

What is the Purpose of Zazen

Dharma Talk by Zen Master Kidō Inoue, Rōshi – Shōrinkutsu-dōjō, Japan

New English translation, with a few small details added (included previous translated expressions or sentences) of one of the daily *Dharma Talks* given by Zen master Kidō Inoue, Rōshi, 井上希道老師 法話 「何の為に坐禅をするのか（前編）」令和三年三月三日, viewable at this address: https://youtu.be/y3BV1_lrcqI (part 1). (Yet to come: part 2 – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ha-23sK9Qn4>)

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“What is the Purpose of Zazen (Part 1)” March 3, 2021

(0:08) To make it perfectly clear, I'll ask the question once again:

Why do we practice zazen?

To get to know one's self. The important thing is to see into one's self.

In the Zen language, there's a simple word for this: *kenshō*. We do zazen to achieve *kenshō*. Zazen is the deepening of *kenshō*; it only serves to deepen our vision. It's the same as what Master Keizan called “the revelation of the soul”, the knowledge of one's true nature or self. Originally, the true nature of the Dharma is the naturally self-generated mind.

(0:55) The search for this “one's original Buddhahood” is the reason for so much of Master Dōgen's efforts. It is the essence of Buddha Dharma. He firmly believed that it was the very essence of Buddha Dharma to elucidate the true nature of this mind, and he struggled for ten years to strive for it. It seems to me that it took him fifteen years after the start of his journey to become a monk. Achieving *kenshō*, gradually becoming an awakened human, freeing yourself... how do you achieve this?

(1:40) You're no stranger to zazen either... And you know that if you don't have a discerning eye, you're just spending your time in vain.

In fact, it's simply impossible to get away from yourself, from your mind. This clarification brings comfort and clarity! This is what “becoming a Buddha” means. By nature, you *cannot* cut yourself off, and you're never separate or disconnected, but many people don't know this, and so they fight amongst themselves, confront each other, suffer, sometimes even commit suicide. So that's what spirit is. It has no substance, but it can decide to do deadly things. It can kill itself, but it can also kill others. The spirit can become a Buddha, but it can also become a demon.

That's what we are. We must understand that we originally have a Buddha nature. By becoming clearly aware of this, by forming a clear idea of ourselves, we can experience peace of mind and bring joy to others through the elimination of suffering. To do this, we practice zazen. It's now or never.

(3:25) So, what should you know about zazen?

(If you're wondering, “how do I do this?”...) if you wander, you wander *now*: (it's also *now/the present moment/'ima'*) – everything starts *now* and ends *now*. We suffer *now*, we get carried away *now*. Both killing someone and saving someone... Everything is played out in the present moment, *now*. It's necessarily always *now*, there's no other possibility. The wandering you exists only in the *now*, and that's where we go astray.

(3:53) Once you know this crucial point, you stop worrying about the present. Without it, you don't notice your deeper self, which is buried beneath all the layers laid down by the past, the illusions, obstructive thoughts and false perceptions all accumulated over time, habits, habits again and again, and which we in Zen most often call *jiga* (the troubled self).

Let's do away with these bad habits of the mind. Through the practice of zazen, let's destroy the ego, let's get rid of these bad habits of the mind, which will result in the Truth appearing before our eyes.

Then the true direction of the wind (or the Way), the winds of true nature, will be unequivocal; for this truth is clear. (This is the only correct path,) so if you want to know yourself truly, you have no choice but to see yourself as you are *now*, in every present moment.

But how do we go about taking an in-depth look at our true nature? (How are we supposed to do that?) There's nothing to do, nothing to think about – because you can't leave the present, because what you do now **is** you, now. The present moment, '*ima*' – the thing itself – you simply can't let it go. **You just can't.** Because this (drinking tea) is the *absolute now* with no before and after. There is no past in it. There is only you – no time, no space. **You don't have time to reflect!**

(5:21) Pay attention, because this is the most important thing, the most crucial thing: if you don't *become one, body and mind*, with what you're doing, to the point where you're not even aware of it, the useless, unneeded past will never allow you to be present in the *now*; knowing that, as long as you have this body, you're also dragging along the past or the karma linked to everything that preceded it (which determined and conditioned its existence, and also linked to its own history).

