing things in the world? How can being in the state of mind of a baby solve the many problems we're facing today?" This is the kind of thinking that arises when we conceptualize about things. Such mental busy-ness arises with every new thought.

Along with the conceptualizing mind, however, we also have the mind of a baby that reflects without discrimination or judgment, free of all notions of good and bad. Everything it reflects, it reflects equally, with no preconceived idea of seeing something in a specific way.

I do not mean, of course, that we should ignore or refuse to use the capabilities of the rational mind, with its many useful powers of thought, insight, and decision-making. What I'm saying is that with regard to our original mind there's nothing that needs to be thought about or analyzed rationally. In zazen we aren't trying to intellectually *understand* the great bright mirror mind—we're allowing ourselves to *be* it. We do not add images onto what it actually is. As we experience this clarity of mind we understand that anything we've ever thought about it, any wonderful idea we've ever had about it, any pleasure we've had reflecting upon it—all of these are mere shadows passing in front of this great bright mirror. The mirror itself, reflecting things exactly as they are, is the original mind.

When we directly encounter this mind and know the awareness that comes forth from it, then no longer can we pretend that the things and ideas we have been holding on to are anything but shadows that obscure our awareness. We realize that anything we experience, anything we cling to and consider part of our life, regardless of how real it may seem at the moment, is no more than a phantom compared to the perception of this great bright mirror mind. When we see how ephemeral these things are, we realize how pointless it is to be attached to them.

When we realize this mirror-like mind and perceive things exactly as they are, we respond quite naturally to what is in front of us without adding extra layers of opinion and judgment. We act appropriately, with no need to stop and wonder what might be the best way to deal with a particular situation. When we're able to respond spontaneously in this way then we no longer worry about our actions, congratulating ourselves when we're effective and blaming ourselves when we fail. We no longer have any lingering thoughts about the small self and how it performed. Whether we're praised or insulted it ends with that, even if we've been made a complete fool of. When it's gone, it's just gone. This is our original and natural state of mind.

When we don't cling to fixed ideas about things we can move and respond naturally and freely. This may seem difficult, but even the idea that it's difficult is nothing but a shadow.

As Master Ikkyu said, how sad it is that each day after birth a baby moves further away from being a Buddha. We must realize that this is exactly what is happening as we accumulate concepts and opinions and all sorts of other conditioning and thereby move

further and further away from our original, clear mind. The entire purpose of zazen is to help those who do not wish to live this way, and who therefore choose to do something that will return them to this original mind.

One cannot know zazen, however, by simply hearing or reading about it and attempting to understand it intellectually. Thoughts about what it might be like or mental idealizations of it are worthless. The zazen posture and breathing I have been describing must be physically practiced and experienced. This wonderful body of ours, properly used and aligned, can help us greatly in releasing our mental tensions and obstructions, and our vast sea of breath is something into which we can release ourselves. But just knowing this isn't enough. We have to use and give life to the body and breath.

Through zazen we come to know that our body and our breath are not restricted to our individual selves but are huge and all-embracing and the source of our very existence. When we align them we are no longer caught by self-centered ideas, nor do we become irritated or get entangled in unimportant matters. Seeing that these things are mere shadows, we can easily let them go. It's because we have never experienced our original mind with all of our being that we cling to concepts and ideas and cannot let go. Aligning our physical posture and our breathing helps us see the nature of these shadows and free ourselves of the bonds they impose on us.

There are those who think that this is far too difficult, that they would rather live a pleasant, easygoing life just the way they are. What a tragedy to decide that it isn't worth making the effort to awaken to our great mind, even though all of us possess it and are

capable of knowing and living in it. Once awakened we can perceive whatever appears before us, whether it be a Buddha or a god or a devil, exactly as it is. This is our original mind.

Please don't let anything I've said become added distractions for your zazen. But perhaps, if you're not feeling fresh and awake in your practice, my advice may be of some help. That is why I've explained these things in such detail.

