

Chapter 27 - Zazenshin¹ - A Maxim of Zazen

Shin refers to a bamboo needle used in ancient China for acupuncture. So the word shin carries the meaning of a method for curing human bodies and minds, and it has thus become a maxim for the method of curing the mental and physical diseases of humans. A Zazenshin is a poem written and used as a method of teaching the correct practice of Zazen. In this chapter, Master Dogen first explains the true meaning of Zazen and then praises the Zazenshin written by Master Wanshi Shokaku. At the end of the chapter, Master Dogen presents us with his own Zazenshin or guiding poem on Zazen.

While Master Igen was sitting in Zazen, a monk asked him, “*What are you thinking about in the perfect serenity of Zazen?*” The Master replied, “*I am thinking about the state of non-thinking*”. The monk said, “*How can we consider the state of non-thinking?*” “*It is other than thinking*”, replied the Master.

When we have realised these words from the great Master we should study Zazen and transmit the practice of Zazen in the orthodox manner. This is the true study of Zazen as transmitted in Buddhism. There have been many explanations of Zazen and Master Yakusan’s is only one of these when he said, “*I am thinking about the state of non-thinking*”. We can say that thinking about the state of non-thinking includes the essence of both thinking and non-thinking. The monk asked, “*How can we consider the state of non-thinking?*” It is necessary for us to consider this problem again today, although the state of non-thinking has been discussed countless times over the ages. How can it be possible for there to be no thinking even in the serene state of Zazen?

And why is it so difficult for us to understand the superior state of Zazen in quietness? If we were not such stupid, common people engrossed in our trivialities, we would have the faculty to consider and ask about the state of perfect serenity in Zazen. The Master said, “*It is other than thinking*”. Although it is clearly easy for Master Yakusan to just say, “*It is other than thinking*”, everyone must inevitably use ‘other than thinking’ during practicing Zazen whenever they are thinking about non-thinking. In the state of ‘other than thinking’ there is a presence which is indescribable in words which retains us in the state of Zazen. Though we are undoubtedly sitting there practicing Zazen in serenity, there is more in Zazen than just thinking; the serenity manifests itself in total tranquillity. But how is it possible for serenity to think about serenity? Surely serenity is just serenity! We must therefore conclude that serenity is not Buddhist thinking, universal thinking, enlightened thinking or understanding thinking. Master Yakusan received this state of ‘other than thinking’ as the thirty-sixth patriarch in a direct line from Gautama Buddha. When we go back from Master Yakusan for thirty-six generations, we find Gautama Buddha; it is in this way that the state of thinking about the state of non-thinking has been transmitted. In recent years, however, stupid people who are prone to insist on things without foundation have said, “*The aim of practicing Zazen is to achieve a peaceful mind, and after achieving that, we can live in a serene state*”. This opinion doesn’t even reach the level of Hinayana Buddhist teachers and is lower than the level of humans and gods alike! It is not even possible to say that such people are studying Buddhism! In present-day China, there are unfortunately many people who think in this way and it is saddening that the teachings of the patriarchs have been destroyed in such a manner. There are also those people who sat that only juniors and beginners in Buddhism need practice Zazen, and that buddhas and patriarchs don’t need to. They say that in the case of buddhas and patriarchs, their normal walking is balanced and their normal sitting is balanced so they have no need to practice Zazen as their bodies are always in a serene and peaceful state, as is their speech, their silence and their behaviour. These opinions are held by many people who belong to the Rinzai sect who call themselves the descendants of Master Rinzai. They say these things because it is very unusual for any of them to have received the true life of Buddhism. Who do they call ‘beginners’? Who is so wise that he is not a beginner? Where do they place so-called beginners? Always remember that to pursue the study of Buddhism, we must practice Zazen. It is a principle that in Zazen there is ‘acting buddha’² who does not even want to become buddha. ‘Acting buddha’ is utterly different from ‘becoming buddha’; in the case of ‘Acting Buddha’ the rule of the Universe has been realised here and now. ‘Physical buddha’ is not the same as ‘becoming buddha’, although when we have broken all hindrances with Zazen, we don’t need to worry whether sitting buddha or physical buddha is the same as becoming buddha or not. At such a moment, a person in eternity has the faculty to transcend the difference between the world of buddhas and the world of demons. And their progressive actions and their passive actions are on a vast scale; they pervade all places in the world, filling ditches and valleys.

