# HIDDEN ZEN

PRACTICES FOR SUDDEN AWAKENING &

EMBODIED REALIZATION

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# Contents

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# HIDDEN ZEN

# Introduction

Of the many paths of Buddhist practice, Zen* is among the most direct for a simple reason: the entrance to the Zen path is not an intellectual understanding of the Buddhist teachings but rather an experiential grasp of their central point. This experiential grasp—an awakening to our intrinsic wisdom not essentially different from that realized by Shakyamuni* Buddha* under the bodhi tree—is called *kensho*,* "seeing one's nature."

All Zen rests upon this awakening as the foundation of genuine practice. If there is anywhere a Zen path that does not affirm kensho, we may say it is not genuine Zen. Such pseudo-Zen teachings, in fact, may only add to one's burdens. As Hakuin Ekaku Zenji wrote:

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*An asterisk appears at the first occurrence of a term that can be found in the glossary.

When a person who has not had *kensho* reads the Buddhist scriptures, questions his teachers and fellow monks about Buddhism, or practices religious disciplines, he is merely creating the causes of his own illusion—a sure sign that he is still confined within samsara.* He tries constantly to keep himself detached in thought and deed, and all the while his thoughts and deeds are attached. He endeavors to be doing nothing all day long, and all the while he is busily doing.

But if this same person experiences *kensho*, everything changes. Although he is constantly thinking and acting, it is totally free and unattached. Although he is engaged in activity around the clock, that activity is, as such, non-activity. This great change is the result of his kensho. It is like water that snakes and cows drink from the same cistern, which becomes deadly venom in one and milk in the other.[1]

Given that this awakening of kensho is so crucial, we should not be surprised that Zen preserves many practices for bringing students to it and for afterward progressing along the path of embodying that awakening as actualized realization. Various methods of seated meditation (*zazen**) are perhaps the best-known Zen practices, historically forming a core element of training everywhere. But there are many other Zen practices besides seated meditation.

Among Japanese Zen lineages, the Rinzai* branches are especially marked by a rich variety of such methods, the extraordinary usefulness and power of which come from their emphasis on engaging the practitioner's whole body-mind.[2] Though certainly renowned for its rigorous use of zazen, we may say that *sanzen** is the central method of Rinzai Zen, while sanzen centered on koans*—by which the gate of kensho may indeed be entered and afterward deeply actualized—is likely the method for which Rinzai lineages are most famous.

But although this book reveals many practices found in Rinzai Zen

training, it touches on zazen and sanzen in only a general way. Rather, our primary focus is a diverse collection of practice instructions that are transmitted orally. I have divided these loosely into two groups, the methods of (1) direct pointing and (2) internal energetic cultivation. As we will see, these instructions serve to inform—and give life to—other Zen practices that are better known.

## The Reasons for This Book

Most of the practice instructions we will examine have not previously been written down or publicly revealed.[3] In fact, it may be surprising to many Zen practitioners (and even some scholars) to hear my next statement: much of what is most crucial in genuine Zen practice is still transmitted primarily by means of *kuden*,* oral instruction from one's teacher, rather than in publicly available texts.[4] The pithy methods described in this book certainly show something of the creative nature of such teachings passed face-to-face between Zen masters and their students. I should say, though, that this book is not titled *Hidden Zen* because these instructions are intentionally concealed or stamped as secret; in most instances this is not the case. Rather, they are simply things that one is not likely to encounter as an observer, a casual practitioner, or outside the circle of a committed teacher-student relationship.

Still, I should perhaps here explain my reasons for revealing these things so openly. In fact, there are three.

### *Bareness of Zen Practice in the West*

The first is that it seems there are many modern Zen practitioners who for various reasons have not inherited such practices, and they may even be unaware that Zen contains methods like these at all. The practice of Soto* Zen is popularly thought to be just *shikantaza*,* while the practice of Rinzai Zen is thought to be just koan practice. While those

methods certainly are highly refined within their respective traditions, neither tradition is so minimalist or homogeneous as to be limited to them. Within both the Soto and Rinzai schools there are in fact many different teaching lines, and these often preserve rather varied—and incredibly interesting—practice material reflecting the histories and interests of lineage ancestors.

For example, there have been prominent Zen masters in Japan deeply involved with so-called esoteric teachings, integrating *mikkyo** practices of the Tendai* or Shingon* schools. Rinzai Zen, as we will see, preserves to this day remarkable practices of internal energetic cultivation. In my own Rinzai lineage, because of forebears who were also masters of disciplines like swordsmanship and calligraphy, physical culture and the arts have been deeply integrated. Many other such things can be found.

It is thus disappointing to see the somewhat sterile approaches and bare "toolboxes" of practice methods found within some Zen lines in the West. We should recognize that this is something limiting to students. But it must be stressed that such bareness is not due to a lack of resources within Zen as a whole. It is instead, as far as I can tell, due to an incomplete or idiosyncratic transmission of resources within those lineages. Where this is the case, it might even be accurate to say that crucial foundations of the Zen path are wholly missing.

Aside from the sparsity of teaching resources, a real danger of incomplete Zen of this kind is that it can easily devolve into a mere collection of trappings largely stripped of their inner function. It may ultimately become a burden rather than an aid, a kind of vaguely Buddhist identity rather than a dynamic path of liberation. In other words, as Hakuin said, it only adds to the causes of our own illusion. Bearing such developments in mind, I am not surprised that there have been Western Zen teachers eager in an almost puritanical manner to jettison inherited things like Zen ritual, rigorous training regimens, traditional practice clothing, premodern understandings of the body,

and so on. Absent an understanding of how such things are meant to function within a comprehensive path of awakening, they would indeed appear to have little value beyond whatever surface content—historic, aesthetic, or symbolic—they carry. Thus, toolboxes become even more bare over time, and rich cultures of practice—for the preservation of which our Zen ancestors sacrificed so dearly—can be irretrievably lost.[5]

By sharing the practices in this book, then, I hope that Zen students will benefit from having a small taste of the richness of the hidden practice life transmitted within other lineages. Some of these methods even hide in plain sight and could be accepted by any Zen student, for example the oral instructions revealing how the *taku*,* *inkin*,* and *keisaku** —tools found in every Zen training hall—can be used in ways more profound than the obvious. And because the methods we will examine are so useful not only for approaching and passing the gate of awakening but for actualizing awakening within daily activity, I believe they could benefit any practitioner regardless of lineage, school, or level of experience.

### *Embodied Nature of Genuine Zen Practice*

The second reason I am revealing the practices in this book is that many of them, as will be apparent, turn upon specific usages of the practitioner's body. This underscores another crucial point that I hope will become more widely and clearly understood: the embodied, ultimately *yogic* nature of genuine Zen practice—that is, the truth that Zen is a path accomplished through the body, with engagement of the whole body-mind rather than within the mind alone.

It must be noted that there is today a common kind of Buddhist modernism in which the fruition of Zen is conceived to be a primarily psychological revolution. According to this view, the intent of Zen practice is attainment of a kind of *acceptance* of samsaric* existence—a short-term (that is, for the duration of one's life span) psychological

resilience in the face of life's inevitable suffering—rather than *liberation* from samsaric existence as classically understood in Buddhism: the dispelling of delusion and the final dissolving of body-mind karmic obstructions (*jikke**) with which we have been entwined for endless lives and eons.

Of course, a secular, psychologized approach to Buddhism like this fits the modern tendency toward a materialist view that the mind is a purely brain-based phenomenon, arising with the birth of one's body and ceasing utterly with its death. We should recognize that this is rather different from the Buddhist view: that the body itself arises in causal relationship with a mind stream exhibiting both prebirth and postmortem continuity. The secular approach also fulfills the desire for something advantageous (or marketable) for becoming somehow happier, more effective, or more successful in the increasingly stressful, fragmented environments of modern life. But again, we should recognize that from the standpoint of the Buddhist teachings, there is no real happiness within worldly life at all to which we can aspire. Samsara is not ultimately fixable or able to be rendered satisfying, and the very fact of our existence itself is primarily just evidence of primordial delusion.

But whatever the origins of this modern approach (and whatever beliefs one may have about what happens when we die), this at least must be stated: in the Rinzai Zen view, a purely psychological realization is mostly conceptual and so inevitably shallow. It is a mirage, lacking sufficient power to cut the roots of ignorance in a lasting manner. More bluntly: it is not the awakening of Zen and is unworthy of comparison with the profound attainment for which the great Zen masters labored so exhaustively. The fruition of Zen practice must be experienced as a wholly psycho-physical transformation of the human being, causing not only experiential change within the mind but also *visible change in the body*.

The methods we will examine reveal this more genuinely valuable

understanding: that one's mind, body, breath, and subtle energetic system must all be engaged within and transformed through effective practice. Using methods like these, we may come to understand why the extraordinary power of such integrated, whole-being practice—what I have described as the yogic approach—is in fact a hallmark of genuine Zen. It is also the reason that we can say Zen is an extremely direct, rapid path of liberation. And here I will admit that I especially hope some Rinzai lines in the West—purporting to uphold the methods of sanzen and koan practice yet, it seems in some cases, lacking concrete instructions regarding how koan *kufu** (practice with koans involving great effort and creative struggle) must engage the whole body-mind—may be enriched. The distinctive character of Rinzai Zen stands wholly upon such embodied practice, but where this understanding is lacking, the koan method also can grant only an illusion of insight.