Questions and Answers

Q. When I try to breathe all the way out I often feel resistance in my chest and lungs. What can I do at such times to exhale more deeply?

A. When you feel constrained in your chest and lungs and are having a hard time exhaling completely, it's a sign that your diaphragm is tense. For many of us such tension is chronic, the result of years of habitual tightness in that area, and it can be very difficult to release this tightness. If you've tried to relax and still have a hard time exhaling completely, try lying down and relaxing as thoroughly as you possibly can. Then do your exhalation very, very gently. Let the air out, but don't push it out. This is important. Let yourself exhale little by little, without any force. Relax fully, and breathe with the feeling of the air flowing gently through the diaphragm, just a little at a time and without any force at all.

It might take a while to become accustomed to exhaling completely, because we generally stiffen our diaphragm and take shallow breaths. This relaxed breathing with the entire body is something new for most people, who have become accustomed to breathing in a quite different way, so be patient with yourself and don't try to force it.

Q. You say that the inhalation should happen naturally, but I find that as soon as I exhale more deeply I begin to gasp for air.

A. It's preferable to do this type of breathing effortlessly, of course, but it can be difficult until you learn how to do it properly. That's why it can be helpful, when you reach the end of your exhalation, to give a couple of gentle pushes—not forced, but just gentle pushes—to make sure that all of the air is exhaled. If you do that you'll find that inhalation

follows very naturally. The vacuum made by that complete exhalation initiates the in-breathe without your having to think about it. But at the beginning, before your body becomes used to how this breath happens, you need to make an effort to understand how the process works best. It's not a matter of straining to push your breath out to the end of the exhalation, but rather of allowing it to flow entirely out—of liberating it, as it were, to its natural completion. Then, if you give a couple of small pushes, the inhalation will happen of itself, quite naturally.

Q. During the exhalation you say to concentrate on your tanden. Where do you concentrate during the inhalation?

A. When you play tennis, for example, you can't keep gripping your racket the entire time. When you're hitting the ball it's fine to grip it tightly, but if you do so as the ball approaches you won't be able to respond properly. Right after you tighten your grip on the racket you have to loosen it. When that happens, where is your attention? If you exhale all the way to the very end, then you will naturally inhale.

This is a point often made in the martial arts, in which sharp and focused concentration is essential and in which the emphasis is also on the exhalation. There's something in martial arts called the "resonating after-echo," which refers to the focus carrying through from the end of the exhalation into the inhalation. Without this continuation a gap opens up that an expert opponent can sense and use as an opportunity for attack. This is the same thing that we do in zazen when a complete exhalation leads naturally into the inhalation. If you've been doing this practice of,

attentive awareness to your breath, you know that the exhalation is of the utmost importance to your concentration, which in turn is central to zazen. So, in focusing on our exhalation, we sharpen our concentration; it's not just our breath that extends, it's also the concentration that expands.

Q. Sometimes, when I am focusing on my breathing, I find I am yawning. What can I do about that?

A. First, there's nothing wrong with yawning. A yawn is not indicative of mental fatigue; it's just something that your body wants to do. It might indicate, for example, that you are breathing too shallowly and not taking in as much oxygen as you need at the time, so the body is attempting to compensate with the deep inhalation of the yawn. If you can further extend your exhalation little by little, not forcing it but allowing it to go out further and further, then the level of oxygen in your body will increase and you won't need to yawn.

Q. Is the long, extended exhalation that you demonstrate the way you breathe all the time, or do long breaths alternate with short breaths?

A. My exhalations are not always that long—if they were I wouldn't be able to do anything else. I demonstrate using a long exhalation in order to show that breaths of that length are possible, since it's important to know that during zazen the breath can expand and extend in that way. Although I'm able to do this because I've been practicing for so many years, the point is not that the breath should always be long or that I always breathe that way. I take short breaths and long breaths. Natural breathing changes in length depending on what you are doing.

