

the art of  
**Just Sitting**



*essential writings  
on the zen practice of shikantaza*

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY JOHN DAIDO LOORI  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TAIGEN DAN LEIGHTON

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

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*Come said the muse,  
Sing me a song no poet has yet chanted,  
Sing me the universal.*

*In this broad earth of ours,  
Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,  
Enclosed and safe within its central heart,  
Nestles the seed of perfection.*

*By every life a share or more or less,  
None born but it is born, conceal'd or unconceal'd the seed is.*

Walt Whitman

IN THE COLD, DAMP SHELTERS of our primitive ancestors, lit only by the flickering of a campfire, at day's end there was a time for recollection and stillness that would help to fuel the next day's events. Since the beginning of human history, the still point has served as the birthplace of all our activity. Virtually every creature on this great earth practices the backward step of quieting down and entering this still point. Birds, beasts, bugs, and fish all seem to find time in their daily existence to relax and recreate—to bring forth the flower from what Whitman called “the seed of perfection.”

For us humans, relaxation is much more elusive, and even though its benefits are widely known, they are rarely

appreciated. In the field of science, studies have shown that when the body is relaxed and free of tension, and the mind is not grasping at thoughts, remarkable physiological and psychological transformations take place. During deep relaxation, a person's respiration, heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of metabolism all slow down to a stable resting place. Since 1924, researchers have been able to measure the electrical activity in the brain and have discovered that alpha waves are created when the brain activity is stabilized, as when a person is in a meditative state. Beta waves, on the other hand, are present when a person is engaged in physical or mental activity. Though all this is now common knowledge, particularly interesting and relevant to us are the residual effects of these waves. While monitoring meditators, scientists found that alpha waves produced in meditation often continue on when activity is engaged. The energy to perform the activity is there, but not the tension.

Meditation in a variety of forms has been present worldwide since ancient times. A central spiritual practice for many of the great mystics, meditation has been used for both physical and spiritual restoration and as a potent preparation for strenuous undertakings. The warrior takes a moment to center himself as he gets ready for battle, as does the athlete for competition, or the musician for a performance. Meditation, in one form or another, has been intrinsic to most of the great religions of the world. Some traditions may have developed it more than others, but its presence is widespread and undeniable.

In the Buddhist tradition, meditation has been a core element of practice since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, two thousand five hundred years ago. Different schools of Buddhism may emphasize other forms of practice, but meditation remains instrumental in all of them for attaining enlightenment. In the

Zen school, meditation is the *sine qua non* of Zen practice and realization. The Five Houses of the Zen School during the T'ang Dynasty's Golden Age of Zen all recognized zazen (meditation) as the heart of their practice. In fact, by definition, Zen Buddhism is "meditation Buddhism"—the word *zen* is a derivative of the Chinese word *ch'an*, which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit term *dhyana*, or meditation.

*Shikantaza*, or "just sitting," is meditation without a goal. It is boundless—a process that is continually unfolding. Even students engaged in koan introspection, upon completion of their koan study, return to shikantaza during zazen. If you have ever wondered what kind of practice old Zen masters are doing, sitting so long and serenely year after year, the answer is: they are just sitting. The spiritual maturation resulting from this kind of practice is as subtle as it is profound. It shapes our spiritual character the way a river shapes the rocks it encounters on its journey to the sea. The resulting form has as much to do with the rock as with the action of the water, and the changes that take place are gradual and almost invisible. There is no definite way to chart this kind of activity. And so it is with sitting and the teachings that deal with it. We are left only with pointers, reminders that keep us moving in the right direction.

Given the importance placed on seated meditation in the Zen tradition, there is a surprisingly scant amount of written work addressing its practice. The volume of ancient and modern Zen literature is staggering, yet works that address meditation are few and far between. Is this because zazen is so simple and direct that all that can be said about it has already been said? Or is it that there is a profundity within the realm of zazen that is essentially ineffable? I am inclined to believe the latter. As Yasutani Roshi points out in his piece in this volume:

“Shikantaza should be taught personally and individually by the right teacher.” Zen practitioners, as they progress beyond the beginning stages of zazen, encounter a unique landscape that reflects their own personality and individual life experiences. There is no map for this terrain, so an experienced guide is required. Shikantaza, the zazen of “just sitting,” is a continuous process of discovery that is aided by face-to-face encounters with an experienced teacher. Yet even teachers are limited in what they can do. Ultimately, the practitioners themselves must write their own rule book. They must go deep within themselves to find the foundations of zazen.

