

Shobogenzo Chapter [1] - Bendowa

How To Pursue the Truth: A Modern Interpretation

[11] When the buddhas – those who live fully in the present – each of whom has learned the Buddha's truth from a real person, realise what the truth is, they achieve it by the best method there is. This method, in which there is no intention of reaching an aim, is subtle, and is only taught by one buddha to another buddha. It never deviates from this. It is a practice that balances the active and the passive, and it sets the body-and-mind right. The authentic form of this practice, which is known as Zazen, is sitting in an upright posture. Although we each have the natural state, if we do not return to it in this practice, it does not show itself, and if we do not experience it, we do not realise what it is. It comes to us and fills us as soon as we give up our intentions, and is not a discriminative state. When we speak, this state expresses itself through our mouth in complete freedom. Buddhas live in and maintain themselves in this natural state in which they do not separate reality into two parts: mental and physical. People who do not separate reality into two parts are buddhas. The way I am teaching now to follow the Buddha's truth is a way that allows us to really experience everything clearly as it is, and gives us a state of wholeness that brings true freedom. When you get rid of everything that hinders you and find this freedom, these words that you are reading now will have no relevance.

[14] Establishing in myself a firm resolve to search for the Buddha's truth, I travelled to many parts of Japan to meet teachers who I hoped would help me in my search. One of these was Master Myozen, who lived at Kennin Temple. I stayed as his student for nine years, learning the teachings of the Rinzai lineage. Master Myozen was the most excellent of Master Eizai's students, and had received the teachings of the Buddha's truth directly from him. None of the other students were comparable. Then I travelled to China, searching east and west for a

good teacher, and learned of the traditions of the five lineages that practice Zazen. Finally, I visited the temple on Mt. Dai-byaku-ho and met Zen Master Nyojo, with whom I finally completed the great task of a lifetime's practice. Then in 1228, I returned to Japan determined to spread the truth that I had found to others in order to save them. I felt as if a heavy burden had been placed on my shoulders. But while waiting for favourable circumstances to carry me forward, I thought that I might spend some time wandering from place to place, following the flow of events, like wise teachers of old have done. But I also felt that there may be people who were already sincerely practicing Zazen and seeking for what is true, people who were not seeking for fame or wanting to get something, and those people might be misled by teachers who were not genuine, whose teachings would only lead them away from a correct understanding of what is true. They might then deceive themselves with those wrong ideas and become caught by their own delusions. How could they then strengthen their intuitive ability to know what is true, and have the chance to practice what is true? If I just wandered around waiting for the right time, where would they be able to find a true place to practice? This seemed to me a very sad situation, and so I have decided to write down all the customs and criteria that I myself experienced during my visits to the Zen monasteries in China, together with the teachings from my master, Tendo Nyojo, which I have received and put into practice. I will then leave these writings for people who learn by actually doing things, and who find it easy to live in reality, so that they will know the true teachings of the Buddha that have been passed on from person to person. I feel that this task may be of great importance.

[17] The sutras say that the Great Gautama Buddha passed his truth on to Master Mahakasyapa. The Buddha's truth was then passed on without any modification from teacher to student, until it reached the Venerable Bodhidharma. He settled in China and passed the Buddha's truth on to Great Master Eka. This was the first arrival of the practice of Zazen in China. Then, passed on naturally like this from teacher to student, teacher to student, after five generations it arrived at Master

Daikan Eno. As the practice of Zazen – the real Buddha's truth – spread through China, people began to understand that the state experienced in Zazen is different from teachings expressed in words and books. Master Daikan's two excellent students, Nangaku Ejo and Seigen Gyoshi, learned how to practice Zazen, and made it their own. They became great teachers who taught all kinds of people. These two streams of the teachings based on Zazen eventually became five different schools known as the Hogen, Igyo, Soto, Unmon, and Rinzai schools. In Sung dynasty China today, the Rinzai school is the most powerful. Although there are differences between these five schools, there is only the one true practice of Zazen that the Buddha taught. Idealistic Buddhist teachings had already spread through China from around 200 AD and had left their mark, but there was no criterion by which anyone could decide which of these teachings was true. But when Bodhidharma arrived from India he cut through all this complicated theorizing and taught the practice of Zazen. I hope that the same thing happens in Japan. The sutras say that all the many ancestors and buddhas who lived and practiced the truth that the Buddha taught relied on the practice of Zazen, which is sitting upright with both active and passive forces in balance. They all valued this practice as the right way to find out what reality is. All the people in India and China who realised what reality is practiced Zazen. This practice, the power of which we cannot fully grasp, is passed on exactly from one teacher to one student. The student makes the practice their own and through it maintains the essence of the true teachings.