### *Danger of Loss*

The third reason I am revealing the methods in this book is a very simple one, though perhaps the most important: cultural and technological trends have created conditions such that the challenges of rigorous, embodied Zen practice seem more difficult. Persons willing to undergo the truly arduous path of lifelong Zen training are becoming even less common than in the past.

Zen has always stated quite clearly that its path is open to both monastics and laypersons and that the most profound realization of awakening may indeed be attained in the midst of everyday life. But this is rather different from a modern conceit that seems increasingly common: that profound awakening may be grasped *without* exhaustive, devoted practice over many years—practice of such intensity that one's "everyday life" will indeed appear rather different from the usual everyday life.

It has become common to hear statements from Buddhist practitioners revealing that, far from integrating daily life within their

practice, they have instead undertaken to adjust practice to fit their daily lives. The idea has arisen that what is essentially an inconsistent effort to remain mindful, undistracted, and present throughout one's day constitutes practice and is itself sufficient. Though certainly important, such efforts are a far cry from the effortless and seamless meditative state, unified with the upwelling of that recognition first arrived at in kensho, that is actual liberation. It is not without reason that a master as great as Torei Enji,[6] who practiced in a rigorous manner that few modern persons would endure, said:

> It is relatively easy to accomplish the important matter of insight into one's true nature, but uncommonly difficult to function freely and clearly [according to this understanding], in motion and in rest, in good and in adverse circumstances. Please make strenuous and vigorous efforts to this end, otherwise all the teachings of Buddhas and patriarchs become mere empty words.[7]

I thus fear that the Western Zen landscape may one day be finally reduced to a dry, stagnant expanse of shallow sitting practice and self-referential "mindfulness," while orally transmitted methods like those we will examine—hidden treasures of our lineages—could be entirely lost. It is naturally incumbent upon Zen teachers in each generation to maintain the core principles of practice, while also seeking innovative ways to present the teachings in a manner matching the needs of contemporary people (whether that is by according with current conditions or decisively challenging them). Yet principles are transmitted using methods and forms, and the process of adaptation and transformation is most successfully accomplished when allowed to happen organically. This is something like transplanting a tree from one place to another: the old soil must be taken with the roots, and over time this can meld with the new ground. Therefore, in the short term at least, I will be

grateful if by means of this book some old soil is preserved that might otherwise be washed away.

If a few of the many inherited Zen practices can be kept alive within even a handful of lineages, we can indeed hope that a truly healthy, native Zen will take root in the West. And finally, I should say that if dire predictions of worldwide environmental and social collapse come to pass, I would certainly hope that books like this might help some Zen practices to survive, even if it comes down to the smallest thread.

## Regarding Zen, *Kensho*, and *Samadhi*

Before we turn to the main subjects of this book it will be useful to clarify what is meant by those crucial words "seeing one's nature," or kensho. *Samadhi*,* meditative absorption, is another term that bears examination, and we should understand the role it plays in Zen practice.

Since these things are rarely discussed in plain language from a practitioner's standpoint, I would like to do so here. There exists a great deal of confusion about them, and clarifying their meaning will help us to understand how some of the practices we will examine function.

### *Kensho: Seeing and Knowing*

I should say first, though it may seem obvious, that the awakening we call "seeing one's nature"—kensho—obviously does not mean that upon entering the gate of wisdom there is some vision literally seen with the eyes. It also does not mean that one suddenly arrives at an intellectual understanding of some profound Buddhist teaching or a new way of conceptualizing one's place in the universe. Such new understandings could certainly result from kensho, but these are not by themselves awakening.

"Seeing" here simply refers to the moment that one discovers or knows something for oneself, directly and experientially, rather than

through the descriptions of others. To use a simple example: if one reads or hears from others that there is a bright red, crested bird called a cardinal, that may be an interesting fact to know. But upon personally glimpsing a bright red, crested bird, one might be able to recognize it, saying, "Oh, *that* is a cardinal." One could then say further, "Now I really know what a cardinal is. I have discovered for myself what they were talking about."

The important point here is that what we may call a true knowing does not arise with a conceptual grasp of what is signified by the word *cardinal* or even with the sight of the bird itself. Rather, it arises only when one *recognizes* what was seen and so arrives at a basic certainty regarding it. Of course, in arriving at this certainty one can make use of (indeed, may require) guidance from others to confirm that what one has discovered is indeed a cardinal. In other words, if there is any doubt regarding what one has seen, one relies on those with more knowledge to affirm the discovery. With that affirmation a confidence in the discovery can begin to arise. And naturally, one may seek to see the red bird again and again to increase one's familiarity with it. Seeing and recognizing it repeatedly is the best way to increase the depth and usefulness of one's experiential knowledge.

The above is a clumsy illustration perhaps. But what we mean by kensho is very much like this. It is one thing to hear that there is a kind of awakening to one's own "original face" or intrinsic wisdom called kensho and that just this awakening marks the entrance into the Zen path. We may have studied the Buddhist teachings and conceptually grasped the truth that there is no unchanging self to be found anywhere—that all appearances precisely reveal the original face of our own nature and that "the entire universe is the true human body"[8]—and all of this may be helpful in a way. But upon entering experientially into the truth of *muga*,* "nonself," and recognizing suddenly without doubt that just this is precisely the nature of both oneself and all so-called phenomena, then there is no longer any question of what

kensho is or what nonself really means in the Buddhist teachings. We have finally discovered or recognized our own true, boundless nature directly. With the help of our teachers who confirm this to be a genuine recognition, we may then begin to deepen our acquaintance with what we have discovered and so over time increase our certainty and depth of knowledge.

And with that knowledge, we no longer have any doubt regarding the essential point of the Buddha's enlightenment, the fundamental meaning of all the Buddhist teachings, the central intent of all Buddhist practice methods, or the truth of the Zen path. There is no doubt because with kensho one has verified all these things for oneself. Thereafter, one may continue along the path with conviction that the direction is correct. This conviction is in fact a crucial thing since, as I have said, true Zen practice is founded upon kensho and consists of further clarifying that knowledge until one has come to seamlessly embody it.

Kensho, thus, might be described succinctly as the arising of experiential knowledge confirming something that was previously taken on faith. But we should understand that it is a very special kind of knowledge. This knowledge does not arise as the result of seeing a physical object or apprehending a mental one. We should say rather that it arises from a fundamental, liberative shift in *the very manner* that one sees, apprehends, and knows.

Of course, at this point those who have not yet entered this gate of kensho may still reasonably ask: Can't you describe a bit more *what* is recognized? If kensho is to see one's nature, what specifically is this nature that is known?

When useful to do so, we might reply that it is just the actual or true nature of one's own mind that is recognized and known. And here is an important point to clarify, since we have potentially arrived at the edge of a trap. To take any of the myriad objects, thoughts, fantasies, or states of consciousness that arise within one's experience—

no matter how fascinating or seemingly important they may be—to be awakening is a great error. The truth is that nothing the mind may conceive, project, or visualize is the wisdom of kensho. Rather, kensho is to arrive at a seeing—an intimate and wordless knowing—of the nature of *that which sees and knows*.[9]

I am here reminded of a time that Hosokawa Dogen Roshi,[10] one of my teachers, stated, "Whatever you experience during zazen, it is not kensho." At the time this confused me greatly: What could it mean, I wondered, to say that kensho cannot occur during zazen? Aren't there great masters who did in fact arrive at awakening while sitting in meditation? But of course, that was not what he meant. His meaning, rather, was that kensho is not an object or experience to be observed.

In Zen practice we must be clear in this way regarding the difference between the common mind of delusion, which habitually fixates on so-called inner and outer objects from a dualistic standpoint subtly and deeply fixated on "I," and the original or intrinsic nature of that mind itself, which with kensho is revealed to be utterly free from such boundaries and not essentially different from what we call "buddha." This true nature has in fact never been altered or in the least bit stained by our deep-seated, habitual delusion. Though wisdom seems to be something we lack, the truth is that we have never been apart even for an instant from the very awakening that we seek. Again, all that is initially lacking is to recognize and know with certainty for oneself: the discovery called kensho.

All of this sounds wonderful. But for many students such an explanation is still not enough. They will press: But what *is* this original nature of my existence? What *am* I really?

To deeply inquire into such questions is excellent and itself an important method of Zen practice upon which we will touch later. But if we must further describe the so-called true nature, we may say that it is utterly boundless (that is, empty of any limitations of reified

"self" or fixed identity) and wondrously luminous (that is, effortlessly illuminating all the phenomena of the universe).