*The Art of Just Sitting* is an attempt to bring together some of the writings on shikantaza scattered over one thousand five hundred years of Zen history, from the time of its founder Bodhidharma in the fifth century down to the present time. A number of the pieces in this volume have been made previously available in English in a variety of publications, and, along with original material drawn from current teachings, they form a compilation of the best and most relevant of these widespread sources.

This book is inspiration for a sacred journey that, by its very nature, is wide open and limitless. But words can only take you so far. The journey is up to you. Like any practice that is worth doing, shikantaza demands commitment and personal discipline. Eventually, you may require the assistance of an experienced teacher. You will know when that time comes. Trust yourself and the process of zazen to guide you to the right teacher. If your sitting is strong and grounded, a teacher will appear and you will recognize him or her.

Like Whitman’s muse, the ancient Zen masters beckon us to explore our own being, to discover the undiscovered, and in so doing, sing the song of the universal. We live at a time of great



challenge and uncertainty, *amid the measureless grossness and the slag*. Yet, within each one of us lives a seed of perfection, the buddha nature. Every single one of us has it, *by every life a share or more or less*. And although some may realize the buddha nature and some may not, it is nevertheless present, waiting, as Whitman's poem suggests. It is my hope that the wisdom contained in these pages will awaken the spiritual journey for you, the reader, as it has for so many practitioners who have preceded us. *Enclosed and safe within its central heart* is your heart, your journey, your song. Please take it up, and realize the still point as it bursts into flower as this life itself.

John Daido Looi  
Tremper Mountain, New York  
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Finally, deep bows to Master Dogen for his teachings on shikantaza, to my teacher Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi for making me aware of this profound practice, and to all the teachers who have tirelessly dedicated their lives to the transmission of the genuine dharma.

# INTRODUCTION: HONGZHI, DOGEN, AND THE BACKGROUND OF SHIKANTAZA

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Taigen Dan Leighton

ONE WAY TO CATEGORIZE the meditation practice of shikantaza, or “just sitting,” is as an objectless meditation. This is a definition in terms of what it is *not*. One just sits, not concentrating on any particular object of awareness, unlike most traditional meditation practices, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, that involve intent focus on a particular object. Such objects traditionally have included colored disks, candle flames, various aspects of breath, incantations, ambient sound, physical sensations or postures, spiritual figures, mandalas (including geometric arrangements of such figures or of symbols representing them), teaching stories, or key phrases from such stories. Some of these concentration practices are in the background of the shikantaza practice tradition, or have been included with shikantaza in its actual lived experience by practitioners.

But objectless meditation focuses on clear, nonjudgmental, panoramic attention to all of the myriad arising phenomena in the present experience. Such objectless meditation is a potential universally available to conscious beings, and has been expressed at various times in history. This just sitting is not a meditation technique or practice, or any thing at all. “Just sitting” is a verb rather than a noun, the dynamic activity of

being fully present.

The specific practice experience of shikantaza was first articulated in the Soto Zen lineage (Caodong in Chinese) by the Chinese master Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091–1157; Wanshi Shogaku in Japanese), and further elaborated by the Japanese Soto founder Eihei Dogen (1200–1253). But prior to their expressions of this experience, there are hints of this practice in some of the earlier teachers of the tradition. The founding teachers of this lineage run from Shitou Xiqian (700–790; Sekito Kisen in Japanese), two generations after the Chinese Sixth Ancestor, through three generations to Dongshan Liangjie (807–869; Tozan Ryokai in Japanese), the usually recognized founder of the Caodong, or Soto, lineage in China. I will briefly mention a couple of these early practice intimations in their Soto lineage context before discussing the expressions of Hongzhi and Dogen.

Shitou/Sekito is most noted for his teaching poem “Sandokai,” meaning “Harmony of Difference and Sameness,” still frequently chanted in Soto Zen. “Sandokai” presents the fundamental dialectic between the polarity of the universal ultimate and the phenomenal particulars. This dialectic, derived by Shitou from Chinese Huayan thought based on the “Flower Ornament” *Avatamsaka Sutra*, combined with some use of Daoist imagery, became the philosophical background of Soto, as expressed by Dongshan in the Five Ranks teachings, and later elucidated by various Soto thinkers. But Shitou wrote another teaching poem, “Soanka”—“Song of the Grass Hut”—which presents more of a practice model for how to develop the space that fosters just sitting. Therein Shitou says, “Just sitting with head covered, all things are at rest. Thus this mountain monk does not understand at all.”<sup>1</sup> So just sitting does not involve reaching some understanding. It is the subtle activity of

allowing all things to be completely at rest just as they are, not poking one's head into the workings of the world.

