
What Is Zen?: The Path of Just Sitting

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I was asked to write a big topic: What is Zen? The word “Zen” is used so vaguely that it is not possible to write an article in a way that fulfills all people’s expectations. Zen teaching, in my experience, is what I studied from my teacher, Kosho Uchiyama Roshi (1912–1998). Zen practice is just sitting (*shikantaza*), and this is what I practice. I am going to talk about the particular teaching of my own teacher and the particular practice I have been continuing for more than forty-five years. I hope that my personal path of just sitting will be meaningful for the audience of this book.

Life Is a Koan: My Questions About Life

I was born in Osaka 1948, three years after World War II. My family had been living in the city of Osaka, the second largest city in Japan, working as merchants for more than 200 years and six generations. In March 1945, my family

lost all of the wealth they accumulated across generations after an air raid by the U.S. Air Force. My family moved to the countryside in Osaka Prefecture, transitioning briefly into farming until 1952. The family then moved to Ibaraki, a small town between Osaka and Kyoto, where I lived from age 4 through 18.

During and after World War II, Japanese society changed dramatically. More specifically, the people in my parents’ generation altered their value systems to incorporate completely different perspectives from what they had been taught. When the war ended, my father was twenty-five years old, and my mother was a few years younger. They were raised in the traditional Japanese culture where family is valued as the most important aspect of one’s world. During the war, they were also influenced by the nationalistic ideology of the military government, in which the emperor was worshiped as a god, and the greatest honor achievable for any Japanese man was working hard and dying on the battlefield for the sake of the nation.

After the war, democracy and individualism influenced by the USA became a new foundation for social morality and education in Japan. Given the drastic change in society, my parents’ generation lost confidence in how they think,

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behave, and what they value. Consequently, my generation, the “baby boomers,” did not inherit the pre-war way of thinking and behaving from our parents’ generation. Not having the role models for the new standards, our generation had to acquire our own way of thinking and behaving. To do so, we became skeptical of almost everything, including the ways Japan used to be and how Japanese people lived after the war. To recover prosperity, Japanese people worked extremely hard. Because Japan had to give up military power, economy became the country’s priority.

When I was a high school student, I had many questions about life. As Japan was in a drastic transition, I felt pressure to make many decisions about my future. To do so, I also thought that I needed to understand the basic meaning of life (e.g., “what is my life for?”). Without knowing the true meaning of human life, I felt that I could not make any “right” decision for myself. To find the meaning of life, I often escaped from class and read in the library. I read many books, including those on philosophy, religions, literature, history, science, and many others.

The more I read books, the deeper my question became. I started to see that Japanese society at the time had become one huge money-generating machine. I also began to notice that school systems were serving as factories, manufacturing the components of the machine rather than serving as a place for the young to explore and cultivate the true meaning of life. My parents and teachers, as well as Japanese society, expected me to study hard, attend a prestigious university, have a well-respected job, work hard, and earn money. I could not find any meaning in such a way of life, that is, as being part of the machine. I wanted to escape from this materialistic society, but at the same time, I was not yet aware of alternatives.

I later found out that similar processes occurred in the USA and Europe during 1960s and 1970s. Young people wanted to examine the status quo system of values and escape from the limitations and boundaries of the established society. Some became political advocates while

others developed ideas in spirituality. During these periods, many people who were called hippies in the USA and Europe came to Kyoto, Japan, and practiced Zen. Some of them became close friends of mine, and we have remained friends since.

Encountering Zen Teaching

In the process of searching for the meaning of living, I found a classmate who had the same kind of questions. We became very close. He knew someone who went to Antaiji-temple to practice with Kodo Sawaki Roshi (1880–1965) and Kosho Uchiyama Roshi (1912–1998). Antaiji was a small Soto Zen temple. Unlike many other Soto Zen temples and other Buddhist temples, Antaiji did not have community supporters who offer financial contributions in exchange of receiving Buddhist ceremonies (e.g., funeral, celebration for family ancestry). Sawaki Roshi originally borrowed the temple to allow his disciples, including Uchiyama Roshi, to stay and practice. Later, he was asked to be the abbot of the temple. He accepted the role, but he was the abbot in name only. He returned to Antaiji once a month to lead a sesshin, a period of intensive meditation (*zazen*). Otherwise, Sawaki Roshi traveled all over Japan to teach. Because he did not have his own temple, he was called “Homeless Kodo.” In 1963, when he was 83 years old, Uchiyama Roshi took care of his master until his death. In 1965, during a summer vacation, my friend visited Antaiji and practiced with Uchiyama Roshi for a few weeks. That was the time when Uchiyama Roshi published his first book entitled, “*Jiko (Self)*.” Uchiyama Roshi gave a copy to my friend, and he lent it to me.

After reading his book, I felt that I wanted to live like Uchiyama Roshi and become his disciple. I knew nothing about Buddhism or Zen. However, I found that he struggled with the same questions about meaning when he was a teenager. Uchiyama Roshi wanted to live the truth of human life. To find his answer, he studied Western philosophy at Waseda University, a prestigious private university located in Tokyo.

He primarily studied German philosophy. After completing his master's degree, he became a teacher at a Catholic seminary in Kyushu, in the southeastern region of Japan, and taught philosophy and mathematics there. At the seminary, Uchiyama Roshi also studied Catholic theology. After six months, he found that he could not become a Catholic because of the institutionalism he observed and studied about. He left the seminary shortly after.

Uchiyama Roshi married a woman while he was a university student, but she died after contracting tuberculosis (TB) a few years into their marriage. He, too, contracted TB, living with it for the rest of his life. After leaving seminary and returning to Tokyo, he re-married, but his second wife also died suddenly while she was pregnant. According to Uchiyama Roshi, these tragic experiences led him to pursue his life as a Zen Buddhist monk. He was ordained by Kodo Sawaki Roshi on December 8th in 1941 (December 7th in the USA). He was 29 years old. Coincidentally, the day he was ordained was Pearl Harbor Day.