That answer, of course, still cannot satisfy. It cannot satisfy because to hear and try to grasp such words absent direct experience is like hearing about a red, crested bird called a cardinal: no matter how vivid the description, if we are serious about cardinals, we must glimpse the scarlet plumage for ourselves. If we are serious about Zen, we must do nothing less than turn the light of our own awareness around to discover for ourselves what is truly signified by "buddha."

Especially to Zen beginners, I would like to say here that if all of this seems confusing, it is fine not to worry too much about such definitions or explanations. The truth is they can obstruct more than clarify. Even with the descriptions I have given here, it can be difficult to avoid conceiving of "awakening" or "true nature" as things one must find, conceptually grasp, or attain. To set up "emptiness" or "luminous awareness" as objects in our minds or states to be sought is an especially dangerous pitfall. Even to call kensho an "experience" or "transformation" tends toward this trap. Useful concepts, even liberating ones, can become objects of fixation when misused, causing us to lose our way. We should grasp from this how deeply rooted is our enmeshment in dualistic seeing: our habit of projecting subject-object conceptualization upon our experience and especially our fixation on that false construct "I" at the center of it all. In fact, it is precisely this fundamental ignorance that has bound us from beginningless time.

Along these lines I might mention that recently some presentations of Buddhist-inspired practice have emphasized cultivating an awareness of the "observing I" or "sense of self," equating this with kensho. Some popular spirituality has in a similar way stressed listening to one's "heart" or "inner wise one." But we may understand why these approaches can be prone to error: attachment to the construct of self is so subtly and deeply entrenched that to focus upon the "observing I"

or one's "heart" in a shallow manner only serves to reinforce the core habit of our own delusion. One's "inner wise one" is not, in fact, so wise. In truth, it is only when the root of this "I-heart" is completely obliterated without a trace that the gate of genuine wisdom suddenly opens and, returning again to life, we may arise as the same—yet utterly transformed—selfless self.

Nevertheless, despite the risk of compounding such confusions, I have talked about kensho so that our discussion of various practices does not begin with the reader setting up fixed ideas of some thing or state to which Zen points. In other words, it is my wish to somewhat remove false ideas about kensho, replacing them with ones that do not obstruct too greatly.

### *Depth of Awakening*

I should next say a few words regarding the depth of kensho, another subject that is not often well understood. What is meant here by *depth* is the degree to which awakening cuts the roots of our habitual delusion.

The ultimate exemplar of awakening in Buddhism is, of course, Shakyamuni. The awakening at which he arrived while sitting under the bodhi tree marked for him a complete, irrevocable severing of the roots of delusion. His attainment was unmatched in its profundity, and it was accompanied by the certainty that his spiritual quest was completed and the cycle of endless rebirth broken. Arising from his seat as the Buddha of this age, he thus turned the wheel of the dharma* to benefit all beings.

A truly profound awakening, marking the near fulfillment of one's path if not complete buddhahood, is theoretically possible for anyone. Attaining such a deep kensho, it is indeed possible to know that one has arrived once and for all at the door of liberation and that the roots of entangling ignorance are mostly cut. Such a person may truly attain a state in which there is nothing left to do and no particular path to

follow. But in truth, so thoroughgoing an initial awakening is quite rare. In fact, it is so rare as to mostly not be worth speaking about. Even for the great masters throughout history, and certainly for most of us who are less great, the initial awakening of kensho—though it may be quite profound—is not so complete that our work is done.

There are many examples of this in the Zen records. After Rinzai experienced profound awakening (an episode to which I will shortly return), he yet experienced a measure of doubt in his attainment upon later visiting his teacher Obaku, and so returned to Obaku's monastery to complete the training period that had begun there.[11] Eno, the Sixth Patriarch, famously experienced an initial awakening spontaneously upon hearing lines from the *Diamond Sutra** recited aloud but only later, in sanzen with the Fifth Patriarch, came to a realization that marked sufficient deepening of his insight.[12] Hakuin, though he had experienced awakening, was yet reviled by his teacher Dokyo Etan, who "rained twenty or thirty blows with his fists" upon him and threw him down into the mud, mocking him as a "poor hole-dwelling devil" for thinking his insight sufficient.[13] Hakuin's own great student Torei wrote that although he had arrived at his own kensho and was certain that it was genuine, he still found himself unable to freely function in accord with that wisdom within daily activity. He thus secluded himself and, practicing unsparingly night and day, finally completed sufficient post-kensho practice to arrive at a state of freedom matching Hakuin's.[14]

Again, it is a crucial thing to grasp: though we may awaken to our nature and even dissolve a good deal of the delusion with which we have long been afflicted, no matter how liberating it feels there will still be much for us to do afterward if we wish not to stop short of the final goal. It is for this reason that the path of Zen training has been laid out, taking the basic awakening of kensho as its foundation but also charting a course of post-kensho practice with the purpose of revisiting, clarifying, and deepening that wisdom over many years. In this way,

the initial awakening—even if it is quite shallow—may with a teacher's guidance and exhaustive practice be made to thoroughly penetrate the student's body-mind and so come to fruition as embodied realization.

We should also understand, therefore, that kensho may not always be a dramatic thing. Certainly, we should know that our own arrival at awakening may not necessarily be experienced as the earth-shattering event popular Zen books have sometimes described. Everyone is different.

Take as an example the koan method of practice I mentioned for which Rinzai Zen is famous: this method will, in persons who are suited to it and who put forth devoted effort, cause an all-encompassing meditative absorption to arise. When conditions are ripe this samadhi shatters, and the student can arrive at the threshold of awakening. In some cases this kind of kensho may indeed penetrate very deeply: one feels as if waking from a long dream or casting down a long-carried burden. It is like rowing lost for a long time across a featureless, vast sea in complete blackness when suddenly a beacon on the shore pierces the dark, illuminating the waves. Instantly one knows without doubt that the wished-for destination is in fact quite near, and a course can then be charted. Though the journey is far from complete, one at least need not become lost again.

But for others using the same koan method, depending on their conditions and effort, the initial awakening may not be so deep as that. It may almost seem like nothing, manifesting as a small glimpse rather than an illuminating light. In fact, one might not even realize it was truly kensho at all until the teacher confirms it to be so (a crucial step in all cases). This kind of awakening is like being locked within a small, dark cell when suddenly a door opens and closes quickly. Though not yet able to exit, one at least now knows that an outside world exists even if it was not clearly seen. But the door will need to be opened again, perhaps multiple times, before a real knowledge of that world begins to arise.

An important point is that in both cases the essential content of awakening is the same. We can say that one who wades in a shallow pool will fundamentally know what water is no less than one who plunges bodily into the ocean, even though the experiences are quite different. In the same way, the fundamental wisdom that is known upon arriving at kensho is not different for those who recognize it in shallow or deep ways. We need not therefore say that one is necessarily better or another lacking. What differs is just the depth and power of the seeing and thus its ability to immediately transform us.

For this reason, the path of post-kensho practice may indeed be different for different people. But if we just throw ourselves into that path under the guidance of a legitimate, qualified teacher, there is nothing to worry about: it is certain that we will be able to refine our knowledge by means of the skillful methods and energetic transmission of the teacher's lineage. Doing so, we may even one day arrive at a place where we are deemed qualified to carry that lineage forward ourselves, taking up the teacher's burden and transmitting the precious Zen teachings to another generation. Truly, to aspire to be even slightly worthy of such a task is an excellent thing. It is a way to repay the great debt we owe to all the teachers of the past.

On the other hand, it should be stressed that if we do not devote ourselves to exhaustive practice after kensho, we may be certain that our old habitual delusion will reassert itself, and whatever knowledge has arisen with kensho will in the end become mostly an object of conceptualization rather than living experience. Its liberative power will fade. This is like someone who sees the beacon's light illuminating the waves but then ceases to row: almost certainly the boat will become lost once more. It is like someone who sees the door in that dark room suddenly open but then turns away to again sleep dully in a corner. For people like this, kensho may in the end even seem useless.

The path, once entered upon, should be followed with great care and to its uttermost end. Truly, the path of Zen practice is no light

matter, and upon entering the gate of kensho it narrows to a knife edge. As we examine the practices of direct pointing and internal energetic cultivation, we should keep these things in mind and strive to understand how those practices serve to support and ease our progress along such a path.

### *Samadhi and the Zen Path*

Samadhi is cultivated in all Zen training. Though there exist many types and depths of this meditative absorption, for our purposes we can describe samadhi generally as a relaxed, sustained stability within which the mind functions freely without fixation or distraction. Unifying the body-mind through various Zen practice methods, if our training is sufficiently rigorous and consistent we will certainly begin to experience a free-flowing, nonabiding, and concentrated samadhi like this.

When we do, we discover something remarkable: our usual habit of dualistic seeing is weaker and less binding in samadhi. This is quite interesting. It means that samadhi—though it is not necessarily awakening by itself—can dissolve obstructions to awakening by helping us to see through our habitual, deeply embedded delusion.