Master Baso Do-itsu studied Buddhism under Master Nangaku Ejo, and after he received the form of Gautama Buddha’s mind secretly from his Master, he always practiced Zazen. One day, when Master Nangaku was visiting Master Baso, he asked him, “*Reverend monk, what is your intention in practicing Zazen?*” We should study and consider this question quietly in order to decide whether the Master asked, ‘Is to have an intentional aim while practicing Zazen superior to just practicing Zazen?’ or ‘Are there any truths outside Zazen which haven’t yet been attained?’ or, ‘Should we avoid all intentions?’ or ‘What sort of aim have we attained by practicing Zazen?’ We should consider the problem in detail. It is better for us to love real dragons rather than sculptures of dragons.³ We should be clear, however, about the fact that both real and

sculptured dragons possess the ability to ascend into the heavens, ride the clouds and invoke rain. We should neither hold something remote [like the sutras recorded in India] in too much reverence nor should we treat it lightly; we should become accustomed to the experience. At the same time, we should not take our everyday life too seriously or too lightly but we should also become accustomed to that. Before we see something as good or bad, we should look at it exactly. Before we judge something we are listening to as good or bad, we should hear it exactly. We should recognise the limitations of our eyes and ears but not blame them for it; instead we should value them and make them clear and sensitive.

Master Baso said, "*I intend to become buddha by practicing Zazen*". We should clearly realise these words. What do the words '*to become buddha*' mean? Do the words mean to be made by buddha? Or do they perhaps mean to make buddha? Do the words '*to become buddha*' refer to the concrete facts of one person becoming buddha and another person becoming buddha? As the intention to become buddha is transcendent, can we say that it is the transcendent intention to become buddha? Or even though there are many different cases of '*becoming buddha*', are our efforts mixed with such intentions as the intention to become buddha? Remember that Master Baso's words imply that Zazen is inevitably intending to become buddha. Zazen will always contain this intention. The intention might be before becoming buddha, after becoming buddha, or just at the moment of the present. In short, I would like you to say just how many buddhas your intentions have involved you with! Such intention might very well get caught again and again in the complication of the intention itself. But in that case, every complicated intention to become buddha is still a real intention and this real intention is utterly devoted to becoming a perfect buddha. We can never escape such intention. If we did, even though we should still exist, we should lose our vitality and vigour. But even then, we should still be left with the complicated intention to become buddha.

After Master Baso's reply, Master Nangaku picked up a tile and began to polish it on a stone. At last, Master Baso asked, "*What are you doing Master?*" To put it bluntly, what sort of person is it who can't recognise Master Nangaku's action as polishing a tile? But who is able to understand the Master's action? However, people have always asked about polishing a tile in this manner: "*What are you doing?*" And the action questioned with the words, "*what are you doing?*" necessarily refers to some incomprehensible action or behaviour like polishing a tile. But it remains a fundamental fact that this sort of incomprehensible behaviour has always and will always exist in this and all other countries, even though countries are very different from each other. People cannot see their own opinions for what they are but blindly continue to believe that all behaviour can be studied intellectually. But we should remember that water can't be perceived unless we look at water and we must look at real mountains to understand mountains. In the same way, we can't understand buddhas unless we look at buddhas. It is no part of the study of true Buddhism to be in so much of a hurry that we think there is no method to understand the reality spread before our very eyes.

Master Nangaku said, "*I am making a mirror by polishing a tile*". We should realise the meaning of these words; they contain the realised rule of the Universe and so they can never be false. Even though a tile is just a tile and a mirror is just a mirror, when we study the first meaning of the action of polishing, we can see immediately that there are many actual styles. It might even be possible to make an eternal mirror or a bright mirror⁴ into a mirror by polishing a tile. People who don't understand that these mirrors come from polishing tiles don't have the words of buddhas, the mouths of buddhas and they haven't experienced the exaltations of buddhas.

Master Baso said, "*Can we make a mirror by polishing a tile?*" Still, there are some strong Buddhist practitioners who don't consider whether their efforts are polishing tiles or not. They are too strong to hear the opinions of others and so it isn't a problem for them whether they are polishing tiles or not. Nevertheless, polishing tiles can never become making a mirror. Polishing tiles and making mirrors have no gap; they are identical. The real mirror is just the real mirror itself and the realisation is direct and immediate.