During and after the World War II, Uchiyama Roshi practiced Zen under very difficult conditions. Going through difficult times within himself and Japanese society at large for almost 10 years, he began to find the answers that he was looking for. Continuing his practice, he wrote books and shared the answers that he found with others. I had read many books about great individuals in history, but Uchiyama Roshi was the first living teacher whom I encountered in my life.

When I read the book (i.e., "*Self*"), the primary thing I understood was his devotion to searching and his tireless efforts to share wisdom with others. I was not, however, able to discern the answer he had discovered. After reading the book, I began to study Buddhism and Zen more deeply. In 1968, I went to Komazawa University, a well-known Soto Zen Buddhist University located in Tokyo, Japan, where Sawaki Roshi taught as a professor. I studied basic Buddhist teachings and delved more deeply into the

teachings of Dogen Zenji, the originator of Japanese Soto Zen. After visiting Antaiji for the first time in 1969 to sit for a five-day sesshin, I was ordained in December 1970. I graduated from Komazawa University in March 1972 and entered Antaiji.

From 1965 to 1971, Uchiyama Roshi published seven books. I read all of them before I entered Antaiji and practiced under his mentorship. Together with what I studied at Komazawa University, Uchiyama Roshi's teachings became the foundation of my practice and understanding of Dharma.

The main points of Uchiyama Roshi's teachings are as follows:

1. What is the self in its true meaning?
2. What is the meaning of Zazen practice?
3. How to live daily lives and the life as a whole as the practice based on the understanding of the true self and zazen practice.

What I read in Uchiyama Roshi's books during that period of time was the actual Zen Buddhist teachings that I received, and it has also become the foundation of my life moving forward. Thus, it is important to elaborate on the main points of his teachings to understand this practice and way of living.

Self

Uchiyama Roshi's search for the way started with inquiring the truth of the self. He wanted to find what the self is and how one lives based on the truth of the self. He found that, from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, the fundamental point of Buddhism is to inquire about the self and find a peace of mind in settling within the self. Uchiyama Roshi often quotes from old Buddhist scriptures such as follows:

Sutta-Nipata: Walk in the world depending on the self.

Dhammapada: The foundation of the self is only the self.

Mahaparinibbana Sutta: Take refuge in the self; do not take refuge in anything else.¹

This basic attitude is directly continued in Dogen Zenji's teaching: To study the Buddha Way is to study the self (*Shobogenzo Genjokoan*).²

In his book, *Jiko (Self)*, Uchiyama Roshi defined the Buddha-dharma as follows:

Buddha-dharma is, in short, "the self is being in peace reaching the inner most truth of the self," and "within the peace, the self lives and works."

According to Uchiyama Roshi, the self has these two layers. Ultimately, the self is one with all beings without any separation. When we see this interconnectedness, we naturally think of others with a compassionate heart, enacting kindness, and consideration toward others. He also stated that we must have a *parental heart* toward all beings, seeing everything we encounter as our self, connecting our hearts with the universe.

The self is not a fixed, permanent entity that does not change. It is as if we are collections of billions of elements moving and changing within time and space. From the time of our birth, our bodies and minds constantly transition, their shapes and qualities shifting like a flame of the candle. Uchiyama Roshi asked us to see life as the flux of interdependence. It is actually one with everything, and at the same time, each of us has uniqueness distinct from others. Viewing our

self from these seemingly conflicting perspectives is important.

Although we are a collection of different elements, we tend to view ourselves as a fixed entity that can exist independently from the rest of the world. This fabricated fixed entity is what we usually recognize as "I," "my," "me," and without a clear reasoning, we attach ourselves to it. Uchiyama Roshi called engagement in this process being "self produced by ignorance." He also stated that this "self produced by ignorance" is not the true self that is interconnected with all things in the universe.

According to a Buddhist teaching, we are a collection of five aggregates (i.e., *skandha*: matter, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness). However, when these five aggregates work together, it somehow produces "I." We consider the "I" as the owner and operator of the five aggregates. In Sanskrit, this is called *panca upadana skandha* (five aggregates of clinging). In other words, this is the karmic self, the self created by various elements and experiences we had in the past. Our psychology works based upon our clinging to the "I," and desires for satisfying this "I" are called karmic consciousness.

When Dogen Zenji says "to study the Buddha Way is to study the self," he does not mean to study the self that is produced by illusory thoughts (i.e., self as the owner and operator). Rather our "true" self is revealed when we deconstruct and become released from such clinging to the karmic self by letting go of the self-centered thoughts that are produced by the karmic consciousness. To study the true self is to study the Buddha way.

Zazen

The transformation of self from the karmic self to the true self is not achieved through thinking. According to a Zen teaching, thinking is the very process of dividing the our experience into pieces. In unison with the desires for satisfaction, it is this "discriminative thinking" that is the core of the problem. Zazen is the posture of forgetting the self that is hardened by illusory conceptual thinking. It is important to let go of the thoughts

¹In *Sutta-Nipata* the Buddha said, "They are islands unto themselves. They have nothing. They go from place to place and in every way they are free." (translation by H. Saddhatissa, *The Sutta-Nipata*, Curzon Press, Richmond, England, 1994) p. 57.

In *The Dhammapada* the Buddha said, "Only a man himself can be the master of himself: who else from outside could be his master?" (translation by Juan Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, Penguin Books, London, 1973) p. 58.

In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha said, "Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge." (translation by Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourse of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995) p. 245.