As I've said many times before: so that we human beings can become, from the very origin of the Earth, what we are, and so exist today...

(5:50) Or rather... let's start with the immense amount of time that has elapsed since the creation of the universe, before the Earth even existed; then there were unicellular microorganisms, DNA appeared, cell division began... It took billions of years of evolution to create all the living species we have today.

During this process, we humans began to think, feel and have intentions. We have learned to distinguish right from wrong, we have built nations, created laws, developed science and technology. Only we humans can do this. And because we are endowed with intelligence, we sometimes misuse it. That's why wars happen. When, on the other hand, we devote our intelligence to good ends, with wisdom, we become Buddhas, workers endowed with great compassion and mercy. The difference lies in whether or not we use this wisdom.

(7:11) The thing is, as long as our body exists in this way – with the inherited instinct for self-preservation, the survival instinct inscribed in our genes... The need to survive! All living beings obey this survival instinct; to preserve life, to stay a(live. So we do everything we can to defend our existence. Since birth, the instinct to preserve our physical body has been at work, and we use every possible means to preserve it. We must therefore use our wisdom to make the most of our intellect. However, the mind also has undesirable functions, producing negative and uninteresting emotions and inadequate cognitions. It's naive to think that we will use only the good sides of our intellect and ignore all bad advice it gives us.

(8:14) The mind is one, it has all sorts of sides, but we can't take only the sides that suit us – to put it simply, the good parts or moments – without also having sorrow, sadness, bitterness, dissatisfaction... It doesn't work like that! So, unless we carefully examine this that we call “spirit” or “mind” or “soul” for what it really is, this spirit which has no substance and of which we can say neither: “yes, (that) it exists”, nor for all that “it doesn't exist”, because it's mentally active within us; taking its good sides and leaving aside its bad sides using only our intellect, our perceptions... it won't work! To have this kind of strategic *intention* is already to make a calculation instead of being. These calculations are the very source of our misdirection and prevent us from taking the direct path.

We therefore need to fully grasp the very source of our mind's functioning as it manifests itself to our consciousness. We need to clarify this completely.

(9:24) This deep understanding is what we call *kenshō*. Bodhidharma helped Master Taiso Eka to see inside his own mind; it's a famous story: “To attain enlightenment and see Buddha's original nature, you have to cut yourself off completely from your past, once and for all”. To cut oneself off from one's past means *to become one* with the present, to be completely in it.

What does this mean? Well, it means that nothing exists outside the present moment, right now. Just as you can't separate yourself from your shadow, from yourself, from your mind, you can't separate yourself from the *present moment* either. All circumstances, in their own

way, have created the conditions that place us in the *present*, and over which we have no control: so there's nothing to do but be, in the present moment.

The problem is that we carry our past with us, and don't clearly see the boundary between past and present. If we want to clarify this, we need to calm our wandering mind. So, as we sit here, we should fundamentally ask ourselves: *"Why is my mind wandering all over the place? (While I'm sitting here having my tea) isn't my mind supposed to be here too? But no – it's wandering around, of its own accord, it's in yesterday and tomorrow, in this and that... Why is it so?"*

(11:45) This comes from knowledge, from our knowledge about us, from our knowledge of being a human. *"That living being over there is also a human, that one is a dog, there is a flower; he is a man, she is a woman..."* Our mind constantly categorizes. When we watch something, our eyes are *just seeing*, but there comes our mind and starts telling us *this* and *that*.

(12:22) Why does this happen? Infants and young children are not self-aware. The same goes for animals: they don't know that they are a cat, a chicken, a cow, a horse.... They don't know they'll be killed and eaten, they don't know that they're going to die and that now they're alive. That's how they live their whole lives. Because they have no intellect, no reflective consciousness, no awareness. This is our humans' prerogative. We have an intellect, and emotions and intentions. We think, feel and want to act. We become aware of ourselves, of the things we need and the things we don't need. This is how the process begins: *"I need this and I don't need that, do I want this thing or not, what shall I do with it in the future? Is it good, is it bad, does it make me happy, does it make me angry?"*

(13:49) Medicine tells us that this begins at the age of three, with the development of the frontal lobe and the hippocampus. Then, the cerebellum also begins to ensure that our actions or behavior are in line with our way of thinking. It's usually around the age of three, when children become able to act as they wish, that the separation of body and mind begins to take place.

