



# HIDDEN

PRACTICES FOR SUDDEN AWAKENING &

# ZEN

EMBODIED REALIZATION

# MEIDO MOORE

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**Practices for Sudden Awakening  
and Embodied Realization**

**Meido Moore**



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# Introduction

Of the many paths of Buddhist practice, Zen<sup>\*</sup> is among the most direct for a simple reason: the entrance to the Zen path is not an intellectual understanding of the Buddhist teachings but rather an experiential grasp of their central point. This experiential grasp—an awakening to our intrinsic wisdom not essentially different from that realized by Shakyamuni<sup>\*</sup> Buddha<sup>\*</sup> under the bodhi tree—is called *kensho*,<sup>\*</sup> “seeing one’s nature.”

All Zen rests upon this awakening as the foundation of genuine practice. If there is anywhere a Zen path that does not affirm *kensho*, we may say it is not genuine Zen. Such pseudo-Zen teachings, in fact, may only add to one’s burdens. As Hakuin Ekaku Zenji wrote:

When a person who has not had *kensho* reads the Buddhist scriptures, questions his teachers and fellow monks about Buddhism, or practices religious disciplines, he is merely creating the causes of his own illusion—a sure sign that he is still confined within *samsara*.<sup>\*</sup> He tries constantly to keep himself detached in thought and deed, and all the while his thoughts and deeds are attached. He endeavors to be doing nothing all day long, and all the while he is busily doing.

But if this same person experiences *kensho*, everything changes. Although he is constantly thinking and acting, it is totally free and unattached. Although he is engaged in activity around the clock, that activity is, as such, non-activity. This great change is the result of his *kensho*. It is like water that snakes and cows drink from the same cistern, which becomes deadly venom in one and milk in the other.<sup>1</sup>

Given that this awakening of *kensho* is so crucial, we should not be surprised that Zen preserves many practices for bringing students to it and for afterward progressing along the path of embodying that awakening as actualized realization. Various methods of seated meditation (*zazen*\*) are perhaps the best-known Zen practices, historically forming a core element of training everywhere. But there are many other Zen practices besides seated meditation.

Among Japanese Zen lineages, the Rinzai\* branches are especially marked by a rich variety of such methods, the extraordinary usefulness and power of which come from their emphasis on engaging the practitioner's whole body-mind.<sup>2</sup> Though certainly renowned for its rigorous use of *zazen*, we may say that *sanzen*\* is the central method of Rinzai Zen, while *sanzen* centered on koans\*—by which the gate of *kensho* may indeed be entered and afterward deeply actualized—is likely the method for which Rinzai lineages are most famous.

But although this book reveals many practices found in Rinzai Zen training, it touches on *zazen* and *sanzen* in only a general way. Rather, our primary focus is a diverse collection of practice instructions that are transmitted orally. I have divided these loosely into two groups, the methods of (1) direct pointing and (2) internal energetic cultivation. As we will see, these instructions serve to inform—and give life to—other Zen practices that are better known.

## The Reasons for This Book

Most of the practice instructions we will examine have not previously been written down or publicly revealed.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it may be surprising to many Zen practitioners (and even some scholars) to hear my next statement: much of what is most crucial in genuine Zen practice is still transmitted primarily by means of *kuden*,\* oral instruction from one's teacher, rather than in publicly available texts.<sup>4</sup> The pithy methods described in this book certainly show something of the creative nature of such teachings passed face-to-face between Zen masters and their students. I should say, though, that this book is not titled *Hidden Zen* because these instructions are intentionally concealed or stamped as secret; in most instances this is not the case. Rather, they are simply things that one is not likely to encounter as an observer, a casual practitioner, or outside the circle of a committed teacher-student relationship.

Still, I should perhaps here explain my reasons for revealing these things so openly. In fact, there are three.

### ***Bareness of Zen Practice in the West***

The first is that it seems there are many modern Zen practitioners who for various reasons have not inherited such practices, and they may even be unaware that Zen contains methods like these at all. The practice of Soto\* Zen is popularly thought to be just *shikantaza*,\* while the practice of Rinzai Zen is thought to be just koan practice. While those methods certainly are highly refined within their respective traditions, neither tradition is so minimalist or homogeneous as to be limited to them. Within both the Soto and Rinzai schools there are in fact many different teaching lines, and these often preserve rather varied—and incredibly interesting—practice material reflecting the histories and interests of lineage ancestors.

For example, there have been prominent Zen masters in Japan deeply involved with so-called esoteric teachings, integrating *mikkyo*\* practices of the Tendai\* or Shingon\* schools. Rinzai Zen, as we will see, preserves to this day remarkable practices of internal energetic cultivation. In my own Rinzai lineage, because of forebears

who were also masters of disciplines like swordsmanship and calligraphy, physical culture and the arts have been deeply integrated. Many other such things can be found.

It is thus disappointing to see the somewhat sterile approaches and bare “toolboxes” of practice methods found within some Zen lines in the West. We should recognize that this is something limiting to students. But it must be stressed that such bareness is not due to a lack of resources within Zen as a whole. It is instead, as far as I can tell, due to an incomplete or idiosyncratic transmission of resources within those lineages. Where this is the case, it might even be accurate to say that crucial foundations of the Zen path are wholly missing.

Aside from the sparsity of teaching resources, a real danger of incomplete Zen of this kind is that it can easily devolve into a mere collection of trappings largely stripped of their inner function. It may ultimately become a burden rather than an aid, a kind of vaguely Buddhist identity rather than a dynamic path of liberation. In other words, as Hakuin said, it only adds to the causes of our own illusion. Bearing such developments in mind, I am not surprised that there have been Western Zen teachers eager in an almost puritanical manner to jettison inherited things like Zen ritual, rigorous training regimens, traditional practice clothing, premodern understandings of the body, and so on. Absent an understanding of how such things are meant to function within a comprehensive path of awakening, they would indeed appear to have little value beyond whatever surface content—historic, aesthetic, or symbolic—they carry. Thus, toolboxes become even more bare over time, and rich cultures of practice—for the preservation of which our Zen ancestors sacrificed so dearly—can be irretrievably lost.<sup>5</sup>

By sharing the practices in this book, then, I hope that Zen students will benefit from having a small taste of the richness of the hidden practice life transmitted within other lineages. Some of these methods even hide in plain sight and could be accepted by any Zen student, for example the oral instructions revealing how the *taku*,\* *inkin*,\* and *keisaku*\*—tools found in every Zen training hall—can be

used in ways more profound than the obvious. And because the methods we will examine are so useful not only for approaching and passing the gate of awakening but for actualizing awakening within daily activity, I believe they could benefit any practitioner regardless of lineage, school, or level of experience.

### ***Embodied Nature of Genuine Zen Practice***

The second reason I am revealing the practices in this book is that many of them, as will be apparent, turn upon specific usages of the practitioner's body. This underscores another crucial point that I hope will become more widely and clearly understood: the embodied, ultimately *yogic* nature of genuine Zen practice—that is, the truth that Zen is a path accomplished through the body, with engagement of the whole body-mind rather than within the mind alone.

It must be noted that there is today a common kind of Buddhist modernism in which the fruition of Zen is conceived to be a primarily psychological revolution. According to this view, the intent of Zen practice is attainment of a kind of *acceptance* of samsaric\* existence—a short-term (that is, for the duration of one's life span) psychological resilience in the face of life's inevitable suffering—rather than *liberation* from samsaric existence as classically understood in Buddhism: the dispelling of delusion and the final dissolving of body-mind karmic obstructions (*jikke*\*) with which we have been entwined for endless lives and eons.

Of course, a secular, psychologized approach to Buddhism like this fits the modern tendency toward a materialist view that the mind is a purely brain-based phenomenon, arising with the birth of one's body and ceasing utterly with its death. We should recognize that this is rather different from the Buddhist view: that the body itself arises in causal relationship with a mind stream exhibiting both prebirth and postmortem continuity. The secular approach also fulfills the desire for something advantageous (or marketable) for becoming somehow happier, more effective, or more successful in the increasingly stressful, fragmented environments of modern life. But again, we

should recognize that from the standpoint of the Buddhist teachings, there is no real happiness within worldly life at all to which we can aspire. Samsara is not ultimately fixable or able to be rendered satisfying, and the very fact of our existence itself is primarily just evidence of primordial delusion.

But whatever the origins of this modern approach (and whatever beliefs one may have about what happens when we die), this at least must be stated: in the Rinzai Zen view, a purely psychological realization is mostly conceptual and so inevitably shallow. It is a mirage, lacking sufficient power to cut the roots of ignorance in a lasting manner. More bluntly: it is not the awakening of Zen and is unworthy of comparison with the profound attainment for which the great Zen masters labored so exhaustively. The fruition of Zen practice must be experienced as a wholly psycho-physical transformation of the human being, causing not only experiential change within the mind but also *visible change in the body*.

The methods we will examine reveal this more genuinely valuable understanding: that one's mind, body, breath, and subtle energetic system must all be engaged within and transformed through effective practice. Using methods like these, we may come to understand why the extraordinary power of such integrated, whole-being practice—what I have described as the yogic approach—is in fact a hallmark of genuine Zen. It is also the reason that we can say Zen is an extremely direct, rapid path of liberation. And here I will admit that I especially hope some Rinzai lines in the West—purporting to uphold the methods of sanzen and koan practice yet, it seems in some cases, lacking concrete instructions regarding how koan *kufu*\* (practice with koans involving great effort and creative struggle) must engage the whole body-mind—may be enriched. The distinctive character of Rinzai Zen stands wholly upon such embodied practice, but where this understanding is lacking, the koan method also can grant only an illusion of insight.

### ***Danger of Loss***



The third reason I am revealing the methods in this book is a very simple one, though perhaps the most important: cultural and technological trends have created conditions such that the challenges of rigorous, embodied Zen practice seem more difficult. Persons willing to undergo the truly arduous path of lifelong Zen training are becoming even less common than in the past.

Zen has always stated quite clearly that its path is open to both monastics and laypersons and that the most profound realization of awakening may indeed be attained in the midst of everyday life. But this is rather different from a modern conceit that seems increasingly common: that profound awakening may be grasped *without* exhaustive, devoted practice over many years—practice of such intensity that one’s “everyday life” will indeed appear rather different from the usual everyday life.

It has become common to hear statements from Buddhist practitioners revealing that, far from integrating daily life within their practice, they have instead undertaken to adjust practice to fit their daily lives. The idea has arisen that what is essentially an inconsistent effort to remain mindful, undistracted, and present throughout one’s day constitutes practice and is itself sufficient. Though certainly important, such efforts are a far cry from the effortless and seamless meditative state, unified with the upwelling of that recognition first arrived at in kensho, that is actual liberation. It is not without reason that a master as great as Torei Enji,<sup>6</sup> who practiced in a rigorous manner that few modern persons would endure, said:

It is relatively easy to accomplish the important matter of insight into one’s true nature, but uncommonly difficult to function freely and clearly [according to this understanding], in motion and in rest, in good and in adverse circumstances. Please make strenuous and vigorous efforts to this end, otherwise all the teachings of Buddhas and patriarchs become mere empty words.<sup>7</sup>

I thus fear that the Western Zen landscape may one day be finally reduced to a dry, stagnant expanse of shallow sitting practice and self-referential “mindfulness,” while orally transmitted methods like those we will examine—hidden treasures of our lineages—could be entirely lost. It is naturally incumbent upon Zen teachers in each generation to maintain the core principles of practice, while also seeking innovative ways to present the teachings in a manner matching the needs of contemporary people (whether that is by according with current conditions or decisively challenging them). Yet principles are transmitted using methods and forms, and the process of adaptation and transformation is most successfully accomplished when allowed to happen organically. This is something like transplanting a tree from one place to another: the old soil must be taken with the roots, and over time this can meld with the new ground. Therefore, in the short term at least, I will be grateful if by means of this book some old soil is preserved that might otherwise be washed away.

If a few of the many inherited Zen practices can be kept alive within even a handful of lineages, we can indeed hope that a truly healthy, native Zen will take root in the West. And finally, I should say that if dire predictions of worldwide environmental and social collapse come to pass, I would certainly hope that books like this might help some Zen practices to survive, even if it comes down to the smallest thread.

### **Regarding Zen, *Kensho*, and *Samadhi***

Before we turn to the main subjects of this book it will be useful to clarify what is meant by those crucial words “seeing one’s nature,” or *kensho*. *Samadhi*,\* meditative absorption, is another term that bears examination, and we should understand the role it plays in Zen practice.

Since these things are rarely discussed in plain language from a practitioner’s standpoint, I would like to do so here. There exists a great deal of confusion about them, and clarifying their meaning will

help us to understand how some of the practices we will examine function.

### ***Kensho: Seeing and Knowing***

I should say first, though it may seem obvious, that the awakening we call “seeing one’s nature”—kensho—obviously does not mean that upon entering the gate of wisdom there is some vision literally seen with the eyes. It also does not mean that one suddenly arrives at an intellectual understanding of some profound Buddhist teaching or a new way of conceptualizing one’s place in the universe. Such new understandings could certainly result from kensho, but these are not by themselves awakening.

“Seeing” here simply refers to the moment that one discovers or knows something for oneself, directly and experientially, rather than through the descriptions of others. To use a simple example: if one reads or hears from others that there is a bright red, crested bird called a cardinal, that may be an interesting fact to know. But upon personally glimpsing a bright red, crested bird, one might be able to recognize it, saying, “Oh, *that* is a cardinal.” One could then say further, “Now I really know what a cardinal is. I have discovered for myself what they were talking about.”

The important point here is that what we may call a true knowing does not arise with a conceptual grasp of what is signified by the word *cardinal* or even with the sight of the bird itself. Rather, it arises only when one *recognizes* what was seen and so arrives at a basic certainty regarding it. Of course, in arriving at this certainty one can make use of (indeed, may require) guidance from others to confirm that what one has discovered is indeed a cardinal. In other words, if there is any doubt regarding what one has seen, one relies on those with more knowledge to affirm the discovery. With that affirmation a confidence in the discovery can begin to arise. And naturally, one may seek to see the red bird again and again to increase one’s familiarity with it. Seeing and recognizing it repeatedly is the best way to increase the depth and usefulness of one’s experiential knowledge.

The above is a clumsy illustration perhaps. But what we mean by kensho is very much like this. It is one thing to hear that there is a kind of awakening to one's own "original face" or intrinsic wisdom called kensho and that just this awakening marks the entrance into the Zen path. We may have studied the Buddhist teachings and conceptually grasped the truth that there is no unchanging self to be found anywhere—that all appearances precisely reveal the original face of our own nature and that "the entire universe is the true human body"<sup>8</sup>—and all of this may be helpful in a way. But upon entering experientially into the truth of *muga*,\* "nonself," and recognizing suddenly without doubt that just this is precisely the nature of both oneself and all so-called phenomena, then there is no longer any question of what kensho is or what nonself really means in the Buddhist teachings. We have finally discovered or recognized our own true, boundless nature directly. With the help of our teachers who confirm this to be a genuine recognition, we may then begin to deepen our acquaintance with what we have discovered and so over time increase our certainty and depth of knowledge.

And with that knowledge, we no longer have any doubt regarding the essential point of the Buddha's enlightenment, the fundamental meaning of all the Buddhist teachings, the central intent of all Buddhist practice methods, or the truth of the Zen path. There is no doubt because with kensho one has verified all these things for oneself. Thereafter, one may continue along the path with conviction that the direction is correct. This conviction is in fact a crucial thing since, as I have said, true Zen practice is founded upon kensho and consists of further clarifying that knowledge until one has come to seamlessly embody it.

Kensho, thus, might be described succinctly as the arising of experiential knowledge confirming something that was previously taken on faith. But we should understand that it is a very special kind of knowledge. This knowledge does not arise as the result of seeing a physical object or apprehending a mental one. We should say rather that it arises from a fundamental, liberative shift in *the very manner* that one sees, apprehends, and knows.

Of course, at this point those who have not yet entered this gate of kensho may still reasonably ask: Can't you describe a bit more *what* is recognized? If kensho is to see one's nature, what specifically is this nature that is known?

When useful to do so, we might reply that it is just the actual or true nature of one's own mind that is recognized and known. And here is an important point to clarify, since we have potentially arrived at the edge of a trap. To take any of the myriad objects, thoughts, fantasies, or states of consciousness that arise within one's experience—no matter how fascinating or seemingly important they may be—to be awakening is a great error. The truth is that nothing the mind may conceive, project, or visualize is the wisdom of kensho. Rather, kensho is to arrive at a seeing—an intimate and wordless knowing—of the nature of *that which sees and knows*.<sup>9</sup>

I am here reminded of a time that Hosokawa Dogen Roshi,<sup>10</sup> one of my teachers, stated, "Whatever you experience during zazen, it is not kensho." At the time this confused me greatly: What could it mean, I wondered, to say that kensho cannot occur during zazen? Aren't there great masters who did in fact arrive at awakening while sitting in meditation? But of course, that was not what he meant. His meaning, rather, was that kensho is not an object or experience to be observed.

In Zen practice we must be clear in this way regarding the difference between the common mind of delusion, which habitually fixates on so-called inner and outer objects from a dualistic standpoint subtly and deeply fixated on "I," and the original or intrinsic nature of that mind itself, which with kensho is revealed to be utterly free from such boundaries and not essentially different from what we call "buddha." This true nature has in fact never been altered or in the least bit stained by our deep-seated, habitual delusion. Though wisdom seems to be something we lack, the truth is that we have never been apart even for an instant from the very awakening that we seek. Again, all that is initially lacking is to recognize and know with certainty for oneself: the discovery called kensho.

All of this sounds wonderful. But for many students such an explanation is still not enough. They will press: But what is this original nature of my existence? What *am* I really?

To deeply inquire into such questions is excellent and itself an important method of Zen practice upon which we will touch later. But if we must further describe the so-called true nature, we may say that it is utterly boundless (that is, empty of any limitations of reified “self” or fixed identity) and wondrously luminous (that is, effortlessly illuminating all the phenomena of the universe).

That answer, of course, still cannot satisfy. It cannot satisfy because to hear and try to grasp such words absent direct experience is like hearing about a red, crested bird called a cardinal: no matter how vivid the description, if we are serious about cardinals, we must glimpse the scarlet plumage for ourselves. If we are serious about Zen, we must do nothing less than turn the light of our own awareness around to discover for ourselves what is truly signified by “buddha.”

Especially to Zen beginners, I would like to say here that if all of this seems confusing, it is fine not to worry too much about such definitions or explanations. The truth is they can obstruct more than clarify. Even with the descriptions I have given here, it can be difficult to avoid conceiving of “awakening” or “true nature” as things one must find, conceptually grasp, or attain. To set up “emptiness” or “luminous awareness” as objects in our minds or states to be sought is an especially dangerous pitfall. Even to call kensho an “experience” or “transformation” tends toward this trap. Useful concepts, even liberating ones, can become objects of fixation when misused, causing us to lose our way. We should grasp from this how deeply rooted is our enmeshment in dualistic seeing: our habit of projecting subject-object conceptualization upon our experience and especially our fixation on that false construct “I” at the center of it all. In fact, it is precisely this fundamental ignorance that has bound us from beginningless time.

Along these lines I might mention that recently some presentations of Buddhist-inspired practice have emphasized

cultivating an awareness of the “observing I” or “sense of self,” equating this with kensho. Some popular spirituality has in a similar way stressed listening to one’s “heart” or “inner wise one.” But we may understand why these approaches can be prone to error: attachment to the construct of self is so subtly and deeply entrenched that to focus upon the “observing I” or one’s “heart” in a shallow manner only serves to reinforce the core habit of our own delusion. One’s “inner wise one” is not, in fact, so wise. In truth, it is only when the root of this “I-heart” is completely obliterated without a trace that the gate of genuine wisdom suddenly opens and, returning again to life, we may arise as the same—yet utterly transformed—selfless self.

Nevertheless, despite the risk of compounding such confusions, I have talked about kensho so that our discussion of various practices does not begin with the reader setting up fixed ideas of some thing or state to which Zen points. In other words, it is my wish to somewhat remove false ideas about kensho, replacing them with ones that do not obstruct too greatly.

### ***Depth of Awakening***

I should next say a few words regarding the depth of kensho, another subject that is not often well understood. What is meant here by *depth* is the degree to which awakening cuts the roots of our habitual delusion.

The ultimate exemplar of awakening in Buddhism is, of course, Shakyamuni. The awakening at which he arrived while sitting under the bodhi tree marked for him a complete, irrevocable severing of the roots of delusion. His attainment was unmatched in its profundity, and it was accompanied by the certainty that his spiritual quest was completed and the cycle of endless rebirth broken. Arising from his seat as the Buddha of this age, he thus turned the wheel of the dharma\* to benefit all beings.

A truly profound awakening, marking the near fulfillment of one’s path if not complete buddhahood, is theoretically possible for anyone. Attaining such a deep kensho, it is indeed possible to know

that one has arrived once and for all at the door of liberation and that the roots of entangling ignorance are mostly cut. Such a person may truly attain a state in which there is nothing left to do and no particular path to follow. But in truth, so thoroughgoing an initial awakening is quite rare. In fact, it is so rare as to mostly not be worth speaking about. Even for the great masters throughout history, and certainly for most of us who are less great, the initial awakening of kensho—though it may be quite profound—is not so complete that our work is done.

There are many examples of this in the Zen records. After Rinzai experienced profound awakening (an episode to which I will shortly return), he yet experienced a measure of doubt in his attainment upon later visiting his teacher Obaku, and so returned to Obaku's monastery to complete the training period that had begun there.<sup>11</sup> Eno, the Sixth Patriarch, famously experienced an initial awakening spontaneously upon hearing lines from the *Diamond Sutra*\* recited aloud but only later, in sanzen with the Fifth Patriarch, came to a realization that marked sufficient deepening of his insight.<sup>12</sup> Hakuin, though he had experienced awakening, was yet reviled by his teacher Dokyo Etan, who “rained twenty or thirty blows with his fists” upon him and threw him down into the mud, mocking him as a “poor hole-dwelling devil” for thinking his insight sufficient.<sup>13</sup> Hakuin's own great student Torei wrote that although he had arrived at his own kensho and was certain that it was genuine, he still found himself unable to freely function in accord with that wisdom within daily activity. He thus secluded himself and, practicing unsparingly night and day, finally completed sufficient post-kensho practice to arrive at a state of freedom matching Hakuin's.<sup>14</sup>

Again, it is a crucial thing to grasp: though we may awaken to our nature and even dissolve a good deal of the delusion with which we have long been afflicted, no matter how liberating it feels there will still be much for us to do afterward if we wish not to stop short of the final goal. It is for this reason that the path of Zen training has been laid out, taking the basic awakening of kensho as its foundation but also charting a course of post-kensho practice with the purpose of



revisiting, clarifying, and deepening that wisdom over many years. In this way, the initial awakening—even if it is quite shallow—may with a teacher's guidance and exhaustive practice be made to thoroughly penetrate the student's body-mind and so come to fruition as embodied realization.

We should also understand, therefore, that kensho may not always be a dramatic thing. Certainly, we should know that our own arrival at awakening may not necessarily be experienced as the earth-shattering event popular Zen books have sometimes described. Everyone is different.

Take as an example the koan method of practice I mentioned for which Rinzai Zen is famous: this method will, in persons who are suited to it and who put forth devoted effort, cause an all-encompassing meditative absorption to arise. When conditions are ripe this samadhi shatters, and the student can arrive at the threshold of awakening. In some cases this kind of kensho may indeed penetrate very deeply: one feels as if waking from a long dream or casting down a long-carried burden. It is like rowing lost for a long time across a featureless, vast sea in complete blackness when suddenly a beacon on the shore pierces the dark, illuminating the waves. Instantly one knows without doubt that the wished-for destination is in fact quite near, and a course can then be charted. Though the journey is far from complete, one at least need not become lost again.

But for others using the same koan method, depending on their conditions and effort, the initial awakening may not be so deep as that. It may almost seem like nothing, manifesting as a small glimpse rather than an illuminating light. In fact, one might not even realize it was truly kensho at all until the teacher confirms it to be so (a crucial step in all cases). This kind of awakening is like being locked within a small, dark cell when suddenly a door opens and closes quickly. Though not yet able to exit, one at least now knows that an outside world exists even if it was not clearly seen. But the door will need to be opened again, perhaps multiple times, before a real knowledge of that world begins to arise.

An important point is that in both cases the essential content of awakening is the same. We can say that one who wades in a shallow pool will fundamentally know what water is no less than one who plunges bodily into the ocean, even though the experiences are quite different. In the same way, the fundamental wisdom that is known upon arriving at kensho is not different for those who recognize it in shallow or deep ways. We need not therefore say that one is necessarily better or another lacking. What differs is just the depth and power of the seeing and thus its ability to immediately transform us.

For this reason, the path of post-kensho practice may indeed be different for different people. But if we just throw ourselves into that path under the guidance of a legitimate, qualified teacher, there is nothing to worry about: it is certain that we will be able to refine our knowledge by means of the skillful methods and energetic transmission of the teacher's lineage. Doing so, we may even one day arrive at a place where we are deemed qualified to carry that lineage forward ourselves, taking up the teacher's burden and transmitting the precious Zen teachings to another generation. Truly, to aspire to be even slightly worthy of such a task is an excellent thing. It is a way to repay the great debt we owe to all the teachers of the past.

On the other hand, it should be stressed that if we do not devote ourselves to exhaustive practice after kensho, we may be certain that our old habitual delusion will reassert itself, and whatever knowledge has arisen with kensho will in the end become mostly an object of conceptualization rather than living experience. Its liberative power will fade. This is like someone who sees the beacon's light illuminating the waves but then ceases to row: almost certainly the boat will become lost once more. It is like someone who sees the door in that dark room suddenly open but then turns away to again sleep dully in a corner. For people like this, kensho may in the end even seem useless.

The path, once entered upon, should be followed with great care and to its uttermost end. Truly, the path of Zen practice is no light matter, and upon entering the gate of kensho it narrows to a knife

edge. As we examine the practices of direct pointing and internal energetic cultivation, we should keep these things in mind and strive to understand how those practices serve to support and ease our progress along such a path.

### ***Samadhi and the Zen Path***

Samadhi is cultivated in all Zen training. Though there exist many types and depths of this meditative absorption, for our purposes we can describe samadhi generally as a relaxed, sustained stability within which the mind functions freely without fixation or distraction. Unifying the body-mind through various Zen practice methods, if our training is sufficiently rigorous and consistent we will certainly begin to experience a free-flowing, nonabiding, and concentrated samadhi like this.

When we do, we discover something remarkable: our usual habit of dualistic seeing is weaker and less binding in samadhi. This is quite interesting. It means that samadhi—though it is not necessarily awakening by itself—can dissolve obstructions to awakening by helping us to see through our habitual, deeply embedded delusion.

Viewed in this light the purpose of many Zen practices begins to become clear. For example, we often read of some great Zen master bringing a student to awakening with a sudden shout or blow of a stick; this is the shattering of samadhi I described earlier. But if we understand that when we are in samadhi some strong or sharp stimulus can easily penetrate our minds deeply, then we can grasp the meaning of such happenings. When conditions are correct, a sudden shock experienced in samadhi may cause us to momentarily *drop* the habit of dualistic seeing. If that happens, then in the moments immediately after the stimulus—as we emerge from the samadhi state that has been shattered—it is possible for us to suddenly recognize that such freedom from self-reification and self-fixated seeing is nothing less than our true nature. With that recognition, we arrive at the discovery called kensho.

Now, as I noted earlier, the depth and transformative power of kensho can vary. Crucially, one of the factors bearing upon this is the

depth of the samadhi. A shallow samadhi when shattered may allow us to arrive at a liberating insight that does not necessarily penetrate deeply: this is the kind of kensho I described earlier as being like opening and closing a door quickly. But a deeper samadhi can be the gate to a decisive, profound awakening.

There is a depth of samadhi, in fact, in which we may find ourselves so absorbed that we are unable to speak or even move. Hakuin described such a state as like being frozen in a vast sheet of ice. His description is indeed apt: the entire world within that samadhi appears white, frozen, crystalline, and still. It is not the usual world at all. I have described my own experience of this kind of samadhi like this: the room is entirely white and distant. There are people there but no way one could ever speak to them; there is a floor but no way one could ever place a foot upon it. In that state, even one's breathing seems to cease completely.

If we enter an all-encompassing samadhi like this and continue to apply ourselves assiduously to practice—with all our energy and not relenting even for a moment—it will soon deepen immeasurably. A moment then comes in which body, mind, and all phenomena drop completely away: time and space, the senses, and awareness are all extinguished.<sup>15</sup> This place of utter nonbeing is the so-called Great Death of Zen, the state of absolute nothingness. Again, by itself this is not necessarily awakening. But this state of truly profound samadhi holds the tremendous potentiality of causing us to be reborn into a new life. If some incident or stimulus then shatters that state of blackness, causing us to return suddenly to our normal consciousness, it is possible to arrive at an extremely profound kensho.

As we will see, some of the methods of direct pointing we will examine can be used in precisely this way by teachers: to shatter samadhi and bring about the decisive turning around of kensho. But another important thing to know is that the depth of one's samadhi is dependent upon and driven by the degree of body-mind integration cultivated by the practitioner. It is precisely the methods of internal energetic cultivation we will examine that are classically used to

accomplish this and create conditions for such a samadhi to arise. We should say, in fact, that it is only through mastery of such methods that the most profound, subtle samadhi condition possible can manifest. This is one reason for Rinzai Zen's strong emphasis on internal energetic cultivation, and it is why those preserved teachings are so precious.

## **Importance of the Teacher**

Whatever uses the methods we will examine may have for each of us according to our individual situations, I would like to conclude this introduction by stressing that this book is not meant to take the place of a teacher. As Hakuin said, even the most profound teachings and practices can, if applied inappropriately, become poison rather than nourishment. It is true that Zen is a path accomplished only through one's own body-mind. But this is done in relationship with a qualified master whose existence manifests the embodied qualities of awakening. The initial entrance of kensho is most easily accomplished not alone but through the direct pointing activity of the teacher who observes our conditions and acts accordingly using many skillful means.

For these reasons, it would certainly be foolish to forgo such guidance. Even if someone reading this book happened to enter the gate of profound awakening without guidance or prior practice, the fact remains that it is only from a qualified teacher that affirmation of genuine kensho may be obtained. And it is only with a teacher's guidance that one is likely to avoid the many pitfalls that lie along the subsequent post-kensho path of liberation. For those who might think that my committing orally transmitted instructions to writing, as I have done in this book, makes it possible to dispense with the teacher, I must also say that *kuden* consists of more than just the verbal instructions. It includes the hands-on, nonverbal learning that can take place only when one spends time in the presence of, and is able to observe or even feel with one's hands the body-mind functioning of, a teacher who has embodied these instructions.

I often think that none of this should really need saying since the Zen tradition has always stressed the role of the teacher and the indispensable nature of that crucial human relationship. But it seems fashionable today to think that technology allows us to learn anything on our own. The truth is that we should affirm something quite different: technology doesn't remove the need for a teacher, but in fact it makes it possible for sincere Zen students to contact and meet face-to-face with Zen teachers in a manner that is almost effortless compared to what past generations endured. Today we need not travel by foot, ship, and caravan over long distances for months or years. We need not risk storms, disease, and bandits just to encounter a qualified master. We need only send an email, and no matter where in the world a teacher lives it could even be possible to travel there within a day or two. How incredibly fortunate we are to live in such an era of easy access to dharma teachings! Certainly, we should take advantage of the unprecedented ease with which one may find a teacher today. There is no telling how long such a situation will last.

We thus must wonder if some persons who attempt to walk the Zen path alone based on their own faulty understanding—an undertaking long warned against and almost certainly doomed to failure—are not bound within a particularly stubborn and foolish kind of egoism. At the very least, we must say that they are unfamiliar with what the actual path of Zen entails.

Returning to the subjects of this book: it is certain that not all the practices we will examine here could be fully grasped from the text alone. No matter how much detail I give, the text could at best serve as a kind of reference. Nor are all these practices suitable for everyone. Like medicines, some will be appropriate for one's specific disease of delusion, but others may not and could even worsen the situation if misapplied. I therefore urge the reader interested in Zen to seek out a qualified master and so enter the mainstream of Zen practice by which a direct approach to awakening—and the subsequent path of liberation—may be dependably actualized. It is my expectation that anyone choosing to make use of the practices in

this book has done so, including taking up a dedicated regular practice of zazen.<sup>16</sup>

But if this is not the case, it is at least my hope that this book, revealing a small portion of the things that teachers pass on to their students, will provide inspiration to seek one out. In truth, it is only within that relationship that the practices of direct pointing and internal energetic cultivation may truly function as supports for a rightly directed, coherent path of liberation. Within such a relationship, in fact, there are few methods that could *not* be integrated within the Zen path. Taking as it does the recognition of our true nature as its foundation, Zen is ultimately not limited to specific methods at all. It is within the intimate meeting between teacher and student that we may ultimately arrive at the place of freedom in which all our activities become effortless practice.

With that we have completed this introduction serving as a foundation for what follows. Let us now turn to these actual inherited treasures: the practices of direct pointing and internal energetic cultivation.

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\* An asterisk appears at the first occurrence of a term that can be found in the glossary.

## **Part One**

# **DIRECT POINTING**



## Direct Pointing at the Human Mind

*It is thus that Lord Shakyamuni, the most venerable, instructs us here. It is the teaching that comes down to men in response to their needs. But perhaps, gentlemen, you wish to know the state of things before Shakyamuni ever entered his mother's womb.*

*(Muso tapped his staff on the floor.)*

*Listen, Listen!*<sup>[1](#)</sup>

MUSO SOSEKI

Now we will begin to explore the first category of hidden Zen practices: the methods of direct pointing. Before doing so I would like to define the term more clearly and explain in detail how this distinctive aspect of the Zen path manifests and functions.

### Definition of Direct Pointing

The term *direct pointing* in Zen is found most famously in the four lines describing Zen's approach and intent attributed to the Indian master Bodhidharma.<sup>[2](#)</sup>

A separate transmission outside the scriptures,  
Not dependent upon words or letters,

Direct pointing at the human mind,  
Seeing one's nature and becoming Buddha.