²Translation by Okumura (*Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen's shobogenzo*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, 2010) p. 2.

that come from the karmic self without making new karma (please see additional discussion below). In zazen, the five aggregates are simply five aggregates without clinging; therefore, we are released from *panca upadana skandha*. In Dogen's expression, this is called dropping off body and mind (*shinjin-datsuraku*). Dogen says in *Fukanzazengi (Universal Recommendation for Zazen)*:

Let go of all associations, and put all affairs aside.
Do not think of either good or evil.
Do not be concerned with either right or wrong.
Put aside the operation of your intellect, volition,
and consciousness.
Stop considering things with your memory,
imagination, and contemplation.
Do not seek to become Buddha.³

When we practice zazen, we let go of everything. We let go of what we studied, what we memorized, and what we thought including any aspiration to become a Buddha. To express what is happening in zazen, Uchiyama Roshi coined the expression "opening the hand of thought." Even when we sit in an upright posture, all different kinds of thoughts come and go. We simply let them come and let them go; we do not pursue them; we do not fight against them; we do not make efforts to eliminate them. We focus on keeping the upright posture as well as deep and quiet abdominal breathing, not through thinking but through our bones and muscles. We entrust everything to this posture. This unique expression later became the title of the book that is the collection of English translations of his several writings.

Zazen is "just sitting." But we can do two more things in addition to just sitting when we are on the cushion in front of the wall: thinking and sleeping. Zazen is neither thinking nor sleeping. Even if we sit in upright posture, if we think, it is the same with thinking at a desk or in front of a computer. If we are sleeping, it is not different from sleeping in a bed. Both are not zazen of just sitting. Whenever we aware we deviate from just sitting, we return to just sitting,

by waking up from sleep or letting go of thoughts.

There are important distinctions between "thinking" and "thoughts are coming and going." Even when we sit facing the wall, our stomach continues to digest what we ate and the heart continues to beat and pumps blood. Every organ is still working. There is no reason that only our brain should stop functioning in zazen. Metaphorically speaking, the function of our brain is to produce thoughts. It is as if thoughts are secreted from our brain in exactly the same way as the stomach secretes gastric acid. But as we sit and let go of thoughts, thoughts exist without thinking. When we think, our mind is divided into two parts. One part becomes the subject, and the thoughts that come and go become the objects of thinking. These two parts interact with each other. When we are aware that our mind has such separation and interaction, we return to just sitting, upright posture, deep and smooth breathing. This is what letting go of thought actually means. In zazen, we focus our efforts to just sit, whenever we aware that we are deviating from just sitting and engaging in thinking or sleeping, we return to just sitting.

Within this upright posture and letting go of thoughts, true original self manifests itself. Zazen is experiencing the serene self without being deceived by any kind of karmic thoughts. Dogen says in *Shobogenzo Zuimonki*:

Sitting itself is the practice of the Buddha. Sitting itself is non-doing. It is nothing but the true form of the Self. Apart from sitting, there is nothing to seek as the Buddha-dharma.⁴

In *Shobogenzo Zanmai-o-zanmai (The Samadhi that is the king of Samadhis)*, he also said:

Now, we must know clearly that *kekkaфуza* (full lotus sitting) itself is the king of samadhis. *Kekkaфуza* itself is realizing and entering this samadhi. All other samadhis are the attendants of this king of samadhis. *Kekkaфуza* is a straight body, straight mind, straight body and mind, the buddhas and ancestors themselves, practice-enlightenment

³This is Okumura's unpublished translation.

⁴Okumura's translation in *Shobogenzo-zuimonki: Sayings of Eihei Dogen Zenji recorded by Koun Ejo (Sotoshu Shumicho, Tokyo, 1988) p. 101.*

itself, the essence of buddha-dharma, and Life itself. We sit in *kekkaфуza* with this human skin, flesh, bones, and marrow, actualizing the king of samadhis. Shakyamuni Buddha always upheld and maintained *kekkaфуza*. He intimately transmitted *kekkaфуza* to his disciples, and taught it to lay people. This is the essence of the teaching of his whole life. It is lacking nothing. *Kekkaфуza* is the essence of all of the sutras. This is when the Buddha sees the buddha. At the very time of sitting, sentient beings attain buddhahood.⁵

For Dogen, zazen is not a method or means to attain some desirable effects, such as awakening, enlightenment, and discovery of one's true nature; zazen is itself true self, true Dharma. In zazen, we gain nothing. We practice without gaining mind. Sawaki Roshi, Uchiyama Roshi's teacher, said that zazen is good for nothing.

Attitude Toward Our Life: Three Minds, Vow, and Repentance

Uchiyama Roshi wrote that there are two paths for human lives. One is to pursue the fulfillment of our desires for satisfaction by working hard and competing with others. We are always dissatisfied with who we are and the conditions we are in. We feel as if there is something lacking and believe that if we gain or accomplish something to fill the empty space, we must become happy. We make efforts to reach it. However, once we obtain it, we know that we are not fulfilled, and we set another goal to fill the next space. The consequence is that our desires grow larger and larger. It is as if we are hungry ghosts. We naturally become competitive with others because what we want to gain is pretty much the same thing other people who have the same kinds of desires want to get. This is how our lives become *samsara*. Even when we become successful and feel we have more power, wealth, fame, social status than others, we are not free from fear of losing them. When we die, everything we have accomplished and gained will be left behind.

The other path is what Shakyamuni Buddha walked. Even though he was born as a prince, he left his father's palace to pursue the path of liberation. He gave up all of the privileges he had as a young, healthy, strong, and wise prince. In the worldly sense, he became a beggar. After he had awakened, he taught about what he awakened to and gave others the guidance on how to live a wholesome life without being pulled by dissatisfaction and competitive thinking. As the leader of the community of monks and lay followers, he lived the wholesome way through practicing the eightfold correct path as the middle-way for the rest of his life.

The two paths are the opposite ways of approaching life. When we discover the true reality of our self that is connected with all other beings, we cannot avoid aspiring to live harmoniously with all beings. Because we are supported by all beings, we need to support all beings, too. Dogen Zenji described the three minds in *Tenzokyokun* that highlights the mental attitude that we need to maintain if we are aspiring to walk the latter path. The three minds are the magnanimous mind, nurturing mind, and joyful mind. Uchiyama Roshi also often emphasized that we maintain the same attitude in our daily lives based on zazen practice.⁶

Daishin (Magnanimous Mind)

Magnanimous mind is the mind of non-discrimination such as great mountains or the great ocean. Mountains are immovable and embrace different living beings such as tall trees, short trees, grasses, flowers, big and small animals, insects, bacteria, and many others without making discrimination. The great ocean accepts water from different rivers and simply becomes one ocean. As a bodhisattva, we need to embrace all people and living beings, and we need to be free from comparison and evaluations of what is valuable or worthless, what is wonderful or

⁵Okumura's unpublished translation.