Q. When you demonstrate you breathe through your mouth, but aren't we supposed to breathe through the nose?

A. I demonstrate by using my mouth in order to show you how this type of breathing works. Usually in zazen you should breathe through your nose. Nevertheless, the way you breathe changes as you go about your daily life; if there are times when you can't take in enough air through your nose you can use your mouth as well. Generally, as I've said, it's better to breathe through your nose. But for people who aren't yet sure how to breathe in this way it can be helpful to begin by using the mouth to more easily see how the air flows.

Most people breathe eighteen times a minute. But when you work on your breath and establish a deep breathing practice, the number of breaths you take might decrease to five or six, a minute, or for some people even to one or two. You can use a watch to count your own breaths and get some feedback on how you're progressing.

Q. How often do you do this abdominal breathing?

A. I'm always doing it—it's the way I breathe. Because I've practiced this breathing for a long time I'm always aware of what feels like a ball of energy in my abdomen, and I can always access this energy and use it. Anyone who practices *susokkan* for a long time will carry this energy with them all the time. If you want to work on developing this type of breathing, the best time is the first thing in the morning when you've just woken up and you're feeling open and expansive anyway. If you take a few minutes each morning to lie still and work on your abdominal breathing, you'll get used to it very

quickly.

Q. Does the abdomen itself go in and out all the time, or is it just the breath that goes in and out?

A. The abdomen does move with each breath, though it's not something you should think about too much. What happens is that once you're accustomed to this type of breathing the breath naturally becomes more expansive, without your being conscious of it and without your abdomen moving in and out very much. That is when you start to feel the ball of energy I mentioned earlier, which you can expand as much as you want. But it happens of its own. If you continue practicing this deep breathing you'll start to breathe from the abdomen all the time, and not just when you're thinking about it. So when you reach a certain level of practice there is a full, taut energy that's always there regardless of whether or not you are consciously maintaining the deep breathing.

Q. Why do we have to put up with so much pain to do zazen? Why does it have to hurt so much?

A. Right there is where the answer lies. By doing zazen we realize that the greatest enemy we ever have to face is our own small self. As we sit, body and our mind both start to resist. No matter how strong we are with regard to the things that come from the outside world, we find that we're weak in relation to the things that arise from our own small self.

One of the descriptive names for the Buddha is "The One Who Had the Great Bravery to Align Himself Within." While we definitely need a certain kind of courage to face difficulties that confront us externally,

it truly takes great bravery to face difficulties that come from within.

It's much easier to clearly perceive and understand what's happening outside us and around us than it is to see the difficulties and obstructions that exist in our own minds. It's easy to find fault with other people, but extremely difficult to look into ourselves with the same kind of awareness and truly see what it is that we need to work on.

What is essential in zazen is to let go of all of our connections with the external matters of our lives. Just put them aside. By turning our focus away from the external and instead looking only within we become aware of the mind that connects all beings and see how we relate to all that exists.

Q. In working with clutter in the mind, do you have any suggestions on how to determine what is important and should be acted upon, and what is not? That is, what is clutter and what is not?

A. If you try to resolve this through rational understanding it becomes very difficult to answer. If you feed a baby poison, it spits it right out.

Q. But in other experiences I've had with meditation and with trying to let thoughts go, I've found that some thoughts are in fact very healing and releasing. What do you advise regarding thoughts such as these that are helpful?

A. It's true that some thoughts may be nurturing or healing. But the point of doing this practice isn't to determine whether or not a particular thought that comes up is of value. Some of the thoughts that we let go of during zazen may indeed be valuable, but we

have to keep in mind that we're doing this practice in order to realize the mind that connects all beings. To know the mind that is common to everyone and not just me as an individual is the point of sitting zazen.