Viewed in this light the purpose of many Zen practices begins to become clear. For example, we often read of some great Zen master bringing a student to awakening with a sudden shout or blow of a stick; this is the shattering of samadhi I described earlier. But if we understand that when we are in samadhi some strong or sharp stimulus can easily penetrate our minds deeply, then we can grasp the meaning of such happenings. When conditions are correct, a sudden shock experienced in samadhi may cause us to momentarily *drop* the habit of dualistic seeing. If that happens, then in the moments immediately after the stimulus—as we emerge from the samadhi state that has been shattered—it is possible for us to suddenly recognize that such freedom from self-reification and self-fixated seeing is nothing less than our true nature. With that recognition, we arrive at the discovery called kensho.

Now, as I noted earlier, the depth and transformative power of kensho can vary. Crucially, one of the factors bearing upon this is the depth of the samadhi. A shallow samadhi when shattered may allow us to arrive at a liberating insight that does not necessarily penetrate deeply: this is the kind of kensho I described earlier as being like opening and closing a door quickly. But a deeper samadhi can be the gate to a decisive, profound awakening.

There is a depth of samadhi, in fact, in which we may find ourselves so absorbed that we are unable to speak or even move. Hakuin described such a state as like being frozen in a vast sheet of ice. His description is indeed apt: the entire world within that samadhi appears white, frozen, crystalline, and still. It is not the usual world at all. I have described my own experience of this kind of samadhi like this: the room is entirely white and distant. There are people there but no way one could ever speak to them; there is a floor but no way one could ever place a foot upon it. In that state, even one's breathing seems to cease completely.

If we enter an all-encompassing samadhi like this and continue to apply ourselves assiduously to practice—with all our energy and not relenting even for a moment—it will soon deepen immeasurably. A moment then comes in which body, mind, and all phenomena drop completely away: time and space, the senses, and awareness are all extinguished.[15] This place of utter nonbeing is the so-called Great Death of Zen, the state of absolute nothingness. Again, by itself this is not necessarily awakening. But this state of truly profound samadhi holds the tremendous potentiality of causing us to be reborn into a new life. If some incident or stimulus then shatters that state of blackness, causing us to return suddenly to our normal consciousness, it is possible to arrive at an extremely profound kensho.

As we will see, some of the methods of direct pointing we will examine can be used in precisely this way by teachers: to shatter samadhi and bring about the decisive turning around of kensho. But another

important thing to know is that the depth of one's samadhi is dependent upon and driven by the degree of body-mind integration cultivated by the practitioner. It is precisely the methods of internal energetic cultivation we will examine that are classically used to accomplish this and create conditions for such a samadhi to arise. We should say, in fact, that it is only through mastery of such methods that the most profound, subtle samadhi condition possible can manifest. This is one reason for Rinzai Zen's strong emphasis on internal energetic cultivation, and it is why those preserved teachings are so precious.

## Importance of the Teacher

Whatever uses the methods we will examine may have for each of us according to our individual situations, I would like to conclude this introduction by stressing that this book is not meant to take the place of a teacher. As Hakuin said, even the most profound teachings and practices can, if applied inappropriately, become poison rather than nourishment. It is true that Zen is a path accomplished only through one's own body-mind. But this is done in relationship with a qualified master whose existence manifests the embodied qualities of awakening. The initial entrance of kensho is most easily accomplished not alone but through the direct pointing activity of the teacher who observes our conditions and acts accordingly using many skillful means.

For these reasons, it would certainly be foolish to forgo such guidance. Even if someone reading this book happened to enter the gate of profound awakening without guidance or prior practice, the fact remains that it is only from a qualified teacher that affirmation of genuine kensho may be obtained. And it is only with a teacher's guidance that one is likely to avoid the many pitfalls that lie along the subsequent post-kensho path of liberation. For those who might think that my committing orally transmitted instructions to writing, as I have done in this book, makes it possible to dispense with the teacher,

I must also say that *kuden* consists of more than just the verbal instructions. It includes the hands-on, nonverbal learning that can take place only when one spends time in the presence of, and is able to observe or even feel with one's hands the body-mind functioning of, a teacher who has embodied these instructions.

I often think that none of this should really need saying since the Zen tradition has always stressed the role of the teacher and the indispensable nature of that crucial human relationship. But it seems fashionable today to think that technology allows us to learn anything on our own. The truth is that we should affirm something quite different: technology doesn't remove the need for a teacher, but in fact it makes it possible for sincere Zen students to contact and meet face-to-face with Zen teachers in a manner that is almost effortless compared to what past generations endured. Today we need not travel by foot, ship, and caravan over long distances for months or years. We need not risk storms, disease, and bandits just to encounter a qualified master. We need only send an email, and no matter where in the world a teacher lives it could even be possible to travel there within a day or two. How incredibly fortunate we are to live in such an era of easy access to dharma teachings! Certainly, we should take advantage of the unprecedented ease with which one may find a teacher today. There is no telling how long such a situation will last.

We thus must wonder if some persons who attempt to walk the Zen path alone based on their own faulty understanding—an undertaking long warned against and almost certainly doomed to failure—are not bound within a particularly stubborn and foolish kind of egoism. At the very least, we must say that they are unfamiliar with what the actual path of Zen entails.

Returning to the subjects of this book: it is certain that not all the practices we will examine here could be fully grasped from the text alone. No matter how much detail I give, the text could at best serve as a kind of reference. Nor are all these practices suitable for everyone.

Like medicines, some will be appropriate for one's specific disease of delusion, but others may not and could even worsen the situation if misapplied. I therefore urge the reader interested in Zen to seek out a qualified master and so enter the mainstream of Zen practice by which a direct approach to awakening—and the subsequent path of liberation—may be dependably actualized. It is my expectation that anyone choosing to make use of the practices in this book has done so, including taking up a dedicated regular practice of zazen.[16]

But if this is not the case, it is at least my hope that this book, revealing a small portion of the things that teachers pass on to their students, will provide inspiration to seek one out. In truth, it is only within that relationship that the practices of direct pointing and internal energetic cultivation may truly function as supports for a rightly directed, coherent path of liberation. Within such a relationship, in fact, there are few methods that could *not* be integrated within the Zen path. Taking as it does the recognition of our true nature as its foundation, Zen is ultimately not limited to specific methods at all. It is within the intimate meeting between teacher and student that we may ultimately arrive at the place of freedom in which all our activities become effortless practice.

With that we have completed this introduction serving as a foundation for what follows. Let us now turn to these actual inherited treasures: the practices of direct pointing and internal energetic cultivation.

# Part One

# DIRECT POINTING

# 1

# Direct Pointing at the Human Mind

*It is thus that Lord Shakyamuni, the most venerable, instructs us here. It is the teaching that comes down to men in response to their needs. But perhaps, gentlemen, you wish to know the state of things before Shakyamuni ever entered his mother's womb.*

*(Muso tapped his staff on the floor.)*

*Listen, Listen!*[1]

MUSO SOSEKI

Now we will begin to explore the first category of hidden Zen practices: the methods of direct pointing. Before doing so I would like to define the term more clearly and explain in detail how this distinctive aspect of the Zen path manifests and functions.

## Definition of Direct Pointing

The term *direct pointing* in Zen is found most famously in the four lines describing Zen's approach and intent attributed to the Indian master Bodhidharma.[2]

> A separate transmission outside the scriptures,
> Not dependent upon words or letters,
> Direct pointing at the human mind,
> Seeing one's nature and becoming Buddha.

The last two of these lines especially concern us here, as they describe the actual path of Zen practice. I have written about Zen's approach and intent in greater detail elsewhere but will here summarize.[3]

"Direct pointing at the human mind" refers generally to the ways in which Zen students are made to turn around the light of their own awareness to arrive at kensho. This activity—the arranging of the student's conditions in order to enter awakening—constitutes the primary initial task of a Zen teacher.

"Seeing one's nature," as I have said, translates the word *kensho* itself; this is the crucial awakening to one's intrinsic wisdom or "original face." Since the actual path of Zen practice takes this awakening as its basis, we should recognize that until we do arrive at awakening we are not yet, strictly speaking, "practicing Zen." What Zen truly signifies only becomes clear to us when we open our wisdom eyes and are able to ourselves give testament in some small way to the truth that Shakyamuni discovered.

"Becoming Buddha" describes the subsequent—and utterly essential—path of practice after kensho. It is by means of this lifelong, exhaustive path that the initial awakening of kensho is deepened and made to penetrate the body; the roots of habitual delusion are cut, and liberation is realized.

Inasmuch as they concisely map the Zen path, Bodhidharma's lines are worthy of deep examination. Taking them as our starting point, it may in fact be said that all methods of Zen practice can be used in one or more of three ways:

- To help the student dissolve obstructions to awakening
- To cause the student to arrive at awakening
- To help the student revisit, clarify, deepen, and embody awakening as part of a lifelong path of liberation: the actualization of becoming a buddha

In this same way, the practices of direct pointing have varying uses. For persons who have not yet arrived at kensho, these methods have the power to dissolve obstructions to awakening because they are able to effect sudden change in our ways of experiencing. For persons whose conditions are indeed ripe for awakening, methods of direct pointing can cause one to suddenly arrive at that crucial recognition; that is, they can serve as the final impetus that brings one to kensho. Finally, for persons who have already awakened, methods of direct pointing have utility along the subsequent path of becoming a buddha because they allow one to revisit awakening, again and again, until one has completely embodied it.