Shitou also says in "Soanka": "Turn around the light to shine within, then just return.... Let go of hundreds of years and relax completely. Open your hands and walk, innocent." According to Shitou, the fundamental orientation of turning within, also later described by Hongzhi and Dogen, is simply in order to return to the world and to our original quality. Letting go of conditioning while steeped in completely relaxed awareness, one is able to act effectively, innocent of grasping and attachments. The context of this just sitting suggested by Shitou is the possibility of aware and responsive presence that is simple, open-hearted, and straightforward.

When discussing zazen, Dogen regularly quotes a saying by Shitou's successor, Yaoshan Weiyan (745–828; Yakusan Igen in Japanese): A monk asked Yaoshan what he thought of while sitting so still and steadfastly. Yaoshan replied that he thought of not-thinking, or that he thought of that which does not think. When the monk asked how Yaoshan did that, he responded, "Beyond-thinking," (or, "Nonthinking"). This is a state of awareness that can include both cognition and the absence of thought, and is not caught up in either. Dogen calls this "the essential art of zazen."<sup>2</sup>

These early accounts would indicate that there was already a context of Caodong/Soto practitioners "just sitting" well before Hongzhi and Dogen. The Soto lineage almost died out in China a century before Hongzhi, but was revived by Touzi Yiqing (1032–1083; Tosu Gisei in Japanese), who brought a background in Huayan studies to enliven Soto philosophy. Touzi's successor, Furong Daokai (1043–1118; Fuyo Dokai in Japanese) was a model of integrity who solidified and developed the forms for the Soto monastic community. It remained for Hongzhi, two

generations after Furong Daokai, to fully express Soto praxis. Hongzhi, easily the most prominent Soto teacher in the twelfth century, was a literary giant, a highly prolific, elegant, and evocative writer who comprehensively articulated this meditation practice for the first time.

Hongzhi does not use the actual term, “just sitting,” which Dogen quotes instead from his own Soto lineage teacher Tiantong Rujing (1163–1228; Tendo Nyojo in Japanese). But Tiantong Monastery, where Dogen studied with Rujing in 1227, was the same temple where Hongzhi had been abbot for almost thirty years up to his death in 1157. Dogen refers to Hongzhi as an “Ancient Buddha,” and frequently quotes him, especially from his poetic writings on meditative experience. Clearly the meditative awareness that Hongzhi writes about was closely related to Dogen’s meditation, although Dogen developed its dynamic orientation in his own writings about just sitting.

Hongzhi’s meditation teaching is usually referred to as “silent, or serene, illumination,” although Hongzhi actually uses this term only a few times in his voluminous writings. In his long poem, “Silent Illumination,” Hongzhi emphasizes the necessity for balance between serenity and illumination, which echoes the traditional Buddhist meditation practice of shamatha-vipashyana, or stopping and insight. This was called *zhiguan* in the Chinese Tiantai meditation system expounded by the great Chinese Buddhist synthesizer Zhiyi (538–597). Hongzhi emphasizes the necessity for active insight as well as calm in “Silent Illumination” when he says, “If illumination neglects serenity then aggressiveness appears.... If serenity neglects illumination, murkiness leads to wasted dharma.”<sup>3</sup> Hongzhi’s meditation values the balancing of both stopping, or settling the mind, and its active illuminating functioning.

In his prose writings, Hongzhi frequently uses nature

metaphors to express the natural simplicity of the lived experience of silent illumination or just sitting. (I am generally using these terms interchangeably, except when discussing differences in their usages by Hongzhi or Dogen.) An example of Hongzhi's nature writing is:

A person of the Way fundamentally does not dwell anywhere. The white clouds are fascinated with the green mountain's foundation. The bright moon cherishes being carried along with the flowing water. The clouds part and the mountains appear. The moon sets and the water is cool. Each bit of autumn contains vast interpenetration without bounds.<sup>4</sup>

Hongzhi here highlights the ease of this awareness and its function. Like the flow of water and clouds, the mind can move smoothly to flow in harmony with its environment. "Accord and respond without laboring and accomplish without hindrance. Everywhere turn around freely, not following conditions, not falling into classifications."<sup>5</sup>

In many places, Hongzhi provides specific instructions about how to manage one's sense perceptions so as to allow the vital presence of just sitting. "Respond unencumbered to each speck of dust without becoming its partner. The subtlety of seeing and hearing transcends mere colors and sounds."<sup>6</sup> Again he suggests, "Casually mount the sounds and straddle the colors while you transcend listening and surpass watching."<sup>7</sup> This does not indicate a presence that is oblivious to the surrounding sense world. But while the practitioner remains aware, sense phenomena do not become objects of attachment, or objectified at all.

