

The Zen Path of Practice and Verification

Suggested Practice Guidelines by Kokyo Henkel

Introduction

Dogen Zenji, the founder of the Soto Zen lineage in thirteenth century Japan, taught that practice (selfless activity, both on the meditation cushion and in daily life) and verification (directly experiencing the joyful openness of awakening) are not two. One moment of wholehearted practice is one moment of verification, without the slightest gap between them. Dogen wrote, “Although this inconceivable truth is abundant in each person, it is not actualized without practice, and it is not experienced without verification.” In our lineage, transmitted to us through India, China, and Japan, for many centuries the path of practice-verification has been mostly expressed through full-time monastic training and study. These days many people throughout the world are exploring the potential of wholehearted Zen practice-verification while living an ordinary lifestyle outside the monastery – with all the complexities of careers, families, media, entertainment, and much more. From a Zen perspective, everyone’s buddha-nature is complete even before beginning practice, but there can be a gradual deepening of trust in this completeness, direct verification of this completeness, extending this trust and verification into all aspects of daily life, as well as deepening of kindness and compassion for others based on such trust. Some practitioners may be drawn to follow a more structured progression of practice and study that can be developed and maintained in both formal and informal practice, throughout daily life. These guidelines are for anyone who would like to fully and sincerely take up the Zen path of practice-verification similar to the way it has been expressed for over a thousand years – for the relief of suffering, for the unfolding of kindness and compassion, and for the supreme benefit of all beings.

Practice-Verification of Foundational Buddha-Dharma (1-3 years)

Purpose

Establish a basis of ethical discipline (shila), meditative concentration (samadhi), and basic understanding (prajna) of Buddha-Dharma (four noble truths and eightfold path, three refuges, impermanence).

Commitment

Informally take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; attend bi-monthly precepts renewal ceremony w/sangha if possible; develop healthy skepticism about Dharma, testing it like jeweler tests gold for authenticity.

Practice

1. Establish a daily zazen practice (at home or with sangha, at least 30 minutes/day, 5 days/week): learn to find a comfortable sitting posture and practice mindfulness of breathing, body, feelings, mental states, sounds and other sense-objects – attention to present experiences, letting go of thoughts of past and future.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and/or sesshin (multi-day retreat) (3 days/year, alone or with sangha): silent meditation retreats allow access to deeper dimensions of mind that daily zazen usually does not reveal.
3. Establish and maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) relationship with one or more teachers to explore zazen, practice in daily life, and Dharma understanding (meeting once every two months).
4. Attend Dharma talks, discussions, or classes when possible – online or in person (at least once/month); if near a Zen Center, attend regularly and learn zendo roles such as doan, fukudo, jiko; become a member of a Zen Center (to help support temple and make an ongoing connection with a community and/or teacher).

Study (* = most highly recommended)

Foundations of Buddha-Dharma: Discontent and the End of Discontent (read at least two books):

1. *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon – Bhikkhu Bodhi
2. What the Buddha Taught (on four noble truths, eightfold path, etc.) – Walpola Rahula
3. The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching (on four noble truths, eightfold path, etc.) – Thich Nhat Hanh
4. *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice – Shunryu Suzuki
5. Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen – Shunryu Suzuki

Audio class series (<https://kokyohenkel.weebly.com/>)

1. Dogen on Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures (Shobogenzo Kie Sanbo) (Aug-Sep 2016)
2. Dogen on the Bodhisattva’s Four Ways of Embrace (Shobogenzo Shishoho) (Sep 2014)
3. Dogen on Actualizing the Fundamental Point (Shobogenzo Genjo Koan) (Oct-Nov 2010)

Practice-Verification of the Bodhisattva's Way of Compassion (1-3 years)

Purpose

Develop the aspiration to realize awakening for the benefit of all beings (bodhichitta), openness to others, and compassion (sixteen bodhisattva precepts, four bodhisattva vows, six paramitas, repentance, devotion).

Commitment

Informally take up four bodhisattva vows; attend bi-monthly precepts renewal ceremony when possible (at least 6 times/year); request to formally take refuge and receive the bodhisattva precepts from a teacher (jukai ceremony, including sewing a rakusu robe and studying the precepts in dokusan meetings).

Practice

1. Continue daily zazen practice (60 minutes/day, 5 days/week): learn to practice panoramic attention, mindfulness of the whole present, calm-abiding without a specific meditation object like the breath.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and sesshin (multi-day retreat) (7 days/year, alone or with sangha); take up commitment of participating in a Practice Period at a Zen Center if possible (6-8 weeks/year).
3. Maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) relationship to explore the precepts (meeting 2 times/month).
4. Attend Dharma talks, discussions, or classes when possible – online or in person (at least once/month); offer time and energy to the sangha (sangha work days, sangha cooking for homeless, zendo roles, cooking and other support for group retreats, organizational work, etc.); volunteer or charity work.