The last two of these lines especially concern us here, as they describe the actual path of Zen practice. I have written about Zen's approach and intent in greater detail elsewhere but will here summarize.<sup>3</sup>

“Direct pointing at the human mind” refers generally to the ways in which Zen students are made to turn around the light of their own awareness to arrive at kensho. This activity—the arranging of the student's conditions in order to enter awakening—constitutes the primary initial task of a Zen teacher.

“Seeing one's nature,” as I have said, translates the word *kensho* itself; this is the crucial awakening to one's intrinsic wisdom or “original face.” Since the actual path of Zen practice takes this awakening as its basis, we should recognize that until we do arrive at awakening we are not yet, strictly speaking, “practicing Zen.” What Zen truly signifies only becomes clear to us when we open our wisdom eyes and are able to ourselves give testament in some small way to the truth that Shakyamuni discovered.

“Becoming Buddha” describes the subsequent—and utterly essential—path of practice after kensho. It is by means of this lifelong, exhaustive path that the initial awakening of kensho is deepened and made to penetrate the body; the roots of habitual delusion are cut, and liberation is realized.

Inasmuch as they concisely map the Zen path, Bodhidharma's lines are worthy of deep examination. Taking them as our starting point, it may in fact be said that all methods of Zen practice can be used in one or more of three ways:

- To help the student dissolve obstructions to awakening
- To cause the student to arrive at awakening
- To help the student revisit, clarify, deepen, and embody awakening as part of a lifelong path of liberation: the actualization of becoming a buddha

In this same way, the practices of direct pointing have varying uses. For persons who have not yet arrived at kensho, these methods have the power to dissolve obstructions to awakening because they are able to effect sudden change in our ways of experiencing. For persons whose conditions are indeed ripe for awakening, methods of direct pointing can cause one to suddenly arrive at that crucial recognition; that is, they can serve as the final impetus that brings one to kensho. Finally, for persons who have already awakened, methods of direct pointing have utility along the subsequent path of becoming a buddha because they allow one to revisit awakening, again and again, until one has completely embodied it.

Again, it is unfortunate that some Western Zen lineages seem not to have inherited such things. Where that is the case, we often find that Bodhidharma's words "direct pointing at the human mind" are little mentioned or else taken to be simply a general *descriptor* of Zen rather than a crucial *activity* within Zen practice. That is, the existence of such concrete methods for arranging students' conditions in order to lead them to awakening seems little grasped by some.

But how then shall we define "direct pointing" in terms of the actual practices we will examine in this book and in a manner fitting their diverse nature? For our purposes I would like to use the following definition that I expect will prove sufficiently broad: *the practices of direct pointing are means by which the Zen student's way of experiencing is decisively altered to penetrate habitual delusion.*

Let us now examine more closely the ways in which such methods manifest and their actual effects on the practitioner.

## **Means of Direct Pointing**

Direct pointing methods in Zen may be said to fall into one of three general categories: those that are bodily or make use of physical means, those that are verbal or make use of sound, and those that make use of what we may call *extraordinary* means.

### ***Bodily or Physical Means***

Means of direct pointing using some bodily or physical action are likely the best recognized, and they are easily observed within both Zen literature and daily practice. Perhaps the most famous example is described in the so-called Flower Sermon, found in several Chinese chronicles from the Song dynasty. In this episode the Buddha wordlessly holds up a single flower in front of his disciples, at which Mahakasyapa alone smiles, signifying that he has grasped the experiential understanding to which the Buddha's action points. Upon seeing this, the Buddha says the words that according to tradition mark the transmission of the sublime Zen teachings.

I possess the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, the Subtle Dharma Gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahakasyapa.<sup>4</sup>

Another well-known example is this famous episode from the *Rinzairoku*.

When Elder Ding came to see Linji [Rinzai] he asked, "What is the cardinal principle of the buddhadharma?"

The master got down from his rope-bottomed chair. Seizing Ding, he gave him a slap and pushed him away. Ding stood still.

A monk standing by said, "Elder Ding, why don't you bow?" Just as he bowed, Ding attained great enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

We also see in the *Rinzairoku* that Rinzai himself was not spared such means of direct pointing in his earlier days.

When Linji [Rinzai] was one of the assembly of monks under Huangbo [Obaku], he was plain and direct in his behavior. The head monk praised him saying, "Though he's a youngster, he's different from the other monks." So he asked, "Honorable monk, how long have you been here?"

"Three years," replied Linji.

“Have you ever asked for instruction?”

“No, I’ve never asked for instruction. I don’t know what to ask,” replied Linji.

“Why don’t you go ask the head priest of this temple just what the cardinal principle of the buddhadharma is,” said the head monk.

Linji went and asked. Before he had finished speaking Huangbo hit him. Linji came back. “How did your question go?” asked the head monk.

“Before I had finished speaking the master hit me. I don’t understand,” said Linji.

“Then go and ask him again,” said the head monk.

So Linji went back and asked, and again Huangbo hit him. Thus Linji asked the same question three times and was hit three times.<sup>6</sup>

Such episodes abound in Zen literature. Remembering the role of samadhi in practice and the manner in which a sudden shock can lead to its shattering followed by a decisive awakening, we can understand such occurrences and appreciate the keen eye and dynamic activity of great masters like Obaku and Rinzai.

### ***Verbal Means or Those Making Use of Sound***

Direct pointing by means of speech or sound is also well known, and many examples may be found.

Among the most famous is this episode from the *Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch*. Eno, having been secretly designated the Fifth Patriarch’s successor and given the robe and bowl as a symbol thereof, was forced to flee from several hundred monks who did not accept his new status. Finally caught by Emyo,<sup>7</sup> an especially stubborn monk who had formerly been a military general, Eno discovered that this pursuer had in fact come for the teachings rather than to take back the robe and bowl. Directing Emyo to first concentrate and calm his mind for some time, Eno then

reportedly asked him a famously direct and cutting question that led to his sudden awakening:

Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil, what at this moment is your original face before your mother and father were born?<sup>8</sup>

Returning to the *Rinzairoku*, an episode of verbal direct pointing also happily follows the episode I mentioned earlier in which Rinzhai was struck repeatedly by Obaku. This time, it was words spoken to Rinzhai by Daigu that led him finally to awakening.

Linji [Rinzhai] arrived at Dayu's [Daigu's] temple. Dayu said, "Where have you come from?"

"I have come from Huangbo's place," replied Linji.

"What did Huangbo have to say?" asked Dayu.

"Three times I asked him just what the cardinal principle of the buddhadharma is and three times he hit me. I don't know whether I was at fault or not."

"Huangbo is such a grandmother that he utterly exhausted himself with your troubles!" said Dayu. "And now you come here asking whether you were at fault or not!"

At these words Linji attained great enlightenment. "Ah, there isn't so much to Huangbo's buddhadharma!" he cried.<sup>9</sup>

Truly, these episodes reveal that the ability to deliver what is called an appropriate "turning word"—that is, speech that suddenly causes the student to turn around the light of awareness and recognize the intrinsic wisdom that has never been absent—is something highly valued in Zen.

Another very important and well-known type of direct pointing using sound is a sharp, sudden shout: the *katsu*.<sup>\*</sup> This is a subject connected not only to direct pointing but also to internal energetic cultivation, and we will examine it in more depth later.

### ***Extraordinary Means***

The third category is less easy to discern in written records but perhaps the most crucial. So-called extraordinary means of direct pointing reveal the transformative effects that the presence of a realized person may spontaneously have upon the conditions of another. In a sense, all encounters with a legitimate teacher of sufficient power can be said to fall at least partly into this third category, and especially the practice of *sanzen* that is so important in the Rinzai Zen path.

Those who have trained under such a master will be familiar with this in an intimate way. For example, there are times when the student finds that the presence of the master alone causes one to enter *samadhi*; in my own case, such occurrences with my teacher were so common that they ceased to elicit curiosity. It is also sometimes the case in *sanzen* that the essential point of some koan, which has resisted one's best efforts to penetrate it, is suddenly revealed upon facing the master within the interview room. And certainly, in the presence of a dynamic master possessing great energy we may find that our burdens, worries, and problems seem to fall away. Such an effect can last for a time even after we have departed, as if we are being lifted and carried by an infusion of the master's energy. Though it may be hard to believe, there are even instances in which putting on a garment or handling the belongings used by such a person can transform us.

That is perhaps enough to say for now. We will later examine some specific moments during Zen training when extraordinary means of direct pointing are in fact depended upon.

Here I might digress briefly to touch upon the questions of how and when teachers are to employ methods of direct pointing. Understandings of these things are transmitted orally in Rinzai Zen lineages to those who must take up that burden of guiding others. Incidents of direct pointing are also the focus of various koans examined in Rinzai practice. In fact, there is even a koan *about* this question of when direct pointing—or what is called *sottaku*,\* “pecking”—is appropriate. *Sottaku* refers precisely to the teacher's activity to bring the student to awakening, likening it to that of a

mother hen who pecks at a chick's shell even as the chick simultaneously struggles from within. Thus, in the *Shumon Kattoshu* we find this from Nan'in.

Nanyuan [Nan'in], addressing the assembly, said, "You grasp the idea of simultaneous pecking and tapping, but you lack the function of simultaneous pecking and tapping."

A monk came forward and asked, "What is the function of simultaneous pecking and tapping?"

Nanyuan said, "A true adept has no need of pecking and tapping; the moment there is pecking and tapping, the function is lost."<sup>10</sup>

Nan'in's final comment, the ramifications of which must be penetrated in sanzen with one's teacher, does indeed reveal how direct pointing must manifest skillfully and correctly as an expression of the wondrous functioning of Zen wisdom. It is an important point for Zen teachers to grasp, since the consequences of unskillful or ill-timed direct pointing can be unfortunate. Commenting on this danger, in fact, Hakuin famously recorded an incident from his childhood in which he compassionately attempted to help a cicada free itself from its skin but in so doing deformed its wing.<sup>11</sup>

Having said all of this regarding the categories of direct pointing, most of the practices I have chosen to include in this book are not restricted to use solely by teachers (though we will look at some of those methods as well). I have mostly chosen, rather, practices that students may also use *themselves*. Thus, I have not strictly adhered to the categories of direct pointing mentioned above and present the methods in no specific order, except of course in cases where later methods take preceding ones as a foundation. I have also given practice instructions for most of the methods in a manner directed to students rather than teachers.

Next, we will look more closely at the actual functions of direct pointing.



## **Functions of Direct Pointing**

Earlier I explained the various ways in which all Zen practices can be used to fulfill the path revealed in Bodhidharma's four lines: by removing obstructions to awakening, revealing the wisdom of awakening, or helping us to revisit, actualize, and embody that wisdom. I also defined the practices of direct pointing as "means by which the Zen student's way of experiencing is decisively altered to penetrate habitual delusion."

But I would like now to transition to a less theoretical discussion of these methods. Here I will explain their functions more specifically in terms of what someone using them might experience:

- Recognizing basic clarity
- Entering samadhi
- Arriving at awakening
- Returning to wisdom

Let us examine each of these in turn.

### ***Recognizing Basic Clarity***

First, for persons who have not yet arrived at the recognition of kensho, the methods we will examine could at least help them to experience something crucial: the mind's capacity for relaxed, nonabiding clarity.

Why is this important? It is because we usually experience our minds in a rather different manner: habitually caught up in chaotic states marked by fixation, attachment, and fear, we are fascinated by phenomena and chase endlessly after the never-ceasing stream of conceptual elaboration, emotions, memories, and fantasies to which we attach so much importance. But to experience even a moment when these fixations drop and the endless activity of conceptualization lessens—thereby understanding that our minds do indeed possess a basic clear, nonfixated quality not fundamentally obscured by our usual self-centered fabrications—is extremely

worthwhile. Remarkably, we can even see that within this natural clarity our usual afflictions (habitual cravings, aversions or fears, and ignorance) are also lessened or even seemingly absent for a time.

This brief experience of clarity is like remembering that there is a vast, open sky—endless, bright, and clear—hidden behind the clouds. It may also be compared to looking at the blades of a fan or an airplane propeller: our usual fixation on the endless arising of both inner and outer phenomena is like trying to follow propeller blades with our eyes as they spin, getting dizzy and more disturbed in the attempt. But if in a single moment one relaxes and releases that fixation, it is found that the spinning can be seen through. The view of what lies behind was in fact never obstructed by the blades at all.<sup>12</sup>

This, then, is an important function of these practices, and it is a very useful one indeed for removing obstructions to awakening: the methods we will examine can suddenly reveal to us our own capacity for clarity and help us return to it again and again. Practicing like this over time, our habitual fixation relaxes more and more, and we begin to manifest a certain open, free, and courageous perspective. With this we also find that our faith in the path grows: though we have heard for so long that each of us possesses the potential to awaken and that our true nature is not in the least different from that of enlightened buddhas, this experience of basic clarity allows us to believe for the first time that such things might truly be possible. While the experience of clarity alone is not awakening or sufficient for liberation, later in our practice we will come to recognize that clarity is in fact the very face of wisdom.

### ***Entering Samadhi***

Another way these methods can aid us, related to the previous one, is by helping us to enter samadhi. I earlier described samadhi in a general way as a relaxed, sustained stability in which the mind functions freely without fixation or distraction. That stability is, in fact, a seamless resting within the free-flowing clarity described above. In other words, having experienced our minds momentarily as nonabiding and nonobstructed, fixating on neither “inner” or

“outer,” we will be able with practice to deepen and sustain that experience of natural clarity for longer periods and so to integrate it in a living way with our daily activities.

Because samadhi powerfully helps us to dissolve obstructions to kensho, and later to seamlessly embody its wisdom, it is indeed a crucial aspect of the Zen path. I have already explained how samadhi is a particularly fertile state from which it is possible to arrive at awakening. But to use these methods of direct pointing to enter samadhi there is something we should know: it will be necessary for us to apply the embodied concentration power we have cultivated through such practices as zazen. When one-pointed concentration is unified energetically with our own mind’s relaxed, nonabiding clarity, then we are able over time—and with less and less effort—to manifest an increasingly intense and vital samadhi.

This is what is meant by the cultivation of *yoriki*,\* or “samadhi power,” in Zen. Until we begin to cultivate such power, any beneficial state we experience will be impossible to sustain and deepen: it will come and go with little usefulness for our path. We will see later that the methods of internal energetic cultivation are also extremely useful in this regard.

As with the basic experience of clarity, we should know that sustained samadhi is not by itself awakening. But later in our practice we will come to see that samadhi is the active function and manifestation of our awakening, and that true Zen awakening manifests in seamless unity with samadhi.

### ***Arriving at Awakening***

Here, of course, is the most well-known function of these methods: what we might call the classic direct pointing. Having encountered the Zen teachings and given rise to *bodaishin*\*—the aspiration to awaken for the sake of all beings—a student who is truly ripe might through these methods be able to experientially discover what is meant by “seeing one’s nature.”

This is the turning around of the light of one’s own awareness to clearly recognize that within one’s own mind—intrinsically free and

not bound by afflictions, luminously aware and nonabiding, permeating all phenomena and free of the divisions of “inside” or “outside”—there is, in fact, no fixed “I” or “me” whatsoever nor anything anywhere that is apart from one’s original face. It is the moment when the essential point of Zen is known, and with this knowledge the basis of all subsequent Zen practice becomes clear. This is kensho.

As I have said, it is generally the teacher’s task to bring the student to this crucial place of awakening. But such is a use of these methods, for persons so fortunate.

### ***Returning to Wisdom***

Finally, for persons who have succeeded in entering the gate of awakening and are working under a teacher’s guidance to actualize it along the post-kensho path, the practices we will examine could be useful as I have described to repeatedly revisit or rediscover that wisdom, like opening the door again and again or seeing the cardinal repeatedly until it has become something intimately familiar. Even though vestiges of habitual delusion still arise to interrupt or dull one’s recognition, we can use these methods to return to the path and continue our progress.

The long training to seamlessly integrate the seeing of kensho—sometimes being in accord with it and sometimes falling back into delusion, but returning to it in unity with samadhi again and again until all the actions of body, speech, and mind are in harmony with it—constitutes the greater and most difficult part of the Zen path. We should understand that it is our samadhi cultivation after kensho that powers this process, manifesting as a constant upwelling of intrinsic wisdom. It is one of the means by which awakening will ultimately penetrate the very fiber of our bodies.

This last use of the practices of direct pointing could be described as a kind of remembering. In other words, these methods can help us to “snap back” when we have fallen once more into habitual delusion. The sensation of such snapping back is not unlike that of suddenly, while having a nightmare, realizing that one is in fact dreaming; at

that moment one immediately remembers that what is seen in the dream is illusory, a fantasy. With that all fear vanishes, and one gains the freedom to enjoy—or even beneficially use—the circumstances of the dream. Like this, the methods of direct pointing can help us to remember and reaffirm awakening and so to reunify ourselves with the path as we train to accord harmoniously in samadhi with whatever we encounter. Returning again and again to wisdom in this way, we slowly begin to feel that dreamlike fantasy no longer binds us as it once did. We find ourselves able to live more and more grounded in the wisdom of awakening. Our constant ups and downs become less dramatic; we find ourselves less reactive in the ways we had been in the past.

To become increasingly familiar with our intrinsic wisdom like this within the changing situations of life is the actual path of liberation. By liberation what is meant, at the very least, is the arising of unshakeable confidence in this wisdom, and also sufficient progress along the post-kensho path to embody it in a nonregressing manner. Ultimately, to realize nondeparture from the wisdom of awakening is the culmination of becoming Buddha.

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In this chapter I have defined direct pointing, described the means with which it is done, and explained its functions as might be experienced by practitioners. It is my hope that this has clarified why these practices are valuable and how they support the overall intent of our Zen path. What follows now are the twenty-eight actual practices of direct pointing I have selected for this book.

## 2

# Selected Practices of Direct Pointing for Zen Students

**THE FIRST TWENTY-TWO** practices of direct pointing in this chapter have been purposefully presented in a manner allowing students to use them directly.

### Spreading Out the Vision

The first practice we will examine is a bodily method of direct pointing. Specifically, it uses the eyes and vision to change our way of experiencing.

In Zen training, and particularly during zazen, the eyes are used in a specific manner that may be summarized thus: rather than staring at a single point using foveal (focused or central) vision, one activates the peripheral field to encompass one's surroundings with awareness in a broad, sweeping, and relaxed manner. A traditional way this has been described in Japanese swordsmanship is that one should use the eyes "as if gazing at distant mountains." Somewhat earlier in history, we have these words from the Fifth Patriarch.

Look to where the horizon disappears beyond the sky and behold the figure *one*. This is a great help. It is good for those beginning to

sit in meditation, when they find their mind distracted, to focus their mind on the figure one.<sup>1</sup>

The character for the number one in Chinese is a single horizontal line. Advising students to look in this manner at the distant horizon is in fact the same thing as “gazing at distant mountains.” If you imagine how you might view at once a distant range of mountains, spread out from horizon to horizon—or visualize a single horizontal line spread out at the horizon where the earth meets the sky—the meaning of these words will become clear.

What is interesting is that when we use our eyes this way, we experience a marked decrease in gross thought activity: mental chatter stills. Examining more closely, we may observe that when using the eyes with attention in this manner there will seem to be little afflictive or negative emotion arising: our usual habit of giving rise to fear, craving, and other afflictive states lessens dramatically. Furthermore, we may notice that our sense of being an observing “self” separate from the things we see falls somewhat away. The sensation of existing inside one’s skull and watching objects that are outside in the world dissolves. Thus, the way we use our eyes in Zen practice can reveal our capacity for clarity and help us to experience samadhi. It can even lead us to awakening.

Over the years, I have heard my teachers stress again and again how crucial this way of using the eyes is. They have constantly reminded how important it is for correct zazen to integrate this manner of seeing. Reflecting further on the experience one has when seeing this way, I have come to an interesting conclusion: the modern habit of using the eyes almost entirely in a focused manner is an aberration, and not at all in accord with our physical evolution.

Most of our time these days seems to be spent with eyes tightly focused on screens. Even when walking outside we find it difficult not to pull out phones to continue indulging this habit. It is little wonder that we feel socially isolated and largely cut off from nature. One need only stroll down a city sidewalk to observe how most people walk with their fields of vision cast downward onto screens or

the ground, avoiding the gaze of others and largely occupied with inner thoughts and worries. They will often walk right into you if you do not move to avoid them. Really, people who spend days and years like this cannot be said to be fully in the world at all. In a way, they are more like ghosts than living persons.

But for most of our development as a species I imagine that human beings moved through space and used their senses quite differently. Our distant ancestors lived in a world that required them to be fully present. Moving about on savannahs and plains or in deep forest, one must activate peripheral vision to sense activity and movement in the environment. This was necessary not only to find game but to avoid predators and enemies. Fine vision was also important, of course: to make a tool, to focus on a face when speaking, to examine something found. But I believe that for much of human history, peripheral vision was, in fact, equally important.

Hunters and others who observe wildlife still know this well today. If one wishes to find a deer in the woods or a bird in a tree, one does not search from point to point with focused vision. Instead one spreads out one's gaze broadly, encompassing the whole scene within the peripheral field. The mind then becomes remarkably still and clear, and one feels immersed in or connected to the surroundings. In that state even a small flicker of movement—the flutter of a wing, the blinking of a deer's eye, or the movement of its tail—is instantly sensed without effort or thought. Immediately and unconsciously, one then focuses in to determine what was glimpsed. Soldiers, police officers, and martial artists, if they are well trained, certainly also learn to integrate this way of using the eyes.

That is all very interesting. But what we should especially understand as Zen practitioners is that overuse of focused vision increases tension, internal chatter, and neuroses. Yet everyone, not just practitioners, can relearn to spread out their vision. When we do so, whole new worlds of living detail and movement open for us. We begin to feel again that we are part of the space surrounding us rather than isolated within ourselves. Truly, we should all regain this original human way of seeing.



Despite the importance of using the eyes this way in Zen training, it oddly seems to be among the orally transmitted details of practice not always received by Western Zen students. I have even heard from some Zen students that their teachers advised them to stare one-pointedly at a fixed spot on the floor or wall, something that not only causes eyestrain and fatigue but also an increase in gross thought activity and tension. For these reasons I have placed this method first among the direct pointing practices, followed by several that rely upon it.

Here is an exercise you may try in order to grasp this physical way of using the eyes. (I have also given this in a previous book as part of basic zazen instruction.<sup>2</sup>)

1. Sitting or standing comfortably, look straight ahead and spread out your vision in a broad, relaxed manner so that you are watching the entire room at once (rather than staring with focused vision at whatever point across the room your gaze strikes).
2. Extend your arms behind your head where you cannot see them and raise your index fingers to eye level. Slowly bring the arms forward until the fingers appear in your peripheral field. Stop at the point where you can just see both fingers at the same time on the very edges of your vision. Stretch your vision out to simultaneously encompass both fingers and the entire visual field between them. (Figure 1)
3. Now drop your arms but maintain this expansive gaze, stretching your awareness to the limits of the peripheral field and filling the surrounding space. You are not looking at one thing; you are seeing everything at once, softly and effortlessly.



Figure 1: Activating the peripheral field.

If you wish to understand how this way of using the eyes is integrated within seated meditation, simply allow the angle of your gaze to drop to forty-five degrees while maintaining the expansive vision you cultivated. Though the eyes are gently downcast, your awareness still fills the space around you. The feeling is that even if a fly should land somewhere in the room, you will know it without having to shift your gaze.<sup>3</sup> (Figure 2)



Figure 2: The gaze used in zazen: vision spread out, with eyes gently downcast.

In daily life we should also use our vision this way whenever possible. As I have said, many people spend large portions of their days with visual and mental focus strongly fixated upon a series of things (screens, the ground, their food during meals, and so on) but excluding from their attention most of the world around them. Our way of using the eyes should more often have a sweeping, expansive quality, filling both horizontal and vertical space with this feeling of seeing the entire view at once.

If you found the exercise using upraised fingers to be difficult, here is another simple one that uses this book you are holding. Using the diagram below, follow the instructions given. (Figure 3)

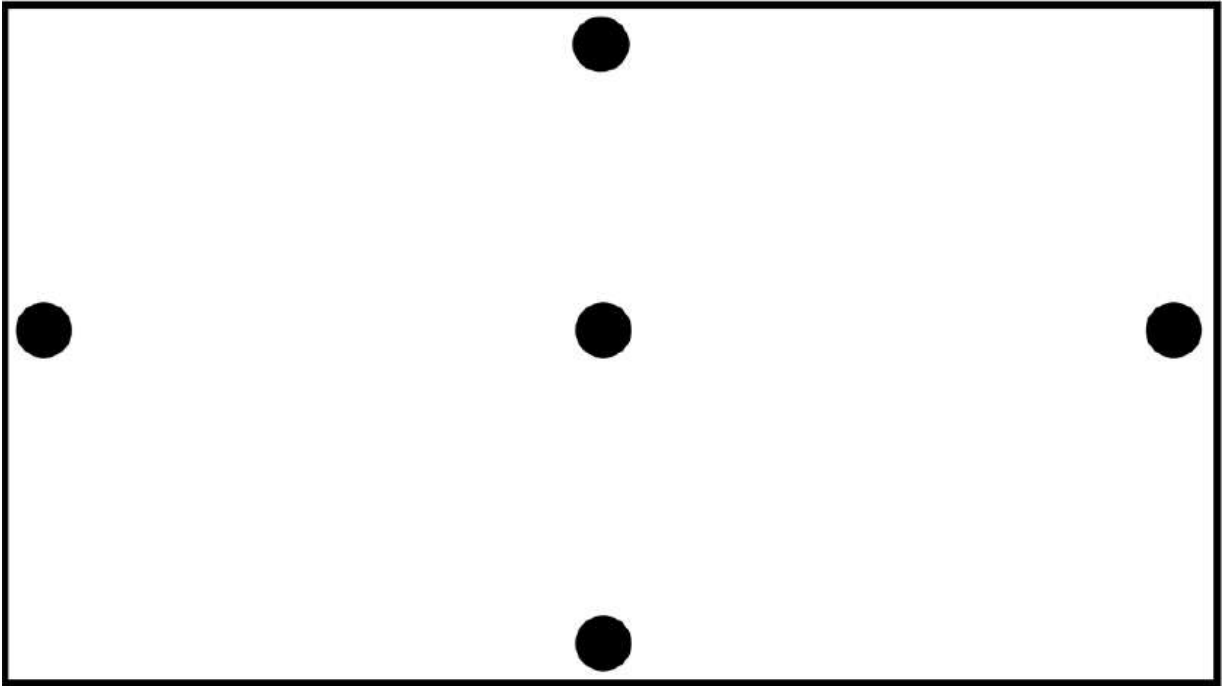


Figure 3

1. Looking straight ahead, hold this book up at eye level at a comfortable distance from your face such that you can stare intently at the center dot in the diagram. Doing so, restrict your attention solely to that dot: this replicates the experience of focused vision. In that state, now observe your condition of mind. Is it tense or tight in feeling?
2. Continuing to hold the book in that manner, now expand your attention to encompass the four outer dots simultaneously. Your vision is now being used a little more broadly. You are still aware of the center dot, but the other dots are now included in your field of awareness.
3. Expand your attention more broadly now to encompass the entire page. Once again, observe your condition of mind in that state.
4. Finally, without turning away or shifting your gaze, let your attention extend beyond the edges of the book. Keep the book where it is, but simply expand your attention to encompass the room beyond the page that is in front of and around you. You

will notice that you are still aware of both the center and outer dots, and the book itself, but your vision does not stick to them and softly takes in the entire surroundings as well. Observe your condition of mind now: it will feel even more free and relaxed.

Once you have gained some familiarity with this way of using the eyes, there are many ways to apply it. Here is a practice of direct pointing using this way of broad, expansive seeing.

1. Go to a place in which you have some open space in front of you, for example, facing out toward a distant view, an open field, or a horizon where the waters of a sea or lake meet the sky. Stand or sit comfortably, relaxing the body. Let your chin be level so that you are looking straight ahead. You may raise your chin slightly if it helps to establish such an expansive view.
2. Take a few deep breaths naturally in and out through the nose, letting all tension drop from body and mind.
3. When you are ready, now take a final deep breath and exhale slowly. As you exhale, and especially at the end of your exhalation when the breath has mostly exited but before you feel the need to inhale, immediately and strongly spread out your vision to the very limits of your peripheral field. Do this with full attention for five or ten seconds. (The exact length of time is unimportant.) You may continue to breathe naturally during this time as required.
4. Now relax and recall those few seconds when you spread your vision out, examining your experience:
  - Were there thoughts arising or the usual mental chatter during that time you spread your vision out?
  - Did any negative or afflictive states arise during that time? Were there any habitual feelings of fear, craving, anxiety, sadness, and so on?
  - Was there, in fact, any “I” present within that expansive awareness?

If you are able to catch the intent of this method, you will likely recognize that there is actually little or no gross thought activity during the time you spread out your vision. For those few moments, there are no negative states or feelings arising. And there is little or no solid sense of “I” within it; there is seeing, but the sense of a watcher engaged in the activity of viewing separate “things” is not strongly present at all. Just this reveals your own capacity for clarity and the ultimately boundless nature of your mind, not restricted by habitual dualistic seeing.

To use this method more profoundly, here is a final step you may use:

1. Do the practice as described above: when you exhale, activate the peripheral field and spread your vision out broadly.
2. Now, in the moment when your vision is spread out and you have encompassed everything within your relaxed gaze, *allow this expansive attention to extend also to the place within your own mind where seeing is occurring*. In other words: rather than looking outward at or troubling yourself with the so-called external world of objects—as if your mind were reaching out through the eyes to grasp whatever lies within your field of view—just let the mind rest within the act of seeing itself. See at *the source* of seeing.

Using this method, you may be able to recognize the inseparability of mind and phenomena, that is, the nondivision between so-called inner and outer worlds. If with sustained clarity you can rest within that way of seeing, that is samadhi.

Furthermore, if you can truly recognize that within neither outer nor inner world is there any solid, fixed self whatsoever to be found, then in that moment you might grasp what is meant by one’s “original face” and “nature of mind.” That is, it could be possible for you to have the recognition we call kensho.

Shido Bunan Zenji, the great master who was the teacher of Dokyo Etan (and thus the dharma grandfather of Hakuin), said the words

below. Using the method of seeing I have described here, one might be able not only to catch his meaning but to grasp the complete path of liberation that is thereby revealed.

There is no special principle in the study of the way; it's only necessary to see and hear directly. Directly seeing, there is no seeing; directly hearing, there is no hearing. You must fuse inside and outside into one solid thoroughly peaceful state before you can do this.<sup>4</sup>

When Shido Bunan says that in direct seeing there is no seeing and in direct hearing there is no hearing, he does not mean that we become senseless. There is “no seeing” because there is no separation of seer and seen. There is “no hearing” because there is no hearer apart from what is heard. Indeed, we must experience the samadhi in which inside and outside are fused in order to grasp this.

But even if you are not able to immediately have that more profound recognition and arrive at kensho through seeing, you are now at least able to use this practice of spreading the vision out to experience and revisit your own natural clarity. Whenever you feel awash in thought and afflictive emotion, you may sit or stand, relax, spread out your vision, and thereby instantly change your state. In Zen we do not try to change our minds using our minds: it is more rapid and effective to use the body—or rather, the whole body-mind—to transform our experience. This method of using the eyes is a wonderful example.

The next two practices of direct pointing we will examine rest upon this way of using the eyes.

## **Seeing a Tree**

Here is a method that will further reinforce the Zen manner of using the eyes we just learned. Remarkably, it can also reveal the doorway to a world many feel they have lost: the magical world known in childhood, when things around us appeared intensely vivid, fresh, and alive.

To use this practice, first find a place where you can see a mature tree in its entirety. One that stands in the middle of a park or open field is ideal. Then apply these instructions.

1. Stand or sit at such a distance from the tree that it fills your entire visual field.
2. Looking first at the tree with focused vision, observe in turn as many individual details as you can. For example, focus intently on various parts of the trunk, then on individual limbs, on specific leaves, and so on. Doing so, observe how your mind feels and how it perceives the solidity and existence of the object “tree.” You will notice that when the tree is seen as a succession of parts using focused vision, it is experienced as something distinctly separate from you and from other objects surrounding it.
3. Now spread out your vision as we have learned, encompassing the entire tree at once with a relaxed, expansive gaze. Spend a few minutes like this observing the tree in its entirety, from its roots to topmost boughs simultaneously, with all its color and movement. Throw yourself energetically into this broad, nondivisive way of seeing. Do not allow your mind to be taken with individual parts or aspects of the tree. Just see the tree whole, using the eyes softly and broadly.
4. Observe then how your mind feels in that state and what your sense of “tree” is. Where does the tree begin and end? Where do you?
5. Finally, turning your awareness inward, see the tree at the source of that seeing. That is, experience the tree reflected within the source of your awareness rather than as a thing sitting some distance away from you. This is to directly see without seeing, as Shido Bunan Zenji describes. In that state, what then is “tree”?

This method in its fruition reveals to us the living quality of the world around us. To see a tree in its seamless wholeness and totality



of presence, free from our usual visual habit and discriminating mind that “kills” the tree by separating it from ourselves and dissecting it into labeled pieces, is indeed to rediscover a lost world. The gray, sterile environment filled with detached, colorless objects—the wasteland of exile and longing within which we seem inexplicably to find ourselves as adults—suddenly disappears. In its place is revealed a shining, living, magical realm.

There are many such objects one could use to integrate this way of seeing; the form, size, way of movement, and common presence of trees simply make them ideal. However we arrive at it, we might again begin to understand these truths: that our own “selves” as well as “objects” are not so rigidly fixed as we think, and that the manner of our seeing in fact creates or destroys the worlds that we inhabit.

### **In a Busy Place**

For this next method we will go to a place that does not necessarily have an expansive view. Instead, we will purposefully seek out someplace that is not still and calm at all but rather contains many movements and distractions. Once there, our practice will be to encompass the surroundings with our awareness such that we join with the myriad activities, using all our senses, without missing a single thing. But we will do this in a manner that also cultivates nonfixation and nonseparation.

Here are the instructions:

1. Find a place where there is a great deal of activity and movement. Particularly excellent are busy restaurants, bars, public trains, and so on where there are many people. Another, different kind of place that is nevertheless excellent for this practice is a forest or other natural setting where there might not be people but still are many small (and usually unnoticed) movements of the natural world: insects and other creatures, the movements of grasses and trees, and so on.