⁶About the three minds, see *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: a translation of Eihei Shingi* (Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1996), and *How to Cook Your Life: From the Zen Kitchen to enlightenment* (translated by Thomas Wright, Weatherhill, Tokyo, 1993).

difficult. We should see various conditions with a single eye without the worldly system of values and judgment.

Roshin (Nurturing Mind)

Dogen stated that a nurturing mind is the mind of parents. Even if they are poor, they protect their children under any circumstances. Childish people want to be taken care of, crying and complaining if they are not. However, matured people find a meaning of life in working hard to protect their children and others. As a bodhisattva, we should consider the three treasures of Buddhism (i.e., Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) as our children, protecting and nurturing them.

Kishin (Joyful Mind)

Joyful mind is the attitude that finds a joy within working to take care of others. When we are in favorable conditions, we do not need joyful mind because the circumstances are already joyful. We can simply enjoy our life. When we are in difficult situations and cannot find any reason to enjoy them, we need joyful mind for not being overwhelmed by the difficulties and our negative thoughts and emotions influenced by these difficulties.

Vow and Repentance

Another thing Uchiyama Roshi emphasized was that we must take bodhisattva vows and practice repentance. In Mahayana Buddhism, all bodhisattvas have to take four general vows: (1) Beings are numberless, I vow to free them; (2) Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them; (3) Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them; (4) The Buddha way is unsurpassable, I vow to realize it. These are endless vows under the direction of the bodhisattva practice. We must walk toward the direction even one step at a time, but it is not possible to completely accomplish them. Our practice is always incomplete; therefore, as we take these vows we need to make repentance. Repentance in the bodhisattva practice is not simply saying "I am sorry; I will try not to make the same mistake

again." Rather, repentance in this context is the awareness of the incompleteness of our practice. This awareness encourages us to take another step forward on the journey.

Specific, concrete, and attainable vows are necessary for each of us. Uchiyama Roshi always said that he had two vows: one was to produce determined zazen practitioners; the other was to write texts of zazen practice for the modern practitioners.

When I began to practice at Antaiji in 1972, I understood that I needed to take the bodhisattva vows, but I had some difficulties in finding my own strong motivation to help all beings. Because my question regarding life originally came from my own desire of escaping from the busy, noisy materialistic society, I was not so much interested in working toward helping others.

Practice at Antaiji

My First Five-Day Sesshin

As mentioned above, I first visited Antaiji in January 1969 to sit for the five-day sesshin, a period of intense meditation (zazen). I was a 20-year-old college student. I had only about half a year of experience practicing zazen after I entered Komazawa University in Tokyo in the previous year. During the sesshin at Antaiji, we sat fourteen 50-min periods of zazen a day. We woke up at 4 a.m., washed our face, brushed our teeth, and went to the zendo (i.e., meditation hall) by 4:10 a.m. We sat two periods before breakfast, which was scheduled at 6:00 a.m. Between the periods of zazen, we had 10 min *kinhin* (walking meditation). After breakfast, we had a short break then sat again from 7:10 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., five consecutive periods. We then had lunch and a short break until 1:10 p.m. We sat five more periods in the afternoon until 6:00 p.m., followed by supper and a short break. Then, we sat from 7:10 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. This extremely simple schedule repeated for five days. On the last day of the sesshin, we sat until 5:00 p.m. instead of 9:00 p.m.

During my first experience of a five-day sesshin, I experienced pain in my feet, ankles, knees, and lower back. To sit in a cross-legged posture was to sit with pain. In Tokyo, I read books until early morning, slept until late morning, and then went to school. I had to wake up around the time I usually went to bed. I was constantly sleepy as if I had jet lag. The zendo at Antaiji was not in good condition. There were spaces between pillars and walls such that cold air entered in freely. We only had two small kerosene stoves. The sesshin was painful, exhausting, and a cold experience. When the sesshin completed, I thought that it would be my last sesshin. Only thing I could enjoy were meals. Even though we had to sit in *seiza*, one of the traditional ways of sitting in Japan, and were required to eat quickly, I was happy to have wholesome, albeit simple foods, as I was a starving student. Several months later, somehow and somehow, I returned to Antaiji. To this date, Antaiji style of sesshin has been my main Zen practice.

Antaiji Practice Under Uchiyama Roshi's Guidance

Immediately after I graduated from Komazawa University in 1972, I entered Antaiji. This felt like a natural decision after having spent my years in college constantly reading books and thinking; I was tired of it. I put all of my books in the closet and tried not to read them except for the texts which Uchiyama Roshi gave lectures on, and Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo Zuimonki*. *Zuimonki* is a collection of Dogen's short informal talks recorded by his successor, Ejo. Uchiyama Roshi gave two 90-min lectures on a bimonthly meeting, called Sunday Zazen-kai. He spoke on various texts written by Dogen. I read the entire *Zuimonki* so many times that I almost memorized the talks.

Sesshin

We had ten sesshin each year except February and August when it was too cold and too hot in Kyoto. June and September sesshin were three

days because of humidity and heat. Having a five-day sesshin each month was difficult for me but I was happy to devote myself fully to it.

Daily Practice

For the rest of the month, we sat three periods in the early morning from 5:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m., and two periods in the evening from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. During daytime, we did various necessary work called *samu* (community work), such as cleaning the temple, taking care of the vegetable garden, and chopping firewood. Because we cooked and created warm water with firewood, preparing firewood all year round was one of the most important tasks. Especially at a temple like Antaiji, which was located in a city, collecting firewood was sometimes quite challenging. We had a small garden where we grew vegetables, such as various kinds of greens, cucumbers, eggplants, and tomatoes. We ate them during the summer. From the summer to the fall, we also grew daikon radishes and Chinese cabbages to pickle for the winter and the following year. Cleaning the temple and weeding the temple ground were also important duties. When we did not have community work, I often took a walk in the mountains near the temple while others self-studied.