[20] In true Buddhism, the passing on of this practice of Zazen from teacher to student in one direct line is said to be the most valuable thing there is. After we meet a teacher who passes on this practice to us, we realize that religious practices such as burning incense, doing prostrations, reciting the Buddha's name, practicing confession, and reading sutras are all unnecessary. We simply sit in Zazen and enter the state where we are no longer conscious of a separate body and mind, and become whole. When someone, even for a short moment, sits up straight in the balanced posture of the Buddha that puts the

body right, it becomes apparent that everything in the Universe also exhibits the same balanced state, and that this realisation spreads through the whole of space. Practicing thus returns us to the joyful state of buddha and we confirm anew how splendid reality is. All the various states of mind and all the different physical conditions that human beings go through in living their lives dissolve immediately, replaced by a state of wholeness that is clear and pure. We enter the state that is free from all that hinders our acting freely and return to our state of natural balance. Experiencing and understanding what is truly real extends through all things, and each thing assumes its balanced and natural form. In this moment, sitting supreme in the same posture as the Buddha under the tree of truth, each thing passes beyond the limits of what can be experienced and understood. In its balanced state, each thing in this moment is in tune with the teachings of the Universe and is exhibiting the bare and profound state that exists before the world is conceptualized. Because it is dynamic balance between the practitioner and the world, it works in both directions in ways that we cannot fully understand, so that we who are sitting in Zazen are freed of the split between body and mind, cut away the various indoctrinations and thoughts we have accumulated from the past, and thus realise in experience the real and pure nature of this world.

In each of the infinite ways in which the truth of this world demonstrates itself, the practitioner acts as an awakened being, spreading this awakening to people far and wide who are waiting for the key to finding reality, and manifesting oneness with reality in the state of balanced action. With the awakening of the practitioner, all things in the Universe show their real nature. Receiving this profound assistance from everything around them, practitioners of Zazen directly manifest their state of wholeness. Practicing and experiencing this state of oneness with the external world, they transmit it to those who interact with them, who are also endowed with the limitless virtue that is the awakened state. This activity expands and grows until it fills both the inside and the outside of the entire Universe with the

truth of this world, which is beyond limits and cannot be analysed or measured. However, the balanced state itself is unaffected by the individual positions from which each of these individuals sees the world, since in its quietness, and with no intentional activity being pursued, the state is the direct experience of reality. If we divide the result of our practice from the practice itself, as people do in their minds, we observe two distinct things that we think are separate. But that state, which is a mixture of observing and thinking, is not the state of direct experience, because this, the standard state of experience does not include any kind of judgment based on feelings. In the quietness of Zazen, our separate thoughts and perceptions of the world at one moment disappear into the wholeness which is the direct experience of reality, and at one moment appear together again from the wholeness. This drifting in and out of wholeness is our experience of natural balance. So the drifting in and out does not disturb anything at all; it is the working of a buddha in Zazen. In this, everything in the natural world radiates the brightness of the present and shows the fundamental and exquisite nature of reality endlessly. Everything in the natural world is then showing the truth to all people, both ordinary and great, and at the same time, both the ordinary and the great are themselves showing the truth to the natural world. In this real experience, there is then no separation between being conscious of ourselves and being conscious of the world around us. No moment is idle in the balanced state in Zazen. Even one person sitting for one moment in Zazen becomes whole with all things in the Universe through the whole of time. In this way, Zazen – the work of buddhas – extends through the past, present, and future. Everyone who practices Zazen experiences the same. The practice resonates within us, like a bell. It resounds within us up to our next practice, and extends on again afterwards. How could the practice be limited to this place? All concrete things in the world are in their normal state in this practice of the original state, but it is beyond our capacity to understand this intellectually. Remember this: even if all the buddhas that exist everywhere, more numerous than the number of particles in the Universe,

were to use all of their wisdom and power to analyse the experience in Zazen of a single person, they would be unable to even come near to describing it.