When Master Nangaku said, "*Can we become buddha by practicing Zazen?*" we can see clearly that the practice of Zazen by its nature has no expectation of becoming buddha; the fundamental thought that becoming buddha is irrelevant to Zazen is clear and evident. Master Baso said, "*What is the right thing for us to do?*" These words appear to be a question about concrete matter, but at the same time they are a question about abstract rightness here and now. We should think of the situation when a person meets his close friend. When someone is good to me, I am good to him; the right thing to do is realised at once.

Master Nangaku said, "*If a man is riding in a carriage which is not going forward, which is it better for him to do, strike the carriage or strike the ox?*" In these words, what does the Master mean by 'going forward' or 'not going forward'? For example, is the carriage going forward like going with the stream or going against the stream? Sometimes the carriage goes in the same direction as the stream and sometimes it doesn't. So when we consider the carriage going forward, we should also consider the meaning of 'not going forward' and also the meaning of 'without going forward', because these meanings all depend on time for their

definitions; they all exist in time. We should remember the words 'not going forward' have many meanings in time. The Master continued by saying, "*Which is better, to strike the carriage or to strike the ox?*" To strike the carriage is a real situation, and to strike the ox is also a real situation; sometimes we strike the carriage and sometimes the ox. We should consider whether these two cases are the same or not. In normal circumstances, we would never think of striking the carriage. In our everyday lives, there is no way we can strike the carriage, but we should realise that in Buddhism there is a method to strike the carriage, and it is as important in the study of Buddhism as our eyes. It is not the same method as striking an ox. And even though there are methods for striking an ox in our everyday lives, we should further study striking an ox on the basis of Buddhism. For instance, do we strike a castrated water ox like Master Enchi Dai-an,⁵ or an iron ox like Master Fuketsu Ensho, or perhaps a clay ox like Master Tanshu Ryuzan? Do we beat the ox with a whip, with the Universe, with the mind? Do we crush the bones and marrow completely or do we strike it with a fist? There must be a case where a fist is struck with a fist or an ox is struck with an ox.⁶

We should not overlook Master Baso's attitude carelessly; he remained silent to the Master's question. The action of getting something like a precious jewel in exchange for giving up something worthless like a tile is present in his behaviour - flexibility; a change of direction or expression is there to be seen in his attitude. Furthermore, any effort to change his silence would be wasted; we must leave him as he was - silent.

At another time, Master Nangaku said, "*When you are studying Zazen you are studying sitting buddha*". If we study these words, we can realise the essence of the ancient patriarchs. It is difficult for us to realise at first exactly what studying Zazen is. But we can now see that to study Zazen is just to study sitting buddha. If the Master had not been an orthodox descendent of Gautama Buddha, he would not have been able to say that to study Zazen is to study sitting buddha. So we should remember that, even when we are beginners and are practicing for the first time, at this time, we are studying sitting buddha.

Master Nangaku also said when explaining about Zazen, "*When we have learned Zazen, it is clear that Zazen is different from our usual sitting or lying*". These words mean that Zazen is Zazen and not normal sitting or lying down. But at the same time, since we Buddhists have realised that Zazen is not the same as our usual sitting or lying down, and since the meaning of Zazen has been transmitted in one line, our limitless usual behaviour like sitting or lying down has changed into realisation of ourselves. After understanding the true meaning of Zazen and our everyday lives, we have no need to discuss the difference between delusion and enlightenment or between Zazen and our everyday lives. This is not a matter for intellectual understanding.

Master Nangaku said, "*When we have realised that sitting in Zazen is being buddha, it becomes clear to us that buddha has no definite form*" These words which say that the form of Buddha himself is not definable are words which express the true situation; the reason why every concrete buddha sitting in Zazen is the same as every other concrete buddha is simply that all buddhas are decorated with splendid indefinite form. When Master Nangaku said, "*Buddha has no definite form*", he was expressing the true form of buddhas. When we are sitting in Zazen we must necessarily be buddha because there is no defined form. When we are sitting in Zazen we are buddha; it is not a question of whether we like or dislike the fact. Sitting buddhas in Zazen transcend human likes and dislikes.