Study (* = most highly recommended)

The Bodhisattva Path: Limitless Compassion (read at least three books):

1. *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts – Reb Anderson
2. Entering the Mind of Buddha: Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas – Reb Anderson
3. The Practice of Perfection: The Paramitas from a Zen Buddhist Perspective – Robert Aitken
4. *Living by Vow: A Practical Introduction to Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts – Shohaku Okumura
5. The Lotus Sutra – Gene Reeves, Burton Watson, or Bunno Kato, etc.

Audio class series (<https://kokyohenkel.weebly.com/>)

1. Brahmajala Sutra on the Ten Major Bodhisattva Precepts (Oct-Nov 2016)
2. Asanga's Treatise on the Bodhisattva's Three Pure Precepts (Feb-Mar 2014)
3. Vasubandhu's Treatise on the Bodhisattva's Vow and Six Paramitas (Dec 2014)
4. Avatamsaka Sutra on Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Conduct and Vows (May-Jun 2016)
5. Dogen on Arousing Aspiration for the Unsurpassable (Shobogenzo Hotsu Mujoshin) (Feb 2014)

Practice-Verification of Deep Inquiry into Nonduality (1-3 years)

Purpose

Take up the study, contemplation, and living application of the profound view of selflessness, emptiness, and nonduality as taught in the perfection of wisdom (prajna-paramita), middle-way (madhyamaka), mind-only (chittamatra), and buddha-nature (tathagatagarbha) traditions of the great vehicle (mahayana).

Commitment

Informally take up four bodhisattva vows; attend bi-monthly precepts renewal ceremony when possible (at least 6 times/year); be available to fulfill the role of head student (shuso) for a Practice Period (which involves helping a practice leader to lead Practice Period and giving Dharma talks). Memorize zendo chants.

Practice

1. Continue daily zazen practice (90 minutes/day, 5 days/week): learn to practice meditative inquiry, such as looking for and not finding a separate self anywhere in body or mind, or looking for the edges of awareness.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and sesshin (multi-day retreat) (10 days/year, alone or with sangha); take up commitment of participating in a Practice Period at a Zen Center if possible (6-8 weeks/year).
3. Maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) to explore nonduality (meeting 2 times/month).
4. Attend Dharma talks, discussions, or classes when possible – online or in person (at least once/month); offer time and energy to the sangha (sangha work days, sangha cooking for the homeless, zendo roles, cooking and other support for group retreats, organizational work, etc.); volunteer or charity work.

Study (* = most highly recommended)

Middle Way of Dependent Arising and Emptiness; Mere Manifestations of Mind (read at least four books):

1. The Heart Sutra – *Karl Brunnholzl, Donald Lopez, Red Pine, Mu Soeng, or Thich Nhat Hanh
2. The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, or Jay Garfield, Mark Siderits & Shoryu Katsuda, Mabja/Dharmachakra
3. The Third Turning of the Wheel: Wisdom of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra – Reb Anderson
4. Inside Vasubandhu's Yogacara: A Practitioner's Guide – Ben Connelly
5. *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso

Audio class series (<https://kokyohenkel.weebly.com/>)

1. Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra (Aug-Sep 2015)
2. Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way, Ch 18 on Self (Jun-Jul 2007), Ch 24 on Truths (Nov-Dec 2015)
3. Samdhinirmochana Sutra: Foundational Scripture of the Mind-Only School (Feb-Apr 2011)
4. Mahaparinirvana Sutra: Buddha Nature as True Self (Oct-Dec 2019)
5. Dogen on Mind Itself is Buddha (Shobogenzo Sokushin Zebutsu) (April 2019)

Practice-Verification of Zen: A Separate Transmission Outside the Scriptures (1-3 years)

Purpose

“Point directly to mind, see your true nature, be buddha;” take up investigation of Zen stories (koan), transmission of light, ceremony and ritual expression.

Commitment

Informally take up four bodhisattva vows; attend bi-monthly precepts renewal ceremony when possible (at least 12 times/year); set up a home altar and regularly make offerings to it; take up personal specific vows such as giving to each homeless person one meets, or not eating meat; explore possible priest ordination.

Practice

1. Continue daily zazen practice (90-120 min/day, 6 days/week): learn to practice turning the light around (eko hensho), just sitting (shikantaza), self-enjoyment samadhi (jijuyu zammai) – a.k.a. nondual awareness.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and sesshin (multi-day retreat) (15 days/year total, alone or with sangha); take up commitment of Practice Period (6-8 weeks/year). Consider doing 5-10 day solitary retreat.
3. Maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) relationship to explore Zen (meeting once/week).
4. Attend Dharma talks, discussions, or classes when possible – online or in person (at least once/month); offer time and energy to the sangha (sangha work days, sangha cooking for the homeless, zendo roles, cooking and other support for group retreats, organizational work, etc.); volunteer or charity work; attend Green Gulch Farm 3-week Intensive or 2-month Practice Period, or Tassajara 90-day Practice Period.