In order to do this we have to let go of any small, personal self-reflection or thought that brings us back to a sense of a small, separate self. If we're able to do that, then when our eyes see and our ears hear we are perceiving what's right in front of us with no obstruction from any kind of thinking. That, in turn, means that we are seeing clearly and directly, without any of the extraneous baggage that usually accompanies those perceptions. When thoughts intrude on our perceptions then we are no longer seeing with the same mind, the same eyes and ears, as everybody else. When we let go of all of the thinking, let go of all of the extraneous thoughts, then we perceive from a standpoint common to all beings. Nothing personal, nothing small-self, occludes our perception in any way.

When there are thoughts that we hang on to, even if they are nurturing or helpful, then we are no longer perceiving with this universal mind, which is what the practice is about. Zen practice involves letting go of *all* thoughts so that we might return to the mind from which all of our consciousness and awareness comes forth. To know that mind is why we do zazen.

Q. Since it's the mind that's actually doing the breathing, when we do this full-exhalation type of breathing are we in fact emptying our mind by forcing our awareness in our abdomen?

A. We all tend to do far too much brain work. As a result our energy rises into our heads, making us head-heavy and stuck in our upper half. When you let

go of all tension in the upper half of the body, however, your energy naturally settles in the abdomen, which in turn gives rise to a full, taut feeling there. Relaxing the upper half of our body, we exhale into the tanden area one breath at a time. With the continuation of these breaths a large energy arises. Thus this feeling is not the result of pressing your energy from your mind into your abdomen, but rather arises of itself when tension leaves the upper body.

Q. When we exhale completely we're emptying the lungs, but aren't we in fact also emptying the mind?

A. It's not necessary to empty the mind because the mind is empty from the start. Our heads are filled with thoughts that we regard as actually constituting the mind, but in fact we're just unwilling to let the thoughts go. In order to drop this attachment to thinking, as you suggest, we breathe out entirely by exhaling to the final point, not forcing the breath but allowing it to flow out to its final point. This facilitates the releasing of thoughts. When we concentrate on extending the exhalation we find that thoughts demand less and less of our attention and start dropping away of their own. They don't cling to us so much. That's the way it works.

Q. My question is about walking meditation. When I'm walking it seems to be more difficult to keep my mind from jumping around. Is that one reason we do it?

A. The practice of walking meditation originated thousands of years ago in India when monks would meditate for long periods, causing their energy to stagnate. They discovered that in order to get their energy flowing again and return to meditation in a

fresh state of mind they needed to move their bodies. In addition, they realized that it's important to move the muscles and change the posture so that the body doesn't tense up from holding the same position all the time.

Walking also allowed the monks in India to continue their concentration and breathing in a different mode. By continuing their practice while moving they deepened their ability to maintain concentration while engaged in the activities of everyday life, and not just while sitting. Since this is indeed more difficult they would often recite the teachings of the Buddha as they walked in order to help quiet their minds. If they became scattered they would repeat a mantra (a word or special series of words, often from a sutra) to help them stay centered.

A number of different mantras are used for this. One that is particularly useful, and that I use myself, is the mantra at the end of the *Heart Sutra*: "Gyate gyate paragyate parasam gyate bodhi svaha." The rhythm of this mantra makes it good for repetition along with the physical movement of walking. The mantra is usually translated as "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone beyond to the other shore," but it can also have the meaning "Arrived, arrived, now arrived at this place of abundance." That is, right now and right here we are on the "other shore." So repeating it helps us to remember that we are always in this clear, original, full and abundant state of mind. But although the meaning of the mantra contributes to its effectiveness, it isn't the most important reason for using it. Rather, it's that the particular rhythm of the mantra helps us to stay centered.

Q. Can we learn the type breathing you describe from

doing tai chi?

A. During zazen it's not our small self that's doing the breathing. Rather, we're being breathed through by the entire universe. When we're caught in our small self we become narrow and automatic in our behavior, doing things only because everyone thinks they should be done or matching our actions with some image we have in our heads. This makes us melancholy and rigid, a sure sign that something is amiss at a very fundamental level since our true essence is marked by richness and joy. Letting go of all these limits so that the universal energy to flow through us is the point of meditation. Zazen aligns us with this energy and allows us to live in accordance with it, so that we can experience the joy of being alive.