2. Having chosen a suitable place, find a spot where you may sit unmoving to observe the entire surroundings without needing to turn your head or change the direction of your gaze. For example, if you are in a public place, sit in one corner overlooking the entire scene. If you are in the woods, sit where you can see a good portion of the forest around you. Positioning yourself comfortably, relax your body and spread out your vision as we have learned.
3. Having done so, the task now is this: throw yourself into observing your surroundings, fiercely but dispassionately, without missing a single thing. Challenge yourself to notice every detail and nuance of activity around you with great intensity *but to not mentally stop upon or chase after anything that is perceived*. If you are in a restaurant or other public place, spread out your vision and let your awareness simultaneously embrace every movement and gesture of the people as they eat, talk, and walk but without giving rise to thought, judgment, attraction, or aversion to any of it. If you are outside in nature, strive to encompass the movement of each leaf, every insect flying or crawling, and all the activities of the living world around you from the earth up to the sky, without becoming fascinated by or fixated upon anything
4. Though we have thus far stressed vision, you may also open all your other senses. Encompass every sound that strikes the ear, every sensation of temperature or movement of the air on the skin, and so on with the same sweeping, inclusive, nonfixating awareness.
5. Can you maintain your expansive, all-encompassing awareness, noticing and joining with the many movements and sensations you perceive, without being captured by or fixating upon any single one? The busier the location, the more difficult this can be. But when you notice that your attention has stopped for a moment on something—for example, perhaps your mind seizes upon a squirrel that has wandered into your woodland view—just recognize that fixation and then spread your senses back

out in an expansive manner. Within that more expansive state, the movements of the creature are still known, but nothing else will be excluded and lost to your awareness.

6. Finally, as we have done before, allow your attention to shine inward and rest at ease at the source or location of all this seeing, hearing, feeling, and knowing. Though you are surrounded by movement, noise, and activity, there is no need for the mind to attach to these things as if reaching out through the sense organs to grasp them. All things may just be sensed as they appear and released as they pass away. Such is the mirrorlike function of your basic awareness, which wondrously and effortlessly reflects things that pass before it, holding them when they are present but releasing them without clinging or remainder as they depart.

Practicing like this you will with time be able to rest unperturbed for longer periods, even in places that are extremely hectic and filled with a swirl of activity. You will find, again, that there is no clear point where an observer ends and the observed objects begin, and that your experience of the so-called outer world arises in seamless continuity with the inner.

It is very easy to enter samadhi in this way. But when this nonabiding samadhi is further permeated with the profound recognition of nonself, it is what in Zen is called the jewel mirror samadhi (*hokkyo zanmai*).<sup>5</sup> Just this samadhi constitutes the actual path of embodying the wisdom of kensho, and in fact within Rinzai koan practice there is a point at which the student is directed to secretly practice it in daily activity for a minimum of three years. Within the jewel mirror samadhi, all phenomena that one encounters are clearly seen to be precisely the original face of one's own wisdom-nature. There is no need to be attached to quiet, peaceful places. No matter what conditions we encounter, we just join with and "taste" them completely with the whole body-mind, yet without giving rise to any sense of a self that "becomes one with" anything.

Over time, gaining an intimate familiarity with the wisdom of awakening in this way, one gradually begins to embody it and make it one's own. This reveals a concrete way in which the Zen path dissolves the deep roots of our habitual delusion and opens to us the possibility of liberation within this very body.

## **Samadhi of the Elements**

Just as by spreading out the vision to observe an expansive scene we can integrate something of that expansiveness within our own minds, so by observing the five elements (*godai*\*) described in Japanese Buddhist thought we may experience their qualities. Water, for example, is marked by qualities of nonabiding, flowing, and free movement. Using our vision and other senses to enter the samadhi of water, we can realize those same qualities within our own minds.

The five elements are earth, water, fire, wind, and space (or voidness). I will first give instructions for using water in this way and then more briefly will describe how to apply the method to the other elements in a similar manner. It may be that one or another of these elements suits your conditions more closely, and this is something that you will be able to discover with practice.

### **WATER**

For this method you should sit in a place where moving water may be observed. The best kind of place will be one where the water moves in varied and unexpected ways, such as where a stream swirls and eddies, a waterfall tumbles into a pool, or waves strike a shoreline.

By way of example: along the shore of Lake Michigan in Chicago there was a place useful for this practice where I liked to sit in zazen at night when I was younger. Just offshore and below the surface the remains of old wooden pilings could be seen, and when the breeze was strong the broken tops of these timbers would appear and disappear rhythmically with the waves. I soon discovered that when my gaze rested upon this view in zazen, the quality of the swirling water would gradually cause a shift such that I would enter the state of samadhi in which all the senses drop completely away for a time.

It was in that place, in fact, that I first learned how to seamlessly hold the first koan I had been given.

Perhaps you will be able to find a place with similar qualities conducive to meditation. Seating yourself comfortably, here is a practice to do there.

1. Spreading out your vision, relax and let your awareness rest upon the surface of the water within your view. In this case you need not look up and out toward a horizon: it is fine to gaze downward at a smaller area, as we do when seated in formal meditation. The point is to do so where you can softly observe the movements of the water.
2. As you observe these, do not allow yourself to be fascinated by them as they arise and pass away. Do not, for example, indulge in trying to see faces or other shapes in the shifting flow or become entranced by reflections playing off the surface. Rather, just let your mind join with the movement of the water itself. As the water rises or falls, swirls this way or that, allow your mind to rest and accord with that flow however it may go.
3. Practicing in this way, you will eventually see that you are able to attend to the shifting movement and flow in your visual field without any habitual compulsion to attach to, push away, control, or anticipate it. A kind of spontaneous freshness will be revealed in your seeing: the water's unexpected and varied movement is naturally, effortlessly reflected—that is, the mind is not apart from the flowing, swirling view—and we may experience that there is no one purposefully choosing to see, follow, or view anything. The unique way in which water moves allows us to have this experience quite easily.
4. Open your other senses as well. The sound of moving water also has a quality that is useful. Allow these sounds to penetrate your mind, without fixating upon or anticipating them at all.

An important point we may be able to understand through this kind of practice is that the mind cultivated in Zen is not something

static or clinging to a state of dead stillness. It is, rather, utterly responsive and in accord with changing conditions, entering and enjoying the flow of things without the slightest attachment. The stability of mind cultivated in Zen samadhi is not, in other words, like that of a large, immobile, unconscious stone. It is rather dynamically alive, adaptable, and utterly free in its movement. The image of a ball bouncing along in rapids—floating, spinning, and rushing along in spontaneous accord with the constantly changing flow, without ever sticking to any obstacle—is an apt description of the mind in samadhi.<sup>6</sup>

With the above instructions in mind as a kind of template, you may also practice taking the other elements as a support for your practice.

### **FIRE**

Sitting close to an open fire, open your senses, and with your whole body just join unwaveringly with the unceasing, unpredictable play of the flames, smoke, and light. Doing so, you may enter the fire samadhi, marked by a similar free-flowing, nonabiding quality of mind that we could experience with water but containing also a ferociously energetic, purifying quality. Such samadhi is easily entered during the *goma*\* ritual used by practitioners in the Shingon, Tendai, and Shugendo\* traditions. Doing such practices and reciting the mantra\* of a deity such as Fudo Myo-o,\* it is not that a vision of Fudo is to be sought within the flames but rather that the purifying flames of Fudo arise within one's own body-mind in the samadhi of that practice. In this way, we ourselves become Fudo Myo-o and embody the state that his image represents.

### **WIND**

Go to some place where there is a constant wind or strong breeze, and sit or stand fully exposed to it. Opening your senses, attend to every nuance of the swirling air as it moves about your body. Observing these sensations at the source of your own awareness, you may begin to feel that the gusts do not actually move around or over you but *through* your body-mind, which in fact is flowing in one

continuum with the outer world. Letting the wind blow through you in this manner, allow it to sweep away thought and self-fixation, and experience yourself as completely empty, transparent, and expansive with the wind.

## **EARTH**

The quality of earth is solidity rather than movement. But like the other elements, this can serve as the gateway to the dissolution of dualistic seeing fixated on self. For this method, sit upon the bare earth or a large stone. Within your meditation attend wholly to the sensations of contact with the earth beneath you.

Now if you wish, you might first for a few moments contemplate something rather extraordinary: sitting upon that surface of stone or patch of earth, you are in truth sitting directly upon the place or region where you are, which in turn sits upon whatever state or nation you inhabit, which sits upon a continent, which sits upon this globe we call Earth, which itself sits upon this solar system, which sits upon this galaxy, which sits upon this vast universe. All of that—from the ground beneath you to the most distant star—is precisely and quite literally what you sit upon. Expanding out your awareness to encompass all of it, experience clearly that you are sitting upon *that*. This of course is a contrived, conceptual kind of visualization. But you may find it useful to expand your feeling out in this manner. (Some later methods we will examine use a similar sort of expansive visualization.)

Returning to focus simply upon your body's contact with the earth, let your awareness rest within the sensation of living solidity and expanse that simultaneously permeates both your body and the ground beneath it. Body above and earth below are utterly and in the same manner devoid of any fixed, observing "I." There is, in fact, no body above an earth and no earth below a body. Experiencing in this manner, you may enter the earth samadhi in which the boundaries of what we call "body" dissolve completely.

## **SPACE**

From the way in which we initially learned to use the eyes, you may already understand how to enter the samadhi of space. Sitting in some place where you can gaze out into the sky or to the horizon, activate your peripheral field to encompass that expanse with your awareness. The open, unhindered quality of spaciousness interpenetrates and supports all the phenomena of both inner and outer worlds simultaneously, erasing the false distinctions between them: the vastness of the sky is not apart from the vastness of one's own mind. Just rest within that effortlessly. Even if distracting thoughts or afflictive emotions arise, they simply do so within the unstained field of this space that is unmarked by any feature yet possesses infinite, dynamic potentiality. As they pass away, they leave behind no trace whatsoever. In this way, we can realize that what we call "delusion" has, in fact, no real substance or obstructive qualities at all.

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All of the elements, in fact, reveal themselves in this same way to be dynamic, unfixed, and ceaselessly transforming. Using any of them as a gate in the ways I have described above, you may be able to truly grasp that your own body-mind has precisely that same nature, and it has never been bound by anything.

## **Pressing the Solar Plexus**

Of the many physical methods that we can use to quickly change our way of experiencing, this next is among the simplest. It is also something that is rather useful for our health. It is common to store tension, both physical and emotional, in the area of the solar plexus. But by using this method we may begin to release such things and may indeed feel a dramatic improvement in both mind and body. This method is also specifically useful for freeing up the movement of the diaphragm, which allows us to breathe deeply and correctly; as we will see later, this is quite important.



Here are the instructions for this method of pressing the solar plexus:

1. Sitting in any comfortable posture, locate the area of your solar plexus. This is the soft cavity, somewhat sensitive to pressure, immediately below the sternum.
2. Using either a fist or a few fingers, now press gently and gradually into the solar plexus. NOTE: There is a small bony protuberance, the xiphoid process, at the bottom of the sternum. You must be cautious not to press sharply on this, as it can break off! The spot to press is well below it, and you will feel nothing hard there at all. (Figure 4)



Figure 4: Pressing the solar plexus.

3. As you press, gently inhale deeply to the belly, and then with each exhalation allow your pressing fist or fingers to sink into the solar plexus a bit more. Penetrate slightly deeper as each of your exhalations concludes, being careful never to exceed your comfort level. If the muscles there tense up involuntarily, it is likely you are pushing too quickly or deeply. Go slowly, and with each breath just use the pressure from your own hand or hands to become aware of tension within the solar plexus, releasing it as you go.
4. Continue this process until a place is reached at which you feel the pressure is sufficient and there is no need to penetrate deeper. At that point, take another three to five deep breaths, just continuing to accept the pressure and allowing tension to release.
5. To finish, gradually—rather than suddenly—withdraw the pressing fist or fingers. Then, letting both arms rest, just relax and observe the condition of your body and mind: if all was done well, you will experience a rather strong sense of clarity. Taking a few breaths, you may also experience that it is easier now to breathe deeply.

The experience of clarity that results from this practice is caused not only by the release of physical tension. Pressing the solar plexus and then releasing it can help the energetic currents of the body that may have risen upward in an unbalanced manner to drop back down. The pressure also serves to physically reset the posture, establishing for at least a short time a more aligned spine and a proper “set” of the breath in the lower abdomen.

Later when we learn the manner of breathing used for internal energetic cultivation, the solar plexus will importantly reveal something to us about how our bodies must be trained in Zen. But for now, it is enough to use this pressing exercise simply for the benefits explained above: to reset the energetic currents of the body, experience clarity, and breathe more freely.

## When the Breath Stops

When we earlier learned the method of spreading out the vision, our activation of the peripheral field was done especially during the outbreath. There are several reasons for this.

One is that the mind's concentration and stability are stronger during exhalation than inhalation. (This is also why during *susokukan*,\* a breath-counting practice used in zazen, we strive to unify the mental count completely with our exhalations rather than inhalations.)<sup>7</sup>

Another is that in Zen there is a crucial method of breath cultivation—a foundation of Rinzai practice, in fact—that causes the energetic currents of the body to gather at the *tanden*,\* the energy center located approximately two inches below the navel. During exhalation there is a way of using the body to “set” the breath power in the *hara*,\* or lower abdomen. When this happens, *ki*\*—vital energy—radiates through the body, gross thought activity stills to an even greater degree, and it is very easy to experience our natural clarity and enter samadhi.

We will examine this method of breathing, called *tanden soku*,\* in part two. It is enough now to just breathe deeply and with relaxation. But here let us explore some interesting qualities of that moment when an exhalation concludes and before the next inhalation begins. It is something quite useful to examine.

Here are the instructions:

1. For this method you may sit, stand, or lie in any position: in fact, this is a method you can use in almost any circumstance.
2. Spreading out your vision, take several deep, abdominal breaths: inhale and exhale naturally through the nose, allowing primarily the belly rather than chest to expand and contract naturally as the diaphragm moves. (This is *fukushiki kokyu*,\* abdominal breathing, another thing we will examine in more detail later.) Do not here try to control or regulate your exhalation: let the air simply escape naturally and effortlessly.

As you do so, allow all tension to drop from body and mind with each deep breath.

3. Now when you are ready, take a final deep inhalation through the nose and then, pursing your lips gently, let the stream of exhaled air exit slowly from your mouth, steadily and smoothly, stretching it out somewhat. Do not use force or excessively control its length: just observe the sensation of the air stream leaving your body. It will of course gradually lessen, become weaker, and finally become very fine. Allow it to completely exhaust itself.
4. You will find that even after the obvious flow of air has ceased, there yet remains a subtle energetic feeling of the exhalation continuing. Allow even this to subside completely, which it will do after a few moments.
5. A time will then arrive when you feel that the entire process of exhaling—both the actual exhalation of air and the finer energetic feeling of exhalation—has slowed and finally ceased. At that moment, just relax your mouth completely, letting it naturally close by itself. Let the whole body remain relaxed. And at that same moment, *gently close the anal sphincter and “lift” the muscles of the perineum, or pelvic floor*. This latter is not a clenching action, to be done with tension; it is a very light, subtle thing. (This body usage will be important later for *tanden soku*.)
6. Finally, in that state with all air exhaled and both upper and lower “gates” of your body closed, spread out your vision and just rest for a few moments without inhaling. Observe your mind with the breath stopped in this manner.

With a little practice you will find that your mind’s clarity manifests easily using this method. I should stress that there is no need to hold the breath for a long period; in fact, we are not really holding the breath but simply resting for a few moments in the space between breaths. Be sure to inhale again before you become uncomfortable, and certainly do not cease breathing to the point that

you become lightheaded. But by using this method we can discover another one of the ways it is easy to enter samadhi.

Another reason this method is useful to learn is that if we enter deep samadhi during zazen, we may arrive at a place in which the breath seems to cease completely: this is the state I described earlier in which one feels as if having entered a frozen, crystalline world. The breath does not really stop completely, but it is common to feel as if it does since breathing becomes so fine and one does not later recall doing it at all. But by practicing this method we can experience something of that same fineness of the breath, and so we will not be disturbed later when we experience deeper meditative states.

## **Correct Standing**

It is traditionally said that we must integrate our Zen practice with all of the “four postures”—that is, when walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. The sitting posture of zazen is of course most often commented upon in Zen practice, but here we will examine the correct way of standing.

When you are able to use this way of standing you will discover that it is an excellent way to experience our natural clarity. It will also reveal to you how all formal Zen postures—like that of standing with the hands folded in *sasshu*,\* as is commonly observed in monastic environments—are in fact no different than zazen posture in terms of their utility for practice. Finally, learning to stand correctly will open up the possibility of using other methods we will shortly examine, including a kind of integrated walking that causes samadhi to more easily arise.

It may be that you will be able to grasp this way of standing with a simple description, as follows: we should not lean to one side or the other; nor should we lean backward by resting our weight on our heels. Rather, our way of standing should have a slight forward feeling or attitude, as if one were about to spring forward. Of course, this should not be an exaggerated or overly obvious thing. Simply imagine how you would stand in a manner that allows you to move

quickly. For example, if you were standing on a sidewalk and a bicycle were to suddenly swerve toward you, how would it be best for you to be standing in order to leap aside?

In case that is not enough to catch the meaning, here are detailed instructions.

1. Stand with your feet comfortably shoulder width. The knees should be neither bent nor locked: just let your body relax and be natural.
2. It is crucial that the pelvis be properly aligned, just as it must be in zazen. There should not be excessive lordosis (curvature) in the lower spine (Figure 5). Rather, the muscles of the low back and the area around the sacrum should be released, allowing the sacrum to “drop” downward and the pelvis to settle into a neutral position (Figure 6). Though it sounds simple, this pelvic alignment is one of the most crucial physical aspects of Zen practice, and we will revisit it later.



Figure 5: Incorrect standing posture with excessive curve in the low back.



Figure 6: A more integrated standing posture.

3. Let the chin be level, and spread out the vision as we have learned. Breathe naturally in and out through the nose.
4. Now, the final point to set up the proper bodily condition is this: *let the weight of your body rest on the centers or balls of the feet, rather than the heels*. Again, this will create the feeling of a slight forward attitude or angle. (Figure 7)

When you align the body as described above, breathe deeply, relax your entire frame, and then finally shift your weight subtly onto the balls of the feet—remembering to spread out your vision as you do so—you will immediately experience a state of clarity. Interestingly, you may also feel slightly more confident, strong, and aware of your surroundings: this way of standing with the body in a balanced state of relaxed readiness is something we unconsciously know to do when encountering situations of potential danger. It is also the way that martial artists stand.







Figure 7: Standing with weight centered on the balls of the feet.

An instructive experiment in this regard is to observe that many modern persons habitually stand with bodies unbalanced, leaning to one side or another or else upon some supporting object, and with awareness and energy contracted. As Zen practitioners we are called upon to be different: we must use every moment for practice, ceaselessly cultivating breath, posture, and awareness in every situation. This simple method of correct standing is another tool we may use to that end in daily life.

The next practice we will examine is an important hidden method that builds upon this.

### **Pressing Down the Toes**

In the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sūtra*\* there is an episode in which the Buddha's disciple Sariputra questions why the world—though it is the pure realm of Shakyamuni Buddha—nevertheless appears impure. The Buddha ultimately replies with an action.

Thereupon the Lord touched the ground of this billion-world-galactic universe with his big toe, and suddenly it was transformed into a huge mass of precious jewels, a magnificent array of many hundreds of thousands of clusters of precious gems, until it resembled the universe of the Tathagata\* Ratnavyūha, called Anantagunaratnavyūha. Everyone in the entire assembly was filled with wonder, each perceiving himself seated on a throne of jeweled lotuses.<sup>[8](#)</sup>

Leaving aside the broader themes of the sutra,\* there is something very interesting here. From the standpoint of Zen practice there is an inner, hidden meaning in these lines for practitioners: a simple but profound method of bodily direct pointing that has been orally transmitted. Here are the instructions:

1. Stand in the correct, integrated manner we practiced earlier, with your weight centered on the centers or balls of the feet rather than the heels. Spread out the vision, breathing naturally and with relaxation through the nose, letting go of tension.
2. When you are ready, the actual method is this: inhaling once more, exhale deeply and completely while activating the peripheral field. But as you exhale this breath, gently close the anal sphincter and lift with the muscles of the perineum or pelvic floor while simultaneously *pressing firmly with both big toes into the earth*.

In the moment when this simple physical movement of pressing down with the toes is done, you will immediately and strongly experience the mind's clarity. Afterward examining this state, you will observe—as we did earlier when we first learned to spread out the vision—that there were few if any thoughts arising and no particular “I” at the center of what is experienced. But the pressing of the toes increases this experience dramatically compared to using the eyes alone. The simultaneous pressing of the toes and lifting of the pelvic floor cause a downward energetic current accompanied by the experience of feeling suddenly grounded, as if snapping out of one's head to be present. With the whole body involved and somewhat integrated in this manner, the experience of the dropping away of dualistic seeing can manifest powerfully.

Again, if this way of seeing is sustained we can say it is samadhi. But for one who has already entered the gate of kensho, this method may be used to return again and again to that recognition of wisdom in order to integrate it within daily activity. Such a person will indeed experience that, with the simple pressing down of a toe, our

seemingly impure world of suffering is revealed to be a wondrously pure, jeweled realm of myriad buddhas.

While it is not the custom in Rinzai practice to discuss what occurs in the private meetings between teacher and student that are so important to that path, I will nevertheless reveal something here: I have sometimes used this passage from the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra* as a kind of koan or test for my own students. They are required to experience for themselves this method, using the sutra as a clue. But there is no worry that reading what I have written here would help anyone “pass” such a test, since the only way to do so is to manifest the actual state to which that passage in the sutra points. Since the presence or absence of that state can be clearly seen, a qualified teacher will not be fooled. And if someone is able to experience that state because of the explanation I have given here, there is certainly nothing lost.

## **Bowing**

Bowing is a bodily practice found in Zen that, perhaps more often than others, is commonly thought in the West to be a primarily cultural artifact rather than something deeply useful for our training. Many Western Zen teachers describe the function of bowing as simply an expression of respect or reverence, meant to instill qualities like humility.

Bowing does certainly have that function. But like many of the things we are examining, there is a deeper use of bowing that practitioners should know. If we have grasped other important aspects of body usage, such as the manner of using the eyes and the integrated manner of standing, we will be able to use bowing in a more profound manner to immediately enter a state of clarity.

There are several ways of bowing, including the *hai*,\* or full prostration, in which one descends fully to the floor. In Zen, three *hai*—in Japanese, *sanpai*\*—are typically performed at the conclusion of different rituals as well as upon meeting one’s teacher for private instruction. There are several ways to integrate one’s breathing with

such prostrations that enable us to use them as a meditative practice. Performing 27, 54, or 108 prostrations each morning in this way then becomes an excellent method.

However, here we will simply examine the simplest kind of bowing. This is the common action of placing hands palm to palm in the position called *gassho*\* and inclining forward from the waist. It is something repeated numerous times throughout the monastic day, for example, each time one enters and leaves the meditation hall. Since it is done so often, it becomes a superb practice if we know how to use it. Here are the instructions:

1. Stand in the integrated manner we have examined, spreading out your vision.
2. Place your hands palm to palm in *gassho*. Oral instructions do exist regarding the correct manner to do this in order to ensure that no undue tension enters the body. But for our purposes here, it is enough to say that there should be no stiffness in the hands or arms, and the elbows should be allowed to hang downward with gravity. Rather than a tense or exaggerated *gassho* position, simply relax and be natural. (Figure 8)

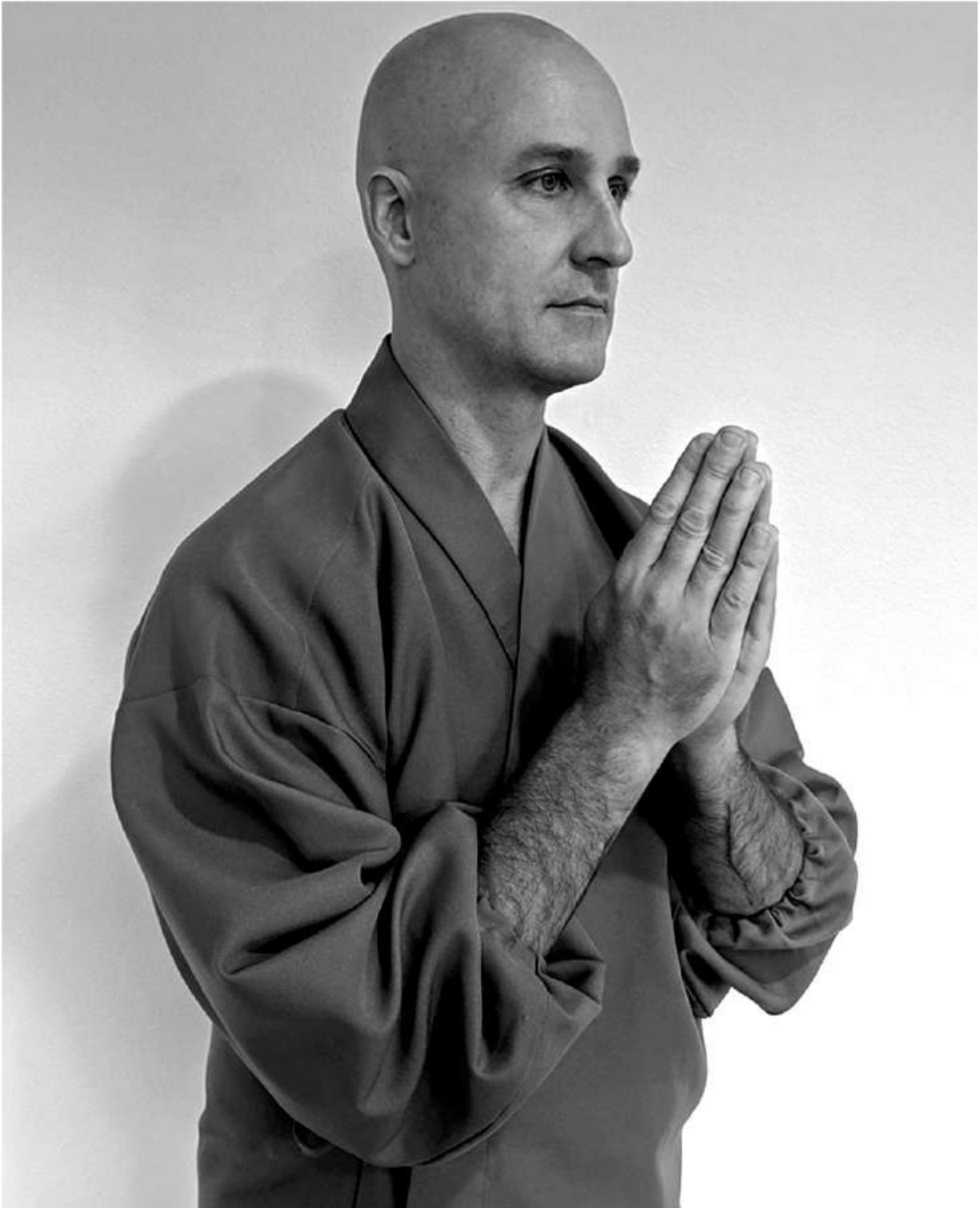


Figure 8: Relaxed *gassho* position.

3. Now, to bow: what is important is that this is done with one's whole body. The weight stays centered on the balls of the feet,

the knees remain unlocked and soft, and one inclines forward from the waist without arching or compressing the spine. Naturally this causes a shift in the center of gravity, so we must practice to adjust the whole body at once in a subtle manner such that it stays integrated. This is somewhat difficult to explain verbally, but here we can at least use photos. A balanced bow will appear natural and somehow solid. (Figure 9)

4. An unbalanced bow will manifest as a swinging backward of the hips, a locking of the knees, a compression and backward arching of the cervical spine, and so on. (The photo shows all of these aberrations.) (Figure 10)



Figure 9: An integrated bow, holding one's center.





Figure 10: A common way of bowing incorrectly.

5. If we are able to learn the correct way of bowing, what then is its use? The action of bowing—when unified with the spreading out of the vision and performed with relaxation and an integrated body—by itself causes gross thought activity to cease for a few moments. To confirm this, observe your mind at the precise moment that the forward movement of bowing ceases and you rest for a few seconds in that position of reverence. You will experience the mind's natural clarity strongly.

It is indeed very interesting how certain movements of the body can have such an effect. Certainly, we can understand that the action of bowing could give rise to feelings of humility and reverence. But from the standpoint of embodied Zen practice, we must also become sensitive enough to see how certain physical movements and usages of the body decisively cut through our usual habits of conceptual proliferation and fixation.

If we see this, then when bowing we will manifest a more true, uncontrived reverence and humility: for a few moments at least, we can enter into the experience of clarity that is the gateway to samadhi and the transcendence of self-referential seeing. Revisiting this again and again whenever we bow, we will eventually come to know that the entire universe bows together with us.

## **Integrated Walking**

There are indeed many bodily methods of direct pointing. They reveal remarkable ways to dramatically change our way of experiencing through adjustments to posture, the breath, or the senses. This accumulated yogic knowledge is a treasure.

One of the most interesting things to examine in this light is walking. Specifically, there is something we should understand that is quite surprising: the common way of walking used by modern persons, while obviously adequate for getting around, is in fact a

manner of locomotion lacking whole-body integration. This is important to know because samadhi cultivation is most easily accomplished through such integration; the main example of this, of course, is use of the classic meditation posture. But for many people the normal, everyday way of walking can thus sabotage their efforts to cultivate and sustain samadhi. Much like the expansive vision we practiced, I have become convinced that integrated walking is something many modern persons need to relearn.

The practice of integrated walking I will explain below is rather difficult to learn from a book. If you are unable to catch it from the description and images, it will be necessary to learn in person from a teacher. Nevertheless, I have decided to include this method since it is important. If nothing else, reading this will hopefully cause you to question such usually unexamined activities as walking and to consider how our unconscious physical habits affect the body-mind. Even the simplest activity, if examined from the standpoint of Zen practice, can be used in remarkable ways.

To begin, let us examine the typical way of walking. Describing it most simply we can say that it is a means of locomotion in which the body's weight is transferred to one foot, allowing a twisting motion of the hips to then swing the opposite foot forward. Once that opposite foot is placed on the ground, weight is then transferred to it. All of this constitutes one step forward. When repeated, this movement of placing a foot, transferring weight to it, and then using the hips to swing forward the opposite foot is what we usually mean by "walking."

The process can be seen in the series of images below. The arms in this common way of walking of course swing in a manner opposite the feet, revealing the twisting of the hips that drives forward movement. (Figures 11–13)





Figure 11: Common walking, planting weight on one foot.





Figure 12: Twisting the hips to swing forward the opposite foot.







Figure 13: Shifting weight to the forward foot.

But how, then, does this common way of walking prevent whole-body integration? It is because the hips twist. The use of twisting at the waist to drive each foot forward means that the upper and lower bodies are in effect split—moving in opposite directions—at the pelvic girdle. The planting of a foot anchors the lower body, while the upper body twists to drive forward the other foot. Essentially, in this way of walking the opposing movements of upper and lower body “swivel” the walker across the earth.

It is understandable if this does not seem too odd to us. It is a way of generating movement and power common not only in daily life but in modern sports. A baseball outfielder, for example, takes a few steps to generate momentum and then forcefully plants his forward foot onto the ground, creating a stable base for the strong twist of the hips that drives the opposite throwing arm forward. This is indeed a powerful way of moving, and the ball will travel far. We cannot say it is incorrect in any absolute sense and indeed in some cases may be desirable.

From the standpoint of some other physical activities, however, this way of moving is incorrect. This is interesting to examine. In a premodern art like swordsmanship, for example, to move in such a way must be considered fatal. Why? Because the step of a foot and subsequent transfer of weight onto it necessarily occurs a split second *before* the twisting of the hips and movement of the upper body. This unavoidably telegraphs the movement as a whole.

In other words: if a swordsman raises his blade above his head, steps forward, and plants that foot to generate the twisting hip

movement that will drive his arms and sword downward in a cut, it means that his foot will move and arrive a split second *before* his blade descends. A defender seeing this is thus given a moment to react before the attack arrives (perhaps, by immediately thrusting or blocking). The attacker loses the initiative: his attack is, in fact, two movements—a step and a strike—rather than a single decisive motion. (Figures 14–15)

But there is a different way of generating power that avoids this pitfall: *to move one entire side of the body forward at once*. That is, the foot that steps forward to attack is not first planted so that a twisting of the hips may drive the sword downward. Instead, the attacking foot, knee, hip, shoulder, arms, and sword all advance *simultaneously*, with no splitting of upper and lower body and no twisting of the hips at all. What this means practically is that a defender is confronted not with someone swinging a sword using the arms; he is confronted with an entire body and sword moving in unity, advancing and arriving all at once in one irresistible motion. This kind of movement is much more difficult for his eyes to track, and so there is little or no telegraphing. To say it another way: the attacker's step forward *is* his attack, and his attack *is* his step forward. The attack is not a one-two movement but just one. (Figures 16–17)



Figure 14: Unskilled swordsmanship: the foot steps forward and plants.



Figure 15: The cut comes a moment after stepping forward.



Figure 16: Skilled swordsmanship: there is only stillness before the attack.



Figure 17: The step and cut occur, and arrive, simultaneously.

This premodern way of movement is little used in modern sports and preserved mostly in archaic disciplines like traditional martial arts. There are other reasons why it is important in those disciplines, for example, the fact that there is less shifting of the weight from one foot to another that might allow one to be more easily taken off balance by an opponent. But for our purposes, the important thing to observe is that upper and lower body move in a whole, integrated way.

Now all of that may be interesting for martial artists, but why linger on it here? What does it mean for us as Zen practitioners? The crucial point is this: we may learn to walk in daily life using that same premodern body usage. The way a swordsman must walk when wearing a sword also happens to be the way of movement cultivated in such Zen practices as *kinhin*,\* walking meditation. This is something that may be practiced in our everyday situations, without needing to learn something like swordsmanship.

When we master this, we find that we are able to walk at all times with our entire bodies fully integrated within movement, just as during zazen the body rests fully integrated within the stillness of the meditation posture. And crucially, when we walk in this manner we find that our condition of mind quickly transforms: we are able much more easily to experience clarity and enter samadhi just by walking a short distance. This is a wonderful thing.