Another aspect of Hongzhi's practice is that it is objectless not only in terms of letting go of concentration objects, but also

in the sense of avoiding any specific, limited goals or objectives. As Hongzhi says at the end of "Silent Illumination," "Transmit it to all directions without desiring to gain credit."<sup>8</sup> This serene illumination, or just sitting, is not a technique, or a means to some resulting higher state of consciousness, or any particular state of being. Just sitting, one simply meets the immediate present. Desiring some flashy experience, or anything more or other than "this" is mere worldly vanity and craving. Again invoking empty nature, Hongzhi says, "Fully appreciate the emptiness of all dharmas. Then all minds are free and all dusts evaporate in the original brilliance shining everywhere.... Clear and desireless, the wind in the pines and the moon in the water are content in their elements."<sup>9</sup>

This non-seeking quality of Hongzhi's meditation eventually helped make it controversial. The leading contemporary teacher in the much more prominent Linji lineage (Japanese Rinzai) was Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163; Daie Soko in Japanese). A popular historical stereotype is that Dahui and Hongzhi were rivals, debating over Hongzhi's "silent illumination" meditation as opposed to Dahui's "koan introspection" meditation teaching. Historians have now established that Hongzhi and Dahui were actually good friends, or at least had high mutual esteem, and sent students to each other. There was no such debate, at least until future generations of their successors, although Dahui did severely critique "silent illumination" practice as being quietistic and damaging to Zen. However, Dahui clearly was not criticizing Hongzhi himself, but rather, some of his followers, and possibly Hongzhi's dharma brother, Changlu Qingliao (1089–1151; Choryo Seiryō in Japanese), from whom Dogen's lineage descends.<sup>10</sup>

Dahui's criticism of silent illumination was partly valid, based on the legitimate danger of practitioners



misunderstanding this approach as quietistic or passive. Dahui's critique was echoed centuries later by Japanese Rinzai critics of just sitting, such as Hakuin in the seventeenth century. Just sitting can indeed sometimes degenerate into dull attachment to inner bliss states, with no responsiveness to the suffering of the surrounding world. Hongzhi clarifies that this is not the intention of his practice, for example when he says, "In wonder return to the journey, avail yourself of the path and walk ahead.... With the hundred grass tips in the busy marketplace graciously share yourself."<sup>11</sup> The meditation advocated by both Hongzhi and Dogen is firmly rooted in the bodhisattva path and its liberative purpose of assisting and awakening beings. Mere idle indulgence in peacefulness and bliss is not the point.

The other aspect of Dahui's criticism related to his own advocacy of meditation focusing on koans as meditation objects, explicitly aimed at generating flashy opening experiences. Such experiences may occur in just sitting practice as well, but generally have been less valued in the Soto tradition. The purpose of Buddhist practice is universal awakening, not dramatic experiences of opening any more than passive states of serenity. But contrary to another erroneous stereotype, use of koans has been widespread in Soto teaching as well as Rinzai.

Hongzhi himself created two collections of koans with his comments, one of which was the basis for the important anthology, the *Book of Serenity*. Dogen also created koan collections, and (ironically, considering his reputation as champion of just sitting meditation) far more of his voluminous writing, including the essays of his masterwork *Shobogenzo* (*True Dharma Eye Treasury*), is devoted to commentary on koans than to discussion of meditation. Dogen was actually instrumental in introducing the koan literature to Japan, and his writings demonstrate a truly amazing mastery of the depth

and breadth of the range of that literature in China. Steven Heine's modern work, *Dogen and the Koan Tradition*, clearly demonstrates how Dogen actually developed koan practice in new expansive modes that differed from Dahui's concentrated approach.<sup>12</sup> Although Hongzhi and Dogen, and most of the traditional Soto tradition, did not develop a formal koan meditation curriculum as did Dahui, Hakuin, and much of the Rinzai tradition, the koan stories have remained a prominent context for Soto teaching. Conversely, just sitting has often been part of Rinzai practice, such that some Soto monks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries went to Rinzai masters for training in just sitting.

Although a great deal of Dogen's writing focuses on commentary on koans and sutras, and on monastic practice expressions, the practice of just sitting is clearly in the background throughout his teaching career. Dogen builds on the descriptions of Hongzhi to emphasize the dynamic function of just sitting.