Takuhatsu

As Antaiji had no family members or particular patrons, monks there had to support their practice by *takuhatsu* (begging), a traditional form of alms common among Zen Buddhist monks in Japan. We went out to do *takuhatsu* two or three times a month to support our practice and purchase foods for the sesshin. Sesshin was also open to the community members. Uchiyama Roshi never required sesshin participants to pay a fee or make donations. He simply asked them to bring one cup of rice for each meal they wanted to have during the sesshin. There were, of course, people who made donations; however, it was never requested of them.

Takuhatsu was a powerful practice. When we walked on the streets wearing traditional

Buddhist robes, bamboo hats, and straw sandals, people bowed to us with *gassho* (both hands putting together) so politely as if they were worshipping the Buddha. Other people insulted us or even shouted at us. Some people simply ignored us. Toward all people who treated us in various ways, we maintained the same sincere and polite attitude. For me, takuhatsu was not simply to receive donation; it was also a practice to be free from our discrimination toward all people regardless of their attitudes toward us.

No Ceremony, No Chanting

One of the most unique aspects of Antaiji, compared to other Zen temples, was that we conducted almost no ceremonies. We had no morning, noon, or evening service except the ones during the two weeks of summer special period in August, which were offered to college students for learning Zen. For the rest of the year, the only time we chanted was when we went to takuhatsu and when we came back from takuhatsu. We chanted the *Heart Sutra*, a famous sutra in Mahayana Buddhism, and *Shosaimyokichijo-darani*.⁷ We had meals in the dining room using *oryoki*, but we did not chant the meal verses. We, Antaiji monks, had a bad reputation when we went to other monasteries for practice because we could not chant even the *Heart Sutra* without seeing a sutra book.

Antaiji was originally established in 1921 as the study monastery for the selected monks who graduated from Komazawa University and wished to continue to study Dogen's teachings. That was why it did not have family members, and therefore, it was not necessary to do funeral ceremonies or memorial services for lay people. Uchiyama Roshi decided not to have even daily morning, noon, and evening services to make it

⁷*Dharani* is the mystic syllables like a *mantra*. Indian people thoughts the words themselves had the power even to move heavenly gods to bestow them some benefits, therefore dharani and mantra were not translated. We chanted in transliteration of the Sanskrit words. This particular dharani is to praise the blessing of the Buddha to save all beings from suffering.

clear that Antaiji focused on the practice of zazen alone.

Cooking

All monks took turns cooking every three days. Our meals were very simple. In the morning, we usually had rice gruel made from the leftover rice from the day before and pickled *daikon* or other vegetables. For lunch, we had brown rice, miso-soup, and some pickled vegetables. For supper, we had either brown rice or white rice, *miso*-soup, one side dish, and pickled vegetables. Cooking is the actual practice of what Dogen taught in *Tenzokyokun (Instruction to Cook)*.⁸ Uchiyama Roshi wrote a commentary on the text entitled *How to Cook Your Life* and described how we should work in the kitchen as an important practice as zazen in the zendo. Because we did not have a gas or electric stove, we cooked with firewood. Cooking with firewood was completely different from cooking with gas or electricity. It was a practice of concentration and attentiveness. We had to take care of three or four fires simultaneously to cook rice, make soup, a side dish, and boil water for tea. If the fire was too strong, we burned everything; if it was not strong enough, half cooked food was not eatable.

No Bait

As Antaiji was a small temple, we were not qualified to be teachers of Soto Zen School despite having a strict zazen practice. We needed to go to other official monasteries to get qualification to become a temple priest. Uchiyama Roshi stated that the practice at Antaiji had no bait. What he meant was that we needed to just practice for the sake of practice without any expectation of desired outcomes, such as getting the license to become a teacher. In Uchiyama Roshi's teachings, this practice without any expectation, but just practice, was very

⁸See footnote 6.

important. We maintained the same attitude with in zazen in our daily lives without gaining mind.

English

During the monthly five-day sesshin, we usually had about 50–60 people. One-third of the participants were the resident practitioners like myself, another one-third were Japanese from outside Antaiji, and the final one-third were those from the USA, Germany, England, France, Australia, and other countries. Many of them lived in various parts of Kyoto, and they came to sit sesshin regularly. Some of them lived in a neighborhood of Antaiji and came to sit every morning and evening.

In 1960s and early 70s, many Zen centers were established in the USA and Europe. So called “hippies” became very interested in Eastern spirituality including Zen. Many of them came to Kyoto to study Japanese cultures, such as martial arts, tea ceremonies, Noh theater, *sumie* painting, haiku poetry, Japanese traditional carpentry, and vegetarian cooking. They thought that Zen was the spiritual origin of these Japanese arts. Some of them came from Zen centers to practice in a Japanese traditional monastic setting. At that time, there were few Zen Buddhist temples in Japan that were open to the westerners. Uchiyama Roshi accepted and welcomed those young people and allowed them to stay at Antaiji until they found a place to live. Several of them lived at Antaiji and became ordained monks.

Although there were many westerners who regularly came to sit at Antaiji, Uchiyama Roshi himself did not speak any foreign languages. He wanted to teach the true meaning of zazen practice as the Buddha-dharma to those young westerners. He always had a vast perspective of the history of human spirituality, and he thought that the twenty-first century must be the age of spirituality. And he often stated that the world needed people who had thorough experience of zazen practice in order to convey the significance of zazen to other cultures in various languages.

I was very much influenced by the depth and breadth of his vision.