Here, then, are instructions for this Zen way of integrated walking:

1. Find a place where you may walk back and forth over a short distance, perhaps twenty meters in length.
2. First walk that distance a few times in your normal way, feeling how the mechanism of walking drives you forward in the manner described above. Observe the planting of each foot, the transfer of weight to it, the twisting of the hips and swinging of the arms to throw the opposite foot forward, and so on.
3. As you walk this way, you might also notice how your head bobs vertically while walking and that your line of sight shifts left and right with each step, requiring you to constantly realign your

gaze forward to compensate for the movements of your head off center. These vertical and horizontal movements reveal the shifting of weight and twisting of the hips.

4. Now let us begin to learn a new way of walking. To first remove hip twisting and arm swinging, we can gently grab the outer seam of each pant leg with our hands. This will help to remind us that upper and lower body must move together, without being split at the hips.
5. Here is the crucial first step: to advance one foot, do not first shift your weight to the opposite one. Instead, slowly shift your entire balance *forward* until gravity begins to take you, and then allow *one entire side of your body*—the foot, knee, hip, and shoulder of one side, all at once—to “fall” forward until that foot naturally arrives on the earth. This is one step, accomplished without shifting or twisting. (Figure 18)





Figure 18: Integrated walking. First step forward without twisting.

6. From that step, do not plant the forward foot and stop the motion. Instead, continue to allow gravity to shift your balance forward until the opposite foot—and that entire other side of the body with it, all at once—may in turn swing forward, being placed on the earth. (Figure 19)



Figure 19: Integrated walking, second step forward: a controlled fall.

7. In this way, practicing slowly and with concentration, you will understand that correct walking is in fact not something we do by swiveling or pushing ourselves across the ground. It is in fact accomplished through gravity. It does not require planting and twisting: it is simply a relaxed delivery of the body forward, in harmony with gravity. All of this may sound rather difficult, but once you catch what is meant here you will be able to practice it easily.
8. You will notice with this way of walking that the head does not bob up and down but remains mostly level. Notice also that the vision remains focused straight forward, with no need for adjustment: your line of sight is not disturbed, because the face is not jarred to the left and right by twisting hips. You easily track a straight line physically, visually, and energetically.
9. Once you have become comfortable with this, you may release the hands and practice walking in a more refined and subtle way. The arms need not swing, nor should they be restrained; just let them relax and hang as they will, without any affectation or added, unnecessary movement. Eventually you will be able to integrate this manner of walking and use it in a very natural and nonobvious manner.
10. One thing that may help at first when practicing is to visualize that there is a line connecting the shoulder, hip, and knee of each side: when one of these moves, the others must also move in unity with it as if they were physically connected. This visualization helps to establish and maintain the correct locomotion. (Figure 20)



Figure 20: Visualizing a connection between knee, hip, and shoulder.

11. Finally, walking in this way with upper and lower body unified, observe the following: What is your state of mind like? Notice that there is an arising of clarity. (Do not forget to spread out your vision as we have learned.)

After practicing like this for a while it is a good thing to occasionally force yourself to walk in the old way: swing your arms and twist your hips. You might be rather surprised at how ungainly it seems to do so; it no longer feels like walking but rather a crude sort of swagger. You will also notice a marked difference in your mind state when you do so.

Walking in this integrated Zen way also gives us a completely different appearance to others, though that is not our intent. The sharpness of the line that our gait and energetic attention follow, the even movement of the head, and the full-body integration that manifests will cause others to react to you differently. Hosokawa Dogen Roshi wrote that when he observed Omori Sogen Roshi walking through a temple gate from behind, he was so struck by the appearance that he resolved to become Omori Roshi's student: "The monastery gate was more than 12 feet tall yet it seemed very small as Omori Roshi passed through it. He seemed to fill the space like a mountain gliding slowly and regally on a cloud."<sup>9</sup>

That our unified way of walking, manifesting the embodiment of powerfully cultivated samadhi and bristling with vital energy, could so affect and inspire others is not surprising at all from the standpoint of Zen practice. Zen, after all, requires us to bodily manifest our realization of wisdom. A trained (or intuitive) eye can discern the presence—and absence—of this quality, just as clearly as a master swordsman can discern the skill of others merely by observing them take a few steps.

## **Walking in a Fearful Place**

One way the clarity revealed by these practices of direct pointing is especially useful is when it is applied to dissolve fear.

Zen training often requires us to enter difficult situations. As practitioners we are taught not to reflexively project blame upon the surrounding conditions or to fixate upon regret, even when our circumstances are extraordinarily fearful and challenging. Rather, we must examine our reactions to difficult conditions and see that our discomfort is due at least partly to our own habitual views and ways of experiencing. Such a thing may sound harsh, but it does not mean we must passively accept inappropriate situations or injustice. It simply means that there is a positive, proactive way to face adversity and live with freedom. As Shido Bunan Zenji said, “If you view everything as practice, your suffering will disappear.”<sup>[10](#)</sup>

Really, such an attitude of constant self-examination and improvement is essential for Zen training. It means that no matter what we encounter we may learn to use the situation to forge ourselves and expand our capacities. The situations of life themselves become the true dojo,\* or practice hall. It is precisely to actualize the entire world as this true practice hall that we enter the smaller practice hall with four walls and a roof. Forcing ourselves to face fearful situations is an especially powerful way to accomplish this.

There are of course many fearful or difficult situations in life that we might use. In this regard there are also many stories of past Zen practitioners to inspire us, such as this anecdote regarding Hakuin’s teacher Dokyo Etan.

Once when villagers were being molested by wolves, for several days surreptitiously he went to the cremation and burial grounds here and there and sat peacefully through the night. When the wolves sniffed at his ears in annoyance, or snorted at his throat, he was intent on testing whether the continuity of his right mindfulness would be interrupted.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

We might not have the opportunity or readiness to test the continuity of our right mindfulness—that is, our samadhi—with wolves, as Dokyo Etan did. But still, I expect each of us could think of circumstances we would find challenging. For example, there is the

following incident from the life of one of my teachers, the late Toyoda Tenzan Rokoji.<sup>12</sup> As he related it:

The places that scared me [when I was young] were our family cemetery, and a local shrine. Sometimes I would see what looked like a cloud of insects floating over the cemetery, and that scared me. The shrine was supposed to be the place where a *kami* [god] lived, so I was afraid to go in there.

But one day I decided I was going to find out for myself if there was a god in the shrine. I decided to sneak inside the shrine building and open the doors of the cabinet that was the home of the god. I went in there when no one was around, and I was shaking. Somehow, I worked up the guts to slowly open the doors...and there was just a mirror in there! I didn't see any god. It was just a mirror, and my own reflection.

From that I realized something. After that, everything was different.

The following practice uses a situation that many will likely find frightening: walking alone in some deserted place, like a cemetery, in complete darkness. Here are the instructions.

1. To begin, go at night to any dark, solitary place that you find especially terrifying and where you will be able to walk about for some time. In my own experience this was an area of deep forest far from people. For others, a terrifying place might be a deserted house, a cemetery, some place reputed to be haunted or where a terrible death has occurred, or any other place that one personally finds difficult to endure.
2. Whatever location you choose, the important points are that you should be alone, and it should be sufficiently dark that you cannot fully see who or what is around you. (Of course, do not use a location that is hazardous, and be certain that someone knows where you have gone.)



3. The actual practice then is to move through that dark, terrifying space *as silently and slowly as you are able*. If you are carrying a light with you, turn it off. Opening your eyes wide to see as best you can in the pitch black, opening your ears completely to catch every small noise, and extending your bodily awareness and energetic feeling out into space—in other words, activating body and mind with full, intensely focused attention—you should then walk, or more accurately *stalk*, very slowly through that place. If it is possible (and safe) to do so, it is good to increase your feeling of vulnerability as much as possible by removing any barriers between your body and the environment. In a cemetery, remove your shoes and let your bare feet feel the earth of the graves. In a forest, remove your shirt to let your bare skin feel the foliage and subtle movements of air.
4. While moving about in this state, you may of course feel an urge to run and leave quickly! Especially when there is some noise—a creak of a floorboard or the crunch of leaves nearby—there could be an upwelling of fear or even outright terror. But in such moments when the fear seems to be gaining control, just stop, be completely still, look, listen, and feel with all your senses, and wait. *That is, stay with—and attempt to fully experience—the fearful situation*. What you are not permitted to do is run away from it.

If we do this practice for some time, a truly interesting thing begins to happen. By joining bodily with the frightening environment and attending to all its nuances of sight, sound, and touch with full awareness, we will eventually notice with amazement that the fear lessens or even disappears. In fact, we will soon understand that fear dissolves within the clarity that arises from a focused, energetic engagement of the entire body-mind.

My own experience with this kind of practice was truly transformative. Walking alone in the forest at night frightened me tremendously, so I forced myself to do it again and again. At first, I noticed no change at all in my feeling: stalking silently through the

darkness, I was convinced that every sound around me was a ghost or other malevolent being. I felt distinctly out of place and unwelcome in that place, while the dark woods—which I happened to know had been the scene of some tragedy and also contained an abandoned plot of graves—seemed to exude a kind of sentient hostility toward me that crept along the ground like mist.

In response to these feelings it was all I could do not to run away. Walking even more slowly, crouching down and stalking with bent knees in such a way as to make no noise at all, I tried in my fear to move so slowly that even when stepping on dry leaves I would not be heard. I stretched out my senses as much as possible so that no person or thing could possibly surprise me in the dark.

And then one evening while doing this, something happened: I realized quite suddenly that rather than being stalked by nameless threats in the dark, *I was the one stalking*. It was a complete turning around of perception. At that moment, I realized that the darkness had become rather comfortable. I had learned to inhabit it and move through it confidently and silently. I no longer felt crushed by the darkness but could join with it. I had, in fact, become one with the circumstances that had so frightened me. And with that, the last vestiges of fear dropped completely away.

Later I was able to apply this same kind of method to other frightening places. Though cemeteries were not previously comfortable to me, I found that I could practice zazen alone at night within them and even sit on top of grave plots or stone tombs. The key was learning to join seamlessly with the actual conditions using the entire body-mind. In that integrated state, the one who is fearful and the conditions that are feared are no longer in conflict.

It is traditionally said that evil spirits are unable to harm accomplished Buddhist practitioners simply because they cannot find them: the awakened state of integrated samadhi, devoid of our usual fixation on an illusory self, renders the practitioner invisible to these beings. Leaving aside whatever one believes about ghosts, this reveals something important regarding the fruition of samadhi that we must each come to experience for ourselves. Walking alone at

night through the forest—or in whatever place frightens you—is an excellent way to create conditions for this experience.

Finally, regarding this practice, I will share a way to use the body that may be helpful. When we are walking in such complete darkness that we cannot see our surroundings at all, it is helpful to extend ki energy from one's outstretched hands, positioned palm-downward toward the earth. One who has been trained in the foundational Rinzai method of breath cultivation (tanden soku) that we will examine later could understand what is meant by this. But even lacking such training, one might with practice intuitively catch this point. (Figure 21)



Figure 21: Extending energy through the palms.

When the hands are held in this manner it is possible to “feel” the earth and one’s surroundings even in complete darkness. One finds with practice that unseen obstacles will be effortlessly avoided. To practice this in the past, I trained myself by walking barefoot in the pitch black through an area where a quantity of broken glass and rusted metal lay. Somehow I remained free from injury and, retracing my steps in daylight, was always surprised to see in what manner I had been able to intuitively avoid obstacles and pitfalls.

Eventually I even felt confident enough to run barefoot at full speed through the dark forest.

There are many other such things one could do, but I believe the general principle of this practice has been made clear.

### **Receiving the *Keisaku***

The *keisaku* (“warning stick”) is among the most useful—and misunderstood—tools of Zen practice.<sup>13</sup> A flat, slightly flexible piece of wood a bit over a meter in length, the *keisaku*’s primary use within the Zen meditation hall is to strike practitioners upon specific points that lie between the spine and scapula. Sharply stimulating these points has several effects: fatigue is relieved, the shoulders and diaphragm relax, the breath deepens, and energy that has risen upward in the body is made to drop. It is truly a compassionate thing to offer the *keisaku* to practitioners, especially during long periods of meditation and extended retreats.

But in places where the *keisaku* is not well understood, there may be confusion. It is to be expected that beginners witnessing its use for the first time, with the sharp sound of impact and appearance of violence, might not grasp the *keisaku*’s beneficial intent. It is the responsibility of Zen teachers to impart this knowledge, affirming especially that the *keisaku* is not an instrument of punishment. We might also acknowledge that there are some Zen students who, because of past trauma, may find it difficult to receive the *keisaku*. This does not mean we should dispense with such a useful tool. It does mean, however, that we should clearly explain it and make allowances where appropriate.

With that being said, receiving the *keisaku* is an excellent opportunity for us to cut through habitual delusion, tension, and spinning delusive thought. The *keisaku* essentially resets the body, breath, and energetic system—and thus our minds. It causes a sharp, instantaneous return to clarity: if we know how to receive the blows, they will in fact cause our usual dualistic, conceptual thinking to momentarily collapse. If we are within deep *samadhi* and conditions

are correct, blows from the keisaku or the *shippei*\* (a shorter stick sometimes carried by teachers) can cause that samadhi to shatter as I described earlier, and coming out from that state we may arrive at awakening. As Omori Roshi explained:

When you are in the state of samadhi, whether you call it Musamadhi or another type of samadhi, you are unconditionally in the realm of Absolute Nothingness (*zettai mu*). At that time, because of some incident, when you break through the samadhi, you will attain realization. It is like ripe fruit on a tree. When the wind blows or the branch sways, the fruit will just fall from the tree. If the fruit is not ripe, though the wind may blow or the branch sway, the fruit will not fall.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the keisaku can really be a quite remarkable and profound tool. We should never think it is merely something to relax tense shoulders and wake sleeping meditators.

Instruction in how (and when) to administer the keisaku must be given in person and mastered through experience; it is not helpful to explain it here. But we can at least examine how to receive the keisaku in order to experience the benefits mentioned above. Different Zen training halls may have slightly different etiquette for these things, but here I describe a form used in Rinzai practice that is simple and could be useful for anyone.

1. The position to receive the keisaku is as shown: Leaning forward from zazen posture, we touch one hand to the floor. One should not turn the upper body to the left or right, but simply lean straight forward. It is also important not to rest one's weight on this outstretched hand but to just touch the floor lightly. One's center of balance is still held strongly in the core of the body. (Figure 22)
2. The other hand then reaches across the chest and around toward the opposite scapula. This opens the space that will be struck, between the spine and scapula. The head tilts slightly away from that side. (Figure 23)



Figure 22: Posture to receive the *keisaku*: touching the floor lightly.



Figure 23: Reaching across to open the point on the back that will be struck.

3. To understand how to receive the actual blows it is useful if we have trained in tanden soku. That is, we ideally should know how to set our breath power in the hara, the lower abdomen,



and to hold the pressure there. This serves to unify the body such that the power of the keisaku's blows will move through its entire structure, stimulating all the way down and through to the tanden and core of the body. It also means that in the moment the blows arrive, the body's energetic currents will be dropped down and gathered at the tanden, and the muscles of the shoulders and upper body will thus be able to relax. But since beginners may not yet have mastered tanden soku, we can say it is sufficient to do the following: Inhaling while assuming the position to receive the keisaku, allow that breath to expand the abdomen. Gently close the anal sphincter and lift the muscles of the perineum, or pelvic floor, as we have discussed with other methods, and then *exhale slowly while awaiting the blows*. Keep the vision spread out (as is normally done in zazen). At the very least, the main thing beginners should remember is *not* to inhale or hold the breath tightly as the blows arrive.

4. Finally, do not anticipate, count, or worry at all about the strikes: just observe your own condition as the blows come. The effect on the mind will be experienced as a small shock, and immediately after the moment of impact conceptual thought will collapse. Rest in that state as you are able, continuing to do so as you return to the zazen posture and your main practice.

If you can do the above you may be able to “ride” or sustain the clarity that you experience just after you are struck. When you then return to your meditation it will have a completely new quality. Further, the keisaku—if it is both administered and received correctly and if the inner conditions of both striker and recipient are sufficiently correct—can even have a similar clarifying effect on others within the immediate area. This is accomplished through the quality of the sound, which causes hearers to receive something of the state being experienced by the striker and recipient.

Such occurrences—a kind of transmission in which the mind state of a person or persons can be transformed by and even momentarily

match that of another—seem mysterious. Yet they are recognized and commonly used in Zen training. We will examine another example of this in the next method.

## **Sounds of the *Taku* and *Inkin***

The taku and inkin are two instruments used within the *zendo*,\* or Zen meditation hall, to signal various things. Here we will specifically examine the manner in which they are used to begin and end meditation periods. Just as the sound of the keisaku, properly applied and received, can transform hearers, so correct use of the taku and inkin serves to accomplish something much more profound than simply marking time. It is important that practitioners know how to use them in this way.<sup>15</sup>

For those unfamiliar with formal Zen practice, the taku are two blocks of hardwood that are struck together along their long, flat sides. The inkin is a brass bell affixed to a wooden handle, which is then struck with a metal rod (Figure 24). In Rinzai practice the taku are typically struck together once by the *jikijitsu*,\* the leader of practice within the zendo, to announce that a period of zazen is about to begin; at this signal the practitioners must quickly settle themselves into meditation posture and cease all movement. The inkin will then be rung, usually a total of four times. These mark the beginning of the meditation period, and from that moment the trainees may not move at all. A single ring of the inkin later ends the meditation period, followed immediately by two strikes of the taku at which point the trainees place their palms together, bow in unison, and perhaps begin a period of kinhin.

The above routine will be essentially familiar to all Zen students, even if there are small differences. But the manner of striking these instruments correctly to affect others, and the ways to use them as tools of direct pointing, are less familiar.

First, we should know that the sounds produced by both taku and inkin reveal a great deal about the one striking them. From the depth and richness of tone, its penetration, and other qualities of the

sounds, we can know if the striker's concentration is strongly present. We can know if the breath cultivation power, centered at the tanden and held continuously in a subtle manner, has come to fruition and if the striker's body is energetically grounded, integrated, and free of undue tension. The sound of the taku when struck well by a person manifesting these aspects of correct, embodied Zen practice will be rich and sharp; the feeling will be as if the very centers of the wooden blocks have been struck, and we will hear a living quality of the wood within the sound. It is likewise with the inkin: the sound of this bell when struck will be deep and pleasant rather than tinny, manifesting several tones simultaneously. We will feel as if the bell has come alive in the striker's hands and that the strikes in fact bring out its full, living potential.



Figure 24: The *taku* (center) and *inkin* (right) next to the *jikijitsu*'s seat.

The timing of the strikes also reveals much and can have different effects. The jikijitsu must vary this timing to fit the conditions. Quick, staccato strikes have an effect of energizing the hearers and so may be done in the morning, especially just before the individual meetings with the Zen master to which each student must arrive with full energy and presence. On other occasions, however, the timing can be more spaced out, and the resonance of the sounds is used to calm and relax the trainees. There are many ways like this that sounds are used in Zen monastic practice. These principles will also be familiar to anyone recognizing music's power to cause change within the listener.

But returning to our primary concern: How may Zen trainees use these sounds? First, observing our own minds as the taku are struck once to announce the beginning of meditation, we may see that—if the wooden blocks are struck well—we will upon hearing the sharp sound experience a momentary “snap back” to clarity: the conceptual, thinking mind will briefly collapse. And that is a crucial moment, because precisely as we are experiencing that state, if the jikijitsu then strikes the inkin well, its deep ringing will penetrate our minds completely. Four strikes are made, each one (again, if done well) adding power to the previous one, causing the bell to vibrate powerfully.

I mentioned the timing of the strikes, and here at the beginning of a meditation period this is especially important. The jikijitsu must strike the inkin four times at a pace approximately matching the deep respiration of zazen. That is to say, if the jikijitsu is skilled, each ring will be timed to more or less synchronize with the long, tanden-centered exhalation that is used in meditation. As practitioners, we need at that time simply join with the sound using mind and body integrated in zazen posture: as we breathe and spread out our vision, we unify our exhalations with each of the four rings. If we can do this, then by the time the fourth ring is struck—which is then allowed to carry fully and to slowly dissipate until the bell ceases vibrating, something that may take a minute or more—the sound will carry us into profound samadhi. In fact, if we are able to turn around the light

of awareness at such a time to clearly recognize who or what it is that is hearing—that is, if we are able to hear at the source of hearing, just as earlier we practiced seeing at the source of seeing—the sound of the inkin could carry us across the threshold of awakening itself.

At the end of zazen the process is a bit different. Just as the manner of striking the taku and inkin at the beginning of the meditation period had the intention of settling the trainees into the condition of meditative absorption, so at the end of a period these instruments are used to bring them out from that condition. In this case the inkin will be struck once but is not allowed to sound for an extended time: it is set down upon its stand rather quickly, “cutting” the sound and with it the samadhi of the trainees. Immediately then the taku are struck twice with sharpness, energizing the students to rise from their cushions in a condition of active clarity.

If we do not know these ways to use the taku and inkin, of course, we are wasting a repeated opportunity to deepen our practice. Many meditators, especially beginners, spend those few moments at the beginning of a zazen period awash in thought, scanning body and mind, trying to remember how to use whatever meditation method they have learned, feeling nervous, worrying about physical discomfort or distraction, and so on. After meditation ends, they may immediately fall back into habitual wandering thought, perhaps with some additional fixation on the bodily discomfort or sleepiness they experienced during zazen. All of this is normal, but it is a shame that many have never been taught that the very sounds beginning and ending each period of meditation—the familiar wooden clappers and bell—are meant precisely to help them decisively cut through such fixations. Their inner purpose is to help us immediately experience our own clarity, to quickly enter the samadhi of practice that rapidly dissolves obstructions to awakening, and to arise from meditation in an active state of clarity that helps us to integrate the deep samadhi of zazen with movement and activity.

Something else we might realize from all of this is that the role of the jikijitsu is a crucial one; it involves much more than simply keeping time. A good jikijitsu has the power to arrange the

conditions in the zendo such that the trainees may awaken. But when that job is done poorly—for example, if the taku are hit with tension or too much force, if the inkin is smashed rather than rung, if the timing is off, or if the keisaku is wielded improperly—the trainees’ obstacles in meditation are in fact *increased*. Harsh sounds or blows improperly given cause tension and even feelings of anger to arise; dull sounds and timing cause cloudiness or sleepiness to manifest, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

In truth, all the roles and activities in traditional monastic practice may be viewed in this light of how they contribute to the *kiai*\*—the manifest energetic quality, clarity, and intensity—of the training. When these things function well, the training environment becomes something incredibly vibrant, radiating with a brilliant, vital energy that uplifts the trainees, cuts through their obstructions, and aids them to fulfill the deepest intentions of practice.

This fact reveals part of the rationale for practicing in community with others. It also illuminates why traditional practice forms and instruments should not be discarded without careful consideration: the at times hidden functions of these things and a knowledge of how to effectively use them are real treasures coming down to us only after centuries of trial and error. We should take great pains to clearly understand them.

## **Silent A-UN Breathing**

This is the first (and simplest) of several practices we will examine that use the Sanskrit syllables *a* and *hum*. Transliterated in Japanese as A-UN,\* the mantric significance of these syllables has been well described in different traditions and texts, for example, the Shingon founder Kukai’s *Meanings of the Word Hūm*.<sup>17</sup> It is worth studying such things when you have time. But here I will sum up the effects of chanting or inwardly intoning these syllables this way: the syllable A (“ah”) manifests an expansive, clarifying, and wakeful effect within the body-mind, while the syllable UN (“oon,” along with similar sounds like “oh” or “oo”) manifests a powerfully strengthening,

solidifying, and grounding effect. As we will see, these effects are something we may experience during Zen chanting practice—and especially when chanting mantra and *dharani*.\*

One practice that we will examine a bit later is an intensely energetic method in which the mouth is opened wide to inhale fiercely with the sound A, almost with the feeling of swallowing the entire surrounding atmosphere. During the exhalation UN, the mouth is then closed, and a ferocious, fiery energy radiates through and from the body. This very physical method of internal cultivation will serve in our training to powerfully increase the vitality of the tanden-centered breath that is so important in Rinzai Zen practice. Such intense A-UN breathing can in fact be seen encoded within the images of the Nio,\* the guardian figures often found at the gate of a Zen temple: the mouths of the two Nio display the inhalation of A and the exhalation of UN. (Figure 25)



Figure 25: The *Nio*. A (left) and UN (right).

But in the method we first examine here, we will breathe in a different way: naturally and softly through the nostrils as usual, while mentally intoning to ourselves the mantric syllables A-UN. This is a simple practice that one can do anywhere, yet it has a wonderful effect. Here are the instructions:

1. Sitting or lying in any comfortable posture, spread your vision out. Breathe naturally and deeply through the nose, allowing the belly to expand with each inhalation and fall with each exhalation, releasing all tension.



2. When you are ready, begin the practice: as you inhale, mentally intone the syllable A (“ah”) with all your attention, stretching out its sound to follow the entire thread of the inhalation (“ahhh...”). Rather than experiencing that your breath and the mental sound of the syllable are separate things, try to perform this silent inner intonation with your whole body, feeling that the sound inwardly fills your entire frame.
3. As the inhalation gradually slows and ends, allow the sound of the syllable A also to gradually end. Let the mind then be silent, and while gently holding the inhalation, just rest without tension for a few moments in the state of clarity that will manifest.
4. When you are ready to exhale, mentally intone the syllable UN (“oon”). Again, try to feel that you are breathing this sound with your entire body-mind, stretching out your awareness to join with the entire length of your exhalation (“uunn...”).
5. As this exhalation gradually slows and ends, once more allow the sound of the syllable to gradually end. Again, in that condition of complete exhalation, just rest for a few moments in the state of clarity that will manifest.
6. In this way, inhaling A and exhaling UN mentally to yourself, you may quickly and without much effort release tension and return to a grounded, clear, and energetic state. You may practice this method for as long as you like.
7. A crucial point, again, is that the mantric syllables must be intoned with the entire body. Since you are doing so in unison with deep breathing, you may be able to grasp how this is done. But it is still worth emphasizing: you should not focus upon the sound of these syllables in your mind alone. Do not place your mental and energetic focus upon the perceived space behind your eyes where your mind seems to reside, concentrating there. Rather, let the syllables carry your attention to the entirety of your body-mind. Feel that the sounds are vibrating within your entire frame and that this vibration is carried upon

the energetic currents radiating throughout your whole body to penetrate every bit of tissue.

This gentle A-UN breathing practice is an excellent thing to do slowly and with relaxation as you lie down to sleep at night, and then perhaps with more energy just after waking in the morning. It is a practice you could do even if ill in bed. In fact, any time throughout the day that you find yourself beset with disturbing conditions, you may silently breathe A-UN like this a few times and regain a clear, relaxed state. Simple, effective practices like this are treasures.

### **The *Katsu* Shout**

Examining the various records of great Zen teachers, it is almost a given that we will read at some point of awakening being expressed through a sharp shout or of a student being brought thereby to awakening. Teachers of the Rinzai lineage have especially been associated with this practice, and there are many famous examples, beginning with Rinzai himself in the first episode recorded in the *Rinzairoku*.

A monk asked, “What about the cardinal principle of the buddhadharma?”

The master gave a shout. The monk bowed low.

“As an opponent in argument this young reverend is rather good,” said the master.<sup>[18](#)</sup>

The shout itself is called the *katsu*, and that is approximately the sound that is exclaimed when making it. The character pronounced “*katsu*” in Japanese is in modern Chinese pronounced closer to “*ho*,” and so in some English translations of Zen texts we read of various Zen masters shouting “*Ho!*” rather than “*Katsu!*” But the Japanese pronunciation preserves an older Chinese one and so is more accurate. “*Katsu*” also makes sense from a bodily standpoint, since the way in which this shout is produced requires one’s diaphragm to

suddenly and sharply contract, and that is more easily accomplished with a sharp syllable like “ka” than softer ones like “ho.”<sup>19</sup>

We will examine some uses of the katsu shout by teachers later, and it should be stressed that training in tanden soku—which gives the katsu shout its power to transform—will be necessary to truly grasp this method. But here we can at least examine a way it is possible for students to use the katsu shout themselves. Even if you have not yet learned how to cultivate the breath power through tanden soku and so to manifest a katsu carrying an explosively vibrant, energetic quality, it is still possible to try the method that follows as best you can. Later, when you have gained the ability to use the katsu with power, you will understand all of this more deeply.

A time in which this practice can be especially useful is when we are engaged in extended periods of seated meditation practice alone, for example, while in solitary retreat. We may during such times experience the arising of various obstructions: sleepiness, dullness of concentration, spinning thought or strong emotion, hallucinations, and so on. This may be due to the difficult conditions, the shock of being completely alone, or the ripening of various karmic factors. When we are practicing in a group it is often easier to work through such obstructions, supported by the communal energy and with help from things we have examined like the keisaku and the sounds of various instruments in the zendo. But when we are alone in some solitary place, absent such aids and left to our own devices, the katsu is something that can help us.

One important point to remember: the transformative quality of the katsu does not necessarily come from loudness. As you work with the instructions below, remember that it is the inner power and resonant quality of the sound rather than its volume that will be important to cultivate.<sup>20</sup> But for now, it is enough to just make a sharp, loud sound as best you can and then to observe the effect on your mind. It is not necessary to shout repeatedly and violently until you are hoarse, and by so doing disturb whatever people, creatures, or beings are nearby.

Here are practice instructions for this use of katsu shout.

1. When you experience obstacles and would like to use the katsu, first summon up your energy: shake out your arms and entire body, open your eyes wide with a fierce feeling, and glare straight ahead as you inhale and exhale strongly a few times to and from the abdomen. While preparing in this way, you may place your hands in the position called *nigiri katami* (Figure 26), which serves to drop tension from the upper body into the hara while also causing an intense, almost martial energy to arise in the body.



Figure 26: *Nigiri katami*.

2. When you are ready, inhale deeply through either the nose or mouth. Then, closing the anal sphincter and activating the lower muscles as we have discussed in previous methods, suddenly and sharply shout: “KA-tsu!” The actual shout can be

pronounced long or short in various ways: “KAtsu!,”  
“KAAAAAAtsu!,” and so on. The final syllable “tsu” is often  
barely pronounced and can even be silent: “KA!” or “KAT!”

3. Try to actualize a sharp contraction of the diaphragm in the moment the first syllable “ka” explodes outward. You must feel that the shout erupts from the core of your body, the lower trunk, rather than from the throat or with a nasal quality.
4. Immediately after the shout, observe your mind. If you have used the katsu well, you will find that the obstructing conditions—for example, dullness, emotional fixation, or conceptual spinning—have been cut through and collapsed, and for a moment at least, you are within a state of clarity. Recognizing and resting within that clarity, return then immediately to your main meditation practice.
5. Aside from the word *katsu*, other syllables can be used, often with subtly different effect. For example, the shouts “Ei!,” “Yah!,” and “Toh!” used in traditional martial arts are also useful (and we will revisit some of these later).

When you have been able to experience a beneficial effect of the katsu shout upon your own mind, you will understand more clearly how a shout of great power and resonant quality can dramatically affect others. Indeed, if applied at the right moment and within correct conditions, the katsu shout can even cause a hearer to arrive at awakening.

If you attend a traditional Rinzai Zen funeral ceremony, you will in fact witness the officiant giving a tremendous katsu in front of the remains of the departed. While one purpose of this is to help the mourners, who are naturally overcome with grief, to regain clarity, we should recognize that it is also meant for the deceased. In that moment, if the officiant has enough power and realization, the departed being can be decisively helped.

Much more could be said about this, and we will touch upon it again later. But it is enough for now to understand that the power of

some methods of direct pointing is great enough to penetrate even beyond what is visible to us.

## **Bodily Functions and Sensations**

As we become more familiar with the basic clarity that many of these direct pointing practices reveal, and more skilled at “snapping back” when we find ourselves fixated upon afflictive thought or emotion, we will begin to understand that a natural, clear lucidity is never far from us. In fact, basic clarity is revealed at many moments throughout the day, and there are many opportunities—even within simple actions that we usually perform mindlessly—to experience it. Since the path of integrating our Zen practice within daily activity is accomplished partly by remaining present and sustaining a relaxed mindfulness, it becomes possible for us to observe the effect upon our inner state of anything we encounter and so to use the opportunities presented to us.

Some of these useful moments involve simple sensations and animal functions of our bodies. People seem at times to be uncomfortable discussing some of these things, for example, the act of urination, perhaps because they seem impure. But as practitioners there is no justification for becoming fixated in such ways. Since life is so short and opportunities for awakening precious, we can little afford to reject anything that supports our path.

We have already examined how things like activation of the peripheral field, walking, and so on can be used in practice. Here are some more methods for using the body in interesting ways.

### **URINATION**

During the moment that we release our bladders and allow the stream of urine to flow, interestingly the mind’s gross thought activity and conceptualizing briefly cease. If we can recognize this it is another chance to experience clarity and, sustaining it, to enter samadhi. If we are already in profound samadhi, such a thing could even help create conditions for it to shatter, leading to kensho.

Omori Sogen Roshi, in fact, was someone who experienced kensho upon urinating.

My experience was not very impressive or glorious, so I don't like to talk about it but...One day after finishing zazen, I went to the toilet. I heard the sound of the urine hitting the back of the urinal. It made a splashing sound. It sounded very loud to me, and at the very moment I realized, "AHA", and I understood. I had a realization.<sup>[21](#)</sup>

To be precise, the shattering of Omori Roshi's samadhi was actually triggered by the sound of the urine. But for our purposes here, we may also recognize that the physical act of urinating has a very interesting, momentary effect on the mind that made such an occurrence more likely. Since urinating is something we do often, it may be that of all the methods in this book this one is the easiest with which to experiment!

### **SNEEZING**

Sneezing, also, is followed immediately by a moment in which the mind's endless fabrication collapses. The act combines a sudden, violently forceful outbreath caused by sharp contraction of the diaphragm with a loud vocalization and a brief feeling of shock; in these ways, you may see that it is not entirely unlike the katsu shout. When you sneeze, observe your mind immediately afterward and see what is revealed.