[26] I have described here how great and high is the value of Zazen. But there may be ignorant people who are wondering about what I have said, and might ask these kinds of questions: There are many ways to practice Buddhism. Why do you say that Zazen is the only way into the truth?

I say: It is the authentic gate to the Truth/Buddhist Path.

[26] Someone asks: Why do you say that only Zazen is the authentic gate?

I say: It is the only method that Gautama Buddha taught, and all buddhas of the past present and future use this method, because they are taught it by a real person and then teach it to a real person. This is what I am now teaching.

[27] Someone asks: Surely ordinary people cannot get the subtle transmission of the truth that Gautama Buddha taught this way? I can understand how reading the sutras and reciting the names of all the past buddhas can lead us to enlightenment, but just sitting without doing anything! How can you get enlightened just by doing that?

I say: If you think that the way that the buddhas teach of putting the body right is just sitting doing nothing, you are insulting Buddhism itself. To say that is as deluded as being immersed in the ocean and crying out for water. When we practice Zazen, we are sitting in the state of putting the body-and-mind right. This must have great value. How can you be so inebriated as not to see what this state really is?

The state of buddha cannot be imagined clearly in the mind. Being clever is of no use. If you don't even believe it or are not wise, how could you possibly know? You have to be someone who believes in the right things and someone with the potential to see what it really is. It is difficult to teach people who do not have the capacity to believe in something that is true, and difficult for them to take in what they are

being taught. Even when Gautama Buddha gave his talk on Vulture Peak, many people there left, and the Buddha affirmed that it was the best thing for them to do. It is usually the case that we can only continue to train ourselves and practice something when we believe in it. But if we can't believe in the power of Zazen, it is better to take a rest. Unfortunately learning about and studying what reality is has always been a dry and exact pursuit.

Anyway, do you know for yourself anyone who has benefited from reading sutras or reciting the names of past buddhas? It may be a mistake to believe that wagging the tongue and raising the voice is the valuable work of buddhas. Comparing that kind of practice with the way of the buddhas, it fades into the distance.

We read sutras to clarify the criteria that the Buddha taught of instantaneous and gradual practice, by which we are brought into the state of experiencing reality. We will exhaust ourselves mentally in trying to attain this state in vain. Chanting the name of a buddha thousands of times in order to attain the truth is as stupid as travelling north in order to get to the south. Or like trying to push a square peg into a round hole. Just reading sentences without knowing how to practice is like a doctor who doesn't know how to prescribe medicines. Useless! People who just chant endlessly are like frogs croaking day and night in a paddy field in the spring. Completely pointless.

Even more, people who are disturbed by the desire to get something material or become famous find it particularly difficult to give up these kinds of practices. The mental attitude to gain something runs very deep, and has been around for a long time. How pitiful are such people. Remember, a person needs to follow a teacher who has attained the state of truth and has a clear view of reality. And when that person also practices the state of truth and has the same view, then that is the transmission of the teachings about reality that the Seven Legendary Buddhas passed on, and then the exact teachings become clear in body and mind. Teachers who only teach words cannot understand this. So stop these delusions, throw away your doubts, and

follow the teachings of a real teacher, obtained through their own experience of the practice of Zazen and of following just what is true.

[32] Someone asks: The Tendai and Kegon schools, which came to Japan around 400 years ago, both express the ultimate teachings of Buddhism. And the Shingon school has a direct line of teaching from Gautama Buddha. They teach "mind here and now is buddha" and "this mind becomes buddha." They say that we don't need years and years of training; we can find the truth that the five buddhas found in one go. This is then the ultimate refinement of the Buddha's truth, is it not! What is so excellent about the practice of the Zazen that you are teaching that makes these other practices useless?