In one of his first essays, "Bendowa," or "Talk on Wholehearted Practice of the Way," written in 1231, a few years after his return from training in China, Dogen describes this meditation as the samadhi of self-fulfillment (or enjoyment), and elaborates the inner meaning of this practice. Simply just sitting is expressed as concentration on the self in its most delightful wholeness, in total inclusive interconnection with all of phenomena. Dogen makes remarkably radical claims for this simple experience. "When one displays the buddha mudra with one's whole body and mind, sitting upright in this samadhi for even a short time, everything in the entire dharma world becomes buddha mudra, and all space in the universe completely becomes enlightenment."<sup>13</sup> Proclaiming that when one just sits all of space itself becomes enlightenment is an

inconceivable statement, deeply challenging our usual sense of the nature of reality, whether we take Dogen's words literally or metaphorically. Dogen places this activity of just sitting far beyond our usual sense of personal self or agency. He goes on to say that "even if only one person sits for a short time, because this zazen is one with all existence and completely permeates all times, it performs everlasting buddha guidance" throughout space and time.<sup>14</sup> At least in Dogen's faith in the spiritual or "theological" implications of the activity of just sitting, this is clearly a dynamically liberating practice, not mere blissful serenity.

Through his writings, Dogen gives ample indication as to how to engage this just sitting. In another noted early writing, "Genjokoan," or "Actualizing the Fundamental Point," from 1233, Dogen gives a clear description of the existential stance of just sitting: "To carry yourself forward and experience myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and experience themselves is awakening."<sup>15</sup> That we are conditioned to project our own conceptions onto the world as a dead object-screen is the cause of suffering. When all of phenomena (including what we usually think of as "ours") join in mutual self-experience and expression, the awakened awareness that Hongzhi described through nature metaphors is present, doing Buddha's work, as Dogen says.

Some modern Dogen scholars have emphasized the shift in his later teaching to the importance of strict monastic practice, and supposedly away from the universal applicability of shikantaza practice. In 1243 Dogen moved his community far from the capital of Kyoto to the snowy north coast mountains, where he established his monastery, Eihei-ji. His teaching thereafter, until his death in 1253, was mostly in the form of often brief talks to his monks, presented in *Eihei Koroku*,

“Dogen’s Extensive Record.” These are certainly focused on training a core of dedicated monks to preserve his practice tradition, a mission he fulfilled with extraordinary success. But through his work, both early and late, instructions and encouragements to just sit appear regularly.

In 1251 Dogen was still proclaiming,

The family style of all buddhas and ancestors is to engage the way in zazen. My late teacher Tiantong [Rujing] said, “Cross-legged sitting is the dharma of ancient buddhas.... In just sitting it is finally accomplished.”... We should engage the way in zazen as if extinguishing flames from our heads. Buddhas and ancestors, generation after generation, face to face transmit the primacy of zazen.<sup>16</sup> (Discourse 319)

In 1249 he exhorted his monks, “We should know that zazen is the decorous activity of practice after realization. Realization is simply just sitting zazen.... Brothers on this mountain, you should straightforwardly, single-mindedly focus on zazen.” For Dogen, all of enlightenment is fully expressed in the ongoing practice of just sitting. That same year, he gave a straightforward instruction for just sitting:

Great assembly, do you want to hear the reality of just sitting, which is the Zen practice that is dropping off body and mind?

After a pause [Dogen] said: Mind cannot objectify it; thinking cannot describe it. Just step back and carry on, and avoid offending anyone you face. At the ancient dock, the wind and moon are cold and clear. At night the boat floats peacefully in the land of lapis lazuli. (Discourse 337)

The concluding two sentences of this talk are quoted from a poem by Hongzhi, further revealing the continuity of their practice teachings. Dogen also frequently describes this just sitting as “dropping away body and mind,” *shinjin datsuraku* in Japanese, a phrase traditionally associated with Dogen’s awakening experience in China.<sup>17</sup>

For Dogen this “dropping off body and mind” is the true nature both of just sitting and of complete enlightenment, and is the ultimate letting go of self, directly meeting the cold, clear wind and moon. After turning within while just sitting, it is carried on in all activity and throughout ongoing engagement with the world. Although just sitting now has been maintained for 750 years since Dogen, the teachings of Hongzhi and Dogen remain as primary guideposts to its practice.

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## Notes:

1. Shitou does not use the words for shikantaza, but the reference to the iconic image of Bodhidharma just sitting, or “wall-gazing” in his cold cave with a quilt over his head is unquestionable. For “Soanka,” see Taigen Dan Leighton, with Yi Wu, trans., *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi*, revised, expanded edition (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), pp. 72–73.
2. In Dogen’s *Fuganzazengi*; see Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dogen* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999), p. 55; or the groundbreaking translation by Norman Waddell and Masao Abe later in this book.
3. Leighton, *Cultivating the Empty Field*, pp. 67–68 (reprinted in this book). For more on Hongzhi and his meditation teaching, see also Morton Schlutter, “Silent Illumination, Kung-an

Introspection, and the Competition for Lay Patronage in Sung Dynasty Chan," in Peter Gregory and Daniel Getz, eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), pp. 109–47.