### **SWALLOWING**

The simple act of swallowing is accompanied by a downward-moving current of energy and a kind of relaxation—if only for a moment—of the chest and solar plexus. As we will see in part two, this can be used in some of the Rinzai breath cultivation practices to support the practice of directing power downward to the tanden. But even if we are not doing such practices, we can with a little observation see that at that moment of swallowing gross thought activity can momentarily still, much as with the moment of urination. Taking a

drink of cold water or of hot tea is especially helpful for experiencing this.

### **PAIN AND PLEASURE**

Moments of sharp pain, as when we stub a toe or strike our heads upon something, are not opportunities for practice we normally would seek. But when such things happen we may with some effort learn to let our awareness rest upon the sensation of discomfort, as dispassionately and calmly as possible, simply observing it. In the moment immediately following such an injury, again, the mind is completely clear. Sensations of pain, whether they be sharp and sudden or dully constant and including also other such discomforts as extreme cold or heat, all have a completely fresh, living quality. Giving oneself over to and entering fully into these sensations—rather than suppressing, avoiding, or trying to mask them—can serve to reveal and sustain the state of clarity.

Certainly, this is also something we will have the opportunity to practice in zazen since it is sometimes unavoidable that we experience pain when sitting in the meditation posture for long periods. Another time during meditation that it may be useful to use such a practice, though, is when beset by sleepiness or extreme cloudiness. Though the physical discomfort that can be experienced during meditation receives the most notice, it is in fact the overwhelming urge to sleep, or else the kind of dull haziness that fatigue can cause, that are the most difficult conditions. In such situations a self-administered, momentarily sharp pain can help us to cut through those obstructions and return to clarity. Though Sekiso Soen was famous for keeping a sharp awl beside him as he meditated with which he jabbed his thigh whenever sleep threatened, we need not be so extreme as that.<sup>22</sup> Two methods that may be used discreetly and without injury are to bite down gently on the tip of the tongue, or to sharply pinch the inner thigh.

Related somewhat to pain, we can say that moments of minor physical shock are useful in a similar way. Splashing cold water on one's face to awaken the body from sleep is a common practice. But if



we recognize the momentarily clarifying effect on the mind that such an action has, we can use it in a more profound way.<sup>23</sup>

Leaving aside pain now, it is similar with blissful, pleasurable moments. The moment of sexual climax has long been recognized within some streams of Buddhist practice as a moment when a state free from dualistic fixation can be decisively recognized. Entering fully into the clarity that manifests mixed with the bliss and dissolving of rigid boundaries between self and other that can be experienced in the act of sexual union, it is possible to arrive at a profound experience. Though in the realm of pleasurable sensations sex gets the most attention, in fact any deeply pleasant experience is like this and could be similarly used, even if less intensely so. Wonderful tastes, the soothing warmth of a bath, and the soft touch of a garment are just a few of many examples. And though I am not a habitual smoker, I personally have found, for example, that inhaling from a cigarette has an extremely strong, sudden effect that can be used in this manner.

I have treated only briefly this subject here, but the main point is this: recognizing that this very body is precisely the vehicle of our liberation, we should not neglect to harness its functions and sensations in whatever ways prove effective. Zen practice, again, is so powerful only because it is a path accomplished through the body. Our practice must arrive at a place in which all the sensations we experience serve to reveal the mirrorlike wisdom of liberation, and all the activities of this fragile, impure body subject to sickness, old age, and death—even the most seemingly mundane or impure—are revealed to be gates of the dharma, and ultimately the wondrous activities of a buddha.

## **The Moments Before and After Sleep**

As we extend our practice into daily activity, we should recognize that sleep is another aspect of our lives to be encompassed within seamless training. Especially valuable are two times: the moments just before we fall asleep, and those just after we awaken.

The first is that period after we have lain down to rest but before we have fallen into fully unconscious sleep. This is a time during which mind and body are deeply relaxed and gross thought activity has stilled (in other words, ideal conditions for practice). There is a state we then pass through that is neither full wakefulness nor sleep. Usually we pass through this quickly, losing consciousness a moment later as sleep overtakes us. But with some effort we can learn to recognize this moment just before sleep, and when we do so something remarkable happens: we find we are able to rest in that state and use it to immediately enter samadhi.

Since this experience is familiar to anyone who has done serious zazen practice, I will describe it first within that context. Inevitably there are times during meditation—especially when engaged in periods of intensive retreat—that we find ourselves overcome with fatigue. There are many remedies that can be used when fatigue obstructs our practice, some of which I have mentioned. Even so, in some circumstances no matter what we do we find ourselves slipping inexorably downward into sleep.

But when this happens, if we maintain mindful awareness throughout that process of falling asleep, we will be able to recognize the moment just before sleep in which the mind's gross activity has mostly ceased but there is still basic awareness. It is easy to miss this moment, and if we do we will quickly tumble into full sleep, losing our chance. But if we can recognize that moment just before sleep overtakes us, we will suddenly find ourselves in a state of clarity. Then we need only summon up a little energy and extend our mindfulness into that state, sustaining it by means of whatever meditation method we are using. For example, if we are using the practice of breath counting we simply hold and continue the count throughout this recognition of the momentary state before sleep. If we are working on a koan, we take it up within that space of clarity. When this is done we find that we can enter samadhi with great ease.

When we lie down to sleep at night the process is the same. Naturally this is also a time that we should be practicing: whatever method our teachers have given us—breath counting, concentration

upon a koan or *wato*,\* energetic cultivation practices such as *naikan no ho*\* or *nanso no ho*,\* breathing A-UN silently as we learned earlier, the holding of a mantra or dharani, and so on—if we are serious practitioners, we generally will be working with it as we drift off into sleep. Thus, when the moment just before sleep that I have described arrives, we should be able with a little effort to recognize and join with it. In an instant, we will then enter powerfully into the samadhi of whatever practice we are using and can spontaneously make great progress.

If you practice this way, another not uncommon experience is gaining the ability to encompass the sleep state itself within practice. By extending your awareness throughout the process of falling asleep, you may start to experience the arising of awareness within the dream state, that is, lucid dreaming. When you recognize that you are dreaming, you may then train yourself to call to mind and begin working with your practice within that dream state. This has great benefit, as the quality of clarity we can experience in that state is profound. You may even experience a continuation of this lucidity during the transition from dreaming to full wakefulness, a very interesting experience.

Regarding the second valuable time I mentioned—the moment just after we awaken—we can train ourselves in a similar manner to use this. After we emerge from sleep, we will naturally experience a brief period during which we are partly awake but our usual sense of time—that is, of existing within an expanse of memory, personal history, identity, and projection regarding the future—has not yet re-formed. In other words, our usual gross thought activity has not yet switched “on.”

I think many of us can recall such an experience. It is common when awakening from sleep, for example, to notice the moment at which we “remember” something we have been worried about, and to observe how we pick it up again with our minds. But it is precisely this state just before habitual rumination kicks in that we can use for our practice. If we are able to become aware of that state and extend our concentrated mindfulness powerfully into it just as we did during

the moments before sleep, we may then quickly enter samadhi in a similar way. It then becomes a wonderful training to extend that samadhi into full wakefulness as we rise and begin our daily activities. We may enjoy a clarity and ease that usually disappear almost immediately after waking, as the anxieties of the coming day steal them away.

There are many benefits to these kinds of experiences. But for now, it is enough to say that encompassing some amount of the normally unconscious hours of rest within our Zen practice as I have described has one truly great benefit: further dissolving boundaries between so-called practice time and the remaining time of our days and nights that is often considered nonpractice.

## **Under the Blade**

This next method requires a greater caveat than most in the interest of safety, and so I do not in fact recommend for anyone to try it at all. But since it is a method one of my teachers taught that I found useful, I record it here for the sake of reference.

For this method a Japanese sword is used. Of course, not many people have ready access to a Japanese sword. But as I have been a student of traditional martial arts, I did happen to have one on hand and was able to use this practice on occasion. The instructions are simple:

1. Unsheathing a sword and holding it vertically out in front of you, turn the edge so that it faces toward you.
2. Then, looking directly at the blade, bring the edge toward you so that it lies directly above your forehead and eyes, as if it were being swung downward onto your head and had stopped just short of contact. Holding it there with the edge an inch or less from your skin, observe your state of mind.

This seemingly simple practice is rather powerful. The edge of a sword, especially one that has been forged in the traditional manner, carries an interesting energetic quality, and when it is used like this it

causes one's mind to immediately experience clarity. Accompanying this is a visceral, bodily reaction that can lead one to feel calm in an oddly cold, quiet manner. Naturally there is a recognition of one's physical fragility and mortality in all this. But the important point of the experience for our purposes is the collapse of gross mental chatter and the arising of clarity. Putting the sword down and taking it up again repeatedly, one can then learn to sustain this.

The teacher from whom I learned this simple method also spoke of actually resting the sword's edge on his skin, and even of gently stroking it across his face. These things were not done with sufficient force to cut, of course, but simply to give a rather intimate feeling of the gravity of the situation, and also to feel something of how close the border between life and death is. Perhaps you will be able to think of other methods that reveal that border, ever present and intimately close.

## **Extending Awareness Outward and Inward**

The next method, like most that we have examined, is not difficult to learn yet extremely powerful. More than most others, it is something of a contrived visualization: one imagines that the light of one's awareness extends alternately outward to the ends of the universe and then inward within the body, repeatedly. It is possible that you will now have the tools, having worked through the previous methods, to use this one in a profound manner, especially at the moment of its conclusion.

Since the method itself requires little explanation beyond the actual practice instructions, I will just give them directly.

1. Sitting in meditation posture or else lying down comfortably, spread your vision out. Breathe naturally through the nostrils and deeply to the belly.
2. It could be useful here to first practice any of the other methods that helps you to relax and experience basic clarity, for example, the silent A-UN breathing we examined earlier.

3. Now to this method of extending awareness outward and inward: Spreading out your vision, first bring your attention strongly to the field of space encompassed by your peripheral field. Inhale deeply but without tension, and then as you exhale stretch your awareness out to fill this space completely. For a few moments or breaths, rest in that state.
4. Inhale once more, and this time as you exhale imagine or feel that your awareness stretches even farther in all directions, perhaps to the horizon. When you can clearly feel this sensation, rest for a few moments or breaths.
5. Inhale again, and as you exhale stretch out your awareness even farther: extend it out to encompass the whole sky and earth. When you clearly feel this, rest for a few moments or breaths.
6. Once more inhale, and as you exhale expand your awareness out into the vast heavens, encompassing planets, stars, and all distant space. Feel that your awareness extends completely and infinitely out, encompassing the entire universe. When this sensation becomes clear, rest in it for a few moments or breaths.
7. And now, in that state of complete outward extension, look for a moment with all your attention and investigate: Within all that expanse of infinite distance, stretching from your immediate surroundings out to the farthest galaxy and even to the edges of space and time, is there anything at all that is a self? Is there anything at all that is “I” or “me”? You need not do this verbally, repeating the words above; rather, just give rise to an acute *feeling* of looking and questioning.
8. After a while when you are ready, slowly now draw your attention back in stages until awareness rests once more within the space or room where you are. (Keep your vision spread out.)
9. Now it is time to turn your awareness around and shine it *inward*. Inhale gently, and as you exhale extend your awareness into the space behind your eyes. Rest in that space for a few moments or breaths, just observing and feeling what is there.

10. When you are ready, inhale again, and as you exhale extend the awareness farther down into the core of your body, encompassing and scanning the inside of your body from the head downward to the waist. Rest in that space for a few moments or breaths.
11. Finally, inhale once more, and as you exhale extend your awareness down all the way, encompassing and scanning the inside of your body from head to feet. Rest then for a few moments or breaths in the sensation that your awareness is shining completely inward, entirely illuminating the inner world of your body-mind.
12. Here, once more look with all your attention, investigating for a moment: Is there anything within this inner world of my body that is a self? Is there anything here that is “I” or “me”?
13. You have now completed one cycle of this outward and inward extension of awareness. Repeat the practice. Expand your awareness outward in stages to the ends of the universe, and observe: Where is there any so-called self? Is there any “me” there? Then bring your awareness back in stages to where you are and shine it, in stages, into the body: Is there anything within this body that is a self, me, or I? Is there any “me” there?
14. Repeat this cycle of expanding and contracting awareness as many times as you wish, or for as long as you are able to maintain the sharp focus and poignant quality of your concentration. There is no rush: take your time.
15. We then conclude this practice with a crucial moment: at some point, upon completing the outward extension of awareness and as you rest in that, suddenly and with force perform the katsu shout. (Or if you wish, you could sharply strike the floor, clap your hands once strongly, or do any other such action that produces a loud, sharp sound causing a small shock to the mind.) And in that moment, *drop both the outer and inner direction of your focused awareness completely*. Simply allow your awareness to rest, seamlessly encompassing space with no

dividing line, center, or reference point. Having done so, rest in that state for as long as you like.

Upon arriving at that moment of shouting “KA-tsu!” and dropping the expansion and contraction, we are left with a very fresh, transparent, and free feeling. This, in fact, has something of the taste of our true nature. The katsu shout helps to momentarily collapse the mind’s imaginings and so to decisively sever the method we were using.

You may by now have understood that visualizing one is extending the light of one’s awareness outward to encompass the universe and then inward to illuminate one’s body is not actually the point of this method. Visualizing in this way is just an artifice serving to nudge us loose from our habitual, limited way of seeing that assumes there is a solid subject “I” within one’s skull looking out to see objects that are “not I.” But at that moment when we shout and drop this dualistic way of seeing, we may experience—even if only for a moment—a truer way of seeing.

After having worked with this practice, you may later be able to dispense with the visualization entirely. Having familiarized yourself thoroughly with that truer way of seeing, you will be able to enter it quickly without needing to visualize or shout. In this way, the practice supports our training to sustain a seamless upwelling of clear vision and so over time to dissolve habitual delusion.

### **Four-Breath A-UN Practice**

Now that we have learned this method of extending the light of awareness outward and inward, there is a concise practice that is similar but that also integrates the gentle, silent A-UN breathing we learned earlier. Using this next method, it is possible to completely transform your condition and way of seeing within the space of just four breaths. Here are the instructions:

1. Sitting or lying in any comfortable posture, spread your vision out. Breathe naturally through the nostrils and deeply to the



belly.

2. Now for the first inhalation, bring your awareness completely to the space within your body, as we did earlier. Doing this, mentally intone the syllable A (“ah”) as you inhale. Again, rather than experiencing that your breath and the mental sound of the syllable are separate things, try to perform this silent inner intonation with your whole body. Inhale the syllable A with all your attention, stretching out its sound to follow the entire thread of the inhalation (“ahhh...”). Try to actualize the feeling that this sound A, unified with the breath and energetic currents, fills your entire inner space as you inhale, from head to toes.
3. When you are ready to exhale, now mentally intone the syllable UN (“oon”). But as you do this, change the direction of your attention instantly to extend your awareness *outward*, filling the room around you and expanding to encompass the whole world and all distant space, even to the very ends of the universe, all at once. Breathe this sound with your entire body-mind, stretching it out to join with the entire length of your exhalation (“uunn...”). Try to actualize the feeling that this UN, with the breath, fills all the space of the universe, in all directions.
4. That is the completion of the first breath. For the second breath, we will simply reverse the order. As you inhale, still extending your awareness out to encompass the entire span of the universe in all directions, mentally intone A and fill all space with that sound. Then when you are ready to exhale, turn your awareness instantly around and inward again, to encompass the inner space of your body all at once, and mentally intone UN, filling that space with the mantric syllable.
5. That is the completion of the second breath. Now for the third breath, when you are ready to inhale, powerfully extend the light of your awareness *both outward and inward simultaneously*. Inhale mentally intoning A, letting it fill this all-encompassing, seamless space, with no line or division

between inside and outside remaining. Exhale mentally intoning UN, doing the same.

6. That is the completion of the third breath. Now for the fourth and final breath, in one moment *just completely drop all expansion or contraction of your awareness outward or inward*, with a feeling of relaxation and the dropping of all artifice. In that state of very normal, pure, nonabiding and nonfixated awareness, just mentally intone and resonate with A as you inhale and UN as you exhale.

Like the gentle A-UN breathing we learned earlier, this is a concise but powerful practice that you could do anywhere. Becoming familiar with it, you might later be able to accomplish its effect in just two breaths: with the first breath inhaling A and exhaling UN to instantly drop the illusionary division between outer and inner worlds, and then in the second breath to *drop that dropping* as you inhale A and exhale UN in a state of clarity.

## **Eight-Breath A-UN Practice**

If you are in a place in which you can audibly intone the sounds, here is yet another A-UN practice that you may find useful. In this case we will intone either the syllables A or UN with the voice, rather than mentally, on each exhalation. Joining this with the pattern of visualization we have learned in which awareness is extended inward and outward, we have a powerful practice that can be done in eight breaths. Here are the instructions.

1. Sitting or lying in any comfortable posture, spread your vision out. Breathe naturally through the nostrils and deeply to the belly.
2. Now inhale, and when you are ready to exhale do so while deeply intoning the syllable A (“ah”) with your voice. Exhale this A with all your attention, stretching out its sound to follow the entire thread of the inhalation (“ahhh...”), and try to actualize the feeling that the sound of this A—unified with the breath and

energetic currents—fills your entire inner space from head to toes. Since unlike the previous methods we learned you are now using your voice, you may practice trying to vibrate your entire body with this sound. Let it resonate downward into your body cavities so that your entire frame seems filled with the vibration of A.

3. That is the completion of the first breath. Inhale once more, and when you are ready to exhale now you will deeply voice the syllable UN (“oon”). But this time change your attention, extending your awareness *outward*, filling the room around you and expanding to encompass the whole world and all distant space, even to the very ends of the universe, all at once. Vibrate this sound with your entire body-mind, stretching it out to join with the entire length of your exhalation (“uunn...”). Try to actualize the feeling that this UN, with the breath, fills all the space of the universe, in all directions. Again, this time you are actually using sound, so you may be able to easily feel that the UN vibration is echoing out from your body and filling space.
4. That is the completion of the second breath. For the third and fourth breaths, we will simply reverse the order. Inhale, and then still extending your awareness out to encompass the entire span of the universe in all directions, exhale with your voice intoning A to fill all space with that vibration. When that exhalation eventually fades and ends, then inhale again, and now intone UN as you instantly turn your awareness around and inward again to encompass the inner space of your body all at once.
5. Now for the fifth and sixth breaths: inhale, and when you are ready to exhale, powerfully extend the light of your awareness *both outward and inward simultaneously*. Exhale A, letting it fill this all-encompassing, seamless space, with no line or division between inside and outside remaining. When you are ready to inhale once more, maintain the same unified awareness and then exhale UN, again letting that mantric syllable fill all inner and outer space as a seamless whole.

6. Finally, for the seventh and eight breaths: inhale, and then as you exhale, in one instant *just completely drop all expansion or contraction of your awareness outward or inward* with a feeling of relaxation and dropping all artifice. In that state of very normal, pure, nonabiding and nonfixated awareness, just exhale and resonate with the sound A. Then inhale a final time, and do the same as your voice exhales the sound UN.

At the conclusion of each inhalation or exhalation during this longer practice, it is very easy to experience a state of clarity, and so you may practice resting in that and sustaining it. But after you have completed the entire series of eight breaths, this will certainly be the case even more so. Resting without distraction in that nonfixated, nonabiding awareness—devoid of dualistic distinctions of inner or outer, self or universe—you may easily enter samadhi.

### **Inquiry: “Who?”**

When in the introduction we examined what is meant by the word *kensho*, I said that deep inquiry into the nature of one’s own existence is itself an important method of Zen practice. “What is the nature of this mind that experiences?” “Who is it that carries this body around?” “Who or what *am* I?” These are expressions of fundamental and essential human questions, not at all limited to Zen.

Certainly, inquiring into these questions in any manner is a worthy undertaking. But it should be made clear that such inquiry becomes Zen practice only when it is done in the yogic manner encompassing one’s whole body-mind. Unifying the body, mind, breath, and subtle energetic system, and making use of concentrated samadhi power to then enter with one’s entire being into these questions—becoming one with them and so penetrating them to their core—is the only way we could be justified in calling our inquiry Zen practice.

Inquiry done like this in an integrated state, with great energetic effort and commitment, immediately confirms something important: we could never arrive at acceptable answers to our pressing

existential questions through intellectual analysis and learned knowledge alone. Nothing that we could read, think, contemplate, or conceive will lead us by itself to a truly satisfying resolution. Only answers that explode forth from the deepest totality of one's integrated being can satisfy and liberate. Whatever outward forms our path of Zen practice may take, the essential inner point of all practice is like this. Here we may indeed glimpse the footsteps of all the great masters before us, regardless of tradition.

Naturally, Zen preserves many explicit instructions for accomplishing this that we may receive from a qualified teacher. In part two we will revisit this kind of practice, exploring how the methods of internal energetic cultivation inform such an embodied way of working with wato and koan.

But with all that said, I think it not harmful for beginners to take up a general practice of inquiry. In its essence, such inquiry is really another way of turning around the light of our awareness such that we fixate less on perceived objects and instead begin to see at the source of seeing, hear at the source of hearing, and trace back thoughts to the source of thinking. For our purposes here I will thus give simple instructions that could be sufficient for beginners to temporarily use on their own, until they are able to find a teacher.

1. The essential point of this method is to release one's usual rigid fixation on outer circumstances and just look with great energy into the source of all one's experiences. This is to be done within whatever activity one is doing. When you eat, for example, focus completely on the act of eating, bringing your attention to the sensations and tastes, attending to them with your whole body-mind. But as you do this, give rise to a simple thought—or more accurately, a *feeling*—of inquiry: *Who* is eating? Who or what is it that is experiencing this? Who is tasting the food?
2. When you are walking about, spread your vision out and attend to the act of walking. Inhabit it with your whole body-mind and enter the samadhi of that activity. While doing so, give rise to

the simple inquiry again and again with great energy: *Who* is walking?

3. All activities are like this. As you throw yourself into your daily work, sparing nothing of your attention and fully engaging your entire body and senses to completely “taste” the situations you encounter, inquire constantly in the background and observe with a feeling of wishing fervently to know: *Who* is doing this? Who (or what) is it? What is *this*?
4. In the beginning you will find that you often forget to set up this mind of inquiry. It is easy to be taken up by the wonderful taste of the food, the sights that meet the eye (or the thoughts that arise) while walking, the stressful situations of work, and so on. But just keep reminding yourself to observe and ask: Who is this? Who am I? What is this thing that is experiencing, seeing, hearing, eating, working, shitting, sleeping, growing old? If you like, you could even hang up the single word “Who?” or the words “What is this?” someplace like your desk at work. Seeing them repeatedly, you may be reminded to look closely at your life while engaged within the midst of it.

If you practice inquiring into your daily affairs like this, you may begin from time to time to have a strange feeling. It is something like glancing at a word on a page or at one’s own outstretched hand: normally a feeling of familiar recognition arises. But if we look intently at one of these things long enough, our habitual recognition—that is, the conceptual fabrication we make and project onto the sight of these things—falls somewhat away. A word then suddenly looks odd and foreign, a collection of lines and shapes rather than something with meaning. A hand suddenly looks strange and unrecognizable, as wondrous and odd as the appendage of any alien creature in a science fiction movie. Practicing inquiry of the kind I have described, we will start to have moments when our whole existence and being suddenly seem foreign, unrecognizable, and alien in such a way. We will realize that we really have no idea at all

what this strange existence is, and we actually haven't the slightest clue who or what this one who experiences, lives, and dies actually is.

In such a way we can enter the “great doubt”<sup>\*</sup> often spoken of in Zen. And it is crucial to do so, because it is just this fundamental, pressing, existential inquiry that will drive our Zen practice most quickly to fruition. Stepping out from the illusory, projected world of fantasy within which most people unknowingly live, we must come to see clearly that there is nothing we know for certain at all. It is an odd but quite good place at which to arrive, this state of utter nonknowing. It is a state pregnant with the possibility of wisdom.

To sum up this method most simply, the following words from Torei Enji—the great master who helped refine the koan method of practice used in Rinzai Zen today—are incredibly useful. Taking Torei at his word, putting these simple instructions into practice and engaging the entire body-mind as best we can, there is no doubt that we will draw closer to the gate of kensho.

Look at what is, at who sees, hears, walks, sits—now, here! With all your heart, look at everything. Without giving rise in the heart to [concepts of] being and not being, to yes and no, without discrimination and without reasoning, just look! When the time is ripe, it will appear of itself, requiring neither knowledge nor discrimination.<sup>24</sup>

### 3

## Selected Practices of Direct Pointing for Zen Teachers

**WE NOW TURN** to the last six methods of directing pointing, for use by teachers.

### A Note to Teachers

Though I will not be providing detailed practice instructions for the methods in this section as I did in the last, I will where possible give instructions that could be enough for someone with sufficient ability to use them. Where it is not possible or desirable to give instructions, I will at least mention some points I think worth considering. But before doing so, I would like to share a few thoughts specifically directed to readers who actually are Zen teachers or who may in the future become teachers.

As I have said, the initial responsibility of a Zen teacher is nothing less than to bring the student as quickly as possible to the discovery of that intrinsic, liberative wisdom we call kensho. But as Omori Roshi wrote, “If the fruit is not ripe, though the wind may blow or the branch sway, the fruit will not fall.” Now that we are discussing methods used by teachers, this is something that I would like to stress: *the teacher must be able to see that the fruit is ripe*. That is, a



Zen teacher must be possessed of a sufficiently clear eye—*kan*,\* the unclouded seeing or insight arising from profound awakening—to recognize the type and depth of a student's state and to immediately act with an appropriate method. Without such clear seeing as a basis for their application, methods like these are mostly useless.

Zen teachers, through the depth of their own unending training, must extend their awareness seamlessly to encompass the student at each meeting and are called upon to bring whatever discernment they have cultivated to bear, holding nothing back. The eyes of teachers must be sharply penetrating, while their actions—potentially carrying the power of opening the gate to a new life or of condemning the student to continued ghostlike existence—must be precise. When a genuine teacher sees and acts within that one crucial moment when conditions are correct, direct pointing becomes nothing less than the wondrous manifestation of enlightened activity, like a flashing sword that in one magnificent blow severs the head of an ancient dragon.

But if a teacher lacks this discerning eye, methods like these become nothing more than a ridiculous sort of Zen affectation. They exude then a kind of stink that only reveals the shallowness of one's own insight: a truly sorry display. Hakuin's tale of damaging a cicada's wing aside, the most common consequence of "pecking" at an inappropriate moment is that the student's unique circumstances that might have led to awakening—arising despite deeply embedded delusion and in accord with truly fortunate and mysterious karmic circumstances—can in a single moment be wasted. More than anything else, we should as teachers consider that to be a tragic thing: that a student might have entered the gate of awakening, but through our own lack of ability they missed the chance.

I say these things while holding in mind some of the problems that have arisen in the West when unqualified teachers found themselves in positions of influence and authority over their students and in some cases caused great damage. What is meant by "unqualified"? Certainly, a teacher that has not completed the standard course of training of his or her lineage cannot be considered qualified.<sup>1</sup> Nor

can one who has not inherited a legitimate lineage to begin with. But even where these minimum conditions have been fulfilled, we must say that teachers become illegitimate at the moment they begin to think of themselves primarily as “Zen teachers” rather than “Zen practitioners.” Such persons will not be able to cleanly and wisely use inherited practices like the ones we are examining.

As we consider the following methods, we should therefore remember that teachers do well to stick with humility to ones that fit their abilities and characters rather than trying to imitate past masters or act in a self-consciously “Zen” manner. And we should hold in mind the simple point that bears endless repeating: a Zen teacher who is not tirelessly continuing to practice, or who has forgotten that one’s attainment—no matter how advanced—is never sufficient, has ceased to be a legitimate teacher at all.

## **Calling a Name**

Many of the methods of direct pointing are elegantly simple. When fruit is truly ripe, even the lightest of breezes or shaking might cause it to fall. The method of calling a name is like this.

We have already seen that even when we are caught up in our habitual dualistic fixation, there are still simple, everyday occurrences that can interrupt this spinning and cause gaps within which the recognition of basic clarity—and even our true, boundless nature—may occur. We examined various bodily functions, for example, that interestingly cause the mind’s endless conceptual fabrication to momentarily stop: if the student can in such moments recognize what has occurred, an insight can arise.

Now, in this method of calling a name the student will ideally be absorbed in practice, as is commonly the case in koan training where there is absorption within deep inquiry of the sort we have discussed. At such a moment, as the student struggles to arrive at a resolution to the problem at hand, the teacher may simply call out the student’s name.

The sound of one's own name striking the ears has a very interesting effect: gross thinking drops completely for a moment, and we become wordlessly present. Our minds momentarily open with a kind of fresh focus. In fact, we can experience this in a small way even by ourselves: just speak your own name aloud, and observe your mind's state in the moment just afterward. That effect is much stronger when we are called by another. Instantly the mind stills, and a momentarily clear state arises as we wait with a kind of naked expectation to hear the words that might normally follow: perhaps some request or an explanation revealing the reason we were called. But if the student is sharp and practicing deeply, this can cause something more: the turning around of the light of awareness, allowing the student to clearly know the one who is hearing. The calling of one's name and the instant, pure response of the mind that results can reveal to us the original face of our awareness.

Thus, as we are absorbed in our practice—perhaps, for example, with a wato like “Mu”—it could be that at some appropriate moment the teacher may suddenly and sharply call out the student's name: “Meido!” And with that, a state of clarity manifests. Then immediately various means can serve to reveal the crucial point. For example, the teacher might quickly ask, “What is that?” Or the teacher might simply point at the student.

Even if the student does not arrive at some profound insight in this way, again, it is at least good if the clarity of the mind at such moments can be recognized. The straightforward openness and quality of clear presence that we experience when our names are called and without thought we turn to look or answer “Yes?” reveal a manner of being that we might aspire to bring into all our interactions and activities. Bankei described the effortless, unintentionally pure function of this mind very well.

When you were born, all of you received a Buddha-mind from your parents. You received nothing else. It is beyond any doubt that this Buddha-mind is unborn and possessed of illuminating wisdom. All things are resolved in the unborn.

While you are facing me listening to me speak like this, if a crow cawed or a sparrow chirped or some other such sound occurred somewhere behind you, you would know perfectly well it was a crow or a sparrow even without giving a thought to listening to it, because you were listening by means of the unborn. And this is how in the unborn things all fall into harmony. That they do is the unborn's proof. A person who firmly realizes in himself that this Buddha-mind is beyond all question unborn and possessed of illuminating wisdom, and just lives in the unborn Buddha-mind as it is, is from that day and forevermore a living Tathagata. He will from that time on dwell in the Buddha-mind. The sect to which I belong is for this reason sometimes called the Buddha-mind Sect.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is a pure, wondrously illuminating mind that instantly and without discrimination knows that it is a crow cawing or sparrow chirping, or that turns without hesitation or thought to answer "Yes?" when one's name is called. This is the true and straightforward mind of practice, and it does indeed point directly to our own unborn and undying intrinsic wisdom.

## **Running *Kinhin***

Between periods of zazen in a traditional Zen training hall, it is common for *kinhin*—walking meditation—to be conducted. In the Soto style of practice *kinhin* is sometimes done quite slowly, while in Rinzai training halls it is more often done rapidly and with energy. But we need not become stuck on such stereotypes. There are many ways to do *kinhin* according to the needs of the students present, the time of day, the season and temperature, and so on. The earlier practices we examined of stalking slowly through a fearful place and of walking in an integrated manner could all be considered types of *kinhin*.

The most obvious purpose of *kinhin* in the meditation hall is to refresh the body between long periods of seated meditation. But it should primarily be thought of as a practice of *samadhi* in movement: if a student can maintain the state of meditative

absorption while rising from the cushion, rest within it seamlessly during the time of kinhin, and then return to the cushion while still sustaining that absorption, then we can say practice has progressed well. A student like this will be able to integrate samadhi in all activities; kinhin will have served as a bridge to this.

This next method we will examine is a way of doing kinhin that can indeed cause students to enter profound samadhi in movement. It does require that they know ahead of time what to do but otherwise is a quite useful, easily conducted practice. Especially during a *sesshin*,\* the weeklong periods of intensive retreat conducted in monasteries and many Zen centers, this method of running kinhin can be particularly useful on, say, the fourth day of the retreat or thereafter. By that time the students, if sufficiently experienced, will have settled into the retreat schedule and begun to manifest a profound concentration.

The length of the kinhin period for this method will be longer than might normally be the custom: it can last the duration of a usual session of zazen, perhaps thirty to forty-five minutes. During this time the students are directed to simply focus upon the act of walking itself as their method. Remaining present with body-mind integrated within that simple activity, they should just let their minds rest with the sensation of movement through space. Beginners, if they require some more concrete anchor than this, may be told to focus on the sensation of their feet upon the floor as they walk. Of course, everyone may employ the sweeping way of using the eyes and the integrated manner of walking, as instructed earlier.

But above all, for this method the students are instructed that when they hear a sudden sharp sound—no matter when it comes or where they are—they are to suddenly stop. Freezing completely, they should come instantly to a halt and remain unmoving on the spot until released.

The kinhin then begins, very slowly at first. Gradually over time the speed will be increased, at a pace judged correct to bring the group into unity and complete absorption in the movement. After some time, the students are to be nearly running. There is, in fact, a

way to trot quickly during kinhin of this sort, allowing gravity to propel the body forward rather than pushing off from the floor with the feet. Again, this may be grasped by practicing the integrated walking we examined earlier, which I described as a kind of controlled fall.

Finally, when the correct state has begun to manifest in the bodies of the students and the energetic quality of the room reveals that the crucial moment has arrived, one of the taku or the keisaku is suddenly slammed down with great force upon some surface. With that sound, like a gunshot, all the students stop instantly and completely: and some will experience that their minds also have completely stopped. It may even be that some student, having entered deeply into samadhi during the time of movement, will with that sharp stimulus experience its shattering and arrive at awakening.

After the sudden stop, for however long it seems useful, the students may be made to stand completely still within a state of clarity. They are then led to walk calmly in another round or two around the zendo, returning at last to their seats to immediately begin a session of zazen. In this way, whatever they experienced during the kinhin may be brought into and integrated with their sitting.

The effectiveness of this method, like many we have examined, comes from its engagement of the body. Naturally teachers must use methods that fit the physical conditions and limitations of their students, and it may be that not everyone can endure the period of fast movement that this method requires. Still, because it is a powerful method, I have included it here.