I say: There is no value in Buddhists arguing among themselves over which philosophy is better and which is worse, about shallow truths or deeper truths. We only need to know whether the practice is genuine or not. There are many ways that Buddhist masters of the past have realized what reality is relying on their experiences in nature. And we are surrounded by reality in all its many aspects all the time. Every particle in nature contains the truth. So phrases like "mind here and now is buddha" and so on are just descriptions. We shouldn't get caught by the words, but look to see what the words are pointing to.

When I tell people only to practice Zazen as the way to attain the Buddha's wisdom, I am showing them a subtle truth that buddhas have passed on from person to person. In this way they can come to realize what is true. But for this purpose we need to choose someone who has experienced that for themselves. To take as our teacher someone who only learns through words and does not practice Zazen themselves is like the blind leading the blind. This is the way in which our Buddhist ancestors attained and transmitted the state of truth, and we revere them for it. And it is students learning from teachers that allow the teachers to live in the state of truth and maintain it.

Whoever comes to ask for teachings, whether they are Shintoists or excellent scholars of Buddhist theory, we teach them all the practice of Zazen that makes clear the state of truth. Other schools have nothing to touch this. Disciples of the Buddha should simply learn the truth of Buddhism. We should remember that we all start out with and still have the natural state of truth, and if we maintain it, it will stay with us forever. But because we cannot see this, we get caught up in all kinds of ideas which we think are real, and end up chasing after them, missing what is right in front of us.

This confusion of intellectual ideas is like imaginary flowers whose scent attracts us. We hear about the twelve this, and the four that, the three this and the seven that, and think about whether we have buddha nature or whether we don't. The list is endless. Following these intellectual ideas is not the right way. But when we sit in exactly the same posture that Gautama Buddha sat in and let go of all images and ideas, then the area in which we feel deluded or enlightened, feel emotional, or think about things disappears. There is then no difference between what is sacred and special, and what is ordinary. We are free from our intellectual cage and can access the state of great wisdom. How can being caught up in the trap of words and their meanings compare with this!

[37] Someone asks: But I learned that there are three kinds of training: keeping the precepts, attaining the balanced state, and accessing wisdom. And I learned that the practice of dhyana is only one of six practices (giving, observing the precepts, patience, diligence, dhyana, and wisdom). All bodhisattvas have to learn these things, whether they are clever or stupid. Surely Zazen is only one of these? Why do you say that Gautama Buddha's true teachings are all concentrated in Zazen alone?

I say: The reason you ask this question has to do with the fact that the name of the supreme method of the Buddha, the great practice that the Buddha established, was shortened from Zazen to "Zen." His teaching became known as the "Zen school." This name was never heard in

India; it was invented in China and Japan. When Master Bodhidharma came to Shaolin temple and sat in front of the wall practicing Zazen for nine years, none of the monks or laypeople living there knew that Zazen was the practice of the Buddha himself, so they called Master Bodhidharma a Brahmin monk who made a religion out of Zazen. After him, all of his descendants devoted themselves to practicing Zazen.

But stupid people who did not know that Zazen was the practice of the Buddha talked about "Zazen Buddhism", which became shortened to "Zen Buddhism". This is clear from the records of our ancestors. But we should not talk about Zazen as being one of six practices or one of three kinds of training. No-one through the ages has ever tried to hide the fact that the practice of Zazen itself is what is transmitted from one teacher to one student.

Long ago on Vulture Peak, this was the storehouse of the eye of the truth, this was the clear state of mind that Gautama Buddha passed to Mahakasyapa. All the beings of all the spiritual realms witnessed this fact, and will guard and maintain it. Just remember that to transmit the practice of Zazen is to transmit the whole of the Buddha's teachings of reality; nothing can compare with this.

[40] Someone asks: Why is it that Buddhist recommend us only to practice dhyana in that one sitting posture out of the four standard postures of walking, standing, sitting, and lying down?

I say: It is impossible to enumerate all the different ways that buddhas of the past have practiced in order to enter the state of real experience. But the fact that Buddhists practice this one form is reason enough. We don't need to look for a deeper reason. One of our ancestors said that sitting in Zazen is a peaceful and joyful gate to the real world. So we can conclude that sitting in Zazen is the most peaceful and joyful of the four. And it is not just practiced by a few buddhas; it has been the way of all the buddhas and their ancestors.