Master Nangaku said, "*When we are sitting in Zazen we are negating the concept of buddha*". We can see therefore that there is some virtue in negating the concept of Buddha when we are practicing Zazen. The moment when we are sitting in Zazen as buddha is the negation of the concept of Buddha. And to find the splendour of negated buddha it is necessary to be sitting as buddha in Zazen. Although the word 'negation' here is commonly used by people, we shouldn't take the meaning of 'negation' in Master Nangaku's words to be the everyday meaning of the word. At the same time, we should study the situations that exist in Zazen when we are negating the concept of buddha by sitting as buddha. We should study additionally the negation of the concept 'human being' in relation to the fact that the virtue of buddha is just the negation of the concept of buddha.

Master Nangaku said, "*If we are attached to the form of sitting, our attitude shows us that we have not attained the fundamental principle of Zazen*". To be attached to the form of sitting includes trying to get rid of the form of sitting intentionally and being too concerned about the form of sitting. And according to this principle, when we are sitting in Zazen, we should take care about our posture. But although we are taking care about our posture freely, we cannot say that such a situation is the attainment of the ultimate principle of Zazen. These kinds of efforts are called getting rid of the consciousness of body and mind. And someone who has never practiced Zazen cannot begin to discuss the posture during Zazen. Such words about our posture can appear at the time of practice, at a man who is practicing, at a buddha who is practicing Zazen and in studying sitting buddha. But we can't say that there are sitting buddhas in our usual sittings and lying down. Even though there is a man in Zazen who looks like a sitting buddha or who's sitting looks like a buddha's sitting, there is sometimes the situation of a person becoming buddha and sometimes there is a person becoming buddha. Although there can be a person who has become buddha already we shouldn't say

that all human beings have become buddhas. Buddhas are not all human beings. A person is not always buddha and Buddha is not always a person, because buddhas are not only all human beings. Sitting buddhas are also like this and Master Baso the excellent disciple of Master Nangaku the excellent Master, are both like this also. Sitting buddha is the realisation of having become buddha, as was the case of Master Baso. For having become buddha, Master Nangaku the teacher taught sitting buddha. In the order of Master Nangaku there were efforts like this, and in the order of Master Yakusan there were words like the ones discussed previously. We should remember that the most important essence of buddhas and patriarchs is just sitting as buddha in Zazen. All people who have been called buddhas or patriarchs have realised this essence and used it already. And people who have not used this essence yet have never looked at the truth even in their dreams.