Again, it is unfortunate that some Western Zen lineages seem not to have inherited such things. Where that is the case, we often find that Bodhidharma's words "direct pointing at the human mind" are little mentioned or else taken to be simply a general *descriptor* of Zen rather than a crucial *activity* within Zen practice. That is, the existence of such concrete methods for arranging students' conditions in order to lead them to awakening seems little grasped by some.

But how then shall we define "direct pointing" in terms of the actual practices we will examine in this book and in a manner fitting their diverse nature? For our purposes I would like to use the following definition that I expect will prove sufficiently broad: *the practices of direct*

*pointing are means by which the Zen student's way of experiencing is decisively altered to penetrate habitual delusion.*

Let us now examine more closely the ways in which such methods manifest and their actual effects on the practitioner.

## Means of Direct Pointing

Direct pointing methods in Zen may be said to fall into one of three general categories: those that are bodily or make use of physical means, those that are verbal or make use of sound, and those that make use of what we may call *extraordinary* means.

### *Bodily or Physical Means*

Means of direct pointing using some bodily or physical action are likely the best recognized, and they are easily observed within both Zen literature and daily practice. Perhaps the most famous example is described in the so-called Flower Sermon, found in several Chinese chronicles from the Song dynasty. In this episode the Buddha wordlessly holds up a single flower in front of his disciples, at which Mahakasyapa alone smiles, signifying that he has grasped the experiential understanding to which the Buddha's action points. Upon seeing this, the Buddha says the words that according to tradition mark the transmission of the sublime Zen teachings.

> I possess the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, the Subtle Dharma Gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahakasyapa.[4]

Another well-known example is this famous episode from the *Rinzairoku*.

When Elder Ding came to see Linji [Rinzai] he asked, "What is the cardinal principle of the buddhadharma?"

The master got down from his rope-bottomed chair. Seizing Ding, he gave him a slap and pushed him away. Ding stood still.

A monk standing by said, "Elder Ding, why don't you bow?" Just as he bowed, Ding attained great enlightenment.[5]

We also see in the *Rinzairoku* that Rinzai himself was not spared such means of direct pointing in his earlier days.

> When Linji [Rinzai] was one of the assembly of monks under Huangbo [Obaku], he was plain and direct in his behavior. The head monk praised him saying, "Though he's a youngster, he's different from the other monks." So he asked, "Honorable monk, how long have you been here?"
>
> "Three years," replied Linji.
>
> "Have you ever asked for instruction?"
>
> "No, I've never asked for instruction. I don't know what to ask," replied Linji.
>
> "Why don't you go ask the head priest of this temple just what the cardinal principle of the buddhadharma is," said the head monk.
>
> Linji went and asked. Before he had finished speaking Huangbo hit him. Linji came back. "How did your question go?" asked the head monk.
>
> "Before I had finished speaking the master hit me. I don't understand," said Linji.
>
> "Then go and ask him again," said the head monk.
>
> So Linji went back and asked, and again Huangbo hit him. Thus Linji asked the same question three times and was hit three times.[6]

Such episodes abound in Zen literature. Remembering the role of samadhi in practice and the manner in which a sudden shock can lead to its shattering followed by a decisive awakening, we can understand such occurrences and appreciate the keen eye and dynamic activity of great masters like Obaku and Rinzai.

### *Verbal Means or Those Making Use of Sound*

Direct pointing by means of speech or sound is also well known, and many examples may be found.

Among the most famous is this episode from the *Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch*. Eno, having been secretly designated the Fifth Patriarch's successor and given the robe and bowl as a symbol thereof, was forced to flee from several hundred monks who did not accept his new status. Finally caught by Emyo,[7] an especially stubborn monk who had formerly been a military general, Eno discovered that this pursuer had in fact come for the teachings rather than to take back the robe and bowl. Directing Emyo to first concentrate and calm his mind for some time, Eno then reportedly asked him a famously direct and cutting question that led to his sudden awakening:

> Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil, what at this moment is your original face before your mother and father were born?[8]

Returning to the *Rinzairoku*, an episode of verbal direct pointing also happily follows the episode I mentioned earlier in which Rinzai was struck repeatedly by Obaku. This time, it was words spoken to Rinzai by Daigu that led him finally to awakening.

> Linji [Rinzai] arrived at Dayu's [Daigu's] temple. Dayu said, "Where have you come from?"
>
> "I have come from Huangbo's place," replied Linji.

"What did Huangbo have to say?" asked Dayu.

"Three times I asked him just what the cardinal principle of the buddhadharma is and three times he hit me. I don't know whether I was at fault or not."

"Huangbo is such a grandmother that he utterly exhausted himself with your troubles!" said Dayu. "And now you come here asking whether you were at fault or not!"

At these words Linji attained great enlightenment. "Ah, there isn't so much to Huangbo's buddhadharma!" he cried.[9]

Truly, these episodes reveal that the ability to deliver what is called an appropriate "turning word"—that is, speech that suddenly causes the student to turn around the light of awareness and recognize the intrinsic wisdom that has never been absent—is something highly valued in Zen.

Another very important and well-known type of direct pointing using sound is a sharp, sudden shout: the *katsu*.* This is a subject connected not only to direct pointing but also to internal energetic cultivation, and we will examine it in more depth later.

### *Extraordinary Means*

The third category is less easy to discern in written records but perhaps the most crucial. So-called extraordinary means of direct pointing reveal the transformative effects that the presence of a realized person may spontaneously have upon the conditions of another. In a sense, all encounters with a legitimate teacher of sufficient power can be said to fall at least partly into this third category, and especially the practice of sanzen that is so important in the Rinzai Zen path.

Those who have trained under such a master will be familiar with this in an intimate way. For example, there are times when the student finds that the presence of the master alone causes one to enter

samadhi; in my own case, such occurrences with my teacher were so common that they ceased to elicit curiosity. It is also sometimes the case in sanzen that the essential point of some koan, which has resisted one's best efforts to penetrate it, is suddenly revealed upon facing the master within the interview room. And certainly, in the presence of a dynamic master possessing great energy we may find that our burdens, worries, and problems seem to fall away. Such an effect can last for a time even after we have departed, as if we are being lifted and carried by an infusion of the master's energy. Though it may be hard to believe, there are even instances in which putting on a garment or handling the belongings used by such a person can transform us.

That is perhaps enough to say for now. We will later examine some specific moments during Zen training when extraordinary means of direct pointing are in fact depended upon.

Here I might digress briefly to touch upon the questions of how and when teachers are to employ methods of direct pointing. Understandings of these things are transmitted orally in Rinzai Zen lineages to those who must take up that burden of guiding others. Incidents of direct pointing are also the focus of various koans examined in Rinzai practice. In fact, there is even a koan *about* this question of when direct pointing—or what is called *sottaku*,* "pecking"—is appropriate. *Sottaku* refers precisely to the teacher's activity to bring the student to awakening, likening it to that of a mother hen who pecks at a chick's shell even as the chick simultaneously struggles from within. Thus, in the *Shumon Kattoshu* we find this from Nan'in.

> Nanyuan [Nan'in], addressing the assembly, said, "You grasp the idea of simultaneous pecking and tapping, but you lack the function of simultaneous pecking and tapping."
>
> A monk came forward and asked, "What is the function of simultaneous pecking and tapping?"

> Nanyuan said, "A true adept has no need of pecking and tapping; the moment there is pecking and tapping, the function is lost."[10]

Nan'in's final comment, the ramifications of which must be penetrated in sanzen with one's teacher, does indeed reveal how direct pointing must manifest skillfully and correctly as an expression of the wondrous functioning of Zen wisdom. It is an important point for Zen teachers to grasp, since the consequences of unskillful or ill-timed direct pointing can be unfortunate. Commenting on this danger, in fact, Hakuin famously recorded an incident from his childhood in which he compassionately attempted to help a cicada free itself from its skin but in so doing deformed its wing.[11]

Having said all of this regarding the categories of direct pointing, most of the practices I have chosen to include in this book are not restricted to use solely by teachers (though we will look at some of those methods as well). I have mostly chosen, rather, practices that students may also use *themselves*. Thus, I have not strictly adhered to the categories of direct pointing mentioned above and present the methods in no specific order, except of course in cases where later methods take preceding ones as a foundation. I have also given practice instructions for most of the methods in a manner directed to students rather than teachers.

Next, we will look more closely at the actual functions of direct pointing.

## Functions of Direct Pointing

Earlier I explained the various ways in which all Zen practices can be used to fulfill the path revealed in Bodhidharma's four lines: by removing obstructions to awakening, revealing the wisdom of

awakening, or helping us to revisit, actualize, and embody that wisdom. I also defined the practices of direct pointing as "means by which the Zen student's way of experiencing is decisively altered to penetrate habitual delusion."