When I started to practice at Antaiji, Uchiyama Roshi asked me if I wanted to study English. Even though I was not interested in English, somehow, I could not say “No.” My half-hearted “Yes,” ultimately changed the rest of my life. After I started studying English, I became one of the “English-speaking” Japanese monks. Many westerners became my friends. Practicing zazen with westerners became very natural to me. My current activity in the USA is a tiny fruit of Uchiyama Roshi’s boundless vision. My life would have been quite different had I not met him.

My Practice After Leaving Antaiji

Pioneer Valley Zendo

I practiced in this way until 1975, the year in which Uchiyama Roshi retired. Three of Uchiyama Roshi’s disciples who studied English went to Massachusetts in 1975 to establish a small Zen Community, called Pioneer Valley Zendo. I was one of the three disciples.

The purpose of establishing the Pioneer Valley Zendo was to transplant Uchiyama Roshi’s style of Zen (i.e., just sitting) in USA soil. We bought roughly six acres of woodland in western Massachusetts. We had nothing but trees, and we built a small house. Three Japanese monks lived together, sat, and worked hard to make the place livable. We still continued the five-day sesshin every month with the same schedule as the one at Antaiji. We cleared the land, made vegetable gardens, and dug a well. Our days consisted completely of sitting and working tirelessly.

Because I was raised in a city (i.e., Osaka, Japan), I enjoyed living in the quiet and peaceful woods in western Massachusetts, practicing zazen, and working tirelessly to establish the zendo. I had almost no access to information about what was happening in the rest of the world for about five years. We did not watch T.V., listen to radio, or read newspapers. I felt

that my desire to escape from a busy, noisy society was finally fulfilled.

One day in 1978 or 1979, I had a sesshin at a Zen center in New York City. After the sesshin, I had a half-day off before returning to Massachusetts. I took a walk in Manhattan heading south, finally reaching a park where I could see the Statue of Liberty. I did not bring any money, I did not have an ID, neither did I have my driver's license or passport. I simply had robes in my bag and a ticket for a bus ride to return. It occurred to me that if I was hit by a car and killed right in that moment, no one would know who I was. At that very moment, I felt that I did not need to and should not escape any more. From that moment, I felt that I could return to the society not for becoming a part of the money-making machine, but for dedicating myself to the Dharma.

During my earlier days in Massachusetts, I felt the harder I worked, the stronger my body became. It worked really well when I was in my twenties. However, after I turned thirty, my body began to break down from the hard labor of building Pioneer Valley. Because I did not have income to receive medical care, I was forced to return to Japan in the winter of 1981.

Returning to Kyoto: Truly Good-for-Nothing Zazen

Right after returning to Japan, I stayed in my brother's apartment in Osaka. He was traveling to the USA for about six months. I felt that I did not have a place to practice, I had no sangha, I had no money, no job, and my body felt half broken. Given my physical conditions, I could not practice in the way I had previously for the last ten years at Antaiji and Pioneer Valley Zendo. It was difficult for me to live by myself without practice or sangha. In my twenties, I had devoted my life entirely to practice and to working for the Dharma. I did not know what to do.

I was confused and even depressed for a while. I felt that my life was a failure. It was not because I felt that I was in such a miserable

situation; I clearly recognized the conditions that I was in and the cause of it. My struggles stemmed from the question of why I was in great agony if I knew that zazen was good for nothing and that I practiced without any expectations. I was very fortunate that, from the beginning of my study and practice of Zen, I encountered Sawaki Roshi and Uchiyama Roshi's teachings. Sawaki Roshi clearly stated that zazen is good for nothing. I thought that I understood it and dedicated myself to the "good-for-nothing" practice. Yet I continued to ask myself why not practicing zazen is a problem if it was in fact good for nothing. This great confusion continued for a while.

One day in a great struggle, I realized that my practice in my twenties was not actually good for nothing. I recognized that I had felt that, because of my zazen practice, my life was good, or perhaps better than others' who worked hard in society to make money. I realized that I actually relied on zazen practice to justify my way of living. I saw that my practice had not been really for the sake of Dharma, but rather for my own self-satisfaction. I felt that I could not continue to practice this way. I also could not stop practicing and go back to an ordinary life in the mundane world. I was stuck at the dead end.

I also realized that, in a deeper part of my karmic self, which was much deeper than my rational thinking, my desire to be a "good" boy had been a strong drive since my childhood.

I was a "good" boy until I became a high school student. It was not easy to keep up with this impression; I always wanted to find out what parents, teachers, friends, and others wanted me to do before doing anything, then I tried to do things in the way I thought they would have liked me to do them. When I became a teenager, I felt this way of choosing my actions was not honest or genuine. When I observed my friends, some of them did things simply because they wanted to do so without considering others. Some of them were considered "bad" boys, and I thought that they were more genuine and honest to themselves than I had been. I remembered having the feeling that I really wanted to change myself. That was one of the major reasons why I wanted

to become a Zen monk; I wanted to escape from the influence of society. In a sense, being a Zen monk, I successfully betrayed and rejected all of the expectations I had internalized from my parents, teachers, and the entire Japanese society.

In the midst of this great struggle, I also had the realization that, even after I became a monk, I was controlled by my desire to be a good boy. I wanted to be a good student of the Buddha and a good disciple of my teacher. I had a desire to be a better practitioner than others even though I tried not to express such desires explicitly. The fact was that this realization did not take me to a state of awakening. Rather, it led me to greater disappointment. I felt that I could not continue to live in this way; I could not actually be a good boy as the son of my parents or as a disciple of my teacher. I began to feel that I was really good for nothing, in its worst meaning, not in the meaning of Sawaki Roshi's teaching.

Then, one day, something prompted me to sit on a cushion in my apartment. I had no desire, no reason, and no need to sit, but I found myself sitting by myself. It was very peaceful. I did not sit because of the Buddha's teaching, or my teacher's. No one watched me and saw if I was a good boy or not. I did not need a reason to sit; I simply sat. There existed no need to compare or compete with others or with myself. It was the first time that I felt that I was really doing the "good for nothing" zazen.