It is a general principle, both in India and in China, that the transmission of Buddhism has inevitably been the transmission of sitting as buddha in Zazen, because it is the essence of Buddhism itself. When Buddhism was not transmitted, neither was Zazen. What was transmitted from buddha to buddha in one line was just the fundamental principle of Zazen, so a person to whom this fundamental principle was not transmitted in one line can never be called a buddha or a patriarch. And a person who can't realise this single principle can never realise all things in the Universe and all the conducts in the world. And a person who is unable to realise anything can't be called a person of clear eyes or a man who has attained the truth, so how could they possibly be a buddha or a patriarch in eternity? Therefore, we should be firmly confident that buddhas and patriarchs inevitably receive Zazen in one line. To be illuminated with the light of buddhas and patriarchs is to practice Zazen with effort. Stupid people misunderstand and think that the light of buddhas and patriarchs might be like the sun or the moon's light, or the light from a pearl or a fire. But the light from the sun, moon, pearls and fire are only form produced by the efforts of the cycle of the six processes of cause and effect, and so cannot be compared with the light of buddhas and patriarchs. The light of buddhas and patriarchs is receiving a word of the truth which has been preached and retaining it; to observe and uphold the teachings of the truth and to accept Zazen in one line. People who haven't been illuminated with the light of the buddhas by sitting in Zazen, can't retain or believe in Zazen. Thus, although many years have passed since ancient times, there have been very few people who have recognised that Zazen is Zazen itself. These days, in the Sung Dynasty of China, there are many masters of great and famous temples who don't know what Zazen is and don't practice Zazen. The number of masters who have realised what Zazen is are few. In many temples, the times for Zazen sessions are fixed, and the members of the temple from the master to the monks know that the practice of Zazen is their main task and so they recommend practicing Zazen in the discipline of Buddhist study. Nevertheless, masters who know what Zazen is are very rare. Therefore, although there have been a few venerable monks who wrote Zazenmai [Maxims of Zazen], and one or two veteran monks who have written Zazengi [Guidance on Zazen] and some who have written Zazenshin [Guiding Poems on Zazen], all those maxims of Zazen are inadequate and their guidance is not clear in their understanding of the practice of Zazen. They were written by monks who didn't know Zazen and hadn't received Zazen in one line. The guiding poem in Keitoku Dentoroku,⁷ and the maxim of Zazen in Katai Futoroku are good examples of this. It is a very pitiful fact that even though there can be found many Buddhist monks in all places who spend their whole lives living in Buddhist temples, many of them have not yet practiced Zazen even once! As they haven't experienced Zazen yet, it is clear that they have yet to meet with themselves in the efforts of their lives. Nevertheless, this fact has not occurred because Zazen hated their body and mind, but because the monks didn't want to make sincere efforts and were easily deluded and intoxicated. In their versions, their intentions seem only to recommend to other people to come back to the origin or source, presented as an abstract idea. They recommend that we should make efforts to quieten our minds or to concentrate. These opinions are inferior to the concepts of 'Kan' [Illumination], 'Ren' [Training], 'Kun' [Permeation] and 'Ju' [Practice] taught in the Tendai sect, or the states of ten kinds of sacredness which are virtually the same state as Gautama Buddha! So how can they possibly have received the Zazen of the buddhas in one line? These writings were edited by monks in the Sung Dynasty and shouldn't be read by students of later ages. Among all the guiding poems on Zazen, that written by Master Wanshi Shokoku of Keitoku-ji Temple on Mount Tendo in Nimpō City, China, is the work of Buddha, a true maxim of Zazen. Its intentions are true and so we can say that it is the light that can illuminate both the inside and the outside of the Universe. Master Wanshi Shokoku is a true Buddha among buddhas. By this, buddhas in the past and in the future are instructed and patriarchs in ancient times and today are realised.

Guiding poem on Zazen - written by Master Wanshi Shokoku, honoured by the Emperor.

*Essential centre of buddhas, central essence of patriarchs,
Perceived without touch and illuminated without facing circumstances,
Illuminated without facing circumstances, so the illumination is naturally fine.
The recognition is naturally subtle, so there has been no intellectual thinking.
The illumination is naturally fine, so there hasn't been the slightest intentional movement.*

*There has been no intellectual thinking, so the recognition is not double but one.
There has been no intentional movement, so the illumination is perfect without intention.*

*The water is so pure; the bottom is seen clearly,
And fishes are swimming slowly and leisurely.
The sky is so wide, that it has no limit,
And birds are flying faraway peacefully.*

In this poem, we are taught the situation that great power has been realised already here and now, with a dignity beyond sensuous feelings; the situation of the eternal past long before our parents' birth; the situation that we should not speak ill of buddhas and patriarchs; the situation of how impossible it is for us to live without losing our body, losing our life, at every moment; the situation of having the same balance of body, head, neck as Gautama Buddha.

'Essential centre of Buddhas'.

All buddhas inevitably have buddha as their essential centre, and such an essential centre has been realised already; it is Zazen.

'Central essence of patriarchs'.

This is the situation that Master Hogen Bun-eki expressed with the words, 'My late Master didn't have such words',⁸ and is the fundamental essence of patriarchs themselves; there is the transmission of the rule of the Universe and transmission of the Buddhist ritual robe [kasaya]. Basically, every face, every figure which turns, moves and expresses itself is the central essence of Buddha. Every man and woman who's head moves, who's face shows expression is the central essence of patriarchs.

'Recognised without touch'.

The recognition is not intellectual recognition, which is thinking on a small scale; the recognition is not understanding, because understanding is a kind of intentional effort. Therefore, recognition is the state without touch itself, and the state without touch is recognition itself. We should not think that the recognition is all-round recognition, nor that it is self-recognition as these are both narrow views. The state without touch is the state such that, when our mind is clear, we leave it clear, and when our mind is clouded, we leave it clouded. In other words, it is the state in which we break our human body with practicing Zazen.

