

# Zen Meditation

IN PLAIN ENGLISH



John Daishin Buksbazen

FOREWORD BY PETER MATTHIESSEN

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*“Clear, simple, and well-grounded in years of experience, Daishin’s book is a real gift to anyone interested in Zen practice.”*

Bernie Glassman Roshi,  
Founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order



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By John Daishin Buksbaze

Foreword by Peter Matthiessen



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*To my teachers,  
Taizan Maezumi Roshi,  
Roshi Bernie Glassman,  
Sensei Wendy Egyoku Nakao;*

*to my wife  
Concetta F. Alfano;*

*and to my dear friend  
Rick Fields,*

*this book is gratefully dedicated.  
You showed me the Way.*



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## FOREWORD

Peter Matthiessen

THIS GENTLE BOOK, reflecting the wise teachings of Taizan Maezumi Roshi, is a wonderful introduction to Zen Buddhism, and also an invitation to new life. To practice Zen means to realize one's existence in the beauty and clarity of this present moment, rather than letting life unravel in useless daydreaming of the past and future. To "rest in the present" is a state of magical simplicity, although attainment of this state is not as simple as it sounds: most of us need dedicated training under the guidance of a roshi (a Zen master) in order to let the debris of existence fall away. From the very beginning, the sitting meditation called zazen will bring about a strong sense of well-being, as body and mind return to natural harmony with all creation; later there comes true insight into the nature of existence, which is no different from one's own true nature, or the nature of the Buddha—whose name means "The-One-Who-Knows."

Zen has been called "the religion before religion," which is to say that anyone can practice, even those committed to another faith. And the phrase evokes that natural religion of our early childhood,

when heaven and a splendorous earth were one. For the new child in the light of spring, there is no self to forget; the eye with which he sees God, in Meister Eckhart's phrase, is the eye with which God sees him. But that clear eye is soon clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions, and simple being becomes encrusted with the armor of ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise.

After that day, there is no beauty without pain, and at the bottom of each breath, there is a hollow place that is filled with longing. That day we become seekers without knowing that we seek, and at first, we long for something "greater" than ourselves, something far away. It is not a return to childhood, for childhood is not a truly enlightened state; yet to seek one's own true nature is, as one Zen master has said, "a way to lead you to your long-lost home."

Most of us cast about for years until something in our reading, some stray word, points to the vague outlines of a path. Perhaps this book is the beginning of your homeward way; if so, count yourself lucky, for it offers no tangled analyses, no solutions, only the way to forgetting the self, the way to zazen, to "just sitting." Through zazen, ideas dissolve, the mind becomes transparent, and in the great stillness of samadhi (Melville called it, "that profound silence, that only voice of God"), there comes an intuitive understanding that what we seek lies nowhere else but in this present moment, right here now where we have always been, in the common miracle of our own divinity. To travel this path, one need not be a "Zen Buddhist"—call yourself a zazen Buddhist if you like! "Zen Buddhist" is only another idea to be discarded, like "enlightenment," or "Buddha," or "God."



# INTRODUCTION

**Z**<sup>EN</sup> BUDDHISM, according to various authorities, is a religion, or a philosophy, or a way of life, or a mental and physical discipline. Some say it is all of the above; others say it is none.

Fundamentally, Zen is a way of seeing clearly who we are and what our life is, and a way of living based on that clear vision.

Many people wonder what Zen is all about, and how it works. They find much of the literature about Zen confusing and are unclear about how it applies to daily living.

This book is in large measure directed to those people. Its aim is to give enough information to get them started in Zen practice, especially in the form of seated meditation called *zazen* or just “sitting.” The assumption is that this practice will do more for the inquiring individual than reading any number of books or articles. Once actual practice has begun, then books (carefully chosen for their relevance and reliability) can enrich and broaden one’s understanding. But if there is not a sound foundation of experience, then

the books will remain undigested in the domain of intellect, and not be of much use.

After all, cookbooks are fun to read, but they aren't very nutritious. They are most helpful to somebody who is actually involved in cooking.

So once you've read this book, the next step is to start practice. If your community has a Zen teacher, so much the better. If not, then you are on your own until you find one, and encouraging you to do that is another of the aims of this book. It is intended to give you enough information to get you started and keep you going until you can find and begin practice with a qualified teacher, either of Zen or of one of the related practices, such as Insight Meditation or Tibetan Buddhism.