Q. I have heard that the heart chakra is the place where energy enters the body. What is the relationship between the heart chakra and the tanden as the center of energy?

A. The chakras have a certain emotional content, whereas the tanden as I'm describing it is more physical or materialistic in nature. The kind of full, taut energy I've been talking about is not related to the chakra system—I'm not referring to the "hara chakra" as opposed to the heart chakra. The tanden as it's conceived in Zen is a different point of entrance, a more physical one.

Anybody who breathes in this way, who puts this technique to use, will have the same physical experience of full, taut energy. When we experience this we're able to let go of our small self and awaken to the great life that embraces and accepts all beings. We practice susokkan in order to experience this

unlimited energy in our own body.

Another aspect of the physicality of the tanden is that it is near the navel, where we were connected with our mother when we were still in the womb. This was the source of our life force until we started taking air into our lungs at the moment of birth. Thus the abdomen has always been an important energy center, a place through which we live. This is the place we develop with this practice.

Q. When I'm gazing at one spot during meditation, sometimes that spot seems to disappear and things start getting hazy and blurry. I feel less present, my mind begins to wander, and I become sleepy. What causes this, and what can I do about it?

A. This question about finding yourself unable to focus and becoming sleepy and full of thoughts is very common. This happens because you're putting too much intention into focusing on one point, an effort that ends up constricting you and making you tense, causing fatigue and then sleepiness. The way to avoid this is to open yourself up as much as possible. This opening is the point of zazen. In fact, the mind becomes clearer in zazen not through forced concentration but through ever-expanding openness. As we liberate our awareness it becomes larger and more vast.

To achieve this openness you need to relax completely. When you feel sleepiness or mental distraction coming on, or when you find yourself getting fuzzy in your focus, don't try to focus harder. Just rest your eyes on the point in front of you in a way that you're clearly aware of it without forcing your concentration upon it. At the same time, make sure that you are properly aligned from your lower

back to the top of your head. In order to do this I myself bend forward and then back, and then I intentionally tighten my anal sphincter muscles. When these muscles are tightened you can feel the ki going up your back and making it seem as though the top of your head is opening. Then your energy will start flowing better. Haziness is a sign that your energy has become stagnant. When you make your backbone like an empty pipe and feel the energy moving from where your anal sphincter muscles are closed to where the top of your head is open, your zazen will fill with energy.

The ancient martial arts masters had something similar in mind when they taught their students to stay aware of the distant mountains. When facing an opponent, the point is not to rigidly concentrate on what is directly in front of you, like your opponent's sword or a specific part of his body. The moment you do that you are vulnerable. Your concentration must be so huge, your attention so open, that it includes not only your opponent but also the mountains in the distance. This doesn't mean you can no longer see your opponent's sword and whatever else is right in front of you. Quite the contrary—when the field of your awareness becomes that large it embraces everything in view. True one-pointed attention does not involve concentrating on one thing and shutting everything else out, but rather opening your awareness so that everything is seen clearly.

Q. In yoga we also contract the anal muscles, but when in the cycle of the breath do you do this, on the inhalation or on the exhalation?

A. You should do it the entire time you are breathing. But you need to be gentle—if you breathe in too hard

you become tense. One way to get a sense of what it should feel like is to stand on your tiptoes while leaning against something, since this tension happens naturally when you stand like this.

Q. Is the sense of the top of your head opening the same thing as the opening of the third eye? How much should I be aware of the top of my head?

A. In order to do zazen in the most wide open and liberated way, ultimately your entire body must be the focus of your awareness (that is why I said earlier that it's best not to focus too intensely with your eyes). But in order to do this you must let go of all of the places where you are caught or stuck, and sometimes focusing on your third eye or the top of your head can help. We can also learn how to let go of caught places through the practice of yoga or chikung. Regardless of what method you use, though, it's important not to become caught on that either.