4. Leighton, *Cultivating the Empty Field*, pp. 41–42.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
10. Schlutter, "Silent Illumination, Kung-an Introspection," in Gregory and Getz, eds., *Buddhism in the Sung*, pp. 109–110.
11. Leighton, *Cultivating the Empty Field*, p. 55.
12. Steven Heine, *Dogen and the Koan Tradition: A Tale of Two Shobogenzo Texts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).
13. Shohaku Okumura and Taigen Dan Leighton, trans., *The Wholehearted Way: A Translation of Eihei Dogen's Bendowa with Commentary by Kosho Uchiyama Roshi* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1997), p. 22.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
15. Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (New York: North Point Press, division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1985, p. 69.
16. *Eihei Koroku*, Dharma Discourse 319, from Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, trans., *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of Eihei Koroku* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, forthcoming). All later quotes from *Eihei Koroku* in this introduction are from this translation, identified in the text after the quote by Dharma Discourse number.
17. See Leighton, *Cultivating the Empty Field*, pp. 20–23 (reprinted

in this book).

## EDITOR'S NOTE

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THE SELECTIONS included in this volume use both the Pinyin and Wade-Giles romanization styles of Chinese names. For the sake of fidelity to the original sources, we have kept the spelling used in each piece, adding the Pinyin version in parenthesis when applicable. Certain writers also include the Japanese version of the master's name.

Also, we have retained each piece's capitalization and spelling of words like "Buddhas" and "Buddha-nature," as well as the use of the pronoun "he" to refer to monks or Buddhist practitioners.

The appendix includes six pieces we have called "Foundational Texts." Though they are directly related to Zen meditation, they do not explicitly refer to it as shikantaza or "just sitting." These terms were first referred to by Hongzhi Zhengjue, who called the practice of just sitting "silent illumination."



# GUIDEPOST OF SILENT ILLUMINATION

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Hongzhi Zhengjue

*Translated by Taigen Dan Leighton with Yi Wu*

*Silent and serene, forgetting words, bright clarity appears  
before you.*

*When you reflect it you become vast, where you embody it you  
are spiritually uplifted.*

*Spiritually solitary and shining, inner illumination restores  
wonder,*

*Dew in the moonlight, a river of stars, snow-covered pines,  
clouds enveloping the peak.*

*In darkness it is most bright, while hidden it is all the more  
manifest.*

*The crane dreams in the wintry mists. The autumn waters flow  
far in the distance.*

*Endless kalpas are totally empty, all things completely the  
same.*

*When wonder exists in serenity, all achievement is forgotten in  
illumination.*

*What is this wonder? Alertly seeing through confusion*

*Is the way of silent illumination and the origin of subtle  
radiance.*

*Vision penetrating into subtle radiance is weaving gold on a*

*jade loom.*

*Upright and inclined yield to each other; light and dark are interdependent.*

*Not depending on sense faculty and object, at the right time they interact.*

*Drink the medicine of good views. Beat the poison-smeared drum.*

*When they interact, killing and giving life are up to you.*

*Through the gate the self emerges and the branches bear fruit.*

*Only silence is the supreme speech, only illumination the universal response.*

*Responding without falling into achievement, speaking without involving listeners,*

*The ten thousand forms majestically glisten and expound the dharma.*

*All objects certify it, every one in dialogue.*

*Dialoguing and certifying, they respond appropriately to each other;*

*But if illumination neglects serenity then aggressiveness appears.*

*Certifying and dialoguing, they respond to each other appropriately;*

*But if serenity neglects illumination, murkiness leads to wasted dharma.*

*When silent illumination is fulfilled, the lotus blossoms, the dreamer awakens,*

*A hundred streams flow into the ocean, a thousand ranges face*

*the highest peak.*

*Like geese preferring milk, like bees gathering nectar,  
When silent illumination reaches the ultimate, I offer my  
teaching.*

*The teaching of silent illumination penetrates from the highest  
down to the foundation.*

*The body being shunyata, the arms in mudra;*

*From beginning to end the changing appearances and ten  
thousand differences have one pattern.*