Until this age, a child doesn't have this awareness, doesn't analyze, doesn't draw information from the past and doesn't think about the future. However, with the

development of the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, this type of intellectual activity begins, and everything happens at once; our mind, in an instant, extracts all the information we had previously received through our eyes, ears, mouth, nose... then it establishes links between them, and this is the beginning of the type of mind functioning, specific to human beings.

(15:11) From then on, what we touch, see, hear and smell, as well as our thoughts, create concepts that accumulate in our memory. So, the next time we hear or see something, all sorts of thoughts from the past rush into our heads: *“Last time it was this and that, this time I’ll do this and that”*. As soon as we started making classifications and distinctions, our body and mind got separated (we can, for example, be having a cup of tea and talking at the same time, and still have a pile of stray thoughts).

(15:53) This is how our mind works, because our body and mind have separated. The problem is that as soon as our mind functions separately from the body, its own consciousness comes into play. It has its own sensitivity, its own anger, its own demands, ideals, beliefs or doubts... All kinds of information intermingle in our mind, spreading and taking root, and together they give rise to *jiga*, (troubled) self-awareness.

So, before the age of three, a child, with still underdeveloped both prefrontal lobe and hippocampus, is not equipped for memory. It has no memory storage, but it still suffers, and can suffer enormously. When a baby is hungry, it cries. It may be sad and lonely. If it's been starving for a while, the need for food will grow stronger and stronger. Should its mother finally give the poor child the breast, it will suckle frantically. But if it's given the breast when it needs it, the baby will drink just as much as it needs, and as soon as it's satiated and thus relieved the tension created by hunger, it'll stop sucking; because once the need no longer exists, there's no incentive to continue.

(17:54) On the other hand, for a baby who has been left hungry for too long, the tension of hunger only increases and cannot be satisfied. It keeps on sucking. When its stomach is full, it continues to suck, like a glutton, even when satiated; it still has this tension that doesn't go away, it demands more. It drinks by sucking in air at the same time as the milk. Then it burps and disgorges. The repetition of this process (an unpleasant feeling of discomfort, of being hungry and alone, of being afraid of not having enough food and attention) puts the

poor baby in tension and ready to grab whatever it needs. But because it has no conscious memory, it doesn't know that it's afraid of these things. It doesn't *know* the reason, but it *feels* it, and the fear of starvation and loneliness takes root in it deeply, like in an animal, and this becomes the main driving force of this young human, ruling its mind.

(19:14) Now you can see how important it is to raise young children the proper way. Early childhood education is very important. But here's where we are today: we live in an age of economic supremacy, with parents taking their children to crèches or kindergartens or nannies.

However, children have their own natural rhythm of growth and development, which requires an appropriate environment. A child whose “naturalness” has been preserved, relaxed by the presence of its parents, feels secure, gets into mischief, touches everything and “play with fire”, unconsciously gathers information about things through its senses. It perceives them and begins to understand them even before it realizes it. Then, as its frontal lobe develops, all this information is transformed into knowledge that will influence the child's decision-making process. The child finally becomes fairly self-aware in its third year – it says to himself: “I'm still..., I'm still...”.

(20:24) However, in neglected children, from before the age of three, the survival instinct becomes dominant: the fear of hunger, of danger, the desire to avoid sadness. The brain development of these children, affected by sadness, is disrupted, as if atrophied – their human and intellectual potential is damaged through what is termed a “personality and development disorder”. From then on, at the age of three, when their body and mind separate, their first reaction to stimuli from the outside world becomes totally selfish, a pure desire to get more and better for themselves. Not grasping by force, but receiving in a relaxed way is something they are not capable of. Unconditional acceptance is beyond their reach.

That was a long digression, but let's return now to the moment when the separation of body and mind occurs. As a result of growth and development processes, consciousness (or awareness) is born in the child's brain. First, we're able to see, hear and feel, then when we become self-aware, our body and mind separate.