But I would like now to transition to a less theoretical discussion of these methods. Here I will explain their functions more specifically in terms of what someone using them might experience:

- Recognizing basic clarity
- Entering samadhi
- Arriving at awakening
- Returning to wisdom

Let us examine each of these in turn.

### *Recognizing Basic Clarity*

First, for persons who have not yet arrived at the recognition of kensho, the methods we will examine could at least help them to experience something crucial: the mind's capacity for relaxed, nonabiding clarity.

Why is this important? It is because we usually experience our minds in a rather different manner: habitually caught up in chaotic states marked by fixation, attachment, and fear, we are fascinated by phenomena and chase endlessly after the never-ceasing stream of conceptual elaboration, emotions, memories, and fantasies to which we attach so much importance. But to experience even a moment when these fixations drop and the endless activity of conceptualization lessens—thereby understanding that our minds do indeed possess a basic clear, nonfixated quality not fundamentally obscured by our usual self-centered fabrications—is extremely worthwhile. Remarkably, we can even see that within this natural clarity our usual afflictions (habitual cravings, aversions or fears, and ignorance) are also lessened or even seemingly absent for a time.

This brief experience of clarity is like remembering that there is a vast, open sky—endless, bright, and clear—hidden behind the clouds. It may also be compared to looking at the blades of a fan or an airplane propeller: our usual fixation on the endless arising of both inner and outer phenomena is like trying to follow propeller blades with our eyes as they spin, getting dizzier and more disturbed in the attempt. But if in a single moment one relaxes and releases that fixation, it is found that the spinning can be seen through. The view of what lies behind was in fact never obstructed by the blades at all.[12]

This, then, is an important function of these practices, and it is a very useful one indeed for removing obstructions to awakening: the methods we will examine can suddenly reveal to us our own capacity for clarity and help us return to it again and again. Practicing like this over time, our habitual fixation relaxes more and more, and we begin to manifest a certain open, free, and courageous perspective. With this we also find that our faith in the path grows: though we have heard for so long that each of us possesses the potential to awaken and that our true nature is not in the least different from that of enlightened buddhas, this experience of basic clarity allows us to believe for the first time that such things might truly be possible. While the experience of clarity alone is not awakening or sufficient for liberation, later in our practice we will come to recognize that clarity is in fact the very face of wisdom.

### *Entering Samadhi*

Another way these methods can aid us, related to the previous one, is by helping us to enter samadhi. I earlier described samadhi in a general way as a relaxed, sustained stability in which the mind functions freely without fixation or distraction. That stability is, in fact, a seamless resting within the free-flowing clarity described above. In other words, having experienced our minds momentarily as nonabiding and nonobstructed, fixating on neither "inner" or "outer," we will be able with practice to deepen and sustain that experience of natural clarity

for longer periods and so to integrate it in a living way with our daily activities.

Because samadhi powerfully helps us to dissolve obstructions to kensho, and later to seamlessly embody its wisdom, it is indeed a crucial aspect of the Zen path. I have already explained how samadhi is a particularly fertile state from which it is possible to arrive at awakening. But to use these methods of direct pointing to enter samadhi there is something we should know: it will be necessary for us to apply the embodied concentration power we have cultivated through such practices as zazen. When one-pointed concentration is unified energetically with our own mind's relaxed, nonabiding clarity, then we are able over time—and with less and less effort—to manifest an increasingly intense and vital samadhi.

This is what is meant by the cultivation of *joriki*,* or "samadhi power," in Zen. Until we begin to cultivate such power, any beneficial state we experience will be impossible to sustain and deepen: it will come and go with little usefulness for our path. We will see later that the methods of internal energetic cultivation are also extremely useful in this regard.

As with the basic experience of clarity, we should know that sustained samadhi is not by itself awakening. But later in our practice we will come to see that samadhi is the active function and manifestation of our awakening, and that true Zen awakening manifests in seamless unity with samadhi.

### *Arriving at Awakening*

Here, of course, is the most well-known function of these methods: what we might call the classic direct pointing. Having encountered the Zen teachings and given rise to *bodaishin**—the aspiration to awaken for the sake of all beings—a student who is truly ripe might through these methods be able to experientially discover what is meant by "seeing one's nature."

This is the turning around of the light of one's own awareness to clearly recognize that within one's own mind—intrinsically free and not bound by afflictions, luminously aware and nonabiding, permeating all phenomena and free of the divisions of "inside" or "outside"—there is, in fact, no fixed "I" or "me" whatsoever nor anything anywhere that is apart from one's original face. It is the moment when the essential point of Zen is known, and with this knowledge the basis of all subsequent Zen practice becomes clear. This is kensho.

As I have said, it is generally the teacher's task to bring the student to this crucial place of awakening. But such is a use of these methods, for persons so fortunate.

### *Returning to Wisdom*

Finally, for persons who have succeeded in entering the gate of awakening and are working under a teacher's guidance to actualize it along the post-kensho path, the practices we will examine could be useful as I have described to repeatedly revisit or rediscover that wisdom, like opening the door again and again or seeing the cardinal repeatedly until it has become something intimately familiar. Even though vestiges of habitual delusion still arise to interrupt or dull one's recognition, we can use these methods to return to the path and continue our progress.

The long training to seamlessly integrate the seeing of kensho—sometimes being in accord with it and sometimes falling back into delusion, but returning to it in unity with samadhi again and again until all the actions of body, speech, and mind are in harmony with it—constitutes the greater and most difficult part of the Zen path. We should understand that it is our samadhi cultivation after kensho that powers this process, manifesting as a constant upwelling of intrinsic wisdom. It is one of the means by which awakening will ultimately penetrate the very fiber of our bodies.

This last use of the practices of direct pointing could be described

as a kind of remembering. In other words, these methods can help us to "snap back" when we have fallen once more into habitual delusion. The sensation of such snapping back is not unlike that of suddenly, while having a nightmare, realizing that one is in fact dreaming; at that moment one immediately remembers that what is seen in the dream is illusory, a fantasy. With that all fear vanishes, and one gains the freedom to enjoy—or even beneficially use—the circumstances of the dream. Like this, the methods of direct pointing can help us to remember and reaffirm awakening and so to reunify ourselves with the path as we train to accord harmoniously in samadhi with whatever we encounter. Returning again and again to wisdom in this way, we slowly begin to feel that dreamlike fantasy no longer binds us as it once did. We find ourselves able to live more and more grounded in the wisdom of awakening. Our constant ups and downs become less dramatic; we find ourselves less reactive in the ways we had been in the past.

To become increasingly familiar with our intrinsic wisdom like this within the changing situations of life is the actual path of liberation. By liberation what is meant, at the very least, is the arising of unshakeable confidence in this wisdom, and also sufficient progress along the post-kensho path to embody it in a nonregressing manner. Ultimately, to realize nondeparture from the wisdom of awakening is the culmination of becoming Buddha.

In this chapter I have defined direct pointing, described the means with which it is done, and explained its functions as might be experienced by practitioners. It is my hope that this has clarified why these practices are valuable and how they support the overall intent of our Zen path. What follows now are the twenty-eight actual practices of direct pointing I have selected for this book.

# 2

# Selected Practices of Direct Pointing for Zen Students

**THE FIRST TWENTY-TWO** practices of direct pointing in this chapter have been purposefully presented in a manner allowing students to use them directly.

## Spreading Out the Vision

The first practice we will examine is a bodily method of direct pointing. Specifically, it uses the eyes and vision to change our way of experiencing.

In Zen training, and particularly during zazen, the eyes are used in a specific manner that may be summarized thus: rather than staring at a single point using foveal (focused or central) vision, one activates the peripheral field to encompass one's surroundings with awareness in a broad, sweeping, and relaxed manner. A traditional way this has been described in Japanese swordsmanship is that one should use the eyes "as if gazing at distant mountains." Somewhat earlier in history, we have these words from the Fifth Patriarch.

> Look to where the horizon disappears beyond the sky and behold the figure *one*. This is a great help. It is good for those beginning to sit in meditation, when they find their mind distracted, to focus their mind on the figure *one*.[1]

The character for the number one in Chinese is a single horizontal line. Advising students to look in this manner at the distant horizon is in fact the same thing as "gazing at distant mountains." If you imagine how you might view at once a distant range of mountains, spread out from horizon to horizon—or visualize a single horizontal line spread out at the horizon where the earth meets the sky—the meaning of these words will become clear.

What is interesting is that when we use our eyes this way, we experience a marked decrease in gross thought activity: mental chatter stills. Examining more closely, we may observe that when using the eyes with attention in this manner there will seem to be little afflictive or negative emotion arising: our usual habit of giving rise to fear, craving, and other afflictive states lessens dramatically. Furthermore, we may notice that our sense of being an observing "self" separate from the things we see falls somewhat away. The sensation of existing inside one's skull and watching objects that are outside in the world dissolves. Thus, the way we use our eyes in Zen practice can reveal our capacity for clarity and help us to experience samadhi. It can even lead us to awakening.