[41] Someone asks: Someone who has not yet experienced and understood the truth of Buddhism might be able to benefit by practicing Zazen, but what can we hope to get from Zazen after we have already clarified what the truth is?

I say: It is stupid to ask a fool to interpret your dreams, or to give a mountaineer oars, but I will try to explain to you. The idea that we practice Zazen in order to become enlightened comes from people who do not know what Buddhism is. In reality, practicing Zazen IS being enlightened. When we practice now, the state we sit in is the enlightened state. Someone practicing Zazen for the first time is also sitting in the enlightened state. This is why our Buddhist ancestors were careful to teach us that there is no special state called enlightenment that we get as a result of practicing Zazen; there is only the state in Zazen. Our state in Zazen is what is meant by the enlightened state, and the word enlightenment describes our state in Zazen; we sit in a state in which we experience nothing beginning and nothing ending.

This is how practicing Zazen made Gautama Buddha and his successor Mahakasyapa one with reality. And Master Bodhidharma and Master Daikan Eno also both practiced Zazen and were practiced by Zazen in the clear state. All those who live in the real world and keep themselves grounded by their practice are like this. This state, where there is no separation between what we are practicing and what we attain, is always present. Being fortunate to be taught the subtle practice of Zazen by a teacher in person, we who are beginners in pursuing the truth can claim our share of the realization of what is here already because we have no intention to get anything. Remember that our ancestors have repeatedly encouraged us to practice Zazen regularly in order to avoid our tendency to split our real experience into parts and expect to get something out of Zazen. After finishing the practice, it fills our body and mind and stays with us.

When I was in China I saw monasteries with Zazen halls that were big enough for five or six hundred monks to practice Zazen in, and they

were encouraged to practice Zazen many times during the day and the evening. The leader of one of these halls was a true teacher who had made the Buddha's true teachings his own. When I asked him what was the truth that we were looking for, he said that practicing Zazen IS the truth, and it is the enlightened state. So just as his ancestors had done, he encouraged everyone to practice Zazen; not only the monks in the temple, but also all people who wanted to find the truth, whether they were just beginning or had been studying for years, whether they were ordinary people or deeply religious people. A Buddhist master of old said that although we can think and talk about Zazen and enlightenment as being separate, in reality they cannot be separated. Another master said that someone who intuitively sees what reality is will inevitably practice Zazen. Remember, even when we are in the balanced state of truth, we should still practice Zazen.

[44] Someone asks: Those teachers of the Tendai and Shingon schools all went to China in the 9th century and learned what the Buddhist truth was. Why didn't they teach people to practice Zazen, instead of only teaching idealistic Buddhism?

I say: They did not teach the practice of Zazen because the time was not yet right.

[45] Someone asks: But did they know about the importance of Zazen?

I say: If they had known, then they would have taught it to all.

[45] Someone asks: People say we shouldn't regret the fact that we are born and from then on travel towards our death, but there is a very quick way to escape from this cycle. We simply need to realise that we have an eternal soul, and that although the physical body is born and travels on towards death, the soul does not die. Once we know that we have this original essence that survives the cycle of life and death we can see that the body is just a temporary repository which dies here and is born there, but is not enduring. But our soul, our mind, is eternal and unchanging through past, present, and future. Once we know this, we can free ourselves from the cycle of life and death, and

escape from it forever, so that when our physical body dies we can enter nirvana and become perfect buddhas.

But even knowing this fact, the body we have now is shaped by our actions in past lives and so we are not yet perfect. Those who do not know this are trapped forever in the cycle of birth and death. So we should make efforts to understand the nature of the eternal soul as fast as we can. We cannot gain anything from spending our lives just sitting facing the wall! This is the truth that the buddhas and ancestors taught, isn't it?

I say: This teaching is completely different from the truth that the Buddha taught. It is not Buddhism; it is Brahmanism. In that religion they teach that there is a spiritual intelligence in our body that guides our likes and dislikes, and distinguishes between right and wrong. It feels pain and anger, and suffering and pleasure. When the body dies, this spiritual intelligence lives on in heaven as an immortal being. That is their belief. But if we think that is the truth of Buddhism, we are as stupid as someone who picks up a stone and thinks it is a jewel. It is so stupid that I can't find an example that can describe the extent of this delusion.