*Mr. Ho offered jade [to the Emperor; Minister] Xiangru pointed  
to its flaws.*

*Facing changes has its principles, the great function is without  
striving.*

*The ruler stays in the kingdom, the general goes beyond the  
frontiers.*

*Our school's affair hits the mark straight and true.*

*Transmit it to all directions without desiring to gain credit.*

# CULTIVATING THE EMPTY FIELD

---

Hongzhi Zhengjue

*Translated by Taigen Dan Leighton with Yi Wu*

## THE PRACTICE OF TRUE REALITY

THE PRACTICE OF TRUE REALITY is simply to sit serenely in silent introspection. When you have fathomed this you cannot be turned around by external causes and conditions. This empty, wide-open mind is subtly and correctly illuminating. Spacious and content, without confusion from inner thoughts of grasping, effectively overcome habitual behavior and realize the self that is not possessed by emotions. You must be broad-minded, whole without relying on others. Such upright independent spirit can begin not to pursue degrading situations. Here you can rest and become clean, pure, and lucid. Bright and penetrating, you can immediately return, accord, and respond to deal with events. Everything is unhindered, clouds gracefully floating up to the peaks, the moonlight glitteringly flowing down mountain streams. The entire place is brightly illumined and spiritually transformed, totally unobstructed and clearly manifesting responsive interaction like box and lid or arrowpoints [meeting]. Continuing, cultivate and nourish yourself to embody maturity and achieve stability. If you accord everywhere with thorough clarity and cut off sharp corners without dependence on doctrines, like the white bull or wildcat [helping to arouse wonder], you can be called a complete person. So we hear that this is how one on the way of

non-mind acts, but before realizing non-mind we still have great hardship.

## PERFORMING THE BUDDHA WORK

[The empty field] cannot be cultivated or proven. From the beginning it is altogether complete, undefiled and clear down to the bottom. Where everything is correct and totally sufficient, attain the pure eye that illuminates thoroughly, fulfilling liberation. Enlightenment involves enacting this; stability develops from practicing it. Birth and death originally have no root or stem; appearing and disappearing originally have no defining signs or traces. The primal light, empty and effective, illumines the headtop. The primal wisdom, silent but also glorious, responds to conditions. When you reach the truth without middle or edge, cutting off before and after, then you realize one wholeness. Everywhere sense faculties and objects both just happen. The one who sticks out his broad long tongue transmits the inexhaustible lamp, radiates the great light, and performs the great buddha work, from the first not borrowing from others one atom from outside the dharma. Clearly this affair occurs within your own house.

## WITH TOTAL TRUST ROAM AND PLAY IN SAMADHI

Empty and desireless, cold and thin, simple and genuine, this is how to strike down and fold up the remaining habits of many lives. When the stains from old habits are exhausted, the original light appears, blazing through your skull, not admitting any other matters. Vast and spacious, like sky and water merging during autumn, like snow and moon having the same color, this field is without boundary, beyond direction, magnificently one entity without edge or seam. Further, when you turn within and drop off everything completely, realization

occurs. Right at the time of entirely dropping off, deliberation and discussion are one thousand or ten thousand miles away. Still no principle is discernible, so what could there be to point to or explain? People with the bottom of the bucket fallen out immediately find total trust. So we are told simply to realize mutual response and explore mutual response, then turn around and enter the world. Roam and play in samadhi. Every detail clearly appears before you. Sound and form, echo and shadow, happen instantly without leaving traces. The outside and myself do not dominate each other, only because no perceiving [of objects] comes between us. Only this nonperceiving encloses the empty space of the dharma realm's majestic ten thousand forms. People with the original face should enact and fully investigate [the field] without neglecting a single fragment.

#### THE BACKWARD STEP AND THE UPRIGHT CAULDRON

With the depths clear, utterly silent, thoroughly illuminate the source, empty and spirited, vast and bright. Even though you have lucidly scrutinized your image and no shadow or echo meets it, searching throughout you see that you still have distinguished between the merits of a hundred undertakings. Then you must take the backward step and directly reach the middle of the circle from where light issues forth. Outstanding and independent, still you must abandon pretexts for merit. Carefully discern that naming engenders beings and that these rise and fall with intricacy. When you can share your self, then you may manage affairs, and you have the pure seal that stamps the ten thousand forms. Traveling the world, meeting conditions, the self joyfully enters samadhi in all delusions and accepts its function, which is to empty out the self so as not to be full of itself. The empty valley receives the clouds. The cold stream cleanses the moon. Not departing and not remaining, far

ancestors appear and disappear transforming the world. Amid living beings is the original place of nirvana. How amazing it is that all people have this but cannot polish it into bright clarity. In darkness unawakened, they make foolishness cover their wisdom and overflow. One remembrance of illumination can break through and leap out of the dust of kalpas. Radiant and clear white, [the single field] cannot be diverted or altered in the three times; the four elements cannot modify it. Solitary glory is deeply preserved, enduring throughout ancient and present times, as the merging of sameness and difference becomes the entire creation's mother. This realm manifests the energy of the many thousands of beings, all appearances merely this [field's] shadows. Truly enact this reality.