Keep this in mind, though: sooner or later, you really must study with a teacher, for the practice is long and not easy, and there are many opportunities to become discouraged or confused along the way.

Also, as you progress you will have experiences you'll want to discuss and questions that should be reliably answered. This process should be addressed on a personal basis by a qualified teacher who knows you and can deal with you directly. But this book can keep you going until you and your teacher meet.

## USING THIS BOOK

Beyond reading this book and thinking about it, there is another way to use it.

I've written it as conversationally as possible, so that you can imagine you're at a Zen center receiving the kind of introductory

instruction commonly offered to new sitters. One good way to use the book is to get together with a group of your friends who share your interest in beginning to meditate, and to take turns reading the instructions aloud while the entire group actually follows them step by step.

Somehow even though you may have read the words silently to yourself, they make more of an impact if you can also absorb them through the sense of hearing. Go slowly enough so that everyone in the group has plenty of time to follow each step. Pause often, and don't rush. Allow plenty of time to cover the material, and don't hesitate to repeat a section until it is clear to everyone. You'll often find that hearing a passage for the fifth or even the tenth time will give you new information.

If you're alone, you may find it helpful to make a recording of these instructions, so that you can instruct yourself as you go.

This book is divided into three main sections, followed by answers to some frequently asked questions, and some useful appendices. The three main sections are: "Buddhas," "Sitting," and "Community."

The first section deals with the experiences and teaching career of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, as well as briefly discussing the unbroken line of teachers who have been his successors through more than eighty generations down to the present day.

The second section focuses on the practice of sitting meditation itself. It sets forth detailed instructions on how to do it and places sitting in the context of an overall practice.

The third section extends those individual practices and discoveries to a larger community, providing the vital link between the individual and the society in which he or she exists.

## *Zen Meditation in Plain English*

Hopefully, by carefully reading all three sections, you will begin to get a sense of Zen practice as a whole, and the way it functions in everyday life.

PART ONE:  
BUDDHAS





# BACKGROUND

## THE STORY OF SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA

ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE hundred years ago in India, the son of a wealthy and powerful nobleman made a profound discovery. Dissatisfied with his sheltered existence, and deeply troubled by the problems of life and death and the human suffering all around him, he left his family compound and set off upon a journey of self-exploration and study. And after many years of rigorous asceticism and scholarly philosophical research, he still had to admit that he was unable to answer a fundamental question: “What is life-and-death all about?”

At that point, he abandoned his previous practices of fasting, self-mortification, and intellectual inquiry. He decided that the only way for him to really grapple with that question was to grapple directly with himself.

So he stopped fasting, bathed himself, had a bowl of milk (which really shocked his fellow ascetics!), and looked for the answer within. For six years, we are told, his main activity was sitting

motionless hour after hour, looking deeply into his own mind. Now he knew he was on the right track; he could feel it as he grew steadier and stronger in his meditation. But even though he was determined, it still took a lot of hard work for him not to become discouraged and not to wander off into some other activity.

But he kept at it steadily and one day sensed that he was reaching a crisis. He simply had to break through whatever it was that separated him from realization of the Truth. And so it was, in that frame of mind, that he sat down under a tree and vowed to not rise until he had either answered his burning question or died in the attempt.

Sitting there, he focused his whole attention upon that question and became so absorbed in his consuming inquiry that he lost track of everything else. He didn't even think of himself or about the nature of the question; he was too busy questioning. He and the question no longer seemed to be two different things. It was as though he had totally become one with the question, had become the questioning itself.

On the morning of December the eighth, as he sat there in deep meditation, he caught a glimpse of the morning star—the planet Venus—alone in the empty sky at dawn. And at that moment, something tremendous happened. He suddenly *was* that morning star, suddenly *was* the whole universe itself. Of course, this experience could have been precipitated by almost anything else: a chirping bird, a passing dog, a stubbed toe. In fact, almost any phenomenon could have triggered his breakthrough once he had become sufficiently concentrated and focused upon his question. But in the case of the man called Siddhartha Gotama Shakyamuni, the stimulus was seeing the planet Venus. At that point, his question vanished, and he knew. It was as though he had suddenly



awakened from a dream and was able to see reality directly for the first time.

