

30 Questions on Zen Buddhism and Practicing Zazen

These questions were compiled by Reverend Gustav Ericsson based on questions he received from a group of people in Sweden who practice Zazen. The answers are by Buddhist priest Gudo Nishijima.

1. *What is gained in Zazen?*

What we gain in Zazen is the balance of the [autonomic nervous system](#), which is a nervous system in our body that consists of two parts that are called the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. In the chapter entitled *Bendowa* in Master Dogen's book *Shobogenzo* we can find the words "Jijuyo Zanmai," which Master Dogen indicates is the criteria of Zazen. The first word "Jijuyo" separates into two parts, one is "Jiju" and the other is "Jiyo." Therefore the word "Jijuyo" is a combination of the words "Jiju" and "Jiyo." "Jiju" means to receive ourselves and "Jiyo" means to utilize ourselves. My interpretation is that "Jiju" suggests the function of the parasympathetic nervous system, and "Jiyo" suggests the function of the sympathetic nervous system. And in the words "Jijuyo Zanmai," the second part "Zanmai" means the balanced state. Therefore we can understand that the words "Jijuyo Zanmai" mean the balanced state of the autonomic nervous system, which modern psychology and physiology tell us is a very healthy state for human beings.

2. *What is Master Dogen's "flowers in space"?*

"Flowers in space" is the title of the 43rd chapter in *Shobogenzo*. In this chapter Master Dogen explains that even though Buddhism insists that both intellectual consideration and sensuous perception are not real entities themselves, he also insists that both intellectual consideration as thesis and concrete sensuous perception as antithesis are useful and necessary, and by utilizing those two fundamental criteria we can understand reality on the basis of dialectic thinking utilizing the philosophy of action as the synthesis.

3. *What is the meaning of Dharma Transmission?*

In Shobogenzo we can find the 16th chapter, which is entitled "The Certificate of Succession." In this chapter Master Dogen describes the ceremony of transmitting Dharma. Therefore "Transmission" means the transmission of Dharma, and "Dharma" means the Buddhist truth, the Universe, a real act at the present moment, and Reality itself. Therefore we can interpret that "Dharma Transmission" is giving the certificate of realizing Dharma from a Buddhist Master to his matured disciple.

4. What is a Zen Master?

I guess that the words "Zen Master" may be the translation of the Japanese words "Zen Ji." Zen is the same in English and Japanese, and "Ji" (or "Shi") means a teacher. Therefore a Zen Master means a teacher of Zen. But I think we should be careful in thinking about the word "Zen". Because in some interpretations of Buddhism we sometimes find the strange fact that the word "Zen" is used to represent a special meaning of something mystical.

Those kinds of interpretations of Buddhism use the word "Zen" to represent some kind of mystical but powerful entity. But I wonder whether such a kind of mystical entity really exists in Buddhism or not. The Japanese Buddhist monk Master Dogen hated that kind of mystical interpretation very much, and so in Shobogenzo he wrote his opinion as follows (Shobogenzo Book 2, p. 62):

"People who do not learn this truth in practice speak randomly and mistakenly. They randomly call the right-Dharma-eye treasury and the fine mind of nirvana that have been authentically transmitted by the Buddhist patriarchs "the Zen Sect"; they call the ancestral Master "the Zen patriarch"; they call practitioners "Zen students" or "students of dhyana"; and some of them call themselves "the Zen schools." These are all twigs and leaves rooted in a distorted view. Those who randomly call themselves by the name "Zen Sect," which has never existed in India in the west or in eastern lands, from the past to the present, are demons out to destroy the Buddha's truth. They are the Buddhist patriarchs' uninvited enemies."

Therefore we should be careful to use the word "Zen."

5. What is intuition?

Intuition is a mental ability which has a function to decide a conclusion transcending mental consideration and sensuous perception. When the sympathetic nervous system is stronger, the intellectual consideration works well, and when the

parasympathetic nervous system is stronger, the sensuous perception works well, but when the autonomic nervous system is balanced the ability of intuition works well directly.

6. What is our true original nature?

Generally speaking, it is usually impossible for us to know our true original nature, because it is just a simple fact at the present moment, and so it is usually impossible for us to grasp it at the present moment.

7. What is Buddha-nature?

In chapter 22 of Shobogenzo entitled “Bussho”, or “The Buddha-nature,” Master Dogen describes Buddha-nature as follows (Book 2, p. 6):

“If you want to know this Buddha-nature, remember, causes and circumstances as real time are just it.”

Therefore, Buddha-nature does never exist in the past and it does never exist in future, but it exists just only at the present moment. So we can think that Buddha-nature is Reality just at the present moment.

8. What is Heaven and Hell?

Heaven is a human supposition and Hell is also a human supposition. But when our autonomic nervous system is balanced, it is just Heaven, and when our autonomic nervous system is not balanced, it is just Hell.