## **The Katsu in Ceremony**

As we are discussing the activities of teachers, I would here like to say a bit more regarding the use of the katsu shout in ceremony.

I briefly mentioned earlier that the katsu is used in the Zen funeral ceremony, where it is given suddenly before the remains of the

deceased at the very opening of the ritual. The most obvious purpose, again, is to cause the mourners to let go momentarily of grief and experience clarity. But perhaps it was surprising for some to read my statement that another purpose of the katsu is to help the deceased. In fact, though it is not much discussed, we should say that this is the primary purpose.

The reason for this is that during the intermediate state immediately after death and before rebirth, the deceased person may well be experiencing a condition of great confusion and turmoil.<sup>3</sup> But what we should know about this state is that within it the mind of the deceased may be more easily and deeply penetrated. This does also mean that the grief, attachments, and negative thought projections of mourners can have an adverse impact. Likewise, the well-wishing, prayers, dedications of merit, and extensions of loving-kindness, forgiveness, and compassionate regard can all have great positive impact. But finally, if the funeral officiant has sufficient power, the katsu shout itself can have a profound direct pointing effect on the deceased. In this way, and with the power of the chanting that follows, a decisive benefit can be given.

It is fine for the reader to doubt what I have just said. I am merely describing a traditional understanding, and whatever one believes, I think it important that we are at least informed regarding it. We should grasp that according to that understanding, the task of the officiant is an extremely weighty one: not only is it the officiant's task to help and comfort the living but also to arrange the conditions of the dead such that they may spontaneously progress upon the path, and even be liberated.

In the *Shonan Kattoroku*, a collection of anecdotes from the early days of Zen in Kamakura that is used in koan practice, there is an interesting passage that reveals much regarding this. Ryuho, the thirteenth abbot of Choju-ji Zen temple, was questioned regarding the traditional memorial service.

Sukemichi asked: "If someone makes a vow to perform the ceremony but does not carry it out, will the spirit of the dead

suffer?”

The teacher replied: “The services are to remind the descendants of the virtues of the deceased; as an expression of their devotion, they pray for his welfare. But the pain or happiness of the spirit of the deceased is according to his karma, so the sutras declare. But it must be said that for a follower of Zen, there is something more apart from this.”

The pupil persisted in asking that the teacher should declare it, and finally the master glared at him and gave a great Katsu! shout, whereupon he swooned and lost consciousness. After some time the teacher gave another shout and Sukemichi revived.

The teacher said: “Well, how are they, the happiness and pains of the departed? What you have experienced for yourself, you do not need others to tell you.”

The pupil bowed with gratitude and said: “In all my seventy-two years it is only now that I have come to know the real meaning of the shout which the Zen priest gives before the coffin at the funeral service.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, the katsu is not only used during Zen funerals. It may also be used during other ceremonies such as weddings. In that case it serves to cut through the anxiety and fear of the couple, to bring them together into the present moment where they may meet with clarity as they take their momentous step forward into union with one another, and in general to remove obstacles or negative energetic patterns surrounding the proceedings.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the katsu shout is used in ceremonies to exorcise rooms and spaces. This may be done upon occasions such as a groundbreaking or opening of a business, a family’s move into a new house, the cleansing of a place in which violent death or suicide has occurred, and so on. All these ceremonies begin in the same manner, with the katsu.

Regarding that manner, there is something else interesting that you may see on such occasions. The officiant stands at a funeral facing the remains and perhaps a photo of the deceased, at a wedding facing the altar, or on other occasions directly facing the space to be



exorcised. Holding a lit stick of incense, a large *enso*—circle—is then slowly and with great gravity drawn in space using the smoke. Then, when the circle is completely drawn, the officiant brings out an explosive *katsu* from the very depths of the body, a moment later taking a step backward and bowing with hands in *gassho*.

It is quite dramatic to witness. But regarding the function of this, one teacher connected to my own lineage explained that when drawing the circle in the air before him, he could feel all the negativity of the surrounding area being drawn into it. At the moment of the *katsu* he then felt that the obstructing energy was instantly blown out and away, as if through a hole in the fabric of space. This is interesting, as the physical movement of drawing the *enso* is thus integrated in an important manner with the effect of the *katsu* itself. In this regard, the function of the *katsu* may also be described as one of completely resetting the energetic quality of a place by means of one's whole body-mind.

In the method that we will examine next, the *katsu* shout again plays a part.

## **Group Breathing**

I was originally somewhat hesitant to include this next method for fear that doing so would give too much away. That is, since this method is somewhat contrived and obvious in its application, I was especially worried that students reading about it might then hold some expectation that could obstruct its effect should they later experience it themselves from a teacher.

But I believe my fear was ungrounded. It has been my experience that a student knowing what is going to happen beforehand does not alter the effect of this method at all. If students can give themselves to the moment or be drawn into it by the power of the teacher, I have observed, the method will have effect. On the other hand, if they are not able to remain present with the teacher in that moment or if the teacher lacks sufficient energetic power to begin with, there will be no success anyway even if the method comes as a surprise. This line

of thinking, reinforced by my experience using many methods with my own students, in fact has informed my decision to openly reveal many of the things in this book.

The method we are discussing now is useful for both individuals and groups, but here I will stress its use for groups. The reason is that a group of practitioners will more easily fall into a focused performance of the activity described below, supporting each other in subtle ways.

To use this practice, the students are first made to stand together facing the same direction and with some comfortable amount of space between them. They need not be made to stand rigidly in lines but may be allowed to just spread out and take up space naturally. It is important that they not stand so far apart that the energetic bond of the group is lost. Neither should they be so close as to feel cramped.

Once all of this is arranged, the teacher stands behind them to give the instructions. The students are told that upon a signal or command they will breathe deeply, inhaling fully and exhaling fully, in unison. Of course, their postures should be correct to do this: aligned as described earlier in the method of correct standing, with weight slightly forward on the balls of the feet and the pelvic alignment balanced. They should spread out the vision as we have learned. All the ways of using the body we have discussed that tend toward producing the experience of clarity may be integrated here. In fact, the method of pressing down the toes, of extending awareness outward and inward, or one of the methods of intoning A-UN could be used in its entirety.

After having given whatever breathing instructions seem appropriate, all is then ready. The teacher then directs them to breathe: the command “inhale” is given, followed by that for “exhale,” to unify the group’s timing. Alternately some sound could be used: a light strike of the taku or of the inkin, to mark each inhalation and exhalation. Whatever signal is used, the main thing is that it be used to cause the group to breathe in unison, at a pace that is comfortable for all. Once this unison has manifested, the breathing

is continued for several minutes or however long the teacher feels necessary in order to completely unify the group.

At some point, then, if the teacher has the eye to see and the energetic sensitivity to feel, the group's entry into a state of meditative absorption will be known: this will manifest in their bodies and a change sensed in the room. Of course, the teacher's samadhi must serve to "set" this possibility within the room as well (something we will examine in the method that follows this one). But when the group is unified to the maximum extent and has entered into the meditative state to whatever degree is possible, then right at the end of an exhalation—but before a next inhalation has begun—suddenly the teacher gives an explosive katsu shout.

In my experience the students will all freeze at that moment, even if they have not been told to do so. I have never seen a student turn around in surprise. After a few moments of this quiet standing, the teacher may then walk to stand in front of the group.

Much can then be seen by observing the students' faces, and a next course of action might be chosen depending on that. As I am often concerned to point out to students, especially beginners, that a state of clarity relatively free from delusion is in fact already accessible to them, I will sometimes at that moment ask the group: "What are you thinking now?" The answer, most often, is silence: many or most of the students find themselves unable to speak. When an answer does come, it is generally: "Nothing."

And at such a moment I will point out to the students that within the state they are experiencing, their usual afflictive emotion, anxiety, spinning thought, and so on are absent, and just this state is the place in which to count the breaths, investigate the koan, and do all the many practices of Zen. In other words, I point out to them that what we call our "true nature" is precisely like that, and that they have never in fact been far from it at all.

### ***Kentan: Inspecting the Zendo***

I would now like to discuss an event in the monastic day, also experienced by lay students who attend sesshin, that is a crucial element of Rinzai Zen practice. Yet even though it is so important, there are aspects of it about which many students and even some teachers seem unaware. This is the solemn time of *kentan*,\* when the Zen master comes to inspect the trainees within the meditation hall.<sup>6</sup>

In the tradition of my own lineage, *kentan* takes place in the evening, around the time that the sun has set below the horizon and twilight is growing. This is a time when the energy of the world calms, shifting from the *yo*\* (yang) energy of daytime to the *in*\* (yin) of night. Joining ourselves bodily in meditation with this calming, it is possible to enter deep samadhi more easily. In fact, it is for this reason that the time of the fading light in early evening has always been recommended as an ideal one to practice zazen.<sup>7</sup>

When it is time for *kentan*, the *han*\*—a wooden sounding board—is hit according to a set pattern that lasts a few minutes. The *han* hangs immediately outside the zendo, and so its sharp sound easily penetrates the minds of the trainees as they sit in zazen. Meanwhile the teacher's attendant has gone to request *kentan*, and the two make their way to the zendo entrance. After the striking of the *han* is completed, the trainees are led in a quick, energetic *kinhin* and then must sit down immediately, composing themselves quickly for zazen. This is the moment that the teacher enters the zendo.

And then the inspection begins. Walking slowly, the teacher passes closely in front of each student. They naturally feel that they are under the sharp gaze of a hawk, and it is indeed so: the teacher's job is to carefully inspect each trainee and in a glance to ascertain the state of each.

I think it is natural for students to feel nervous during this time of *kentan*. Particularly when my own meditation practice was quite shallow, I felt extremely self-conscious and anxious as my teacher walked by exuding an atmosphere of indomitable dignity. I found it difficult to keep my shoulders from rising up as he drew closer, to keep my breathing calm, to not fidget or twitch involuntarily from the tension, or to not begin salivating and compulsively swallowing

out of anxiety as he arrived finally in front of my seat. Though I tried to keep my gaze spread out as is correct in zazen, I often found myself focusing involuntarily on his feet as they appeared in front of my downcast eyes. And then a moment later, a great feeling of relief would come over me as he passed me by.

But something else I noticed, though I did not grasp the reason at the time, was that the period of zazen right after this—when the master would sit in the zendo with us—always seemed the most powerful of the day. It was only later that I understood why, and that leads us to this method of direct pointing.

I can give no detailed description of method here, as it is something each teacher must naturally grasp alone. But kentan has a much deeper purpose than simply inspecting the posture and condition of each student. Before arriving at the zendo, the teacher's practice is to prepare for kentan by entering deeply into the meditative state. Then, from the first moment of entering the meditation hall, the students can be affected and transformed purely by the energetic power of the teacher's presence. That is, as the teacher moves down the rows of trainees passing in front of each, he or she extends energetically outward while in the state of unified samadhi and by so doing can transform each of them, drawing all together into a more profound condition of absorption. The period of zazen that follows, then, is one in which the students and teacher together mirror one another. I will say more about this shortly.

Regarding all of this, it is commonly reported by students that the challenges or obstructions they happen to be experiencing in zazen seem to lessen or drop away during kentan. For example, I have seen students experiencing involuntary, uncontrollable tremors during zazen (something that can arise for various reasons that are rarely serious) whose violent shaking invariably slowed and stopped as the teacher passed. Similarly, students commonly experience greater clarity, or at least a lessening of spinning thought, when the teacher is near, even if they are also tense and nervous as I was. It is not uncommon for students to spontaneously enter samadhi when the

teacher is nearby: an example of the “extraordinary” means of direct pointing we have discussed.

Students certainly should not try to do anything special during kentan. But it is useful, I think, for them to know that the teacher then is putting forth all of his or her power for their benefit and joining with them compassionately in the samadhi of practice. If they can then meet this intention with their own sincere effort to throw themselves wholly into their practice, there will certainly be a good result.

In the next and final method of direct pointing, we will continue this discussion of what occurs during kentan.

### **Joining Mind with Space**

We have come finally to the last of the methods of direct pointing we will examine in this book. Like the previous one, we must say that it is a methodless method, not to be approached or learned through step-by-step instructions but rather intuitively grasped. This is the method of joining one’s mind with the space of the meditation hall.

Let us return briefly to my description of what occurs during kentan since that is a time when this final method commonly manifests. I said that immediately after the master has walked to inspect and transform each trainee, he or she will then sit in zazen with the group for a time. This may be only a short period, after which the master exits. But like the walking inspection, we must understand the intent of this. It is nothing less than to transform the students through the sheer power and presence of the teacher’s embodied realization, and by so doing to set them upon a more rapidly deepening path of practice.

Regarding that period of zazen when teacher and student practice together within close proximity to one another, what we can say is this: there is a method then by which the teacher’s mind, manifesting the Zen samadhi that is a sustained upwelling of the wisdom of awakening, is extended to permeate the space of the training hall. The teacher, though appearing quite calm and composed, is in fact

sitting with all the power and determination that can be mustered, holding nothing back at all (a reason in fact that this period of zazen is often rather short: even so, the teacher may become completely exhausted).

During that time, the master's mind is unified with the environment completely, spontaneously, and in accord with compassionate vows. And when that happens the trainees—to whatever extent is possible for each—may directly experience something of the master's state of mind. In other words, the minds of the students and the teacher can, for a moment or moments, match like two mirrors reflecting one another.

Naturally a teacher lacking realization or embodied samadhi power cannot do this. And students with great obstructions, or who have not yet brought their zazen to some basic fruition, may be aware of little or no change. But even such students as those will, in a subtle way, be transformed by the teacher. This, again, is an example of the extraordinary means of direct pointing that occur spontaneously within the presence of a realized master.

In Zen this presence is referred to as the teacher's *ba*,\* or field. Within that field the effect that great *yoriki*—samadhi power, unified with awakening—has upon the conditions of those nearby can be decisive. It is no secret that our minds and bodies affect one another in subtle ways by means of energetics, unconscious physical cues, and so on. In this case, it is the miraculous functioning of awakened mind that arranges the surrounding conditions such that the minds of the students can also change, much as a strongly vibrating string on a musical instrument causes adjacent strings to sympathetically vibrate. This also is a crucial aspect of *sanzen* and reveals how and why that practice is so central to the *Rinzai* Zen path. It also reveals what is, in fact, meant by the words *isshin denshin*:\* the transmission “from mind to mind” by means of which true Zen has always flowed down through the generations.

All of this, finally, points out something that is crucial for those of us who are Zen practitioners to understand. It is not only Zen teachers who must gain the ability to manifest this power to aid

others through the sheer quality and vibration of their existence. All Zen students, as they awaken to the truth of our boundless nature and travel along the subsequent path of post-kensho practice, must come to embody wisdom so thoroughly that they too, unconsciously and effortlessly, give ease to whomever they encounter.

To give “the gift of fearlessness” (*se mu-i\**) is said to be an activity of Kannon,\* the bodhisattva\* of compassion. But in fact, it is the activity of all true Zen practitioners. What we call direct pointing must, in the long progress of our practice, ultimately be revealed by every action of our own body, speech, and mind, without dependence upon the teacher. It must radiate from us, illuminating our surroundings and transforming them into places of awakening. The kiai of an integrated, balanced body-mind functioning in accord with the wisdom of awakening is like this. Spontaneously and effortlessly, such persons grant the gift of fearlessness to everyone they encounter.

If your practice comes to fruition like this, you will know without doubt who the bodhisattva of compassion is. That sublime being we call Kannon will be revealed, clearly and plainly before your own eyes, along with all her myriad, wondrous activities that liberate beings throughout boundless realms and infinite universes. Kannon, you will come to know, is the very one reading these words.



## **Part Two**

# **INTERNAL ENERGETIC CULTIVATION**

## 4

# Embodied Zen

*The essential point brought out in this book is that, whether reading certain parts of the sacred teachings, whether examining the principles of the Dharma, whether sitting for long periods without lying down or whether engaged in walking practices throughout the six divisions of the day, the vital breath must always be made to fill the space between the navel and the loins.<sup>1</sup>*

HAKUIN

Now that we have completed our examination of practices of direct pointing, we are ready to explore a second category of hidden Zen teachings: the practices of internal energetic cultivation.

The late Song dynasty Chan\* Buddhism that arrived in Japan during the Kamakura period was marked by a strong emphasis on energetic vitality and inner cultivation of the body-mind's subtle energetic system. Some Zen practitioners today lack knowledge of such practices and express surprise upon hearing about them, asserting that such an emphasis in Japanese Zen must be a later accretion perhaps originating with Hakuin and his heirs. But the early records of Zen in Japan reveal otherwise. Practices of energetic cultivation—and the signs of their fruition—were of great concern to thirteenth-century Japanese Zen practitioners, and also to the

Chinese Chan masters and monks that had emigrated to Japan to teach them.

In the *Shonan Kattoroku*, for example, we find various episodes revealing such concern. Among the more amusing is this:

At the outbreak of war in the first year of Koan (1278) Tokimune visited Bukko<sup>2</sup> and gave the Katsu! shout of dashing straight forward.<sup>3</sup> Priest Gio said: “The general has got something great below his navel, so the shout too is great.”

...One of the regent’s ministers, Masanori, when he came to know what Gio had said, asked him indignantly:

“When did Your Reverence see the size of what our lord has below his navel?”

The priest said: “Before the general was born, I saw it.”

The courtier did not understand.

The priest said: “If you do not understand the greatness of what is below the general’s navel, then see through to before you yourself were born, the greatness of the thing below the navel. How would that thing become greater or less by the honour or contempt of high or low?”

The courtier was still more bewildered.

The priest gave a Katsu! shout and said: “Such is the voice of it, of that thing.”<sup>4</sup>

We have already examined the katsu shout that features so prominently in this anecdote. Of note here is that concern with the “thing below the navel”—that is, the tanden—is readily apparent. Practices centered on the navel energy center of course figure prominently not only in Chan and Zen practice but also in cultivation methods preserved within Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and Daoist lineages.<sup>5</sup> But it is clear not only from historical evidence like this but from oral tradition within Zen itself that such things do not originate with Hakuin, some four hundred years after the time of Tokimune. Though Hakuin did indeed strongly stress the importance of such

cultivation and was a popularizer of specific practices we will examine, we must affirm that these ways of training body, breath, and subtle energetics have much earlier origins. This points again to what I have called the yogic nature of Zen practice: an embodied, whole-being practice engaging not just the mind but the body, breath, and subtle energetic system.

But what then is the actual function of internal energetic cultivation in Zen? That is, how does it contribute to Zen's approach and intent revealed in Bodhidharma's famous lines that we examined? In what manner do these practices give rise to a more profound, subtle samadhi—and thus to the possibility of a more profound kensho—as I described earlier?

We should consider these questions before looking at the practices themselves. Much as we did for the practices of direct pointing, I would now like to speak about the functions of internal energetic cultivation practices in a practical, rather than theoretical, manner.

## **The Functions of Internal Energetic Cultivation Practices**

We may say that internal energetic cultivation practices can function differently according to the conditions of the student. This is no surprise since, as we discussed, all Zen practices may be used generally in at least one of three ways: to help the student dissolve obstructions to awakening, to cause the student to suddenly arrive at awakening, and to help the student revisit and embody awakening as part of the actualization of becoming Buddha.

I repeat these points here so that it will be clear, as with the practices of direct pointing, how practices of internal cultivation serve to fulfill the promise of Bodhidharma's four lines. But speaking now more specifically, we may say that these practices have four main functions:

- Calming and unifying the body-mind
- Radiating vital energy (ki)
- Creating conditions for profound samadhi

- Causing realization to penetrate the body

Let us examine these in more detail.

### ***Calming and Unifying the Body-Mind***

For the practitioner who has yet to enter the gate of kensho, the important thing we should recognize, again, is that obstructions preventing awakening—that is, the knots of habitual delusion—are deeply embedded within the entire body-mind of the human being, not the mind alone. Beginning practitioners learn quickly that the manner of one's breathing, the integration or disordering of one's posture, the degree to which the energetic currents of the body are settled or agitated, the psycho-physical tension stored throughout the body-mind, and other factors will all affect how we experience our existence and how easily—or with what difficulties—we are able to progress along the path.

Thus, in order to recognize our natural clarity in a lasting way, to enter and sustain the samadhi state, and ultimately to see through fundamental delusion and arrive at the awakening we call kensho, it is necessary to integrate a new way of being that encompasses our whole embodied existence. This, simply put, is what genuine practice entails. Anything less, like the wholly psychologized, largely conceptual practice I mentioned earlier, runs the danger of being too shallow to effect lasting transformation. We must recognize that not only the mind but the entire body-mind has arisen in a manner marked by habitual delusion.

It is a crucial point that bears repeated emphasis: effective practice is not simply a matter of correcting our mental “programming” or adopting a new view. It is better to conceive of practice as an *alchemical* undertaking, that is, nothing less than a transformation of this entire psycho-physical phenomenon that we call a human being.

For beginners, then, things like the discovery (or rediscovery) of correct breathing and other simple methods that can serve to relax body and mind and cause the energetic currents of the body to settle

downward, as Hakuin describes in the quote opening this chapter, will have tremendous usefulness right from the start. Again, we learn very quickly that the amounts and degrees of mental chatter, distraction, and fixation we experience are tied directly to such things as the movement of the breath and the degree to which the body's energetic system is agitated. We likewise discover that such bodily and energetic agitations are in fact themselves also caused and exacerbated by an agitated mental state.

In this way, internal energetic practices grant us an experiential understanding making it possible to break what is essentially a destructive, endless loop of contraction and tension in which mind and body negatively condition one another. At the very least, we can start to experience breaks in that loop by using these practices, and so enjoy moments when the body-mind is briefly calmed and functioning in a more integrated way. Eventually we may enter a sustained experience of the body-mind functioning in unity.

### ***Radiating Vital Energy (Kiai)***

There is another thing we quickly discover when we begin using internal cultivation practices: the boundless, buoyant energy—kiai—that manifests when body and mind are balanced.

We have discussed kiai briefly. But here I should clarify that kiai is not something that these practices create. It is, rather, a manifestation of the universal energetic current (ki) that arises within the body-mind when we have sufficiently opened ourselves to it. In this sense, our existence before we become open to kiai is something like a small, stagnant tidal pool, cut off from the larger currents of the sea. But when kiai manifests, it is as if a rising tide has broken through the pool's walls, filling it to overflowing with fresh energy and the dynamic movement of the ocean. In terms of our daily experience, an interesting thing we come to see is that many of our inner obstructions—such as feelings of lethargy, depression, anxiety, and so on—arise more easily when our vital energy is stagnant or weak. But since Zen practice, if rightly directed, causes this energy to flow and radiate strongly through the body-

mind, we will increasingly begin to experience a kind of power and stability that is not so easily disturbed by inner and outer factors.

In other words, through practice we can see that our fundamental delusion is, in fact, not so binding at all when our entire being overflows with a bright, vital inner energy. When we are able to “plug in” to the universal energetic current, it helps us to more easily dissolve and purify the stagnant patterns that have negatively shaped our bodies and minds. The early Edo period Soto Zen monk Suzuki Shosan commented plainly on this on many occasions.

One day the Master said, “The phrase, ‘one should learn to abide always in a state of samadhi [i.e. concentration of mind]’ means that you should never allow your essential energy to escape.”<sup>6</sup>

Shosan was well known for his method of Nio Zen,\* making use of figures in Buddhist iconography. Such figures in fact reveal many concrete aspects of practice to those that have eyes to see. For example, the dynamic flames with which many figures are surrounded represent something of the free, almost wild, incredibly vital kind of energy that marks effective practice. Such power emanates bodily from Zen students when they practice correctly and with balance. This is *kiai*.

Truly, we should understand that the spirit of a genuine Zen practitioner is a buoyant and courageous one, extending the fiery energy of practice outward seamlessly in such a manner that delusive habit can find no gap to enter and obstructing conditions are instantly burned up within the purifying flames of one’s training. It is for experiencing and embodying this kind of energy—a sort of supercharging of one’s practice that carries one along the path with great confidence, fearlessness, and rapidity—that the internal cultivation practices we will examine are so useful.

### ***Creating Conditions for Profound Samadhi***

So those are some ways that internal energetic cultivation can help to rapidly dissolve our obstructions. But what of helping us to enter

samadhi? This also is a crucial point. I have said that the deepest, most subtle samadhi can only manifest when such energetic cultivation is undertaken.

But to explain it more exactly: when the bodily posture is integrated and balanced and the energetic currents of the body are gathered with the breath at the tanden in the manner that these practices train us to do, something very interesting happens. The gross layers of thought and conceptual fixation that we habitually experience slow and then stop. In other words, through cultivation of the tanden the natural clarity of our minds is made apparent in an uncommonly direct way. This is a rather interesting phenomenon.

We have already experienced something of our basic capacity for clarity using many of the direct pointing methods. But now if we integrate the practices of energetic cultivation, we will find that this basic clarity is not only more dynamically revealed but can be much more easily sustained by means of the breath unified with our posture. As these internal cultivation practices come to fruition and the overflowing of vital power further dissolves psycho-physical knots and sticking points, the clear, balanced body-mind that results will be an ideal vessel within which the samadhi state can most profoundly manifest.

An experience at which we may then arrive—perhaps during zazen, or even when simply standing in the balanced manner we learned earlier—is one in which the body itself seems to completely disappear. Since all opposing forces within it are balanced and the subtle energetic currents move freely and powerfully through its entire frame, it is as if we become transparent. We may experience a feeling that there is no longer any division between so-called body and so-called environment: the usual boundaries that we reify between ourselves and the world, between our bodies and minds, and crucially between ourselves and our practice methods all fall utterly away. We experience that our existence, just as it is, is actually marked by a kind of boundless spaciousness, and we are able then to unify ourselves with our practice method within that. Thus, we enter easily into a truly all-encompassing state of samadhi that is



indeed ripe for breakthrough. This is something crucial especially when using such methods as koan and wato in Rinzai training, since it is only by means of such samadhi that the deep import of the koan can be penetrated: we must join the whole body-mind, in seamless absorption, with the koan. We will examine this in greater depth later.

In such a way—that is, in a wholly bodily manner—we can rapidly transcend our fundamental obstructing delusion. This is a much more powerful and rapid approach to awakening than is possible using the mind alone, and so reveals something of why embodied paths like Zen are considered so direct.

### ***Causing Realization to Penetrate the Body***

Finally, after kensho, these practices of energetic cultivation become the foundation for something else that is truly crucial: the lifelong path of fully actualizing embodied awakening, that is, becoming Buddha. As we discussed, the post-kensho path of embodiment requires us to revisit our recognition of intrinsic wisdom repeatedly, bringing all actions of body, speech, and mind into accord with it and letting that wisdom dissolve the deepest knots of residual delusion—jikke—within the body-mind. How is that accomplished?

Something we should know is that the energetic currents of the body flow in accord with the movements of the mind. That is, they will flow—or be hindered—to the degree that our mind manifests nonabiding freedom or fixation. What is also true is that these currents can transform the physical dimension of being in specific ways, for good or ill, in accord with the quality of the mind's state.<sup>7</sup> Grasping these things, we may express the way in which energetic cultivation is important in the post-kensho path of embodiment like this: after awakening, the intrinsic, liberative wisdom we have recognized is made in our practice to “ride” the energetic currents that radiate from the tanden, permeating the body utterly. This releases obstructions within every square centimeter of tissue as well as every corner of the mind, ultimately penetrating even to the centers of our bones until it may be said that each cell vibrates with

awakening. In other words, the true and ultimate fruition of Zen means that our bodies themselves must be transformed through this vehicle of practice engaging the whole body-mind and in the end completely liberated—in a concretely physical manner—within the consuming fire of wisdom.

We are here discussing a great mystery, not easily grasped from these words. But you may have a sense now of why I used the word *alchemical* in relation to this path. The deep meaning of what I am discussing here becomes clear only within one's own body. For now, we should at least know that nothing less than such a transformation of one's whole being constitutes the realization that "the entire universe is the true human body." To arrive at the complete fruition of this is to attain *sokushin jobutsu*:\* buddhahood in this very body. And that itself is the highest fruition of genuine Zen.

From the brief explanations above, I hope you can now understand more clearly how and why these methods of internal energetic cultivation are so useful in the Zen path of "seeing one's nature, becoming Buddha." It is a joyous, bright, and dynamic *kiai* that is the hallmark of genuine Zen practice: the energy of a dragon taking flight up to the heavens, shaking the very foundations of the mountains as it ascends. Even if one happens to be of a naturally meek and gentle disposition that outwardly does not display such energy, the light within one's eyes—and the vibration of one's bodily existence—will still be apparent when present to those that have the eye to see.

In the end, we must say that a Zen that lacks vital energy and bodily engagement may be a kind of intellectual Buddhism, but it is not the vibrant Zen of the Patriarchs who threw themselves—without hesitation or self-cherishing thought—entirely into the path of whole-body practice. On that path of dissolving the ancient fetters that have cast us again and again into the cesspool of samsaric existence from beginningless time, nothing short of an effort engaging one's whole being will be sufficient.

**Regarding *Koshi*, *Hara*, and *Tanden***

I have repeatedly discussed the tanden (navel energy center) and have also mentioned the hara, or lower abdomen, a few times. Now I would like to briefly examine these terms a bit more closely along with a third, *koshi*,\* that is also important to know. Grasping the relationship between these three things will allow us to better engage physically with the actual practices. (Figure 27)

Koshi refers essentially to the entire lower trunk: the area of the midback down through the sacrum, on the sides from the lower ribs down to the hip joints, and in the front from the solar plexus to the pubic bone (encompassing the area marked “1” in the image). Taken as a whole we may think of the koshi as the physical core of the body. It contains not only our digestive, eliminative, and generative organs but also the body’s structural foundation (the pelvis, base of the spine, and notably the psoas muscles that functionally connect upper and lower body), its center of gravity, and the engine, so to speak, of bodily locomotion.



Figure 27: The areas of the *koshi* (1), the *hara* (white circle, 2), and the *tanden* (3).

The *hara*, or lower abdomen, may be thought of as occupying the center of the *koshi*. From top to bottom it encompasses the area from just above the navel to the pubic bone and from side to side the area that lies inside the two iliac crests (the area encompassed by the white circle marked “2” in the image). When breathing is done deeply and with free movement of the diaphragm, as we will shortly see, this area naturally expands upon inhalation and drops upon

exhalation. In the *tanden soku* manner of breathing that we will learn, this movement will be transformed somewhat dramatically.

In a very real way, the *hara* is the center of the body's strength. A quick method to understand what is functionally meant by this is to do the following: place your hand on your abdomen below the navel, and deeply cough or clear your throat. The depth of the resulting movement reveals not only the location of the *hara* but also how it works. Were you to be tasked with pushing a heavy object, such as a car stuck in snow, you would at the moment of pushing almost unconsciously exhale deeply into the lower abdomen and create the same pressure there that you felt when clearing your throat (though perhaps in a less staccato and more sustained manner). This reveals the manner in which the body knits itself together using the breath in order to unify upper and lower body. It makes possible the generation of tremendous—even explosive—power.

In terms of our posture, it also makes sense that the *hara* must display a kind of strength. The supporting column of the spine lies in the back, but in fact there is nothing holding up the fronts of our bodies. It is only the function of the *hara*, powered by the diaphragmatic breath, that completes the ability of the entire *koshi* area to serve as the body's foundation and core. Furthermore, the subtle pressure that Zen students learn to hold in the *hara* presses backward upon the spine, causing it to simultaneously lengthen upward and downward at approximately the juncture of the lumbar and thoracic vertebrae. This is an important foundation of the balanced, erect posture that is so important for *zazen*.<sup>8</sup>

The *tanden*, finally, refers to the energetic center that in many maps of subtle body anatomy is located near the navel (essentially, in the center of the *hara*: the point marked “3” in the image). As found in various yogic traditions, such maps do not always agree with one another exactly and so are best considered tools aiding the actualization of specific psycho-physical practices rather than absolute realities. One may find systems specifying nine, seven, six, five, or three such centers, and in fact three *tanden*—at the navel, the heart, and within the head—are commonly mentioned together in

Chinese sources. Still, this navel center, called in Japanese the *kikai*\* (or “ocean of energy”) tanden, is something commonly engaged with in the practices of many systems.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of anatomical correspondence there has been some suggestion that the tanden refers to the enteric nervous system, or else to the abdominal aorta. While I cannot speak to this, I do think it likely that intuitive recognition of anatomical features has informed the mapping of such things. For our purposes, we may locate the tanden a few inches below the navel and somewhat inside the body. Males and females may have slightly different senses of where this point is located, but through the methods we will examine, each can arrive at a functional understanding of the point’s location that will be useful for practice. In all cases, we can say that the tanden will be experienced as the central focus of breath cultivation, and the place from which internal energy is made to radiate throughout the body.

Something I would here like to stress in general regarding our concern with the tanden and this region of the body: it is solely a practical concern, for the purpose of actualizing the practice methods we will learn. Aside from the effects that will arise from using these methods, there is nothing particularly important about the lower abdomen and no reason to fixate upon it in an ultimate sense. I say this because I have elsewhere seen instruction given that one should “put one’s mind on the center [i.e., the tanden] and keep it there.” But this is a misunderstanding: the cultivation of the energetic center is not a simple matter of placing mental attention on the belly but rather, as we will see, an exacting physical usage of body and breath that must be mastered. In this regard we should not forget the words of Takuan Soho:

If you try to keep the mind imprisoned below the navel the very idea of keeping it below the navel will take up the mind and the result will be the opposite of what was intended. Above all, there will be no freedom.<sup>10</sup>

## **A Note on Posture**

Before we begin, it will finally be important to say a few words regarding postural integrity. Correct posture in Zen practice could well be the subject of an entire work on its own, and there is no way here for me to give anything other than general advice since the needs of each student will inevitably vary. But earlier, when we examined the manner of correct standing, I mentioned the importance of an integrated pelvic alignment. Here I would like to stress that point once more.

It is a common error of modern people to adopt a posture exhibiting excessive curve in the low back (lordosis). This general trend might be blamed upon our reliance on chairs and our generally sedentary lives. But as for Zen students, I have tried to understand why this aberration seems to be even more pronounced within their meditation postures. In many meditation halls, you may observe students exhibiting artificially erect postures with backs arched and chests thrust out, rather than grounded postures exhibiting the integration of upper and lower body.