It is important to recognize that it was difficult to practice good for nothing zazen. It took me more than ten years of continuous practice. I do not think that I have stopped wanting to be a good boy. However, since I recognized my desire for being a good boy as a disruption, I am less controlled by it. Rather, I can make fun of myself when I behave in ways that focus on pleasing others and being a good boy.

Kyoto Soto Zen Center

In the summer of 1981, I moved to a small temple in Kyoto, called Seitai-an where my friend was the abbot. He graciously allowed me to live there as a caretaker. That was about

6 months after I returned from Massachusetts. Uchiyama Roshi encouraged me to work on the English translation of Dogen's and his writings with one of my American dharma brothers, Daitso Tom Wright. He also suggested that I establish a place where I could do the translation work and practice mainly with the people from other countries. At that time, there were many people who visited Kyoto to study and practice Zen, but there were not many Soto Zen temples, which accepted them.

In 1983, while I stayed at Seitai-an, I married Yuko. Her father practiced zazen at his family temple. The abbot of the temple practiced with Sawaki Roshi, while he was a student at Komazawa University. Yuko had practiced zazen since she was 16 years old. Later, she went to Komazawa University. Yuko, however, withdrew from Komazawa University before graduation, and then went to the USA to study English and visit Dainin Katagiri Roshi at Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. Minnesota Zen Meditation Center was formed in 1972 by Katagiri Roshi when he was invited to come from California.

After coming back to Japan, Yuko visited Seitai-an with a female disciple of Katagiri Roshi. Three weeks after we married, she went to Antaiji to learn sewing Buddhist robes called *okesa*. She remained there for one year. At Kyoto Soto Zen Center, she did tenzo (cooked) during sesshin until we had children. Our daughter Yoko was born in 1987, and our son Masaki was born in 1991.

In 1984, I started Kyoto Soto Zen Center with the support from Rev. Yuho Hosokawa. He allowed me to live in a temple as a caretaker that he owned outside Kyoto. I decided to take over Uchiyama Roshi's two vows and made them my own: practice zazen with western practitioners and translate the texts of zazen practice to be available for non-Japanese practitioners.

I planned to translate several early writings of Dogen Zenji and Uchiyama Roshi's books with Daitso Tom Wright and other American practitioners. Five translation books were published from Kyoto Soto Zen Center. I continued to practice five-day sesshin ten times a year. I practiced with many students from other

countries there until 1992. Unfortunately, Rev. Hosokawa passed away, and I felt that it was time for me to leave the temple. At the time, our daughter Yoko was four years old and our son Masaki was one year old.

Minnesota Zen Meditation Center

After living with my family in a small house, which belonged to a Catholic convent in Kyoto, I moved to Minneapolis to serve as the interim head teacher at Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC) in 1993. As mentioned above, MZMC was founded by Dainin Katagiri Roshi in 1972, but he passed away in 1990. They were without a teacher for three years. I taught there for three years as the head teacher and another year as a part time teacher until 1997.

Katagiri Roshi practiced with Eko Hashimoto Roshi at Eiheiji, one of two main temples of Soto Zen in Japan. Hashimoto Roshi was a close friend of Sawaki Rosh, but their styles of practice were quite different. As Hashimoto Roshi emphasized detailed formal practice derived from Dogen Zenji, Katagiri Roshi's style of practice was quite different from what I learned from Uchiyama Roshi.

I then decided to follow Katagiri Roshi's style at MZMC because I was the "interim" teacher for filling in his role. Quite honestly, that was a challenge for me. However, that experience helped me broaden my understanding of practice. Through my experiences at MZMC, I learned many things about Soto Zen practice in the USA.

North America Education Center

In 1996, I was asked to work as the director of North America Soto Zen Education Center that was planned to establish in 1997 in Los Angeles, CA, by Japanese Sotoshu Shumicho (The Administrative Headquarters of Japanese Soto Zen). Then, I moved to Los Angeles from Minneapolis in July, 1997 to work for the Education Center. The center moved to San Francisco in 1999, changing names into Soto Zen Buddhism

International Center in 2003. It was founded to bridge Japanese Soto Zen tradition and American Soto Zen centers. Another task of this center was to promote the sense of a larger Soto Zen community in America. Many of the Soto Zen centers were established in 1960s and 1970s by various Soto Zen teachers. However, since then, there have not been many communications and exchanges among the lineages. The director position allowed me to travel frequently between the USA and Japan as well as visit various Zen centers in the USA. I had opportunities to meet many Soto Zen teachers in the USA and practiced together with a number of American practitioners in the various sangha. Once again, these experiences allowed me to have broader perspective about Zen in America. I worked as the full time director of the center for the following five years until 2003.

Sanshin Zen Community

In 1996, I founded Sanshin Zen Community after completing my term as the interim head teacher of MZMC. This was the precursor of Sanshinji temple, where I have served as the founder and guiding teacher since 2003. Sanshin means the three minds that I mentioned above. Because I had to move to California to work at the Education Center, I could not be actively involved in establishing a new Zen center. People worked together even though I was not always with them, establishing Sanshinji in Bloomington Indiana in 2003. My family and I moved there in June of that year. I continued to be the half-time director of the International Center until 2010.

One of the reasons why I decided to relocate Sanshinji in Bloomington was that there had previously been no Soto Zen practice center in the entire state of Indiana. There were many Zen centers and Zen teachers, however, in the West Coast. My teacher, Uchiyama roshi, always encouraged us to pioneer. I found that Indiana was a potential frontier for Soto Zen in America, and I was ready to establish a sangha from scratch. To my surprise, as soon as I moved to Bloomington, several practitioners, including a few priests, came to practice with me. Because

Soto Zen was very new in the area and Bloomington is a small university town, we did not have substantial support from the local community. It must have been challenging for the priests to support their practice, but they still practiced diligently. I deeply appreciated their sincerity. About 20 people became my disciples. Some of them have received transmission and became Zen teachers.