Over the years, I have heard my teachers stress again and again how crucial this way of using the eyes is. They have constantly reminded how important it is for correct zazen to integrate this manner of seeing. Reflecting further on the experience one has when seeing this way, I have come to an interesting conclusion: the modern habit of using the eyes almost entirely in a focused manner is an aberration, and not at all in accord with our physical evolution.

Most of our time these days seems to be spent with eyes tightly focused on screens. Even when walking outside we find it difficult not

to pull out phones to continue indulging this habit. It is little wonder that we feel socially isolated and largely cut off from nature. One need only stroll down a city sidewalk to observe how most people walk with their fields of vision cast downward onto screens or the ground, avoiding the gaze of others and largely occupied with inner thoughts and worries. They will often walk right into you if you do not move to avoid them. Really, people who spend days and years like this cannot be said to be fully in the world at all. In a way, they are more like ghosts than living persons.

But for most of our development as a species I imagine that human beings moved through space and used their senses quite differently. Our distant ancestors lived in a world that required them to be fully present. Moving about on savannahs and plains or in deep forest, one must activate peripheral vision to sense activity and movement in the environment. This was necessary not only to find game but to avoid predators and enemies. Fine vision was also important, of course: to make a tool, to focus on a face when speaking, to examine something found. But I believe that for much of human history, peripheral vision was, in fact, equally important.

Hunters and others who observe wildlife still know this well today. If one wishes to find a deer in the woods or a bird in a tree, one does not search from point to point with focused vision. Instead one spreads out one's gaze broadly, encompassing the whole scene within the peripheral field. The mind then becomes remarkably still and clear, and one feels immersed in or connected to the surroundings. In that state even a small flicker of movement—the flutter of a wing, the blinking of a deer's eye, or the movement of its tail—is instantly sensed without effort or thought. Immediately and unconsciously, one then focuses in to determine what was glimpsed. Soldiers, police officers, and martial artists, if they are well trained, certainly also learn to integrate this way of using the eyes.

That is all very interesting. But what we should especially understand

as Zen practitioners is that overuse of focused vision increases tension, internal chatter, and neuroses. Yet everyone, not just practitioners, can relearn to spread out their vision. When we do so, whole new worlds of living detail and movement open for us. We begin to feel again that we are part of the space surrounding us rather than isolated within ourselves. Truly, we should all regain this original human way of seeing.

Despite the importance of using the eyes this way in Zen training, it oddly seems to be among the orally transmitted details of practice not always received by Western Zen students. I have even heard from some Zen students that their teachers advised them to stare one-pointedly at a fixed spot on the floor or wall, something that not only causes eyestrain and fatigue but also an increase in gross thought activity and tension. For these reasons I have placed this method first among the direct pointing practices, followed by several that rely upon it.

Here is an exercise you may try in order to grasp this physical way of using the eyes. (I have also given this in a previous book as part of basic zazen instruction.[2])

1. Sitting or standing comfortably, look straight ahead and spread out your vision in a broad, relaxed manner so that you are watching the entire room at once (rather than staring with focused vision at whatever point across the room your gaze strikes).
2. Extend your arms behind your head where you cannot see them and raise your index fingers to eye level. Slowly bring the arms forward until the fingers appear in your peripheral field. Stop at the point where you can just see both fingers at the same time on the very edges of your vision. Stretch your vision out to simultaneously encompass both fingers and the entire visual field between them. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Activating the peripheral field.

3. Now drop your arms but maintain this expansive gaze, stretching your awareness to the limits of the peripheral field and filling the surrounding space. You are not looking at one thing; you are seeing everything at once, softly and effortlessly.

If you wish to understand how this way of using the eyes is integrated within seated meditation, simply allow the angle of your gaze to drop to forty-five degrees while maintaining the expansive vision you cultivated. Though the eyes are gently downcast, your awareness still fills the space around you. The feeling is that even if a fly should land somewhere in the room, you will know it without having to shift your gaze.[3] (Figure 2)

Figure 2: The gaze used in zazen: vision spread out, with eyes gently downcast.

In daily life we should also use our vision this way whenever possible. As I have said, many people spend large portions of their days with visual and mental focus strongly fixated upon a series of things (screens, the ground, their food during meals, and so on) but excluding from their attention most of the world around them. Our way of using the eyes should more often have a sweeping, expansive quality, filling both horizontal and vertical space with this feeling of seeing the entire view at once.

If you found the exercise using upraised fingers to be difficult, here is another simple one that uses this book you are holding. Using the diagram below, follow the instructions given. (Figure 3)

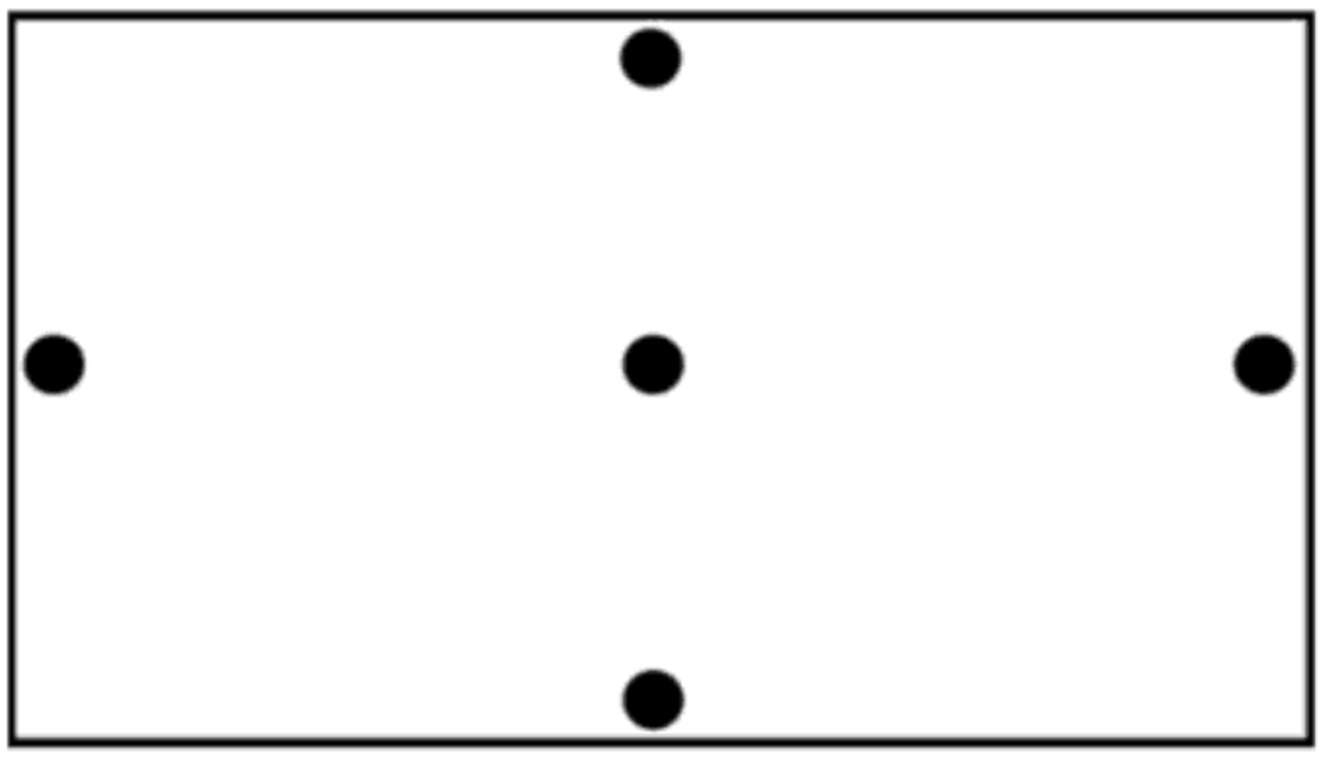

Figure 3

1. Looking straight ahead, hold this book up at eye level at a comfortable distance from your face such that you can stare intently at the center dot in the diagram. Doing so, restrict your attention solely to that dot: this replicates the experience of focused vision. In that state, now observe your condition of mind. Is it tense or tight in feeling?
2. Continuing to hold the book in that manner, now expand your attention to encompass the four outer dots simultaneously. Your vision is now being used a little more broadly. You are still aware of the center dot, but the other dots are now included in your field of awareness.

3. Expand your attention more broadly now to encompass the entire page. Once again, observe your condition of mind in that state.
4. Finally, without turning away or shifting your gaze, let your attention extend beyond the edges of the book. Keep the book where it is, but simply expand your attention to encompass the room beyond the page that is in front of and around you. You will notice that you are still aware of both the center and outer dots, and the book itself, but your vision does not stick to them and softly takes in the entire surroundings as well. Observe your condition of mind now: it will feel even more free and relaxed.

Once you have gained some familiarity with this way of using the eyes, there are many ways to apply it. Here is a practice of direct pointing using this way of broad, expansive seeing.