## NANYUE POLISHES A TILE

---

John Daido Looi

### MASTER DOGEN'S 300 KOAN SHOBOGENZO, CASE 8

#### *Main Case*

ZEN MASTER MAZU DAOYI was an attendant to Nanyue and personally received the mind-seal from him, exceeding his peers. Before that, he lived in Kaiyuan Monastery and did zazen all day long. Knowing that Mazu was a Dharma vessel, Nanyue went to him and asked, "Great monastic, what do you intend by doing zazen?" (1)

Mazu said, "I am intending to be a buddha." (2)

Nanyue picked up a brick and started polishing it. (3)

Mazu said, "What are you doing?" (4)

Nanyue said, "I am trying to make a mirror." (5)

Mazu said, "How can you make a mirror by polishing a brick?" (6)

Nanyue said, "How can you become a buddha by doing zazen?" (7)

Mazu said, "What do you mean by that?" (8)

Nanyue said, "Think about driving a cart. When it stops moving, do you whip the cart or the horse?"

Mazu said nothing.

Nanyue said, "Do you want to practice sitting Zen or sitting Buddha? If you understand sitting Zen, you will know that Zen is not about sitting or lying down. (9) If you want to learn



sitting Buddha, know that sitting Buddha is without any fixed form. (10) Do not use discrimination in the nonabiding Dharma. If you practice sitting as Buddha, you must kill Buddha. (11) If you are attached to the sitting form, you are not yet mastering the essential principle." (12)

Mazu heard this admonition and felt as if he had tasted sweet nectar.

### *Commentary*

You should understand that zazen is not meditation or contemplation; it is not about quieting the mind, focusing the mind, or studying the mind; it is not mindfulness or mindlessness. If you want to really understand zazen, then know that zazen is not about sitting or lying down. Zazen is zazen; it is undefiled.

With regard to "sitting as Buddha," you should understand that the very moment of "sitting Buddha" is the killing of Buddha. Thus, sitting Buddha is beyond any set form and has no abode. Therefore, when the brick is a mirror, Mazu is Buddha. When Mazu is Buddha, Mazu is at once Mazu. When Mazu is Mazu, his zazen is immediately zazen. Each thing is not transformed into the other but is, in fact, originally the other. Practice is its unfoldment.

The truth of the universe fills your body and mind; yet it is not manifest without practice; nor is it realized without enlightenment. Unless you are prepared to move forward and take risks, the truth of your life and that of the universe is never realized as this very life itself.

All this notwithstanding, what is the truth of the universe that fills your body and mind? Don't tell me—show me.

### *Capping Verse*

interesting and accurate analogy: zazen functioning like an acupuncture needle that heals the body and mind. Originally in Buddhism the term “zazenshin” referred to something that had the power to cure a human being of physical or mental pain. Yet healing did not mean transforming sickness into health. Rather, it was a return to a natural, inherent state of health.

In the context of Zen practice, “shin” is the name for a short verse used in the teaching of important points in Zen training. Just as with healing, zazen is understood as a process for returning to our original self, a self that is originally perfect and complete, lacking nothing. This perfection is not something to attain; it’s something that we are all born with, and that we die with, whether we realize it or not. We may go through life suffering from illness, but our original healthy nature is there, hidden. Sickness is no different from the delusion at the source of our suffering, and the reason we suffer is because we don’t understand the true nature of the universe or ourselves.

Master Nanyue is addressing this delusion with Mazu. To me, one of the interesting things is that Nanyue, who was a successor of the Sixth Ancestor, went after the student. Mazu didn’t come to him to ask him about becoming Buddha. Nanyue approached him because he was aware that Mazu was “a great Dharma vessel”—and indeed he was. He turned out to be one of the greatest masters in the history of Zen. He had eighty-four enlightened disciples, all of whom were also exceptional. His lineage continues down to the present day as Rinzai Zen.

*Nanyue went to him [Mazu] and asked, “Great monastic, what do you intend by doing zazen?” In other words, “What’s the point of your zazen?” Mazu said, “I am intending to be a buddha.” Nanyue picked up a brick and started polishing it. Mazu said, “What are you doing?” Nanyue said, “I am trying to make a mirror.” Mazu said, “How can you make a mirror by*

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