After some years of wondering about this, I realized that the advice sometimes found in Zen books to “push forward with the hips” during zazen is partly to blame. “Hips” is often used to translate the Japanese word *koshi* which, as I have said, refers to the entire lower trunk. But many modern people mistakenly identify the iliac crests, that is, the top of the pelvis, to be their hips. (In fact the hip joints are quite a bit lower.) Thus, in response to that instruction meditators will often tilt the tops of their pelvises forward when sitting in meditation—creating excessive lordosis—believing that this is correct. (Figure 28)

That is my theory at least, and discussion I have had with many Zen practitioners strongly supports it. But whatever the reasons for this postural error, what is clear is that there are many people practicing zazen with an excessively arched back that completely precludes free movement of the diaphragm and thus any deep breathing at all.<sup>[11](#)</sup>



Figure 28: Incorrect seated posture displaying excessive lordosis.

In such cases it would be futile to attempt even the most basic of the internal energetic cultivation practices we will examine.

Therefore, I would like to stress again that a correct, integrated pelvic alignment is one in which the solar plexus, stomach, and low back are all relaxed, and no effort is made to artificially arch the back. The sacrum will then naturally settle or drop downward. (Figure 29)





Figure 29: A more integrated seated posture with the sacrum allowed to drop.

If you remain unsure why this is so important, there is a simple experiment you might try. Sit first in a posture with your back greatly arched and then a second time with your back relaxed, as in figures 28 and 29. In each instance, attempt to take a deep, diaphragmatic breath, filling your lungs to their full capacity and causing the belly to expand upon inhalation. You will immediately find that this is nearly impossible to do with excessive lordosis.

A second thing you may try will be somewhat familiar, as it uses the method of pressing on the solar plexus that we examined earlier. This time, sit upright in a comfortable posture and press that spot as we learned, letting your fist or fingers sink gently into the solar plexus a little deeper with each exhalation. When you have done so,

observe the alignment of your pelvis and the amount of curve in your low back that manifests. If you have used the method correctly, you will see that this way of pressing the solar plexus causes the back to relax such that the sacrum drops into a correct position. You will also notice that the hara takes on an appearance of round fullness. In this way, pressing on the solar plexus shows us how our bodies will eventually appear—constantly and unconsciously—once we have later mastered tanden soku: a roundness will manifest in the lower abdomen, and the solar plexus will be so relaxed as to exhibit concavity. Note also that the navel here points at an upward angle; this is another significant point that we will discuss later. (Figure 30)



Figure 30: Pressing the solar plexus reveals various things about the hara.

Much more could be said about this. But for now, please keep these points in mind as we begin to examine the actual practices.

## **An Outline for Practice**

What follows now is an outline of the progressive training program I will present in following chapters, along with some brief explanations. This presents a selection of what I have considered the most useful practices of internal energetic cultivation, arranged in a manner allowing for gradual mastery. The focus here is upon grasping the central pillar of that training: *tanden soku*, the breathing method centered on the navel energy center.

## ***Foundational Practices***

Two practices will aid us in beginning our training:

FUKUSHIKI KOKYU: Simple abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing, a necessary prerequisite.

HAKUIN'S NANSO NO HO PRACTICE: The famous “soft butter” visualization of Hakuin Zenji. We will use this practice not only for its own benefits but to help us avoid problems that can arise from improper practice of the other methods.

## ***Basic Tanden Soku***

This breathing method is the heart of our internal energetic training and a central practice especially of Rinzai Zen. We will approach this in three steps:

USE OF THE OBI\* (BELT): A wide belt or sash assists our training of the breath by providing tactile feedback reinforcing correct body usage.

TRAINING THE INHALATION PHASE: We first cultivate the dynamic quality of inhalation, testing all sides of the *koshi* for expansion.

TRAINING THE EXHALATION PHASE: We next learn the actual, all-important body usage of tanden soku to “set” the breath in the hara using the diaphragm and pelvic floor, and to maintain its power there throughout the cycle of respiration.

### ***Practices to Increase Energetic Depth and Power***

After sufficiently grasping the body usage of tanden soku, the student may then learn various practices to increase the depth and energetic vitality of the tanden-centered breath:

HAKUIN'S NAIKAN NO HO PRACTICE: This second practice transmitted by Hakuin powerfully deepens tanden soku and integrates it more broadly within the frame of the body.

DYNAMIC A-UN BREATHING: This is an energetic, even ferocious way of breathing using the mantric syllables we encountered earlier in part one: A and UN. It enables us to bodily cultivate an energy of great, indomitable intensity.

KATSU/KIAI PRACTICES: These are sharp, explosive vocalizations engaging the hara. The katsu we have already discussed. The word *kiai* here does not refer to manifest energy (as I have used it previously): the term can also refer to a kind of sharp shout familiar to those experienced in martial art training.

### ***Practices of Refinement***

While maintaining the intensity of energy that has been cultivated, the student next uses various practices to both lengthen and refine the tanden-centered breath:

BREATHING THE SYLLABLE A: We will use this practice to greatly lengthen especially the exhalation phase and to become sensitive to the movements of subtle energetic currents that accompany the breath.

CHANTING PRACTICE: Texts commonly recited in Zen can have ritual use as well as conceptual content. But here we will examine the practice of chanting to further refine tanden soku and study the effects of vibration and resonance.

### ***Seamless Integration***

Finally, the student must train to integrate a constant and subtle tanden-centered breath. We will examine how this may be done:

IN ZAZEN: In its fruition, tanden soku—slowing during meditation to only a few breaths per minute and manifesting a subtle but constant holding of energetic power in the hara—supports the arising of a truly profound samadhi.

IN DAILY ACTIVITY: Integration of subtle tanden soku within daily activity means that samadhi may be brought seamlessly into everything we do, as we enjoy an upwelling of vital energy.

After completing our examination of the practices in this outline, we will then in the remaining chapters discuss some additional Zen practices and their applications from that standpoint.

Though I have presented this outline here, I should remind again that individuals must of course be careful to learn and practice according to their unique conditions: there is no one-size-fits-all training system, and an outline like this could never be suited to every student. There also exist many more practice methods than I have included in this book. It must remain the task of the teacher to determine which methods are appropriate for an individual and how to alter their order and application (as is often necessary) to fit the situation. Note also that practices may be used for more than one purpose. To give an example, the practice of breathing the syllable A that we will learn is useful for lengthening and refining the breath as presented here but could also be used by beginners to learn or reinforce the basic body usage of tanden soku, to increase its depth and power, and so on.<sup>12</sup> There are many instances like this.

With that said, let us begin now to explore the selected internal energetic cultivation practices in the order I have outlined.

## 5

# Foundational Practices

**THE FOUNDATION OF** our internal energetic cultivation training consists of two practices. Both could in fact be useful for almost anyone even if they do not further pursue this training or practice Zen at all. But here they will especially be useful to us in the beginning of our training, as they can help us calm and unify the body-mind in preparation for learning the body usage of tanden soku.

### ***Fukushiki Kokyu***

Fukushiki kokyu, literally “abdominal breathing,” is an essential foundation of all Zen training, including the practices of internal energetic cultivation and especially zazen. I described it in a general manner in part one, but here we will examine it in more detail along with a simple exercise to learn it.

We might begin by recognizing that fukushiki kokyu is not a special kind of cultivated breathing unique to Zen. It is just correct, natural human breathing and may be simply described as follows. Since the diaphragm is the primary muscle involved in respiration, it moves when we breathe: as we inhale it contracts and drops downward, and then with exhalation it relaxes and returns upward. If all is functioning well, during a deep inhalation we should see that

the belly expands or rises as a result of the diaphragm's downward pressure upon the abdominal cavity. Likewise, when exhalation occurs and the diaphragm relaxes upward, the belly will be seen to deflate or fall since the diaphragm is no longer pushing downward.

Actually, it is not just the belly that rises and falls: there is expansion and contraction in the entire lower trunk, and with correct breathing even the sacrum may be felt to move. We will return to that later, but for now it is enough to understand that with a healthy, relaxed manner of breathing the belly will manifest obvious movement. Of course, if we take a truly deep breath the movement cascades upward from the belly into the chest, which will also expand. This too is natural. But even so, with correct breathing the observable movement should *originate* in the belly since this means that the diaphragm is functioning properly.

I believe all of this is easy enough to understand. What I am describing is simply the manner in which our bodies have evolved to breathe. But now we might reflect on a disturbing fact: while young children and even animals for the most part breathe efficiently and naturally with movement centered in the abdomen as I have described, many human adults do not breathe this way at all. With bodies bound up from tension (both physical and emotional) and from largely sedentary lifestyles including the overuse of chairs, we often see that modern people no longer have free movement of the diaphragm beyond early adulthood. Their bellies, in fact, move only in a minimal way.<sup>1</sup> To compensate for this, the body will recruit other muscles to help expand the chest cavity: those of the shoulders, the upper back, the intercostals, and so on. The result is that during inhalation movement is seen to originate not in the abdomen but in the upper trunk, and it is primarily the chest that rises and falls rather than the belly.

Aside from its inefficiency, what is wrong with this common way of breathing centered in the chest? Persons who become habitual “chest breathers” will in fact experience real harm to their well-being. Their shallow, chest-centered breath is not only caused by tension but in fact causes and reinforces tension. A truly deep breath—all the way to



the bottom of one's lungs—can rarely happen, and so over time the release of physical and mental tension becomes difficult to accomplish. It may eventually become impossible. Meanwhile, gas exchange in the lungs occurs at only a fraction of what it could. This means that the rate of habitual respiration increases, triggering yet further effects.<sup>2</sup>

Breathing like this, we may eventually feel that we have completely lost the ability to relax and can no longer recall a time when we felt grounded in our bodies. As years go by, psycho-physical tension—manifesting also as mental anxiety, irritability, fear, inability to focus, and a host of other symptoms—becomes our permanent condition.

From the standpoint of the body's subtle energetic system, we can also say that shallow, tense breathing of this kind causes great harm. We become completely unbalanced as energetic currents, which should normally be settled at the tanden and in the lower portion of the body, rise up. Symptoms that reveal this include feelings of chronic heat, pressure, and tension in the head and neck, while the lower extremities and feet may often feel cold. We may have chronic headaches. We may begin to experience unusual sensitivity to the weather or other conditions, feeling that things like cold, damp, and wind cut through us—or that heat oppresses us—in ways we did not experience when younger. And perhaps most significantly, we find that our gross thought activity, mental chatter, and worry all increase dramatically: we are almost completely unable to experience calm clarity within our minds.

How could it be possible for such a person to practice Zen deeply? Indeed, unless we are able to learn (or relearn) basic abdominal breathing and restore the balanced functioning of the body-mind, we are unlikely to experience any progress at all. Even things like basic zazen will not manifest the usual signs of fruition, and we will be unable to enter samadhi of any great depth or duration. Sitting for many years like that, stewing in our own thoughts and tensions and calling it “Zen,” is not something to praise and not a situation in

which we should urge anyone to persevere. It is simply a horrible waste of time and opportunity.

And yet there are many practitioners like this who do not even know the connection between respiration and their meditation or who remain unaware that their unbalanced manner of breathing hinders them. They do not know these things because their teachers did not instruct them. This is something truly tragic. It is especially tragic because the practice of fukushiki kokyu is so easy to learn, and by using it we may—with some time and effort—essentially reset our nervous systems and enter into Zen practice from a more deeply embodied place. As I said earlier, it is precisely these kinds of obstructions that the practices of internal energetic cultivation can help us to dissolve.

I hope that I have made the importance of this very simple, natural way of breathing clear. Even if we do not ever practice Zen, we should all breathe in the deepest, most healthy manner we can, as our bodies have evolved to do. This is another of the gifts that Zen practice can give to the world: a reminder regarding the importance of the breath, which in truth connects mind and body, animates our whole being with life, and ultimately serves as a gateway to profound wisdom.

Following are the instructions for fukushiki kokyu. Though presented here as a foundational practice of internal energetic cultivation, of all the practices we will examine, I would like the reader to feel free to share this one with anyone who may benefit. As long as no tension or forcefulness is used, this method will be of great use to almost everyone. Much like the way that the Zen manner of using the eyes we examined earlier can transform one's life dramatically with only a little effort, so this method of diaphragmatic breathing can help us to regain well-being in remarkable ways.

1. To begin, lie down on your back and relax. If you can rest in that position with your legs outstretched, do so. Those who suffer from back pain, however, may find it easier to bend the legs so

that the feet are flat and the knees point toward the ceiling, and this also is fine.

2. Before beginning to learn *fukushiki kokyu*, it will be good to examine your current state of breathing. That will give you an idea of your starting point. To do this, place one hand on the lower abdomen at the *tanden* (about two inches below your navel). The second hand may be placed on your chest at the sternum. (Figure 31)



Figure 31: Position to practice *fukushiki kokyu*.

3. Now, though we have already discussed the correct way of breathing, try to forget this for a moment! Just breathe naturally in your normal way without attempting to change or correct it. Inhale deeply, noticing which hand moves and when. When you exhale, do the same.

4. After a few breaths, now examine: Which hand moves first when inhaling? That is, in what part of the body does the inhalation originate? Is it the abdomen, the chest, or some combination of both? And as you continue to inhale, does the belly expand, the chest, or both? Which rises upward more?
5. When you exhale try to notice the same things. Where does the exhalation begin? What sinks down, and when? Where is the most movement? After a few minutes of this examination you should have a clear picture of how you are breathing naturally. Now we will begin to learn fukushiki kokyu.
6. Remove the hand from your chest now, letting it rest on the floor, and press into your belly with the hand that remains there. The idea is just to apply light pressure with your palm so that you have the sensation of something resting on your abdomen.
7. Now you are ready to inhale: as you breathe in, see if you can push up against your hand such that it rises toward the ceiling. Can you make your belly rise when you inhale? Use the pressure of your hand to give your abdomen something against which to push. Inhale slowly and smoothly, and as you do, concentrate on breathing down into your belly and making it rise, pushing your hand up toward the ceiling. (Figure 32)



Figure 32: Fukushiki kokyu: the belly rises with inhalation.

8. If you wish, after inhaling you may rest for a moment holding that air in. Keep the belly extended upward and relax. Then when it is time to exhale, you need not do anything special: just let the belly and your hand drop together. Release all tension as you allow the air to flow out. (Figure 33)



Figure 33: Fukushiki kokyu: the belly falls with exhalation.

9. Once you have the hang of this just repeat the cycle for as long as you like. Using no tension or force, simply inhale down to the belly such that it pushes your hand toward the ceiling. When you exhale, let your belly and the hand sink back down. Stay relaxed and enjoy the sensation of your belly moving. Once it begins to do so freely it will mean that you are breathing more naturally and correctly.
10. If you find that this becomes easy over time and your belly is moving very freely with little tension in the body, see if you can make the breath deeper. Place your hand lower down, just above the pubic bone. Can you cause your inhalation to expand the belly that far down? More difficult: can you cause the *initiation* of the inhalation to be centered that low? Eventually, as more tension is released and you retrain your body, you will be able to easily expand the entire abdomen—from the pubic bone up to just below the solar plexus—with each inhalation.

And with each exhalation you will come to feel that layers of stored tension begin to fall away.

Once we can perform fukushiki kokyu with some ease while lying down, then naturally we should begin to integrate this way of breathing within all our practice. Whatever method we are using, including zazen and also many of the methods of direct pointing I described in part one, we should make this natural, abdominal breathing the core of it. Breathing in this way will help us to begin liberating a natural zazen posture from within the shell of habitual tension that we usually carry. And it will drive our concentration—our effort to embody whatever method of practice we are using—rapidly deeper.

At the same time, we must train ourselves to bring deep diaphragmatic breathing into our daily activity. It will be desirable to eventually breathe this way all the time, unconsciously. But until this is attained, at least you now know how to use it. During the day, at any time you feel flustered or anxious you may begin to notice how your breath rises up, becoming shallower, and to see how this contributes to tension, anxiety, and spinning thoughts. At such times check your posture, relax, and just place a hand or hands on your belly. Breathe to them, causing your belly to rise and fall, and soon you will feel your condition change. This is also something wonderful to do at night when lying down to sleep, or in the morning after waking but before you rise.

In this way we may quickly and easily begin balancing our internal energetic systems. We can learn to calm the body-mind when it is agitated and return to a place of more grounded clarity. Though it is something simple to learn, the benefits of this practice for our lives cannot be overstated.

Tanden soku, the crucial practice we will examine later, is a trained, cultivated way of breathing. Though it builds upon fukushiki kokyu and works with ways of using the body we inherently understand, we cannot in general say that it is natural for human beings to breathe that way. It is in some sense a refinement of

fukushiki kokyu and certainly an incredibly profound method handed down to us after many centuries of yogic exploration. But we will be unable to begin learning tanden soku until we fully regain this simple abdominal breathing: fukushiki kokyu. Once you have confirmed with a teacher that you have gained sufficient skill in this basic, natural way of diaphragmatic breathing, then it will be possible to go further.

### **Hakuin's *Nanso no Ho* Practice**

I have previously explained this second foundational practice in another work with slightly more commentary.<sup>3</sup> I repeat most of it here since the practice is so valuable.

In that earlier work I presented nanso no ho as something from which even beginners can gain immense benefit, and this is true: nanso no ho is simply good for our health and nearly always a helpful thing to practice. It is tremendously effective in calming the body-mind and causing the energetic currents of the body to settle. But as mentioned in the training outline I presented earlier, nanso no ho has another important purpose. We will use it after each session of our internal energetic cultivation practice because it serves as a preventative against problems that could result from improper or overly tense training.

The term *nanso no ho* is generally translated as “soft butter method,” for reasons that will soon be clear. Within it the body’s energy is visualized moving downward, from crown to feet, sweeping away tension, energetic obstructions, and disease as it goes. It requires little further explanation beyond the actual instructions, so here they are. I will first explain the full method described by Hakuin and then also a concise method.

1. Sit or lie in any comfortable position. You may close the eyes or leave them open as you wish. Breathing in a relaxed manner, visualize as follows:



- On the crown of the head, suddenly there has appeared a mass—about the size and shape of an egg and the soft consistency of butter—of a wondrous healing substance. This substance is composed of every medicinal herb and panacea one can imagine. (Here, you may imagine this substance in whatever manner brings it to life for you: for example, perhaps it is slightly warm or gives off a wonderful scent like sandalwood, and so on.)
  - Watching this substance, the heat of one's body begins to warm and melt it. Feel it slowly running down to cover the scalp and face—and also within the head, descending *through* the body, into the skull, behind the eyes—always moving downward slowly. Wherever it goes, imagine that this substance warms, softens, and heals the tissue there. All tension, disease, scars, negativity, and trauma of any kind within body and mind melt like lumps of frozen, dirty ice and run downward ahead of the wondrous substance. Where this substance has passed through, the body now feels light, open, soft, and warm, relaxed and vibrantly healthy.
  - The healing substance continues its downward journey: into the neck and over the shoulders, down into the torso, through the heart and lungs, the upper and lower arms, into the hands. Visualize and strive to vividly feel all of this.
  - Descending farther, it moves into the low back and hips, down into the bowels, melting all disease and negativity, healing any distress, relaxing and opening the body, leaving it feeling light and free.
  - Farther down now, it moves into the upper legs, the knees, the lower legs, and finally to the feet, pushing out all disease and obstructions, which flow out the bottoms of the feet like filthy water. The entire body is now left warm, relaxed, clear as crystal, and vibrating with energy.
2. This completes one round of the visualization. You may rest at this point for as long as you wish, visualizing strongly that vital energy has descended to fill the lower body. It is as if you are

sitting up to the waist in a steaming hot bath infused with fragrant, healing herbs: visualize the warmth of it penetrating the body from the waist downward.

3. When you are ready to continue, visualize that suddenly there appears upon the head another mass of the wondrous healing substance. It begins to melt, and so repeat the downward-moving visualization. You may continue with as many rounds of this practice as you wish.

There is no harm in practicing nanso no ho like this for as long as you like. What is important to remember is that your visualization should always move downward, from upper body to lower. As Hakuin explained, the essential point of this method is to cause the vital energy to settle in the lower regions of the body, filling the area from the koshi down into the legs and feet. Because this energy follows our mental attention, we should never visualize in an opposite manner that it is rising.

Once you have gained some skill in the visualization that drives nanso no ho, and having also practiced fukushiki kokyu, it will be possible for you to use a concise version of the practice that can be done within the space of a single breath. Here are the instructions.

1. Spreading your vision out, inhale through the nostrils to the belly using fukushiki kokyu. As you do so and your belly rises, visualize that you are drawing the energetic currents of the body down from the crown of your head into the hara. There they concentrate and circulate at the tanden. With this, feel also that tension completely drops away from your upper body.
2. Now exhaling, visualize that with the outbreath these currents radiate throughout the body but especially downward into the legs and to the soles of the feet. The lower part of your body, from the waist down to the feet, is now also completely relaxed, as well as warm in the manner described in the full version of the practice.

Finally, I will mention a variant of this concise practice: you could combine the visualization of energetic movement—unified with the breath—with the silent intonation of the A-UN syllables that we learned in part one. Intoning the mantric syllable A silently to yourself as you inhale, visualize the movement of energy in the manner described. Intoning the syllable UN as you exhale, do the same. This is a wonderful practice.

This completes the chapter explaining foundations of our internal energetic cultivation. As we now move to the central practice, the breathing method of tanden soku, please do not forget: the natural diaphragmatic breathing of fukushiki kokyu must serve as the basis for all the methods we will examine, and after every session of practice you should take up Hakuin's nanso no ho method for a few minutes or a few rounds of the visualization. This is the way to maintain your health during your study of internal energetic cultivation and to progress without encountering obstacles.

## Basic Tanden Soku

**AFTER MENTIONING TANDEN SOKU** so many times thus far in the text, we will now at last begin to examine this way of breathing that is so important in Rinzai Zen practice and that serves as the heart of our internal energetic cultivation. This is the manner of using the body that, unified with the breath, causes the energetic currents of the body to powerfully gather at the tanden and begin radiating in the way I have described. Once *fukushiki kokyu* has been fully integrated, the student may start to practice this.

In this chapter we will break this body usage down into several steps. First, we will discuss use of the *obi*, or belt, that serves as an aid to learning. Then we will begin working with the inhalation phase of *tanden soku*. Finally, we will work with the exhalation phase and grasp the all-important set of the *hara* that establishes the *tanden*-centered power.

### Use of the *Obi*

*Obi* is a Japanese word for a belt or sash. In this case, it refers to a kind of wide cloth belt worn over the kimono underlayer of the Zen monastic robes and beneath the black outer robe (*koromo*). This belt is sufficiently long to wrap multiple times around the lower trunk. Here I might also mention the *shukin*, another kind of belt that is

worn on top of the koromo. This can be of the rather thick, padded sort shown here or else a thinner rope of hemp or silk. (Figures 34–35)



Figure 34: The *obi* worn over the kimono with monastic robes.



Figure 35: The *shukin*, another kind of belt worn on top of monastic robes.

Thus, in the traditional Zen practice clothing there are two belts worn one on top of the other. What could be the usefulness of this? Naturally they have practical function: the inner belt closes the kimono, while the outer one secures the koromo to the body. Historically there are also less obvious practical uses. For example, a rope shukin worn by a traveling monk could be pressed into service for gathering wood, securing items on one's back, climbing a tree, or even apprehending and restraining a rowdy individual!<sup>1</sup>

But of relevance to our training here, we should learn how an obi serves as an aid to breath cultivation and particularly the training of tanden soku. Essentially, it functions as a kind of meditation strap providing useful tactile feedback helping us to learn the breathing method.

For the practices that will follow, the student should obtain an obi or other such belt that can be securely fastened around the body at a

height just below the navel. For laypersons who do not have monastic clothing, modern martial art belts of the most common type (also called obi) are fine for this and may easily be obtained. Especially ideal, though, is the kind of obi used in the art of *iaijutsu* or *iaido*, the study of drawing and striking with a sword. This wide, long belt is nearly identical to the inner obi worn under the Zen monastic robes.<sup>2</sup> Finally, you may even find it easy to make your own obi: a simple sash of thick canvas will be sufficient. In this case, if it is sufficiently thick it will be fine if it does not wrap around the body multiple times, and you could even secure it using hook-and-loop closures.

Whatever you choose to use, please note in the above images the place on the body where the obi is worn. As much as possible it should be made to lie over the area just below the navel: the *hara*, or lower abdomen, that is the seat of the *tanden*. It is incorrect to wear the obi high on the waist and above the navel since this will be mostly useless for training the *hara*.

Now regarding tightness: the obi should not be worn so tightly that it causes constriction or discomfort but snugly enough that inhalation to the belly—that is, when breathing in the manner of *fukushiki kokyu*—causes the stomach to press firmly against it. If correct, you should be able to insert a few fingers between your stomach and the obi when you are relaxed and the belly drops, as in the moments after exhalation. But when you inhale fully to the belly, that space should close such that it will be difficult to insert your fingers.

I should mention that aside from this use of the obi as a training aid it is not necessary to wear traditional clothing for the practices that follow. It will be fine to just wear something loose and comfortable when you practice at home (and the monastic robes are obviously not something one would wear unless ordained anyway).<sup>3</sup> That being said, lay Zen practitioners do commonly wear another kind of training clothing when they practice. These garments are simply traditional Japanese everyday wear, but they remain useful today because they also integrate the obi and lend themselves well to

the general manner of training the body that we will examine. Actually, they are similar to what is worn in some traditional Japanese martial arts like iaido, kendo (fencing), and *kyudo* (archery): the set consists of a cloth top closed by the obi and a kind of baggy trousers (*hakama*) that are then secured to the obi by means of long ties (*himo*). These ties also wrap around the body in the area of the koshi, further reinforcing the feeling of snugness. The hakama additionally has a semirigid panel on the low back (the *koshita*) that can also be used to good effect in breath cultivation.

For these reasons and others—not the least of which is their sheer practicality—traditional training garments like these will be worth getting at some point in your training. We have yet to come up with Western-style practice clothing that fulfills all the same functions so well. (Figure 36)





Figure 36: Typical lay practice clothing including the *hakama*.

Now that we have discussed the obi at some length, we are ready to begin using it. To learn the basic body usage of *tanden soku*, we will first work with inhalation.

## Training the Inhalation Phase

Earlier when we learned the important practice of natural diaphragmatic breathing, fukushiki kokyu, we observed that if we breathe naturally, the belly rises upon inhalation. With some practice we learn that the more we relax, release habitual tension in the body, and let the diaphragm move freely, the more expansively and deeply this movement of the belly will manifest.

Now we will start to use the obi to reinforce our inhalation. By giving us something we can feel as it presses against the belly, the obi provides feedback that strengthens the deep diaphragmatic breath. It is a very simple method, and here are the instructions:

1. Put on your obi in the manner that was described: around the core of your body just below the navel and with sufficient snugness that when you inhale, your belly may be felt to press against it.
2. Now practice fukushiki kokyu as we learned earlier. When you inhale deeply, observe: Does your stomach expand to press against the obi firmly? As you continue breathing, see if you are able to increase this expansion so that the obi is felt even more firmly against your stomach when you inhale. Do not use tension or force in any way, and stay relaxed. Just observe how much expansion of the lower abdomen is created when you inhale and how the obi's pressure provides a kind of feedback that makes it easier for your body to learn this.

This is an excellent practice to develop a deep, dynamic inhalation phase. But there is something else we may notice when we use the obi this way, and this leads us to an important insight: since the obi wraps around our entire bodies, we may begin to notice that it is not just the belly—that is, the front of the lower trunk—that expands upon inhalation. Actually, if we inhale in a truly deep and relaxed manner the sides of the body under the rib cage, and even the back of the lower trunk in the region of the sacrum and lower vertebrae, will also expand outward when we breathe in. Correct inhalation, we

soon realize, does not simply cause our bellies to inflate; *the entire low trunk will manifest an increased fullness*, much like a balloon squeezed from the top expands evenly at its bottom. Again, it is the obi that helps us to feel this.

In this way the obi can train our bodies to inhale deeply in such a manner that expansion is felt at both front and back as well as both sides, simultaneously. This feedback in turn allows us to release even more tension, and so an even deeper breath and freer expansion can manifest. We may even notice that there is some particular spot of tension—for example, perhaps on one side below the ribs we are habitually tight—and this is revealed to us when we sense that expansion against the obi in that spot is somewhat hindered. Noticing this, we can then put effort into using the breath to relax and expand that place of tightness. We are thus over time able to dissolve habitual stored tension quite effectively using just our inhalations and the feedback of the obi.

It is precisely this full, even expansion that we will learn to set and gently hold in the hara during the exhalation phase. But the point we should grasp here is that the hara, though commonly referred to as the lower abdomen, is not actually in its function limited to the belly. It encompasses the entire core of the body on all sides as I have described. By training the inhalation in an all-expansive way using the obi, we are setting the stage well for what comes next.

Now, along with using the obi in this way to examine expansion, there are some things you can do with a partner that will also reinforce the necessary dynamic quality of inhalation. In this case it will be a living person providing tactile feedback to you using both touch and words, so this can be especially revealing. And once you have clearly felt with your own hands on a partner what we are seeking during this inhalation phase, you will then also be able to test yourself in a similar manner.

Here are the instructions for working with a partner to develop the inhalation phase of *tanden soku*:

1. Sit in any position that is comfortable for you and that allows correct posture. Zazen posture is fine, as is the kneeling posture called *seiza*\* or even seated in a chair. Your partner may stand or kneel beside you.
2. First we will examine the front and back of the body. Your partner will place one hand on your belly just below the navel and the other on the low back over the sacrum, applying firm but gentle pressure inward with both hands so that you can clearly feel them. (Figure 37)



Figure 37: Testing inhalation with a partner: front and back.

3. Now take a deep inhalation to the hara in the manner of *fukushiki kokyu*. Here is your challenge: Can you make both of your partner's hands rise or expand outward? If you have practiced diaphragmatic breathing sufficiently, it will be easy

enough to cause movement of the hand on your belly. But can you also cause the hand on your low back to move?

4. Naturally the movement of the low back during inhalation will not be as great as that of the belly. Still, there should be distinct, discernible movement of the sacrum and low back as inhalation occurs. If you have difficulty achieving this, relax, ask your partner to apply even firmer pressure, and set your mind to expand against both hands simultaneously as you inhale. Your body will be able to learn how to do so using that feedback from your partner. Of course, your partner can also tell you verbally what is felt, if there is movement lacking in some place, and so on.
5. When you have been able to bring simultaneous movement into both the front and back of your body upon inhalation, now you may test the sides. This time your partner will sit behind you and insert fingers just under both sides of the rib cage. There may be some minor discomfort from this, but in fact the pressure will help to release habitual stored tension there.  
(Figure 38)



Figure 38: Testing inhalation with a partner: fingers inserted under the ribs.

6. Inhaling deeply now, see if you can cause the fingers of both of your partner's hands to be pushed outward by the expansion. It is especially common to observe that one side expands less, or slightly later, than the other. Using your partner's feedback, strive to balance this and make the movement greater. (Figure 39)



Figure 39: If inhalation is correct, the fingers are pushed out.

7. Now that you have tested the front, back, and both sides, you may be able to guess what is coming next: we will test all of them at once. Ask your partner to press on the front and back while you insert your own fingers under the rib cage on both sides. (Figure 40)



Figure 40: Testing inhalation on all four sides at once, with a partner.

In this way, your body will have four points of tactile feedback to expand against simultaneously as you inhale. Again, if you observe that one of these points exhibits hindered movement or seems to move late compared to the others, work with it: relax, set your mind to expand at that place with each deep diaphragmatic inhalation, and gradually you will release the tension.

8. Finally, here is the way to work with your own hands if you do not have a partner: placing one on the front (or back) and another with fingers inserted under the rib cage on one side, inhale deeply. See if you are able to cause movement in both hands. After a few breaths, you can then switch sides. (Figure 41)



Naturally, if you grasp the function of these practices using your hands (or your partner's), you will know even more clearly how to use the obi that similarly provides simultaneous feedback around the entire circumference of your lower trunk. When you are confident that you have a deep and even expansion of the entire hara as the diaphragm moves powerfully downward during inhalation, then it will be time to begin working with the crucial exhalation phase. That is what we will examine next.



Figure 41: Testing inhalation for oneself: front (or back) and one side.

## **Training the Exhalation Phase**

Beginning to train our exhalations, we will encounter now the distinctive body usage that defines *tanden soku*.

As I described briefly before, and we began to practice in part one, this is marked by a closing of the anal sphincter and a gentle contraction or “lift” of the entire pelvic floor during exhalation. You may envision the purpose of this to be establishing a sort of base or cup, which then holds the subtle pressure of the diaphragm from above that we will endeavor to maintain. In this way, even though we are exhaling air, a firmness or fullness will remain in the hara. Unlike the natural breathing of fukushiki kokyu, in which the belly expands when inhaling and falls upon exhalation, the belly will fall very little during tanden soku: there will be no moment that the psycho-physical power being held in the hara will completely dissipate. But to accomplish this we must first practice consciously and patiently with the body, paying great attention to details.<sup>4</sup>

Before we examine this, I should remind again that it is useless to practice tanden soku if one has not first established a constant, unconscious, and relaxed natural belly breath. I should also remind that we must always practice gently, without undue tension. Tanden soku is an exacting practice, not an exercise of gross physical strength. Practitioners who attempt it before they are ready, who have misunderstood the method, or who have been taught in a mistaken manner often make the error of tensing the abdominal muscles, or else pressing down with excessive strength using the diaphragm. The latter error especially can cause problems of a subtle energetic sort. It can also cause some rather less subtle problems: hernia or hemorrhoids. I therefore wish to urge the reader again to not practice such things without guidance from a qualified teacher. It is necessary from time to time for the teacher to check with eyes and hands what is going on in the student’s body.

The first thing we will examine is a way to train the diaphragm to maintain some downward pressure even during exhalation. For the time being we will forget about the other aspects of body usage and just work with this. Here are the instructions:

1. Lie down on the floor in the manner we did for practice of fukushiki kokyu. Placing a hand on your belly as we did then,

begin to practice that deep, natural diaphragmatic breathing in which the stomach rises when you inhale and falls when you exhale.