1. Go to a place in which you have some open space in front of you, for example, facing out toward a distant view, an open field, or a horizon where the waters of a sea or lake meet the sky. Stand or sit comfortably, relaxing the body. Let your chin be level so that you are looking straight ahead. You may raise your chin slightly if it helps to establish such an expansive view.
2. Take a few deep breaths naturally in and out through the nose, letting all tension drop from body and mind.
3. When you are ready, now take a final deep breath and exhale slowly. As you exhale, and especially at the end of your exhalation when the breath has mostly exited but before you feel the need to inhale, immediately and strongly spread out your vision to the very limits of your peripheral field. Do this with full attention for five or ten seconds. (The exact length of time

is unimportant.) You may continue to breathe naturally during this time as required.

4. Now relax and recall those few seconds when you spread your vision out, examining your experience:
   - Were there thoughts arising or the usual mental chatter during that time you spread your vision out?
   - Did any negative or afflictive states arise during that time? Were there any habitual feelings of fear, craving, anxiety, sadness, and so on?
   - Was there, in fact, any "I" present within that expansive awareness?

If you are able to catch the intent of this method, you will likely recognize that there is actually little or no gross thought activity during the time you spread out your vision. For those few moments, there are no negative states or feelings arising. And there is little or no solid sense of "I" within it; there is seeing, but the sense of a watcher engaged in the activity of viewing separate "things" is not strongly present at all. Just this reveals your own capacity for clarity and the ultimately boundless nature of your mind, not restricted by habitual dualistic seeing.

To use this method more profoundly, here is a final step you may use:

1. Do the practice as described above: when you exhale, activate the peripheral field and spread your vision out broadly.
2. Now, in the moment when your vision is spread out and you have encompassed everything within your relaxed gaze, *allow this expansive attention to extend also to the place within your own mind where seeing is occurring.* In other words: rather than looking outward at or troubling yourself with the so-called external world of objects—as if your mind were reaching out through the eyes to grasp whatever lies within your field of

> view—just let the mind rest within the act of seeing itself. See at *the source* of seeing.

Using this method, you may be able to recognize the inseparability of mind and phenomena, that is, the nondivision between so-called inner and outer worlds. If with sustained clarity you can rest within that way of seeing, that is samadhi.

Furthermore, if you can truly recognize that within neither outer nor inner world is there any solid, fixed self whatsoever to be found, then in that moment you might grasp what is meant by one's "original face" and "nature of mind." That is, it could be possible for you to have the recognition we call kensho.

Shido Bunan Zenji, the great master who was the teacher of Dokyo Etan (and thus the dharma grandfather of Hakuin), said the words below. Using the method of seeing I have described here, one might be able not only to catch his meaning but to grasp the complete path of liberation that is thereby revealed.

> There is no special principle in the study of the way; it's only necessary to see and hear directly. Directly seeing, there is no seeing; directly hearing, there is no hearing. You must fuse inside and outside into one solid thoroughly peaceful state before you can do this.[4]

When Shido Bunan says that in direct seeing there is no seeing and in direct hearing there is no hearing, he does not mean that we become senseless. There is "no seeing" because there is no separation of seer and seen. There is "no hearing" because there is no hearer apart from what is heard. Indeed, we must experience the samadhi in which inside and outside are fused in order to grasp this.

But even if you are not able to immediately have that more profound recognition and arrive at kensho through seeing, you are

now at least able to use this practice of spreading the vision out to experience and revisit your own natural clarity. Whenever you feel awash in thought and afflictive emotion, you may sit or stand, relax, spread out your vision, and thereby instantly change your state. In Zen we do not try to change our minds using our minds: it is more rapid and effective to use the body—or rather, the whole body-mind—to transform our experience. This method of using the eyes is a wonderful example.

The next two practices of direct pointing we will examine rest upon this way of using the eyes.

## Seeing a Tree

Here is a method that will further reinforce the Zen manner of using the eyes we just learned. Remarkably, it can also reveal the doorway to a world many feel they have lost: the magical world known in childhood, when things around us appeared intensely vivid, fresh, and alive.

To use this practice, first find a place where you can see a mature tree in its entirety. One that stands in the middle of a park or open field is ideal. Then apply these instructions.

1. Stand or sit at such a distance from the tree that it fills your entire visual field.
2. Looking first at the tree with focused vision, observe in turn as many individual details as you can. For example, focus intently on various parts of the trunk, then on individual limbs, on specific leaves, and so on. Doing so, observe how your mind feels and how it perceives the solidity and existence of the object "tree." You will notice that when the tree is seen as a succession of parts using focused vision, it is experienced as something distinctly separate from you and from other objects surrounding it.

3. Now spread out your vision as we have learned, encompassing the entire tree at once with a relaxed, expansive gaze. Spend a few minutes like this observing the tree in its entirety, from its roots to topmost boughs simultaneously, with all its color and movement. Throw yourself energetically into this broad, nondivisive way of seeing. Do not allow your mind to be taken with individual parts or aspects of the tree. Just see the tree whole, using the eyes softly and broadly.
4. Observe then how your mind feels in that state and what your sense of "tree" is. Where does the tree begin and end? Where do you?
5. Finally, turning your awareness inward, see the tree at the source of that seeing. That is, experience the tree reflected within the source of your awareness rather than as a thing sitting some distance away from you. This is to directly see without seeing, as Shido Bunan Zenji describes. In that state, what then is "tree"?

This method in its fruition reveals to us the living quality of the world around us. To see a tree in its seamless wholeness and totality of presence, free from our usual visual habit and discriminating mind that "kills" the tree by separating it from ourselves and dissecting it into labeled pieces, is indeed to rediscover a lost world. The gray, sterile environment filled with detached, colorless objects—the wasteland of exile and longing within which we seem inexplicably to find ourselves as adults—suddenly disappears. In its place is revealed a shining, living, magical realm.

There are many such objects one could use to integrate this way of seeing; the form, size, way of movement, and common presence of trees simply make them ideal. However we arrive at it, we might again begin to understand these truths: that our own "selves" as well as "objects" are not so rigidly fixed as we think, and that the manner of our seeing in fact creates or destroys the worlds that we inhabit.


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An important point we may be able to understand through this kind of practice is that the mind cultivated in Zen is not something static or clinging to a state of dead stillness. It is, rather, utterly responsive and in accord with changing conditions, entering and enjoying the flow of things without the slightest attachment. The stability of mind cultivated in Zen samadhi is not, in other words, like that of a large, immobile, unconscious stone. It is rather dynamically alive, adaptable, and utterly free in its movement. The image of a ball bouncing along in rapids—floating, spinning, and rushing along in spontaneous accord with the constantly changing flow, without ever sticking to any obstacle—is an apt description of the mind in samadhi.[6]

With the above instructions in mind as a kind of template, you may also practice taking the other elements as a support for your practice.

### FIRE

Sitting close to an open fire, open your senses, and with your whole body just join unwaveringly with the unceasing, unpredictable play of the flames, smoke, and light. Doing so, you may enter the fire samadhi, marked by a similar free-flowing, nonabiding quality of mind that we could experience with water but containing also a ferociously energetic, purifying quality. Such samadhi is easily entered during the *goma** ritual used by practitioners in the Shingon, Tendai, and Shugendo* traditions. Doing such practices and reciting the mantra* of a deity such as Fudo Myo-o,* it is not that a vision of Fudo is to be sought within the flames but rather that the purifying flames of Fudo arise within one's own body-mind in the samadhi of that practice. In this way, we ourselves become Fudo Myo-o and embody the state that his image represents.

### WIND

Go to some place where there is a constant wind or strong breeze, and sit or stand fully exposed to it. Opening your senses, attend to every nuance of the swirling air as it moves about your body. Observing these

sensations at the source of your own awareness, you may begin to feel that the gusts do not actually move around or over you but *through* your body-mind, which in fact is flowing in one continuum with the outer world. Letting the wind blow through you in this manner, allow it to sweep away thought and self-fixation, and experience yourself as completely empty, transparent, and expansive with the wind.

### EARTH

The quality of earth is solidity rather than movement. But like the other elements, this can serve as the gateway to the dissolution of dualistic seeing fixated on self. For this method, sit upon the bare earth or a large stone. Within your meditation attend wholly to the sensations of contact with the earth beneath you.

Now if you wish, you might first for a few moments contemplate something rather extraordinary: sitting upon that surface of stone or patch of earth, you are in truth sitting directly upon the place or region where you are, which in turn sits upon whatever state or nation you inhabit, which sits upon a continent, which sits upon this globe we call Earth, which itself sits upon this solar system, which sits upon this galaxy, which sits upon this vast universe. All of that—from the ground beneath you to the most distant star—is precisely and quite literally what you sit upon. Expanding out your awareness to encompass all of it, experience clearly that you are sitting upon *that*. This of course is a contrived, conceptual kind of visualization. But you may find it useful to expand your feeling out in this manner. (Some later methods we will examine use a similar sort of expansive visualization.)

Returning to focus simply upon your body's contact with the earth, let your awareness rest within the sensation of living solidity and expanse that simultaneously permeates both your body and the ground beneath it. Body above and earth below are utterly and in the same manner devoid of any fixed, observing "I." There is, in fact, no body above an earth and no earth below a body. Experiencing in this


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