Study (* = most highly recommended)

Zen: Pointing Directly to Mind, Manifesting True Nature (read at least five books):

1. *Trust in Mind: The Rebellion of Chinese Zen (Sengcan's Song of the Trusting Mind) – Mu Soeng
2. *The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-neng – Red Pine, Thomas Cleary, or Philip Yampolsky
3. Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi – Taigen Daniel Leighton
4. The Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues – Thomas Cleary
5. *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen – Kazuaki Tanahashi, etc.
6. Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dogen – Kazuaki Tanahashi, etc.
7. Commentary on Dogen's Genjokoan – Shohaku Okumura, Hakuun Yasutani, or Shunryu Suzuki
8. *Record of Transmitting the Light: Zen Master Keizan's Denkoroku – Francis Cook or Thomas Cleary
9. Women of the Way: Discovering 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom – Sallie Tisdale
- 10.*The Art of Just Sitting: Essential Writings on the Zen Practice of Shikantaza – John Daido Looi

Audio class series (<https://kokyohenkel.weebly.com/>)

1. Third Ancestor's Song of the Trusting Mind: The First Zen Teaching (Dec 2015)
2. Dongshan's Jewel Mirror Samadhi and Five Relationships (Feb-Mar, Jul-Aug 2013)
3. Dogen on the Wholehearted Practice of the Way (Shobogenzo Bendowa) (Oct 2015)
4. Dogen on the Universal Recommendation for the Ceremony of Zazen (Fukanzazengi) (Dec 2016)
5. Dogen on Radiant Light (Shobogenzo Komyo) (Mar 2018)

Appendix: Reading List for Clarifying and Deepening Meditation Practice

(* = most highly recommended)

1. mindfulness, one-pointed attention, calm-abiding (smṛti/sati, samādhi, shamatha with support)

learn to find comfortable sitting posture and practice mindfulness of breathing, body, feelings, mental states, or sounds as object/support – attention to present experience, letting go of thoughts of past and future.

Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening – Joseph Goldstein

Focused and Fearless: A Meditator's Guide to States of Deep Joy, Calm, and Clarity – Shaila Catherine

The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the Power of the Focused Mind – B. Alan Wallace

*Genuine Happiness: Meditation as the Path to Fulfillment – B. Alan Wallace (chapters 1, 4-7)

*The Mind Illuminated: A Complete Meditation Guide – Culadasa

*Touching the Infinite: A New Perspective on Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness – Rodney Smith

*Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy – Katsuki Sekida

2. panoramic attention, calm-abiding without a specific object (shamatha without support)

learn to practice mindfulness of the whole present, calm-abiding without a specific meditation object/support like the breath.

*Genuine Happiness: Meditation as the Path to Fulfillment – B. Alan Wallace (chapter 2)

*The Method of No-Method: The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination – Chan Master Sheng Yen

*Opening the Hand of Thought: Foundations of Zen Buddhist Practice – Kosho Uchiyama

3. meditative inquiry (vipashyana)

with a foundation of calm-abiding, learn to practice meditative inquiry, such as looking for and not finding a separate self anywhere in body or mind, or looking for the edges of awareness.

How to See Yourself as You Really Are: A Practical Guide to Self-Knowledge – Dalai Lama

Pointing Out the Great Way: Stages of Meditation in the Mahamudra Tradition – Dan Brown

Clarifying the Natural State: A Principle Guidance Manual for Meditation – Dakpo Tashi Namgyal

*Genuine Happiness: Meditation as the Path to Fulfillment – B. Alan Wallace (chapter 12)

*Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso

*The Essentials of Buddhist Meditation – Shramana Zhiyi, translated by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

*King of Samadhis (Shobogenzo Zammai O Zammai) – Eihei Dogen (in "The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo" by Norman Waddell & Masao Abe and "Beyond Thinking" by Kazuaki Tanahashi)

4. nondual awareness (jnana – the culmination of shamatha and vipashyana)

learn to practice turning the light around (eko hensho), just sitting (shikantaza), self-enjoyment samadhi (jijuyu zammai) – a.k.a. nondual awareness.

*The Transparency of Things: Contemplating the Nature of Experience – Rupert Spira (or others by RS)

*Awakening: A Paradigm Shift of the Heart – Rodney Smith

*Way of Effortless Mindfulness – Loch Kelly (or Shift into Freedom by Loch Kelly)

*Fearless Simplicity: The Dzogchen Way of Living Freely in a Complex World – Tsoknyi Rinpoche

*Genuine Happiness: Meditation as the Path to Fulfillment – B. Alan Wallace (chapters 3, 14)

Our Pristine Mind: A Practical Guide to Unconditional Happiness – Orgyen Chowang

The Zen Teaching of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind – translated by John Blofeld (or John McRae)

Beyond Thinking: A Guide to Zen Meditation – Eihei Dogen, translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi

*Minding Mind: A Course in Basic Meditation – translated by Thomas Cleary

*Silent Illumination: A Chan Buddhist Path to Natural Awakening – Guo Gu

*Heart of Zen: Practice without Gaining-Mind (used to be Dogen Zen) – Okumura (Samadhi of Self chapter)

*The Art of Just Sitting: Essential Writings on the Zen Practice of Shikantaza – edited by John Daido Looi