Even moving a finger or a toe can be like yoga or chikung, because a single cell can express the totality of the physical body. This is similar to the martial arts way of seeing that includes the distant mountains, in which we're increasingly open and liberated in our awareness. When our awareness encompasses the far-off mountains then our concentration is clear and we can see every small thing. If, on the other hand, we narrow our focus to only that which is right in front of us then we lose track of everything else.

The martial arts master's ability to use this wide-open, mountain-including kind of awareness cannot be gained all of a sudden, nor is it something that can be understood conceptually. Little by little, though, we can open our awareness to include all things. This allows the possibility of making use of all things, and

gives life to all things as well. We do this by becoming ever more inclusive in our awareness, and by knowing as we open little by little that there's still further to go.

Q. At a certain point in training we tend to lose confidence. At those times, when your energy is diluted and you're feeling spent, what do you do to bring yourself back to a focused, centered place?

A. It depends what the cause of the problem is. If it's physical exhaustion, then sleeping is good. I sleep when I feel down in that particular way. When you wake up your sense of responsibility will have been revitalized, and the energy you need to do what must be done next comes quite naturally. But you must observe carefully to see what it is that's making you tired. If the fatigue is not physical, then sleep won't revitalize you.

The depth of our vow to do this training for the liberation of all beings is what is most important. Those with a deep vow can draw strength from it to face whatever challenge or problem arises. This is not the case for those whose vow is weak.

Q. How can we tell when we're so tired that we should rest or sleep, instead of trying to continue sitting? This seems to be a problem especially during sesshin.

A. One of the things the Buddha was most strict about was this issue of sleeping. There are many things that can be replaced when they're depleted—new ones can be bought or more can be made. But the time we have to live cannot be replenished. One of the biggest problems for people in training—or for

anyone—is that they don't realize how precious their life energy is and forget that they could die at any moment. Thus they waste their time doing pointless things they would never do if they were sufficiently conscious of life's great value and the transiency of their existence.

It is knowing this that sharpens and focuses our energy in training. In fact, in the later sutras the Buddha taught his students that they must be very careful to guard against sleep and prevent themselves from indulging in it, since the temptation to sleep is one of the most serious distractions for people who are trying to awaken. Zen masters often tell the story of Master Sekiso, who would jab himself in the thigh with an awl whenever he felt sleepy. This is a tribute to the wisdom and severity of his teacher, but the Buddha, too, was very strict about this.

The question about how much we should sleep is complicated. The answer differs according to each person's constitution, and also according to where the same person is in his or her training. But the factor that most influences how much we need to sleep is samadhi. Though your body may ordinarily need a certain amount of sleep, that amount can be greatly reduced during sesshin if your samadhi is deep. When you sit deeply you sleep deeply as well, so that you may get by on only three or even two hours of sleep even if you generally need five or six.

This is one of the reasons that sesshins last for one week. It's difficult to maintain a concentrated focus for longer than seven days, for physical reasons relating to the need for sleep. A person can remain concentrated for a week, but after that it's almost impossible to maintain the same intensity. The Buddha likened this to the string of a harp, which will break if it's too tight and won't produce the right

sound if it's too loose. In the same way, if you sleep too much you become muddled and unable to maintain a clear focus, and if you sleep too little you easily become scattered and irritated. So either too much or too little sleep is a problem.

We each need to find out from our own experience how much sleep we need, but we also need to keep in mind the importance of not indulging in it too much. Thus it is a question of each individual knowing his or her own physical needs and discovering how to work with sleepiness.

Staying awake and alert during sesshin is the responsibility not only of each individual but also of the entire sangha. Everyone in the zendo should support each other and help each other to stay awake, and the teacher should help students to stay awake by keeping them motivated and aware in the training. In this sense, sleepiness is dealt with by all three of these—the sangha, the student, and the teacher—working together. But we must recognize that it's a very difficult challenge, and that it's important to be clear about it for yourself. It's not that we need to have a set amount of sleep, it's a matter of learning to sleep the number of hours—not too many, not too few—that will make the best sitting possible, and of knowing that there is a difference in how many hours we need at different times.