Master Nanyo Echo warned us sternly against this kind of belief. If we believe that physical things perish, but the soul is eternal, that body and mind are separate, and that this is the Buddha's truth and the way to escape the cycle of life and death, when we are in fact promoting the very cause of suffering, then we are very stupid. That would be a great shame. We should be clear that this is not Buddhism and should close our ears to it.

But I can't help wanting to convince you why that view is wrong. The truth that the Buddha taught is that mind and body, soul and matter, are not separate. This teaching was clearly understood both in India and in China. We should not contradict it. Even schools of idealistic philosophy in India thought that body-and-mind are not divided. And even the schools of materialistic philosophy in India asserted that es-

sence and form are not divided. So how can we say that, on the contrary, the body is mortal but the mind or soul is eternal? That goes against reason.

What is more, we should realise that nirvana exists right here in the middle of our living-and-dying. No Buddhist has ever suggested that there is a nirvana existing outside of this life itself. What is more, even if we believe that the Buddhist truth is that the eternal soul frees itself from the body, and this is how we become free from the cycle of life and death, the mind which is thinking and believing this is experienced as appearing and disappearing at each moment, so it cannot be eternal. Notice how unreliable this understanding is.

The Buddhist teachings constantly assert that body-and-mind is undivided. So how can the body appear and disappear, while the mind leaves the body and does not. If we can say that sometimes body-and-mind are one reality and sometimes they are not, then what the Buddha taught cannot be said to be true. What is more if we think of our daily life as something to escape from, then we must end up hating the truth that the Buddha taught. We must guard against this.

Remember that the truth that has been taught from person to person in one line says that pure original consciousness includes everything in undivided wholeness. This includes the whole Universe, without things being divided into physical form and value, and without any thought of appearing or disappearing. None of the states that are described with the words bodhi or nirvana are different from this original consciousness. Everything in the Universe is included in this wholeness. Nothing is left out. All lines of teachings that teach the truth assert that all things and phenomena are one with balanced and undivided consciousness. That's all there is.

This is how Buddhist understand the essential state. So how can we divide reality into body and mind, or into life and death and nirvana? Since we are already following the Buddhas teachings we should close our ears to these crazy theories.

[51] Someone asks: Is it important for someone who is devoted to practicing Zazen to also keep the precepts absolutely?

I say: Keeping the precepts and acting in a balanced way are the standards of the schools that practice Zazen, and the usual habits of our ancestors. But people who haven't yet received the precepts or who have broken the precepts will still share in the state of Zazen when the practice it.

[51] Someone asks: Is there anything wrong with people who practice Zazen also using a mantra, or doing quiet reflection practices known as vipassana?

I say: When I was in China I learned the true teachings from a true master. He said that he had never heard of any of our ancestors who passed on the essence of the Buddha's truth ever performing additional practices like these, either in India or in China, either in the past or at the present. If we don't devote ourselves to one teaching we will never attain complete wisdom.

[52] Someone asks: Can ordinary people practice Zazen at home, or is it only for monks and nuns in temples?

I say: One of our ancestors said that we must not discriminate between men and women, or between ordained or ordinary.

[52] Someone asks: People who leave home to live in a temple don't have any problem in finding the time to practice Zazen and learning what the truth is. But how can an ordinary person with their busy life find the time to devote themselves to sitting in the unintentional state of truth?

I say: The practice that the Buddha taught us is generous and compassionate. Everyone can do it and sit in the state of truth. We can find many examples in the past and present of this. For example, two emperors in 8th and 9th century China were able to carry out their state duties and also find the time to practice Zazen. Also their government ministers, who were running the country, practiced Zazen and real-

ized the truth of Buddhism. It depends solely on whether you have the will to do it or not, not on whether you live in a temple or at home. Someone who notices how important practicing Zazen is will find the time.

People who think that worldly affairs make it impossible to follow the Buddhist truth believe that the Buddha's truth is separate from everyday life. They do not understand that the Buddhist truth is not separate from everyday life, and makes no distinction between the secular and the sacred.