'Illuminated without facing circumstances'.

This state of illumination is not illumination of understanding, nor is it mystical illumination. The state without facing circumstances is just illumination. Existence is such that the illuminated state can never be changed into circumstances, because the circumstances are just the illuminated state itself. The state without facing anything is the situation that the Universe conceals nothing from us, or the fact that a world which has lost its wholeness never appears in front of us. So we can say that the state is subtle and fine; it transcends complicated and non-complicated situations.

'The perception is naturally subtle, so there has been no intellectual thinking.'

Thinking is, by its origin, intellectual, so thinking doesn't need to rely on anything. Perception is just form, and form is just mountains, rivers and so forth, and the mountains and rivers are subtle. The subtlety is fine, so that when recognition is utilised, it becomes very vigorous. When we become a dragon, we need not worry whether we are inside or outside the Gate of 'U'. [A Chinese legend says that when fishes go through the U-Mon or Gate of U, they turn into dragons, which in Buddhism means to become enlightened.] And when we use our recognition, we recognise the whole Universe; mountains or rivers, with our whole efforts. We bring the whole Universe, mountains or rivers to ourselves. Even though the mountains or rivers are very familiar to us, if we did not recognise them, there could be no recognition or understanding. We need not regret that our intellectual thinking arrives too late, because individual buddha, who already possesses the faculty to think, has been realised here and now. 'Not yet' is the same as 'already'. And 'already' is the same as realisation here and now. Thus, the situation of there being no intellectual thinking is the situation of us having no second person inside us.

'The illumination is naturally fine, so there hasn't been the slightest intentional movement'.

In these words, 'slightest' refers to the whole Universe. And the whole Universe is naturally fine and naturally illuminated, so it seems that we have never brought anything to ourselves. We should not doubt our eyes, and we should not easily believe our ears. The situation expressed with the words, 'we should understand principles outside thinking directly, and not want to have rules which are expressed in words' is the state which is illuminated. Thus, it is not double and it is not intellectual effort. We have lived in this state of oneness and retained it as self-evident. But it is also true that we cannot help but doubt it sometimes.

'The water is so pure; the bottom is seen clearly, and fishes are swimming slowly and leisurely'.

We should understand the meaning of 'so pure' on the basis that all water in the Universe cannot be so pure that the bottom is seen clearly. Still more, water in vessels can never be that pure. But here, the water which is infinite in the world is so pure that the bottom is clearly seen. When fish are swimming in water of this sort, we shouldn't say that they are not swimming. Fishes can be swimming ten thousand miles away and at the same time be immeasurable and infinite. There is no bank from which we can measure the distance; there is no space in which we float; and there is no bottom to which we sink. So there is no-one to measure the distance. If we talk in terms of measuring, we can only say that the water is so pure that the bottom can be seen clearly. And the virtue of Zazen is like fishes swimming; but who can guess the distance the fish are swimming as being a thousand or ten thousand miles? The practice of Zazen is so pure that the bottom is clearly seen is our whole body; it doesn't follow the path of the birds which is too unfamiliar and mystical for us.

'The sky is so wide that it has no limit, and birds are flying faraway peacefully'

'The sky is so wide' does not necessarily refer to the air. What is related to the air is not the infinitely wide sky. Furthermore, this general place or that general place is not the infinite sky. The infinitely wide sky is that which has neither outside nor inside in appearance or disappearance. When birds fly, they fly in this infinitely wide sky; we cannot imagine the real action of birds as they fly. We can say that to a bird, flying in the sky is just the whole Universe, because the whole Universe can just barely exist with the existence of flying birds. We can never calculate how many birds are flying, but when we dare to express the flying in words, we say 'far away peacefully'; in other words, there is not the slightest trace here in the moment of the present. When the sky flies away, the birds can fly away; and when the birds fly away, the sky also flies away. And when we study 'flying away,' we simply say that flying away is existing here and now. These words are the maxim about the non-movement state in Zazen, and the vast distances of the flying are telling us that they exist here and now.