Q. I understand the concept of setting aside external things and just going within. But, practically speaking, how do you forget externals when you are living in the world?

A. I know how difficult it is to do this for an entire day. But each day try to designate a period of time during which you can put everything aside and just

focus inside. It doesn't have to be for a whole day or a number of hours, but every day, even if just for a short while, try to do this.

The two times of day that are best for meditation with regard both to external circumstances and our inner clock are just after dawn and just before dusk. Although it can be difficult in our busy lives to take time to sit twice a day, these are the best times to do it. Our mind is purest in the morning, at the time of day when our surroundings are beginning to appear out of the darkness. At dusk, when the setting sun bathes the world in its golden rays, we can sit as the light disappears and the forms of the landscape fade away. Instead of thinking about what happened during the day or worrying about tomorrow, we can take this time to be with the falling dusk.

Q. During sesshin we can focus on having no gaps, but how does this translate into day-to-day life?

A. It's difficult, of course, to maintain an open, aware mind outside sesshin. If it were easy, sesshin wouldn't be necessary. Nevertheless, continuing as best we can outside of the ideal conditions of sesshin is the essence of our everyday practice. Even if you can't ordinarily maintain a focused, seamless mind in the circumstances of your daily life, sit zazen regularly every day in order to realign your mind and help bring that state of awareness into all of your activities. If you aren't able to get up a little earlier in the morning or take time in the evening to do this, then find time during the day. Revisiting, refreshing, and recharging the no-gap mind every day in this way will help create a frame of reference of awareness to work with. You may not be able to maintain the same state of awareness as in sesshin, but keep it going as

much as possible in everything you do.

For those in training, one way to focus your attention is to think all that remains of your life is the time until the next sanzen. If that's all there is, then your task is clear: How can you bring resolution and conclusion to this great matter before the next sanzen? Human beings don't operate on theories and abstractions. We need to have a concrete reality right smack in front of us to make us act. Without something to make an issue real and concrete, we won't give it everything we have. That's why there is sanzen. Because we know that sanzen awaits us and because we want to make it meaningful we are motivated to maintain our practice, to sit our best during evening zazen and to remain aware during the day despite all of the activities and distractions.

Q. What is koan study for?

A. Koans are important only when they become necessary, that is, when someone is already meditating well but needs to go even deeper, to break through to profounder levels of experience. To do this practitioners need a tool to help stimulate their questioning. That's what koans are for. Koans have a kind of energy that helps people cut through tangles in the mind that might otherwise be impossible to penetrate.

All of us in our everyday lives deal constantly with influences from our past, and with preconceptions that shape everything we do. Just once we need to cut through all of this, to set aside our small self-concerned mind and transcend all of our normal conditioning. Koans are tools to help us do this. They are challenges and responses uttered by people who have died completely to themselves, who have gone

beyond the limited consciousness of the small self. Because these statements emerged from that profound experience they can be used to help precipitate the same experience in ourselves.

Q. For one's mind to open is it necessary for a ripening process to take place? Or is opening possible even without any kind of ripening?

A. Having an opening is definitely not a matter of zazen ripening. What is essential to opening is doing one thing without looking aside or allowing any distractions. Even if zazen ripens there will be no opening if at the same time we're diverting ourselves with a lot of other concerns. When we practice without devoting attention to extraneous things or looking away from what we're focusing on, then the things we usually occupy ourselves with become less important and our attachments increasingly drop away. As a result we become even more deeply focused.

Thus ripening in zazen isn't the issue. The issue is to deepen this undistracted, one-pointed attention.

Q. For those of us trying to practice the Dharma, what is the most important thing to remember?

A. Right here, right now.