An important government minister in Sung China called Hyo knew the Buddha's truth well. In his later years he wrote the following poem:

*I love to practice Zazen when my work allows me to,
although I can barely find the time to sleep.
Although I am now prime minister, everyone knows me
as someone who has been practicing Zazen for many years.*

Although he was very busy with his official duties, he was able to realize what the truth is because of his strong will. We should compare this with our own situation. In present-day China, kings and ministers, officials and ordinary people all practice Zazen and learn about the truth. Thus it is indisputable that work and the affairs of the world do not stop us from learning the truth of the Buddha.

When the truth spreads through a nation, that nation's affairs become peaceful. When the nation becomes peaceful, then the Buddha's truth can spread. When the Buddha was alive, even people who had committed crimes and people who had crazy ideas were able to get the truth. And some of our ancestors were uneducated people, hunters and woodcutters. We just need to study the teachings and practice Zazen under a true teacher.

[56] Someone asks: Are we still sitting in the state of truth when we practice Zazen, even in these corrupt modern times?

I say: Buddhist scholars believe in the idea of there being three periods of the Dharma after the Buddha's death, but the real teachings do not make any distinction. We say that everyone who practices Zazen attains the state of truth. What is more, in this directly transmitted teaching, we enter the balanced state and leave the intellectual area, and we know when this happens during our practice, just as a person can easily tell the difference between hot and cold water.

[57] Someone asks: Some people teach that once we understand the theory that mind here and now is Buddha, even if we don't recite the sutras or practice Zazen, there is nothing missing in our pursuit of the truth. Just to understand that the Buddhist truth resides in everyone is the whole of the attainment of the truth. There is no need to look for anything else from other people, and certainly no need to practice Zazen.

I say: This explanation is utterly false. If it were just a question of understanding with our mind, everyone is capable of understanding this principle straight away when it is explained clearly. But learning the Buddha's truth is throwing away our subjective and objective views of the world. If just knowing the fact that we are buddha already were the same as attaining the truth, then the Buddha would not have needed to teach us the way to conduct ourselves morally. I would like to illustrate this with a koan story from our ancestors.

Long ago there was a monk called Prior Soku who lived in Master Hogen's order. Master Hogen asked him: *"Soku, how long have you been with us?"*

Soku said: *"I have been here for three years now."*

The master said: *"Since you are quite a new member, why don't you ever ask me about the Buddha's truth?"*

Soku replied somewhat arrogantly: *"I'd better tell you the truth. When I was studying with Master Seiho I attained the state of enlightenment."*

The master said: *"What were the words that enlightened you?"*

Soku said: *"I once asked Seiho, 'Who am I, this student?' And Seiho replied, 'That which the fire created comes looking for fire.'"*

The master said: *"Those words are true, but I wonder if you understood what he meant by them."*

Soku said: *"Well, that which fire created comes looking for fire - I understood him to mean that I am already fire, but I am looking for fire. I am looking for myself although I am already myself."*

The master said: *"Now I am sure that you missed the point of what he was saying to you. If the truth of the Buddha were only a kind of intellectual recognition, then it would never have survived for so long."*

Then Soku became embarrassed and disturbed, and stood up and started to leave the temple. But after a while on the path he thought to himself, *'Master Hogen is known as a good teacher throughout China, and he is teaching over 500 students. There must be something in his criticism of me.'*

Then Soku returned to the temple to apologise and to respectfully ask Master Hogen to explain to him where he was wrong. He asked: *"Who am I, this student?"*

The master replied: *"That which the fire created COMES LOOKING for fire."*

Hearing these words, Soku fully realized what the truth of the Buddha is.

So it is clear from this story, that the intellectual understanding that we are just buddha is not it. If it were, then Master Hogen would never have reprimanded Soku like he did. Right from the first time we meet a teacher, we should ask what is most important, and concentrate ourselves on practicing Zazen to clarify the truth, pushing away all the many kinds of intellectual games. Then we will receive the subtle teaching of the Buddha.