(22:01) So, why do we do zazen?

To get to know ourselves and gradually awaken through *kenshō*, to reveal the original mind (or soul), to understand (grasp through experience) our true original nature; to achieve *kenshō*.

But now, the knowledge we've acquired before is beginning to interfere and occupy our minds. So first we have to “vacuum clean” our mind, to make it *colorless* and *transparent* again, *free* of all interference... This is really the aim of our zazen practice.

(22:40) In other words, we must first rid ourselves of all preconceived ideas from the past, which we do by becoming one with the *present*. When we become *one with the present*, purified, without any trace of the past, then our body and mind become one, in the present. We are no longer influenced by information from past events. When we reach this place of original existence, free of all past events, when this phenomenon, encountered in subjective experience, is further confirmed, we speak of liberation, enlightenment, *gedatsu*, *satori*, seeing and becoming Buddha, and other names or expressions that all mean the same thing.

(23:22) To achieve this, we only need to unite our body and mind by focusing our attention on one sole thing, and become *wholeheartedly one* with (which is what we're doing at that moment). I'm sure you too have studied or worked with unwavering devotion, totally focused, forgetting everything that's going on in the world, to the point of losing track of time! When we are children, then young people, and even more so when we're adults, **when we are doing something with all our heart, there's no space left in our minds for useless thoughts.**

In order to seize the present moment without obstructive thoughts, it is therefore necessary to act wholeheartedly (in what we do then). That's why we recommend that you focus and concentrate on your breathing... because you need to take hold of this very precise moment in a tangible way, freeing yourself from the past, motionless.

Keep your mind free of what you remember, and your heart free of what you don't remember. **To do this, you need to sit in a quiet room and put yourself in conditions where**

you don't need to take your mind out of the room, where your body and mind have nothing to do.

(24:38) Going to the zendō has precisely this purpose. As you go to the zendō, make sure you (sit still). Don't put yourself at the mercy of yourself – you mustn't agitate your body and mind – Agitating is... doing what a toddler would do: wandering around, chasing whatever catches his eye. Moving freely, unhindered... This is what infants, babies and children normally do. When we become adults, to the contrary, we act to accomplish something, with a purpose. Since there is a goal, we plan our actions with a view to obtaining a result. This is where reflection comes in, the habit of sorting or classifying things, drawing on information from the past. When you are in a situation where you can't preserve yourself (by staying away from the past)..., even if you try to *be at one with yourself*, if you don't know how to go about it, it's totally impossible to do so.

You do understand what I'm saying, don't you? Sitting still, with nothing else to do, means having nothing to accomplish, nothing to look forward to. No goals, no expectations. **If we place ourselves in an environment in which there is no space to imagine a future full of consequences, then we no longer feel the need to involve our mind:** it's simply no longer necessary.

(26:33) So we need to set up conditions that don't require the mind to work, and place our bodies in them. Then we can leave our minds in peace, since a suitable environment has been created for them, and we no longer feel the need for them to wander. So we place our body in these conditions, set up for this purpose – thus: (*immobile, like this, in zazen*). But when you put yourself in these conditions, what happens?

As one can imagine, the mind jumps uselessly from one idea to another, no matter how good the conditions are; the past begins to come out and flood us, images arise even when they are totally superfluous, inadequate and useless. When this happens, our thoughts and emotions swirl around inside us. Our past appears, images pop up... Our head becomes a noisy, cluttered place! This happens because our mind cuts itself off from what we really see – because our past comes up. This eruption of the past into our present reality is similar to the body/mind separation. That's why!

(27:29) Basically, zazen is doing zazen, so the mind should also be doing zazen – but the mind can't, of course, sit down and do zazen itself... So... How should you proceed?

Focus your mind on one sole thing. Master Keizan said “*place your mind on your palms*”. That's what he said. Master Mumon Ekai, author of the famous *Mumonkan*, recommended that we “*pronounce the syllable ‘mu’ with our whole being*”.

Fill that gap (where useless thoughts can enter)! (*When you pronounce mu-u-u...*)