9. What is life and death?

When our heart has stopped and if it doesn't move again, the state is called death, and when our heart is moving still without stopping, that state is called life.

10. What is the meaning of the Buddhist idea of emptiness?

The true meaning of emptiness in Buddhism has been misunderstood for so many years as nothingness, or void. But if we have understood that Buddhism is a realistic philosophy, it is impossible for us to understand emptiness like that. In Buddhism emptiness is just “as it is.” A cup is a cup. A cup is never more than cup, or a cup is never less than cup.

11. What is better Zazen and worse Zazen?

There is no better Zazen, or worse Zazen. What is different from Zazen is wrong, and what is just Zazen is Zazen.

12. What is the eternal?

Eternity is just a human idea. But the fact at the present moment is eternal, because it must be recorded as a fact at the present moment, and it can never be erased forever.

13. What is the meaning of Master Dogen's " Bodaisattva Shishobo"? Could you please comment on the four principles of a Bodaisattva's social relations?

Chapter 45 of the Shobogenzo is entitled "Bodaisattva-Shishobo", or "Four Elements of a Bodhisattva's Social Relations." These four elements are as follows:

“First is free giving. Second is kind speech. Third is helpful conduct. Fourth is cooperation.”

- 1) Free giving: When our autonomic nervous system is balanced, it is impossible for our stinginess to occur, and if something is not necessary for us to keep, there is no reason for us to refuse giving it to others.
- 2) Kind speech: When our autonomic nervous system is balanced, it is very natural for us to be polite to others, and if others receive our politeness, the others might be happy.
- 3) Helpful conduct: When our autonomic nervous system is balanced, it will be happy for us to help others, and if others have received our kind help, they will feel very happy.
- 4) Cooperation: When our autonomic nervous system is balanced, we are always cooperative in a common job, and what we want to accomplish will be accomplished much faster.

14. What does it mean that life is only one breath?

Our life exists always just at the present moment, and the length of the present moment is always the shortest time. Actually thinking, the present moment is much more shorter than our one breath. Therefore we can say that our life is always much shorter than the length of our breath.

15. When should we break the precepts?

We should never break the precepts at all, but sometimes we cannot avoid our mistake. But if you break a precept, you shouldn't worry about the fact that you broke a precept. Because it is completely impossible for you to return to the past to correct your mistake. Therefore the best you can do is just to throw away your mistakes in the past, and to do the best just at the present moment.

16. Where will you be in 100 years from now?

When I die in a few years, not so long from now, everything will become nothing including me, and I will take a rest forever.

17. How can we understand ourselves?

I think that it is impossible for us to understand ourselves.

18. What can we understand with words and what can we not understand with words?

We can understand everything, but at the same time, our understandings can never actually touch Reality.

19. Is it possible to teach Zen?

It is possible for us to teach Zazen, but it is necessary for everyone to practice Zazen by himself or herself.

20. Does Zazen have a goal?

Zazen has a goal. The goal of Zazen is to practice Zazen itself.

21. Where do we come from, why are we here, and where are we going?

I think that answering such kinds of questions might be beyond the ability of all human beings.

22. How can we let go of fame and profit?

When our autonomic nervous system has become balanced, it seems to be so boring for us to pursue fame and profit and we can find a much more valuable object to pursue, that is the Truth.

23. Could you please tell me more about the city you were in Manchuria and your time there during the war? What was the name of the city?

It was called Songo in Japanese at that time, and it was in the north-west district of Manchuria near Amur. It was just a military city for the Japanese army. But at that time fortunately there was no fighting in that district, and so we were just guarding the district.

24. Could you tell me more about how it was to return to Japan after the war?

In June 1945, I was ordered to move to Himeji City in Japan for the purpose of guarding Japan. So I travelled along the eastern coast of Korea in rather dangerous situations, and fortunately the war ended while I was in Himeji City in Japan.

25. How can Zazen help us be happy?

It is just the happiest condition to practice Zazen itself.

26. How can we practice Zazen in our daily chores?

Since moving to my new residence, where I am living now, I have begun cooking by myself, and so I have found the fact clearly that even my cooking in my daily life has also the characteristics of action. Therefore my cooking can also be a kind of Buddhist effort, even though I am also practicing Zazen two times a day, every day.

27. What is truth?

Reality is the Truth. Therefore the Universe is also the Truth.

28. What are some of your favourite quotes from the Shobogenzo, and why?

For example, "It is just moment by moment of red mind, upon which we rely solely" (Shobogenzo Book 1, p. 211). The words "red mind" suggest sincere mind, and this is a description of Master Dogen's daily life.

29. How can a Zen Master help a student?

A Buddhist Master can help his student by teaching Buddhist philosophy, by guiding the student's daily life, by practicing Zazen together, and by transmitting Buddhist Dharma.

30. In your life, how have you noticed that Zazen is actually practically working?

I have become a little better than before.

With best wishes,

Gudo Wafu Nishijima