[61] Someone asks: In stories about monks in India and China we hear of Kyogen Chikan, who realized what the truth is when he heard a peb-

ble strike bamboo, and Reiun Shigon whose consciousness became clear when he saw the colour of peach blossom. And the Buddha himself experienced the truth when he saw the bright star, and Ananda entered reality when a temple flagpole fell. Not only that, there are many people in the five lineages descending from Master Daikan Eno the sixth patriarch who made their state clear on hearing just a single word, or a single poem. Did all these people practice Zazen?

I say: All of these people made their state clear through subjective or objective experiences had no uncertainty in their minds about what is real, and lived fully and wholly in the present.

[62] Someone asks: In India and China, people are straightforward and sincere, because they live in the centre of the civilized world. So when they are taught the Buddha's truth, they understand and enter it quickly. But here in Japan, people are not kind or wise, so it is difficult for us to see what is right. Unfortunately we are savages from the south-east. And even ordinary people in China or India are better than monks in Japan. We are narrow-minded and stupid. We all want to get something strongly, and we like superficial things. How can people like us experience the Buddha's truth straight away, even if we practice Zazen?

I say: Yes you are right. People here are as you say. Even if we teach them the truth they will distort it. They like fame and profit and they find it difficult to get rid of their delusions and attachments. But on the other hand, it is not always necessary to be wise and perfect to transcend the habits that society imposes on us. While the Buddha was alive, there was an old monk who realised the truth when another monk threw a ball at him, and even a prostitute who put on the kasaya as a joke was able to make the truth clear. Both of them were rather dull and stupid. But because they believed in reality, they were able to escape from their delusions. One devout old woman who saw a monk practicing Zazen when she was serving meals realised the truth, not because she was wise or from something she read, or from anything written or from listening to talks, but because she had the right belief.

The Buddha's teachings have only been spreading through the whole world for around 2000 years. There are many different nations, and not all of them are wise and benevolent. And not everyone is intelligent and wise and able to see clearly. But the truth which the Buddha taught is very powerful and great. It will spread through those countries at the right time. If people believe in the right thing and practice Zazen, then both clever and stupid alike will attain the state of truth. Don't think that it is impossible for us to grasp the Buddha's truth just because we are like this. And everyone has the potential to develop wisdom. It is just that not many of us practice Zazen yet, and so we are not yet mature.

The above questions and answers have come and gone, and the exchanges have been untidy. Many times I feel my answers may just have prompted more thinking, more intellectual reflection. But the basic principle of practicing Zazen as the centre of the Buddha's truth has not been known here in Japan until now, so no-one could have been aware of its importance. This is the reason why I wanted to collect together the things that I learned in China and make a record of the teachings of my master Tendo Nyojo, so that anyone who wants to read them can do so. I also learned many of the customs and conventions that exist in monasteries and temples in China, but it will take longer for me to teach all these things.

Overall it has been very fortunate for the people of Japan that the truth that the Buddha taught spread from China to us here in the east, separated as we are by the ocean and the weather. However, the meaning of Buddhist concepts and objects, facts and events, has become confused, and this has disturbed the situation, making it difficult to practice. Now, we who have given up trying to gain anything can recognise the state of being awakened in this moment at once, and we achieve a lifetime's practice immediately. This is what Master Ruyge is expressing in his poems, and what Master Mahakasyapa has

left to us. I have set out the standard way to practice Zazen in Fukan-Zazengi which I wrote after returning from China in 1227.

To spread the truth that the Buddha taught through a country it might seem better to wait for the authorities to promote it. But on the other hand, looking back at what happened at the Buddha's huge gathering on Vulture Peak, the Lotus Sutra describes kings, nobles, ministers, and generals accepting what the Buddha instructed and fulfilling their inborn mission to preserve and maintain the Buddha's teachings. The spread of that teaching is not bounded by country. To spread the truth that our ancestors have taught, we don't need to choose a right place or a right time. Let's just start where we are now. So I have compiled this and leave it for wise people who are searching for the truth of this world, and for the stream of people practicing Zazen who want to explore the true state of natural balance.

Shobogenzo Bendowa

Written in 1231 by Monk Dogen who went to China and received the transmission of dharma.

Interpretation completed by Michael Eido Luetchford on 16th June 2004