This is Master Wanshi's guiding poem on Zazen. There have been none written by the venerable monks of many ages to match his. All the many people in many religions trying as hard as they could for two lifetimes could not produce this level of work, even through many different lands. My master, Tendo Nyojo, usually referred to him as 'Master Wanshi, the Eternal Buddha'. He didn't refer to any other masters in this way. When someone has the faculty to recognise the value of a man, he can also recognise the value of buddhas and patriarchs. And we can recognise that there really was a true Buddha, a true patriarch in the line of Master Tozan Ryokai. About eighty years have passed since Master Wanshi died, and I have made this guiding poem on Zazen out of respect for his poem. Today is March 18th, and when I calculate the time from today to October 8th in 1157, it is only eighty-five years since Master Wanshi died. The poem I have composed is this:

Guiding Poem on Zazen

*Essential centre of Buddhas, central essence of patriarchs,
Realised without thinking and established without complication,
Realised without thinking, so the realisation is naturally close,
Established without complication, so the establishment is naturally real,
The realisation is naturally close, so there has been no impurity.
The establishment is naturally real so there is no difference between the substance and the shadow.
And the closeness, which is pure, exists independently here and now.
And the reality, which has no difference between substance and shadow is making its
efforts without any intention.
The water is so pure that the bottom is seen clearly,
And fishes are swimming like fishes.
The sky is so wide that we can see through to the heavens,
And birds are flying like birds.*

Master Wanshi's poem is in no sense inadequate, but I would like to express [my own realisation] in the above poem. As a basic and fundamental principle, all descendants of Gautama Buddha must understand that the practice of Zazen is the most important matter in our life. This theory is the true teaching of Gautama Buddha as transmitted in one line.

Shobogenzo Zazenshin

This volume was written at Koso Horin-ji Temple on March 18th in the year 1242.

This volume was preached at Kippo-ji Temple in Yoshida County, Fukui Prefecture in the winter of November 1243.

Notes

¹ There is some difficulty in translating the actual meaning of Zazenshin, as the most suitable word seems to be 'maxim'. A maxim, however, is usually somewhat shorter than the works presented here and so the expression 'Guiding Poem' has been used. There is also difficulty in distinguishing between a Zazenshin and a Zazenmai, which is generally much shorter, and therefore closer to our meaning of maxim.

² Master Dogen's use of four descriptions of buddha is apt to confuse. It is, however, quite clear if we follow the principle of the four views: 'Becoming buddha' is the first, or intellectual view; it is 'intending to become buddha'. 'Physical buddha' is the second, or materialistic view. 'Acting buddha' and 'Sitting buddha' are the third view; that is, action. The fourth view, or the reality, is represented by 'having become buddha'. These are the apparent four different buddha states that Dogen refers to in the following discussions.

³ The comparison of real and sculptured dragons is a reference to the story of a man called Shoko who was obsessed with collecting sculptures of dragons. However, a real dragon descended from the heavens and appeared at the window of his house, at which sight poor Shoko fainted with fright! Therefore, in Buddhism real dragons are used as a symbol for real practical action, like Zazen, and sculptures or statues of dragons represent the study of abstract theories.

⁴ Discussed in the Kokyo (Eternal Mirror) chapter.

⁵ These three Masters are examples of different behaviour: One of Master Fuketsu Ensho's disciples remarked that he was like a mosquito on the back of an iron ox (i.e. his Master). Master Enchi Dai-an is referred to as a castrated water ox because he lived in a celibate state in his temple. When the clay ox (Master Tanshu Ryuzan) entered the ocean, it dissolved.

⁶ 'A fist is struck with a fist' is Master Dogen's way of saying that a fist really exists as a fist and 'an ox struck with an ox' is the real existence of an ox.

⁷ Keitoku Dentoroku (literally, record of the transmitted light of the Kentoku Period) was a biography of the Buddhist Masters in China and India from Gautama Buddha through to the Sung Dynasty, arranged in chronological order. It was compiled and written by a Chinese Buddhist monk named Ei-an Dogen (no relation). Katai Futotoroku (literally, the general pervading light of the Katai Period) was a similar biography written by a Chinese monk called Rai-an Shouju continuing roughly from the previous work, although there is some overlap between the two works. Neither of these have at present been translated into English.

⁸ This is a reference to a story involving a discussion between two Buddhist monks, one of whom was a disciple of Master Hogen Bun-eki. The disciple is explaining that his master did not have or use words to express the essence of Buddhism, which cannot be explained with words; it is reality itself.