And from then on, people called him Buddha, which simply means “The One Who Woke Up.”



*We must see our life clearly.  
The existence of this very moment—  
what is it?*

Maezumi Roshi



## THE LINEAGE

The Buddha spent the rest of his life, nearly fifty years more, telling and showing people how they too could wake up by making the same discovery he had made. Gradually others came to practice sitting in meditation as he had taught it and found for themselves the experience of realizing who they truly were and what life and death were about on the most fundamental level.

Through the years following his breakthrough, many of his followers made the same discovery. But it was not until late in his teaching career that the Buddha was satisfied that one of his disciples had really deepened and clarified his understanding sufficiently to carry on the teaching independently. Once he had found this person, a man named Mahakashyapa, the Buddha publicly named him as the successor to his own understanding, to his own state of mind.

This man, Mahakashyapa, in turn waited until he too could confidently name one of his disciples as successor, able to provide fully reliable instruction and guidance to future students.

And so it went, each successor in turn training many students and always looking for one or more of them who would have a deep and clear enough understanding and the right personal qualities to carry on the teaching.

This went on for twenty-eight generations in India, before one of these successors, Bodhidharma, finally found his way to China, bringing with him the practice of sitting. After six generations in China, the teaching spread to Korea, the rest of Asia, and eventually to Japan. What's most important to keep in mind about this continuation of the teachings is that it was never based upon purely intellectual study or secondhand understanding; always the individuals

who were entrusted with the responsibility to transmit Buddhism properly were those whose practice and realization were outstanding, and who had thoroughly grasped the essence of each phase of the teaching. Additionally, the personality of the individual must be especially suited to the task of teaching others. With these conditions satisfied, the person could then become a successor in the teaching lineage of his or her teacher.

It is this unbroken line of teachers and their successors that has helped ensure that the enlightenment of the historical Buddha has continued through more than eighty generations from India through China to Japan and now to the Western world.

It is essential that one practice under the guidance of an authentic representative of this succession if one wishes to attain to a deep and clear understanding of life and death.



*No one can live your life except you.  
No one can live my life except me.  
You are responsible. I am responsible.  
But what is our life? What is our death?*

Maezumi Roshi



## BUDDHAS IN AMERICA

That Zen has been transmitted across culture and continents reminds us that Buddhism is not some alien Oriental mystery that we as Westerners cannot understand. It has come to us from Asia, but the point is that we here in the West can now participate in this practice, not as foreigners dipping into an unfamiliar culture, but in our own right, as ourselves, dipping into ourselves. When this takes place, Buddhism is as natural and indigenous to the West as are those who practice it.

Today, as much as anyone ever before, we are concerned with the kinds of questions the Buddha was asking. We seem to be searching for some basic principle to tie everything together. We want this principle to be something that helps us to live and to grow harmoniously and sanely in an increasingly difficult world.

Being of a practical turn of mind, we don't want to settle for concepts alone, for vague emotional generalities, or to accept second-hand the insights of somebody else, no matter how revered or respected that other person might be. We want to find out for ourselves, directly, clearly, and without doubt, just who we are, what our life is, and exactly what difference that clarity makes.

In the day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year practice with a teacher who embodies that realization we find the inspiration and guidance that the students of Buddhism have always sought from and found in their teachers. And after the kind of training and realization that repeated contact with a teacher offers, the student ultimately is able to take enlightenment itself as teacher and guide, having discovered who he or she really is, having forgotten the narrow self.

*Part One: Buddhas*

Shakyamuni Buddha urged his students not to depend upon others, but to look to themselves for liberation. Seventeen centuries later, the great Japanese Zen master Dogen taught:

*To study the Buddha way is to study the self.*

*To study the self is to forget the self.*

*To forget the self is to be enlightened by the myriad things.*

Here, in these pages, is how to get started doing just that.



*Zazen is the practice and realization  
of manifesting our body as bodhi, as enlightenment.  
It is both the practice and the realization, for when we truly do zazen,  
there is no distinction between practice and realization. It is wisdom  
as is, as things are. This zazen, the practice of the Buddha Way,  
is none other than the practice of one's life.*

Maezumi Roshi

