

Three Types of Zazen

by Kokyo Henkel

In the practice of zazen, sitting meditation, we start by settling the body in an upright posture, letting the breath be natural and full. The breath fills the area below the navel, which helps to deeply relax the whole body. As far as what to do with the mind in zazen, there are various options; here we can look at three ways to orient the mind in meditation, three types of zazen, which include all traditional forms of Buddhist meditation. The first is the type most commonly taught in the world of Buddha-Dharma, that is mindfulness of a mental object. Classic meditation objects include mantras or mentally visualized images of buddhas. Probably the most common object that meditators use is the physical body or the breath, which is part of the physical body. But when we examine our experience closely, what are the body and the breath? They are tactile sensations. If we stay with our direct experience as closely as possible, without any preconceived ideas, the so-called body is more like a collection of tactile sensations, is it not? There are parts of this collection of sensations that have some tension in them, and parts that are more relaxed.

Along with tactile sensations, the Buddha also taught mindfulness of feelings which is not just the tactile sensation but also its quality of being either pleasant or unpleasant, before adding any conceptual stories to it. He also taught mindfulness of mental qualities which are also objects of awareness. For example, there might be a desire to move our legs and we can practice just being aware of that desire, not adding anything extra such as trying to figure out if we should actually move or not.

The result of mindfulness of these mental objects – tactile sensations, feelings, and mental qualities – is that we become more present and relaxed, and the mind wanders off less and less into thoughts of the past and future, which relieves a lot of unnecessary suffering caused by thinking. However, this type of meditation alone will not lead to liberation from all suffering. It can relieve us of a lot of distracting thoughts about the past and future, it leads to a relaxed abiding in the present, but it doesn't cut through the root of birth and death, the source of habitual discontent; it doesn't address the fundamental illusion of separation that is the cause of all types of discontent. As long as we believe there is anything apart from or outside of awareness, discontent and grasping and fear are inevitable.

But, isn't this what the Buddha taught in the *Foundations of Mindfulness Sutra* as the complete path to liberation from suffering? He did teach these objects of mindfulness, but he also taught another aspect in addition to mindfulness of tactile sensations, feelings, and mental qualities: that is mindfulness of the cessation of discontent, the end of grasping objects. The object of mindfulness called cessation is not actually an object at all. If one includes mindfulness of cessation, it is indeed a complete path to liberation. The reason we need mindfulness of cessation is because everything else on the list is an object, which means that attention is directed towards something which seems to be outside itself. That illusory division between awareness and its object is the root of birth and death, of delusion and suffering.

The second type of zazen we can look at is mindfulness of the whole field of objects – not just attending to tactile sensations of body or breath, but opening the other senses as well, like the ears. Usually when we are attending to tactile sensation, we're intentionally not paying attention

to sound. In this second type of meditation, we open the ears and let in sound, open the eyes and let in color and shapes. All the sense gates are thrown wide open, but we are not getting involved in conceptual thought. A thought can arise, and becoming aware of it, it drops away and mindfulness returns to the present experience of now. This wide field of experience includes sensory objects, feelings, and mental qualities, but awareness is not directed toward any one particular object like the breath. It is a more open awareness, attending to the whole field of present experience, mindfulness of now. How about the practice of not focusing on any particular object but just letting go of thought? When letting go of conceptual thought, awareness usually lands back on the present experience of tactile sensations, sounds, and so on, so this ends up being the same thing as using the present experience of now as an object.

This type of mindfulness of the whole field of body-mind experience may be commonly talked about in modern Zen, but looking into the foundational teachings of the Buddha as well as those of the Zen tradition, I have not been able to find this kind of practice being taught. The twentieth-century nondenominational teacher Krishnamurti coined the term “choiceless awareness,” referring to this type of meditation, and later Buddhist practitioners began using his term. It seems to me, when exploring these meditation practices in experience, that mindfulness of the whole present body-mind experience, choiceless awareness, and letting go of thought, are all basically the same practice, and I propose that this type of mindfulness – although it also relieves a lot of suffering due to letting go of thoughts, and is even more relaxing than focusing on a single object – also does not completely cut through the root of basic delusion because of the same problem, the same way of obscuring nondual reality, that is the sense of mind and object being separate. The whole field of experience right now is still an object of awareness that mind is attending to; it’s not a specific object like the breath, but an all-inclusive wide object that still seems to be subtly outside the awareness of it. It may not seem like an object at first glance, but this is worth investigating during zazen. Even if experience seems to be happening within awareness, this is still a subtle duality, the root of all fear and discontent.

