
What is zen?

The word **Zen** means silent meditation (*zen* in Japanese, *chan* in Chinese and *dhyâna* in sanscrit).

It defines one of the main schools of Mahâyâna Buddhism from Japan (sôtô Zen school) which favors the practice of sitting meditation going back to the experience of the Buddha Shakyamuni who, two thousand five hundred years ago, realized awakening.

This practice contains the essence of its teaching, whose message is carried universally.

It is called *zazen* or *shikantaza*, and essentially consists of “just sitting”, “simply sitting” facing the wall. It is not based on any dogma or ideology. Simply knowing texts is insufficient for understanding Zen.

Zen offers practice-realization, *zazen*, which gives direct access to intimate knowledge of oneself.

This practice has been transmitted to us by generations of patriarchs and masters, from master to disciple, from person to person.

Hence, the Indian monk Bodhidharma brought the practice of Zen meditation to China in the 5th century AD. Then in the 13th century, Sôtô Zen, introduced by Eihei Dôgen, came to Japan.

In 1967, Taisen Deshimaru came to France to spread the practice of Zen, as his master, Kodo Sawaki, had asked him to do so at the end of his life. Acquiring his force and energy from this practice, Zen made its mark in all moments of his life. Therefore, *zazen* is the teaching of wisdom which is expressed at each moment: when breathing, walking, sleeping, eating, working, thinking, by living in harmony with others and the environment.

If you really wish to realize what Zen is, then you should turn off your computer!

Take a cushion which is 20 – 30 cm high, place it about one meter from a wall in your room and sit on it, facing the wall.

Sit cross legged so that your knees touch the ground, it is best to place the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot brought in against the cushion. You can also place the left foot on the right thigh. Next, place your left hand on your right hand, palms opened and facing upwards, the tips of your thumbs should touch so that they form an oval with the index fingers. The thumbs are horizontal, the edge of the hand touch the lower abdomen. After that, straighten your backbone and stretch the back of your neck as if you wanted to push the top of your head into the sky. Tuck your chin in. Your nose should be horizontal to the navel, ears vertical to the shoulders, and you look down on the ground, about one meter in front of you.

Next, when you're sitting in this posture, pay attention to your breathing. Observe breathing in while it happens. Pay attention to the feeling of the air, which passes through your nostrils. Without holding your breath in after breathing in, begin to breathe out slowly, letting the breath go down under the navel and breathe all the way to the end of the breath.

Remain calmly seated in this way, without thinking about anything in particular. Don't try to empty out your mind. Let thoughts go by after being conscious of them for an instant and bring your attention back to the posture of the body and the breathing. This way, your mind, which is perfectly conscious of what is happening, doesn't stagnate on anything and remains available to see the newness of each moment without being carried away by thoughts. That's what

Master Dōgen called *hishiryō*: letting thoughts arise from non-thoughts and letting them return to disappear.

That's where the essence of Zen is, in this practice of *shikantaza* where one concentrates on sitting, (space) and on breathing with a *mushotoku* mind, which means not having any desires for personal benefit, no goal, no choosing or rejecting.

The practice that you have just experienced is zazen.

Living a life which is not separated neither from others nor the universe.

In Zen, an ideal and reality are not separated. They are like the front and back sides of the same sheet of paper. The ideal is realized in daily life. Zen does not recommend cutting oneself off from society. Quite on the contrary, it is recommended to practice with others and remain active in the working world. The Zen mind loves work which is well done, concentrating here and now on the task being accomplished as well as possible, without egotism, and the result is considered as "extra". Hence *samu*, manual work, is done in dojos and Zen temples all while respecting the environment, like a service rendered to the community (in a broad sense of the term).

Daily life is the Buddha Way. Zen is not moralistic. It is neither moral nor amoral. The zazen practice enables finding the source of the precepts in oneself, by awakening to the reality of *mujo*, impermanence and also to the interdependence of all things. For example, not killing does not simply mean taking life away from someone or something, which would be like killing oneself. It also means continuing the life of Buddha, continuing to practice zazen. Not stealing doesn't only mean not taking what doesn't belong to you because nothing permanently belongs to you: we are bare when we come into this world and can't take anything with us to the grave. During zazen, mind and objects are one. Nothing is to be followed, nothing to be stolen, nor rejected. Not lying means seeing oneself as we really are, without deluding oneself and without deluding others. Not coveting means having little desire because our objects of desire escape us constantly.

The perception of our solidarity with the universe is the spiritual source for true ecology. The practice of zazen reduces the state of frustration and aggressiveness; it liberates the ego illusion, which cause violence. The mind of compassion increases. The bodhisattva, practicing zazen, understands the suffering of all sentient beings. He/she avoids creating suffering and helps to resolve it.

In zazen, the highest spiritual desire is realized: finding inner peace and unity with the whole cosmos.