Now I am 66-year old, living in Bloomington with my family and practicing with a small number of dedicated practitioners. We have five Uchiyama Roshi style of sesshin a year. Even though I cannot sit in cross-legged posture anymore because of my knees, I continue to sit the sesshin in the way I practiced with my teacher since I was 20 years old. We have two Genzo-e retreats. Genzo-e is a study retreat to focus on a fascicle of Dogen's *Shobogenzo* each time. We also have the Precepts Retreat once a year in July to study various aspects of the bodhisattva precepts we receive in Soto Zen tradition. Each year, several people receive the precepts at the end of the retreat. More than 70 people have received the precepts and became lay Buddhists.

Yuko, my wife, has been an active member of the sangha as a sewing teacher of *rakusu* and *okesa*, the traditional Buddhist robe and the cooking coordinator of sesshin/retreats. Because we never forced them practice or become Buddhists, our children are not practitioners but they support our practice. Yoko became a filmmaker and has filmed my teaching activities. My son, Masaki, had a difficult time transitioning after the move to Bloomington. However, he recently has been involved in the community as a volunteer cooking meals for sesshin and retreats. My family have been supported by the three Jewel, Buddha, Dharma (i.e., teachings of Buddha), and Sangha (i.e., Zen community).

When I lived at Valley Zendo in western Massachusetts, I hitch hiked to New York once. The driver who gave me a ride was a university student. For some reason, he took me to his apartment. I found an embroidery made by his mother. On the embroidery, there were trees and the words saying, "To love is to give a space to grow." I deeply appreciated this saying. That was

why I named our children Yoko (child of leaves) and Masaki (tree of truth) with the hope that they would find something they really want to devote themselves to as I did to my path; my hope is that I gave enough space for them to grow.

I have been working on translation and writing my own books. Because of my limited skill in English, I have been working together with various American writers for each book project. The books published with my name are not only my books. All of them are the fruits of collaborative efforts with my American friends and colleagues who love the Dharma and practice. Several books have been published after I started to practice at Sanshinji.

I have been walking a narrow path of just sitting since I first encountered Uchiyama Roshi's teaching. I was a 17-year-old high school student, and it was more than 45 years ago. I have not done anything else. I have been seeing my life from zazen. In just sitting, we let go of thoughts, meaning that we let them come and go. We try not to prevent any thoughts from coming. Letting go of thoughts is the complete negation of all thoughts either being good or bad, positive or negative. And yet letting go is to embrace all thoughts. We do not pick or choose any thoughts, but we simply let them come and go without judgment. In this way, we can be intimate with all different aspects of our mental activities, in different mental and physical conditions and external situations. We cannot lie to ourselves.

Zazen has been the anchor of my life. Without ongoing zazen practice, I would have gone somewhere else, being pulled by my thoughts, desires, ambitions, or hopes of each stages of my life. Zazen practice allows me to walk stably on the path of vow and repentance.

This is a narrow path, but I have been practicing with many people both in Japan and America. Through my translation work and book writing, I have friends not only in the USA, but also various parts of the world. I am deeply grateful to my teacher, Kosho Uchiyama, and the tradition of Shakyamuni Buddha, Mahayana Buddhism, and Dogen's Soto Zen.

One thing that has become increasingly clear to me by walking this narrow path is that I am

connected with all people and beings throughout time and space. I can live only within the relation with all beings and support from them. I should say, instead, there is no such thing called “I” beside the relation and interconnectedness.

Bodhisattva Way and Therapy

Because this book is primarily for various professionals and students in the field of behavioral healthcare, I would like to say one thing. I do not think that my practice of just sitting as a Mahayana Buddhist or bodhisattva practice is a therapy. In my understanding, a therapy is a method for enabling those who are not able to function well to function in a normal, healthy way. I acknowledge that Buddhism is often considered therapeutic as the teachings of Four Noble Truths are understood as the diagnosis and prescription for the ill by the doctor, Buddha.

I would say that such an understanding of Buddhist teaching is not incorrect. However, it is based on a limited view, I think. At least, for Shakyamuni himself, the practice of the eightfold correct path, which is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths, is not a method for reaching the cessation of suffering. He did not practice the eightfold correct path as the preparation for attaining awakening. He discovered the eightfold correct path as the Middle Way between two extremes, self-indulgence and self-mortification within his awakening. Then, he practiced the eightfold correct path for the rest of his life.

When he taught the five monks at the Deer Park, he taught the same eightfold correct path as the path leading to the cessation of suffering for the people who are in the middle of suffering. Then, the eightfold correct path began to be viewed as a method or a means to be released from suffering. There are two different meanings of the path of practice; one is the meaning for Shakyamuni himself, and the other is for the people transmigrating within samsara.

When Dogen talked about the practice of zazen, he meant his zazen practice in the former

meaning of the eightfold correct path. The model of his zazen was Shakyamuni’s zazen after he became the Buddha. The Buddha did not practice zazen as a means to attain enlightenment because he was already enlightened. That was why Dogen said that zazen itself is buddhas’ practice, not a method to make deluded human beings into enlightened buddhas. To me, this is the difference between the endless bodhisattva practice following the Buddha’s way and a therapy that is used to alleviate suffering for those with mental illnesses.

It is fine with the idea that any methods of meditation practice developed in Buddhist traditions can be useful as a therapy to help people who are mentally and physically in trouble to restore a healthy condition. However, if that is the only meaning, then as those people restore their wholesome condition, they have no reason to continue to practice. I believe that Zen practice should be continuous and ongoing.

My practice of zazen is not a temporary “method” to restore mental or physical health. When we are sick, the healthy way of life can be a medicine. But, when we restore health, we still need to continue to practice the same thing as Shakyamuni practiced after he became a buddha until the end of his life. The Bodhisattva way is not simply a method to restore health, but it is a healthy way of life.

Conclusion

To sit 50-min a period 14 times a day may not be possible for most of the clients. However, this practice might be meaningful for the therapists who wish to experience thoroughly who we are as humans and what we are here and now for. I hope that behavioral health professionals and students are also bodhisattvas who take the vow to save all beings, even if they are not “Buddhists.”