One time I was speaking with a Zen teacher from Korea who was checking out my zazen practice. He asked, "What is your meditation practice?" I said, "Letting go of thought, letting go of anything other than the present experience." He said, "After you let go, then what?" I said, "Something else comes up, some thought of past or future, so I let go again." "Then what?" he asked. "I let go again, and again, and again." The teacher said, "If you just keep letting go like that for years and years, how will this ever cut through the root of birth and death, basic delusion? It's like putting a rock on top of living grass. If you take the rock off, the grass just pops back up. It's still alive under the rock, since the root has not been cut. How could simply letting go ever cut the root?" This was disturbing to hear, since I had been practicing this way for a long time, but his point could not be denied.

There is a third type of meditation, which I propose is the hallmark of traditional Zen. The Zen ancestors of China and Japan usually taught a zazen we could call awareness of awareness, or just being awareness itself. Awareness that is usually directed toward an object of experience, either a specific single object or the whole field of objects, is instead directed back upon itself, where it is always already shining. Since awareness itself is the only thing that is not an object of awareness, this is the end of subject-object duality, the cessation of the division of mind and

experience. This is mindfulness of no object, nondual awareness, and when immersed in it, this is therefore the cessation of suffering, the end of discontent and grasping and fear, and the source of true love and compassion.

It may sound difficult or tricky to practice this way, but it is actually quite simple. It's just unusual because awareness is virtually always directed towards some kind of object, all day long. That's why Dogen Zenji called this zazen "learning the backward step" which he defined as "turning the light of awareness around and shining back." He also called it "thinking of what doesn't think," and "the essential art of zazen." Though there may be some debate about what Dogen meant by "just sitting," I understand this term to refer to being this very awareness. A simple way to open to this type of meditation is to ask, "Am I aware?" or "Is awareness present right now?" It's not a trick question. If we sincerely ask this question, the answer "yes" may be the most obvious conclusion that anyone could ever have about anything. Then, to follow up, we can ask, "How can this be confirmed?" or "How is this awareness known?" Without referring to any object of awareness, the obvious conclusion is that only awareness itself can know it is aware. These two simple questions, asked sincerely, turn the light around. Now awareness can simply attend to itself, rest in itself. If attention strays onto objects, such as tactile sensations of body and breath, feelings, or thoughts – which is its usual mode of operation – we can simply let awareness return to itself. This doesn't mean that objects stop appearing in awareness, it's just that most of the attention is now on awareness itself. Usually objects are in the foreground and awareness is in the background so we don't even notice it; we reverse this perspective so that awareness itself is in the foreground while experiences seem to come and go in the background. In this kind of objectless meditation, we have to take care not to make awareness into another object by subtly attributing graspable characteristics to it, or make it into some kind of personal identity or subject. Awareness, by definition, is ungraspable since it is not an object of awareness. It has no reference points. At the same time, it is totally ordinary, always present, and cannot be lost.

If we become somewhat familiar with just being this awareness which has always been here – a practice which is very easy to realize for one moment, though quite difficult to sustain simply because we are not accustomed to it – we can start to explore some important aspects and implications of it. We can inquire, with total sincerity and honesty in present direct experience, without referring to any preconceived ideas or intellectual knowledge, "Does this awareness have any boundaries, edges, or center?" The obvious experiential answer is no, it is boundless like space, we cannot find any edges or center since it is not something physical. We can continue to inquire, "If awareness has no boundaries or edges, could it ever touch or meet objects of experience – such as visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, thoughts, feelings, emotions, or the sense of individual personal self?" We can check out this list of apparent objects one by one in direct experience, and conclude that awareness never touches anything, since if it were to touch objects that meeting place would be a boundary or edge of awareness.

One time, during sesshin, a sense of openness arose and I went to check it out with my teacher, Tenshin Roshi. He asked me to tell him about the experience, which I did. We were walking slowly down the path during one of the breaks. He put his arm around my shoulder as we walked and he asked, "Can anything touch it?" The question surprised me, and I began to

investigate. If an experience is any kind of object, it will appear to touch awareness or be touched by awareness – but awareness itself cannot be touched by anything, since it is not an object.

If awareness does not touch objects, then could objects be outside or apart from it? Thus, from the point of view of awareness, it is not possible to know anything other than awareness, all “things” must be part of it, therefore there are not really objects outside of awareness, only appearances made out of awareness. Every experience of the body as tactile sensations, the mind as thoughts and emotions, and the world as visual forms, sounds, and so on, from this deeply examined perspective, is simply a display of awareness itself. Even the sense of individual personal self is a manifestation or expression of this awareness. Intimately investigating, we can see how all experiences are actually nothing but awareness itself. Awareness is empty of anything other than itself, empty of subject-object duality; awareness is simply empty and aware. All appearing objects are like reflections on the mirror of awareness. We usually don’t notice the mirror while looking at the reflection, because the reflection is much more interesting, but the mirror is always there – completely present and obvious. Do the reflections ever touch the mirror? Can any experiences ever benefit or harm awareness? If nothing can harm awareness, is it possible for awareness to be discontent? Can dullness or distraction have any effect on awareness itself? And is there any boundary or edge between what seems to be “my” awareness and the awareness of “others,” all sentient beings? From the point of view of awareness, there is just this one boundless ungraspable unchanging awareness that seems to manifest as “me” and “you”, the bodies and minds of infinite sentient beings, as well as the world itself. From this perspective, unhindered and unbiased love and compassion for all of life naturally pour forth, because the illusion of separation is not operating; awareness sees that all beings are actually just awareness too, their freedom only being temporarily obscured by belief in the illusion of duality.

This nondual awareness, without any subject or object, manifests or displays itself as appearances of sense organs, sense objects, and dualistic consciousness. It’s not that dualistic consciousness has to somehow be transformed into nondual awareness, but that consciousness simply needs to be seen as an illusory manifestation or expression of awareness. In Indian Buddhism, this awareness is called tathagatagarbha or buddha-nature, appearing as the illusion of duality – or dharmakaya, the body of reality, when completely free from the illusion of duality. This type of so-called “meditation” is the classic style of Zen practice, which cuts the root of birth and death, and is called by many names: your original face, mind itself, ordinary mind, the unborn, the undying person in the hut, precious mirror awareness, the one who is not busy in the midst of busyness, knowing without touching things and illumining without facing objects, dropping off body and mind, self-enjoying presence, absorption in the treasury of light, the host of the house.

Here are some classic sayings from the Zen ancestors of China and Japan that point to this type of zazen:

Shitou said, “The nature of your own mind is beyond annihilation and permanence. It is complete and whole, the same in ordinary people and sages, responding freely. The world and all living beings that appear are nothing but this mind. How could the reflection of the moon in water, or images in a mirror actually come into being or cease?”

Baizhang said, “If you don’t recognize that innate knowing and awareness are your own buddha, you will always be searching for buddha elsewhere... Just understand that the myriad things do not originate by themselves; all of them come to be from mind’s imagination mistakenly grasping appearances. If you know that mind and objects never touch each other, you will be immediately free.”

Huangbo said, “All buddhas and all living beings are only this one mind; there is nothing else. This mind has never been born and has never died... It is not existent or nonexistent, not old or new, neither long nor short, neither large nor small. It goes beyond all limits and measurements, all labels and characteristics. This very being is it; when conceptual thoughts arise, it is turned away from. It is like space, with no boundaries or dimensions.”

Changsha said, “The entire world is within the radiant light of the self, the entire world is the radiant light of the self, in the entire world there is not a single person that is not this self.”

Yunmen said, “Everyone has a light, but when they look for it they don’t see it – it seems dark and obscure. What is everyone’s light? The kitchen and the front gate.”

Dogen said, “The mind that has been authentically transmitted means one mind as all things, and all things as one mind. For this reason, an ancient said, ‘When a person becomes aware of awareness, there is not a bit of soil on the earth.’... Mind as mountains, rivers, and earth is nothing other than mountains, rivers, and earth. There are no additional waves or surf, no wind or smoke.”

Keizan said, “Observe closely – this realm of empty clarity is brighter than the rising sun. Though this wondrous, non-material true nature is not an object of discrimination, it is a complete, perfectly lucid knowing. Though it does not have bones or marrow, it has a bright luminous body that is never hidden, yet cannot be discerned by conscious thought... So without relying on seeing and hearing, reliance on knowing external objects, or reliance on thinking, try to see what is behind them. There is an alert, awake knowing that does not come from others.”