2. When you are ready, we will begin to change things. Inhale deeply as before, causing the hand on your belly (or your obi, against which the belly presses) to be pushed up toward the ceiling. But this time, instead of immediately exhaling just gently hold that breath for a moment, maintaining the expansion.
3. Take a moment then to mentally scan your chest and especially the area around the solar plexus. If there is any tension being held in the upper torso—or in the shoulders, neck, or face—release it and just relax. Doing this, you may feel now that only your belly or hara holds any power. In other words, just let all tension drop away and let the belly be the center of your focus. Something you may try that can help at that moment: gently swallow, and feel the downward-moving contraction that results. By observing this as it passes downward into the stomach, it is possible to release tension especially in the chest and solar plexus.
4. Now it is time to exhale. But here is your challenge: Can you exhale slowly through the nose, with relaxation, while not letting the hand on your belly (or your obi) drop? In other words, what you must do is exhale while maintaining the fullness of the lower abdomen. It will drop a little bit, naturally. But see if you can exhale without letting it collapse completely and without tensing the body—including the abdominal muscles—at all. It is not necessary to exhale all the air in your lungs; just do so to a natural degree. But again, start training yourself to do so without letting the belly fall.
5. There is no need to practice this for a long period. Ten or twenty breaths will be sufficient in the beginning. Afterward you should take time to sit or lie in some relaxed posture and practice Hakuin's nanso no ho practice, which again serves to

calm the body and will prevent any problems that may occur from incorrect practice.

It can be an odd feeling at first to do what I have described above. I should remind again that here we are beginning to learn a way of breathing that is cultivated rather than inborn, and it will probably not come easily to you at first. If you find that it is just impossible to do, that it leaves you feeling out of breath or tense, causes feelings of heat or pressure in the upper body and head, headaches, or other unusual symptoms (for example, a dry mouth or blurry vision), you should stop immediately. In such cases it will be best to practice fukushiki kokyu and nanso no ho only, until such a time as your teacher thinks appropriate.

Once the student is able to maintain a relaxed fullness in the hara during exhalation, we may add the following steps to the practice to begin integrating the full body usage of tanden soku:

1. Lying down as before, begin practicing deep diaphragmatic breathing. Then, transition to what we learned above: inhaling deeply, begin exhaling while maintaining the fullness of the hara, not letting it drop completely.
2. When you are ready, take an inhalation as before and hold it briefly, relaxing any tension held in the upper body. (Again, you may use a gentle swallow to help with this if useful to do so.)
3. Before you exhale, do the following: gently close the anal sphincter and lift or gently contract the muscles of the pelvic floor—that is, the perineum. Again, the body usage for this must be light and subtle. We are not clenching: the buttocks stay relaxed, and we are just lightly closing the anus. We are not strongly contracting the muscles of the pelvic floor: we simply have a feeling of lifting them slightly. But now that you have done this, observe how the sealing of the “lower gates” in this way creates a kind of foundation against which the diaphragm can now press from above, increasing and solidifying that feeling of firmness that is held in the abdomen and entire lower

trunk. This body usage of simultaneously cupping from below and pressing from above is what we call *setting* the hara. It is crucial to grasp.

4. When you are ready, again exhale while maintaining this set. Once again see if you can hold fullness in the hara, preventing your belly from falling as you exhale. Now that we have integrated the full body usage of *tanden soku* you may find this to be much easier than before.
5. At the conclusion of the exhalation, it is best in the beginning to just relax those lower muscles. In other words, your initial practice will be to activate that sealing of the anal sphincter and lifting of the pelvic floor during the exhalation phase only, releasing it as you begin the next inhalation. Eventually you will find that the lifting and releasing of these muscles becomes more subtle, such that a feeling of constant holding remains even during inhalation. But this is not something that should be forced in the beginning.
6. Once more, at the completion of your practice, take time to sit or lie in some relaxed posture and practice Hakuin's *nanso no ho*.

One thing to note: I have given instruction to lie down when working with most of these initial methods, but once you are able to perform them easily it will be useful to use a seated position such as *zazen* posture. The reason is that when seated or standing, gravity naturally aids the downward pressure that we are learning to hold in the hara. The purpose of beginning in a prone position is simply that it can be easier for beginners to relax the gross tension of the body.

Let us return for a moment now to the use of *obi* and hands to test our breathing, as we did when training the inhalation phase. Once you have mastered the basic body usage of *tanden soku* to a sufficient degree you can use the *obi* to check and develop it. Wearing the *obi* during your practice, see if your inhalation is full and expansive in all directions. But when you then set the hara and exhale, training to maintain the fullness there, now also observe:

Does the fullness of the hara remain equally—front, back, and both sides—as evidenced by the pressing of the body against the obi around the entire lower trunk? Use the obi in this way as an aid to check the continuity of this fullness.

Using your partner's hands (or your own) as we did earlier, you may also check: when inhaling, the hands on the belly or sacrum and the fingers pressed in under the rib cage on the sides of your body should be pushed outward. But now exhaling, they should all remain pushed outward, without excessive dropping.

That concludes this chapter describing a basic manner of learning and integrating the body usage of tanden soku. It may sound somewhat simple from just reading the descriptions here. But it is important to understand that this cultivated breathing method takes time and practice to fully grasp. Do not be impatient! And even if we do gain some ability to breathe in this way, we should know that our training of tanden soku is far from over: we must then practice to increase its energetic vitality, refine it endlessly, and ultimately integrate an extremely subtle, unconscious, and constant holding of power in the hara, without effort or physical force.

We will next examine methods for those later aspects of the training.

## Increasing Energetic Depth and Power

**AFTER WE HAVE** learned and become proficient to some degree in the basic body usage of *tanden soku*, we must then begin to cultivate it diligently. In this chapter we will examine some of the practices that may be used to first increase the intensely energetic vitality of the *tanden*-centered breath. Doing so, we will begin to experience for ourselves the psycho-physical effects that manifest when the energetic currents are not only gathered at the *tanden* but begin to radiate through the body, permeating and even expanding outward from it. It is in this stage of practice that we might understand experientially the teachings of someone like Suzuki Shosan, who said, “When I make use of this energy there arises a state in which not a single thought becomes an obstacle to me.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Hakuin’s *Naikan no Ho* Practice**

The first practice we will examine to this end is Hakuin’s famous *naikan no ho*. The term *naikan* may be translated as “introspection” or “internal observation” and here refers to one of the two methods of energetic cultivation and health preservation that Hakuin taught widely after learning them (he reported somewhat tongue in cheek) from the mysterious hermit Hakuyu.<sup>2</sup> The other method, *nanso no ho*, we have already examined.

Hakuin describes these two methods primarily in his writings *Yasenkanna* and *Oretagama*, the former of which was distributed widely during his lifetime among the laity as well as monks. Speaking generally we may say that naikan no ho, like nanso no ho, takes as its fundamental point that which he stated in *Yasenkanna*: “The most essential thing is to make the vital energy located in the heart descend into the lower body so that it fills the elixir field in the sea of energy.”<sup>3</sup> Hakuin’s public instructions for the practice itself given in that work are as follows.

Before you close your eyes, lie on your back, put your legs together, and stretch them out straight, pushing downward as hard as you can with the soles of your feet. Next, draw all your energy down into the elixir field, so that it fills the lower body—the space below the navel, down through the lower back and legs, to the soles of the feet.<sup>4</sup>

To help effect this downward movement of energy, Hakuin then gives a series of koan-like contemplations. Practitioners familiar with bodily koan practice as done in the Rinzai manner (which we will examine later), remembering that one aspect of the body’s subtle energetics is that its currents will move as directed by mental attention, will recognize immediately how these could be useful.

1. This elixir field [i.e., the tanden] located in the sea of vital energy [kikai], the lower back and legs, the soles of the feet—it is all my true and original face. How could that original face have nose holes?
2. This elixir field located in the sea of vital energy, the lower back and legs, the soles of the feet—it is all the home and native place of my original being. What news or tidings could come from that native place?
3. This elixir field located in the sea of vital energy, the lower back and legs, the soles of the feet—it is all the Pure Land\* of my own mind. How could the splendors of that Pure Land exist apart from my mind?



4. This elixir field located in the sea of vital energy, the lower back and legs, the soles of the feet—it is all the Amida Buddha\* of my own self. How could Amida Buddha preach the Dharma apart from that self?<sup>5</sup>

The result of practicing in such a manner, Hakuin says, is not merely mental. Change will manifest in the body in ways that by now should sound familiar to the reader.

Turn these contemplations over and over in your mind. As you do, the cumulative effect of focusing your thoughts on them will gradually increase. Before you even realize it, all the primal energy in your body will concentrate in your lower body, filling the space from the lower back and legs down to the soles of the feet. The abdomen below the navel will become taut and distended—as tight and full as a leather kickball that has never been used.<sup>6</sup>

Now, for our purposes here I would like to set aside the contemplations Hakuin described. This is so that we may focus on the little-known orally transmitted details of the body usage in *naikan no ho* that accompany the pithy instructions Hakuin gives in *Yasenkanna*. It will be enough at first to practice the method as I describe below, remembering always that one's focus should be to relax and draw the energetic currents downward. After learning the physical details, if someone is familiar with koan practice and wishes then to integrate those contemplations, it could certainly be useful. But someone who is not doing koan practice can still learn and benefit from *naikan no ho* by practicing in the basic manner I will describe: the body usage and the physical changes that manifest will not be hindered.

The method below absolutely requires some mastery of basic *tanden soku*. If you have not yet attained this it will be necessary to first work with those instructions, and of course before that with *fukushiki kokyu*. Attempting to practice *naikan no ho* without such a foundation will only cause undue tension and other problems, ultimately sabotaging one's practice.<sup>7</sup> That being said, *naikan no ho*

is one of the most effective ways to deepen one's mastery of basic tanden soku and to increase its energetic vitality.

Here then are the instructions for *naikan no ho*:

1. Lie down on your back with your legs stretched straight out. Let your feet be somewhat close together and pointing toward the ceiling. You may place your hands on the belly below the navel, at the area of the tanden. (Figure 42)



Figure 42: Position for *naikan no ho*: legs outstretched, hands on the hara.

2. Begin now to breathe in the manner of basic tanden soku: When you inhale, your belly should rise. Then gently close the anal sphincter, lift the muscles of the pelvic floor, set the breath in the hara, and exhale without allowing the belly to fall too greatly. Pay attention as always to the upper body, chest, and solar plexus: there should be no tension in these places at all, as you relax completely and let all your power be centered in the hara. The abdominal muscles also should remain relaxed throughout.
3. Now we will start to integrate the lower body in the manner that is a distinctive aspect of *naikan no ho*: it is this body usage that helps draw the energetic currents downward in the way that Hakuin said was crucial. First, during inhalation: gently—with no undue tension or discomfort—pull the toes and feet backward in unison with your inbreath. This movement need not be large and again should not cause tightness. Simply incline the feet back toward your head, with the toes slightly pulled back. The feeling is as if you were drawing the inhalation

in through the soles of the feet and up into the tanden. (Figure 43)



Figure 43: Naikan no ho inhalation: the feet pull back.

4. To exhale, of course close the anal sphincter and lift the muscles of the pelvic floor as we have practiced, letting the belly remain full and taut throughout the outbreath. But as you do so, now gently press *downward* through the balls of the feet. The toes remain lightly pulled back, but the feet incline away from you in unison with the outbreath, with the feeling that the exhalation circulates downward to fill the lower body, legs, and feet. (Figure 44)



Figure 44: Naikan no ho exhalation: the feet press downward.

5. That is the basic practice: to integrate the physical movement of the legs and feet with the inner body usage of tanden soku, while also focusing your mental attention such that the energetic currents are moving always to fill the lower body. When you have gained some skill in this and begun to feel its effect, you may add an additional, final bit of body usage: during exhalation, as you press downward through the balls of the feet, also gently push the backs of your knees toward the floor. This has the effect of further lengthening your legs and more strongly causing the energetic currents to move downward.

While practicing this method, as always, it will be crucial to never force anything with excessive physical strength or tension. If you have indeed integrated the basic body usage of tanden soku, it will then require some practice to unify the movements of the feet and legs with that. Do not underestimate the difficulty of this. But when you are able to do so, you will understand how those movements reinforce and strengthen tanden soku. The energetic movement of tanden soku begins to encompass your body, filling first the lower

body down to the feet and then eventually circulating in a discernible manner throughout the entire physical frame. And as you practice naikan no ho more, you will feel the strength of that circulation become greater.

This concludes our brief examination of the naikan no ho practice. One of my teachers, many years after he had begun his Zen training and even years after he had received *inka shomei*\* (certification as a Rinzai lineage holder and teacher), commented that it was a recent practice of naikan no ho that had deepened his personal cultivation in the greatest manner. There are indeed few practices as useful for driving our tanden soku deeper, integrating it completely within our bodies, and greatly increasing its energetic intensity. For these reasons I have placed it first in this chapter.

## Dynamic A-UN Breathing

Next we will examine a method of training the breath that truly supercharges the energetic intensity of tanden soku. This is the practice of dynamic A-UN breathing.

We have already studied several methods that make use of the mantric syllables A-UN, intoned silently or aloud. But in this case, we will be using those syllables in a rather intense manner to reinforce and increase the hara power. When I briefly mentioned this practice earlier, I explained that the Nio statues commonly found at temple gates encode something of the method. Now learning this practice we will in fact become the Nio and embody their energy completely. In fact, it would even be fine to call this method *Nio breathing*.

Here are the instructions:

1. To practice, you may sit or stand in any correct posture. We do also commonly integrate this way of breathing with movement. (We will examine some methods later that may be used in that way.)<sup>8</sup> But at first it is fine to remain still.
2. With feet shoulder width and standing in the integrated manner we learned earlier, place both palms on the hara. Spreading out

your vision, open your eyes widely.

3. To inhale, open your mouth and draw the air in deeply through it. But here you will inhale in a rather ferocious manner, as if trying to draw in the entire atmosphere or to inhale an entire ocean within the space of a few seconds, filling the lower trunk with dramatic expansion. The feeling should be as if the air is being inhaled strongly *from* the hara, that is, sucked in from below rather than being drawn in from the throat. The result will be a voiceless, drawn-out A (“ah”) sound as you inhale. The face will naturally take on a rather fierce look when doing so, precisely like the Nio statue with the open mouth we saw earlier in figure 25.
4. After you have inhaled sharply and deeply like this, set the breath in the hara as we have learned: close your mouth, and while keeping the chest and solar plexus relaxed allow the power to drop totally into the lower abdomen, letting the diaphragm press downward as you simultaneously close the anal sphincter and lift the muscles of the pelvic floor. Again, here as always it is important to remind that no excessive physical force should be used. Your hands (and obi, if you are wearing one) will show you that the fullness of the lower abdomen has manifested correctly. They will also help you to ensure that this fullness remains throughout the exhalation that now follows.
5. To exhale, keep your mouth closed, and with a feeling of great ferocity maintain that fullness in the hara as you let the breath escape in a controlled manner through the nostrils, making a voiceless extended UN (“oon”) sound in the bottom of the throat. The feeling that accompanies this is that energy radiates powerfully out from your body in all directions. Notice again the appearance of your face, resembling the Nio statue with the closed mouth we saw earlier.
6. When you are ready to inhale again, open the mouth and repeat as above.

When you first begin learning this method of A-UN breathing it will likely be easier to breathe in a relatively quick manner, for example, performing each inhalation in the space of a few seconds and each exhalation in the same. But after you have gained some confidence you may experiment with breathing at different paces. A long, slow inhalation of perhaps five seconds followed by an exhalation of seven or ten seconds is a good practice: it requires relaxation and control, and one may learn from it that even when breathing more slowly, the depth of the breath and the intensity of the energetic effect may be maintained or even increased. Slow and quiet breathing can, in fact, manifest incredible power. This is something we will grasp when we learn to integrate tanden soku with zazen, at which time our breathing must be completely silent and almost indiscernible yet still no less fierce than this A-UN breathing.

## **Katsu and Kiai**

The final method we will examine in this chapter as a means of increasing energetic depth and vitality is a way of training the katsu shout. As I mentioned earlier, in martial art practice there is a similar shout performed in encounter with an opponent called kiai. (The word contains the same characters as the one we use to refer to manifest energy, but this second usage refers specifically to such a shout.)

In part one, I explained some uses of the katsu. But now that we have learned the body usage of tanden soku, we may be able to begin cultivating a shout with true power to transform. The manner in which tanden soku causes the body's energetic currents to gather and concentrate allows us to produce a shout with unusually piercing, resonant qualities. Such a shout can convey something of that vital energy—and, indeed, something of the inner condition of the one who shouts—to others. There is a deep mystery here that can only become clear through practice. It must be said that the true way to understand the power of katsu/kiai is by experiencing such things from one's own teacher and thereby catching the teacher's energetic

vibration within one's own body. But here, at least, we can examine some methods serving as an entry to the practice.

Before doing so it will be useful to say a bit regarding the body usage at the moment of giving the katsu shout. You may recall in my initial discussion of the hara that I mentioned the firmness and strength that manifests in the body's core when clearing one's throat or when pushing a heavy object; I said that the body usage we must learn in tanden soku allowing us to seamlessly hold power in the hara was not dissimilar to this, though done in a less staccato and more sustained manner.

When we perform the katsu shout, the body usage will again not be so different than that. But here it may be said that the usage of the hara will indeed be staccato, and quite sharply so. As the breath—and with it an energetic extension from the tanden—is forcefully ejected within one instant, we will feel a sudden, sharp movement of the diaphragm not unlike that felt when coughing suddenly and deeply. This “jumping” of the hara and the additional pressure it creates will be made quite clear in the following practice.

1. For this practice we will sit in the kneeling posture (seiza) as shown in the images or in zazen posture. A chair could also be used if needed.
2. To gain feedback regarding the depth and vitality of the breath, we will make a fist with one hand but with the middle finger's knuckle extended as shown (Figure 45). This knuckle will then be placed under the rib cage of one side. It is also fine to just use the outstretched fingers of one hand for this, exactly as we did earlier when testing the inhalation phase of tanden soku. But in this practice, as you will see, a quick and sharp movement is involved, so I believe that the fist is a bit more easy and secure to use. It also creates a more solid feeling that will be useful here. (Figure 46)





Figure 45: Fist with the middle finger knuckle extended.



Figure 46: Position for *katsu/kiai* practice: the fist inserts under the ribs.

3. Note that the other hand is also drawn into a fist but in this case with the thumb inside: the hand position called *nigiri katami* that we encountered earlier.
4. Now it is time to inhale: opening your eyes wide and spreading your vision out, do so through the open mouth in the same manner as the dynamic A-UN breathing we learned. But as you

do so, bring that fist held in nigiri katami from the level of the hara upward, in a clockwise motion, to a position above your head. As it arrives there and your inhalation ends, close the mouth, relax the chest and solar plexus, and set the breath power downward into the hara as we have learned. Your other fist inserted under the ribcage will reveal to you how fully the hara has expanded and that you have been successful in setting and holding the power there. (Figure 47)

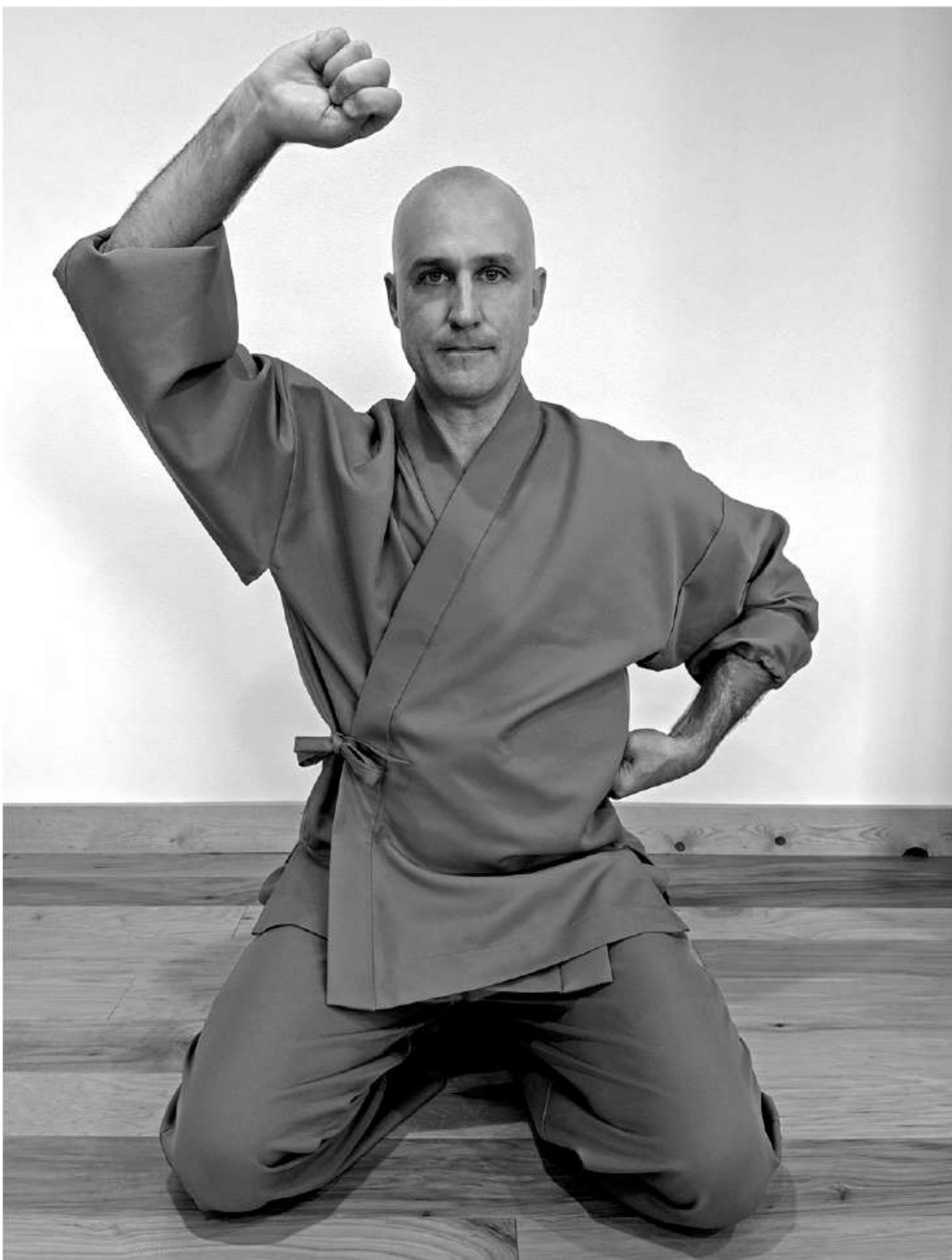


Figure 47: Katsu/kiai practice: after inhalation, the moment before striking.

5. Now for the crucial moment: all at once, complete the circular movement of your raised fist as you bring it in a clockwise direction down to strike upon the hara, and at the moment of impact vocalize sharply: “KA-tsu!” Note that the intention is not to strongly impact your own stomach with the fist. The blow should be sharp but light, with a clean stop, and need not cause great discomfort. A crisp impact serves to reinforce the momentary pressure in the hara that will manifest at precisely the moment the shout explodes out. In other words: as you yell, the hara will “jump” at precisely the moment the fist impacts. You should clearly feel this sudden jump where your other fist is inserted under the rib cage. (Figure 48)



Figure 48: Katsu/kiai practice: striking downward upon the hara while shouting.

6. Inhaling once more and bringing the fist around and up again, repeat the practice. See if you are able to maintain or increase the sharpness of the sound and its piercing or resonant quality as your body relaxes into the practice. The more you can drop all tension and power out of the body, letting it be held only in

the area of the tanden, the more this method will open up for you.

7. Other shouts that may be used in the martial art manner are “Ei!,” “Yah!,” and “Toh!” Each of these is a kiai commonly used in swordsmanship, and much like the mantric sounds we encounter in our Zen practice, each possesses a different feeling and effect. Whether you use these or the exclamation “Katsu!,” you may experiment with shouting very sharply in a short, piercing manner but also try drawing the sounds out with great power over a few seconds, using a longer exhalation that erupts from the core of your body: “Yahhhhhh...!,” “Tohhhhh...!,” and so on.
8. It will be especially useful after this practice to calm the body and breath using *nanso no ho*. Do not neglect to do so.

This is indeed a very interesting practice. At first, if your mastery of *tanden soku* is insufficient you may feel that it is difficult to keep the shoulders and chest relaxed: tension will manifest. You may also feel the throat become raw from shouting or that after a few repetitions you feel out of breath or fatigued. If you experience such things, it will be better to return to focus on *fukushiki kokyu* and on integrating the basic body usage of *tanden soku*.

But if you can catch this method, after some practice you will certainly discern change. The shout will come more easily and consistently from the core, with a certain penetrating quality of sound that was not present in the beginning. You may feel as if your body mostly disappears except for the *hara*. Longer periods of practicing this method will not fatigue you; rather, you will feel increasingly energized as if a font of power has sprung up at the *tanden*. Other uses of the voice, such as when chanting or even when simply speaking, may also start to change and take on more resonant, powerful qualities as a result.

There are some further interesting ways to test the development of one's *katsu* or *kiai*. For example, if you have access to a *keisu*,\* the

bowl-shaped bell of various sizes commonly found in Buddhist temples, you may try this.

1. Set up the keisu at some distance away from you, perhaps a few yards or meters away.
2. Standing facing the bell, shake out your arms and body, summon up a fierce energy, and direct a sudden katsu or kiai toward it with all your power. See if you are able to ring the bell—that is, actually cause it to vibrate audibly—by impacting it with the sound of your voice alone. (Figure 49)



Figure 49: Striking the *keisu* (bell) with the voice.

With a little strength of voice it is not difficult to cause some faint sound to arise from the bell. But to cause a strong sound is not easy! And the smaller the bell, the more difficult you may find it.

The practices we have examined in this chapter, then, are among those that can help the student to dramatically increase the energetic

power centered at the tanden. When this energy begins to manifest you will feel it without doubt: it is as if something has overturned deep in the core of the body, coursing outward through its frame and spilling out even into the surrounding space. You may feel exhilarated, even liberated. Deeply held habits of body and mind can suddenly release as this energy percolates through the body-mind, giving a feeling of great freedom and even a kind of brave recklessness.

It can all seem exciting or fascinating. But what we must be careful to remember is that our internal energetic cultivation is not an end unto itself. The purpose of Zen training, in other words, is not to attain a kind of energetic power or unusual abilities. Rather, we should understand how such power and its refinement help us to cut our fundamental delusion, deepen our meditative attainment, and eventually embody wisdom, all for the sake of fulfilling our vows to help others. Especially at the time that we begin to experience some result from methods like these, it is therefore crucial to stick with diligence only to the practices that one's teacher has given and not to self-assign other methods. Since an unskilled or mistaken cultivation of such practices can lead to energetic imbalance, an incorrect physical habit that can later hinder one's training, or even departure from the Zen path entirely, communication with a qualified teacher only becomes more essential as time goes on.

Additionally, something we should remember is that all the methods we are examining are only tools, and in fact all the situations of life must become for us places in which to powerfully extend a great and vital energy. As we discussed when examining some of the methods of direct pointing, any difficult or fearful situation can become such an opportunity for training. To feel courageous and able to freely function even in situations of fear, physical exertion, social anxiety, and so on is a truly great gift that this energetic training can give to us. We should make a habit of examining how such situations are precious opportunities for us to test our cultivation, and then we should throw ourselves into them wholeheartedly and bodily.



In the next chapter, we will start to examine another stage of our training: refining the intense, tanden-centered power that we have cultivated.

## Practices of Refinement

**AS WE BEGIN** to speak now of refinement, we are of course presupposing that the foundation of tanden soku has been mastered and that its depth and energetic intensity have been successfully cultivated. It is useless to talk about refining our internal energetic cultivation if there is nothing to refine. For most students, therefore, the stages of establishing the tanden-centered breath and then expanding its energetic vitality will occupy a great deal of practice time—over a period of years—before they arrive at a place in which refinement is a concern.

That being said, it is useful to understand that what is generally meant by “refinement” in Zen practice is not a weakening of energetic strength but rather its ripening. We must in our training attain a kind of embodiment that does not require dramatic methods of breathing or loud shouts to reveal the same overwhelming power. And since we are, again, Zen practitioners and not merely cultivators of internal energy, that embodiment must ultimately manifest the inner qualities of wisdom and compassion—that is, it must manifest the unified Zen samadhi that is the seamless arising of awakening—in ways that can assist others.

A story that illustrates this kind of refinement of power is told about Yamaoka Tesshu, a famous swordsman, calligrapher, and lay Zen master of the late Edo and early Meiji periods. Tesshu practiced

zazen with great dedication. As he lived in a situation of poverty, rats ran freely about in the rather shabby dwelling where he meditated. As Omori Roshi writes:

Once Tesshu began *zazen*, however, all the rats which had been running about until that time would disappear without a trace. Tesshu's wife, who thought it was strange, asked him about it. He said with a laugh, "My Zen has value as a scarecrow for rats." I think that he must have sat with a vigorous spirit as if ready to meet a strong enemy with his sword. When he sat, he seemed so ferocious that no one could approach him. That awesome power of Tesshu must have made it unbearable for the rats to remain in Tesshu's house while he meditated.<sup>1</sup>

Such was the intensity of the energy that emanated from Tesshu in the state of concentrated samadhi: the fruit of his long training not only in Zen but also martial arts, where one must meet an opponent on the edge of life and death. Yet even though we may admire this, there is a further kind of embodiment to which we should aspire. Omori Roshi continues:

It is also said, however, that in his later years, rats would play joyfully, running along his shoulders and arms as he copied Buddhist sutras. The dignified, spiritual power of Tesshu's sitting is what Master Suzuki Shosan calls Nio-Zen. We should emulate his example.<sup>2</sup>

It is a wonderful anecdote. For our purposes it is important in that it reveals not only the necessity of cultivating the kind of fierce energy of the Nio in our Zen practice but also that the ultimate end of that path transcends the outward ferocity of the Nio and arrives at the energy represented by images of Kannon or Shakyamuni: a wholeness that is not weak, passive, or lacking in dynamism, yet it is completely open and exuding an aura of compassion such that even small creatures or children could approach without hesitation. If the intensely fierce appearance of the Nio or of figures like Fudo Myo-o

surrounded in raging flames represent the power we must cultivate in our Zen path, we should also recognize that the shining light that surrounds the Buddha, and the calm effortlessness with which the thousand-armed Kannon attends to the myriad suffering beings, represents the true refinement and ultimate expression of this energy.

With this principle in mind, let us turn now to examining practices of refining the tanden-centered breath. Doing so will enable us to embody and express our energetic cultivation in varied ways, including eventually its integration with zazen. At this point it may be useful to view things thus: if our practice of internal energetic cultivation has so far been like an effort to ignite a fire and then to stoke it to a fierce, raging height as if with bellows, now our focus will be to see how we can use this heat in ever finer ways, much as a glassblower might apply it delicately to mold and shape a vessel. The flame itself is not less intense, but our application of it now will require—and cultivate—sensitivity.

## **Breathing the Syllable A**

This first practice we will examine for refinement is also another that works with the mantric syllable A (“ah”): it is a voiceless, long exhalation of that syllable through the mouth.

In a previous work, I gave instructions for this practice as a method useful for grasping the basic body usage of tanden soku (something that in this book we have broken down in much greater detail). I also explained that this method is useful to enter samadhi immediately before beginning zazen.<sup>3</sup> Here, however, our focus will be to use this practice to refine and lengthen the tanden-centered breath that we have thus far worked to establish and strengthen. Using this practice, we can learn to maintain the intensely energetic quality of tanden soku that is easily seen (and heard) in something like the katsu shout, yet while letting the exhalation become very long and fine, quite different from a shout.

As I have described, the mantric syllable A carries a vibration that causes an expansive, wakeful, and clarifying effect to manifest when intoned either aloud or silently. In this practice we will not pair it with the syllable UN, as we have done in others, but will simply join ourselves completely with that single syllable, embodying its qualities quite powerfully with body and breath in unity. By doing so we will also begin to see even more clearly how the act of breathing, with which we have been so concerned, is not just a movement of air: the movements of the subtle energetics tied to it can be distinctly felt. This is something we also encountered in part one, and it has great use for our practice as a whole.

Here are the instructions for breathing the syllable A:

1. Sit upright in zazen posture, seiza, or any other comfortable position. (A chair is also fine.) Spread your vision out. You may hold your hands in the meditation position as for zazen, or you may use nigiri katami: in that case, the hands will be placed palm side down on the thighs.
2. Once settled into your posture, begin fukushiki kokyu—abdominal breathing through the nostrils—as we have practiced. Allow the belly to expand with each inhalation and fall with each exhalation.
3. When you are ready, set up the body usage of tanden soku: take a deep inhalation through the nostrils and set this breath in the hara, gently closing the anal sphincter and lifting the muscles of the perineum as you do so.
4. Then to exhale, open your mouth very slightly and breathe out making a voiceless, almost silent A (“ahhh...”) sound. Let this sound be as smooth as possible and centered in the back of the throat, maintaining the same steady intensity of the air stream throughout the entire exhalation. Do not open your mouth too wide as if yawning; if you do so you will feel that the breath is centered at the palate and in the front of the mouth, with the resultant sound being harsh and raspy. It is important, rather, to relax the face and throat. As in the basic tanden soku

method, keep the anal sphincter closed while you exhale, maintaining a degree of fullness in the lower trunk without letting the abdomen collapse completely. If you are wearing an obi you should feel the fullness of the hara pressing against this throughout the entire exhalation.

5. Exhale this A as long as you are able without becoming tense. You may reach a point at which you still have air to exhale but seem to hit a barrier of tension or anxiety; this often manifests in the area of the solar plexus. If this happens, try to relax, let the breath settle back into the abdomen, and continue to exhale. With practice these layers of tension stored in the body will dissolve.
6. As the exhalation eventually subsides by itself, you may feel that although the stream of air ceases, there is still an energetic movement of exhalation that has yet to be exhausted. Just relax completely and allow that to happen, resting for a moment in the experience of clarity that may also arise. Then when you are ready, relax the lower muscles and inhale deeply again through the nostrils to the abdomen, expanding it once more. If you have fully exhaled, this will happen without much effort as air rushes in to fill the partial vacuum.
7. Completing the inhalation, repeat the cycle as above: set the breath in your lower abdomen as you gently close the anal sphincter and lift the pelvic floor muscles, open your mouth slightly, and exhale A while maintaining power at the tanden.
8. Again, do not forcefully bear down on the stomach, tense the abdominal muscles, or exert any undue pressure. Your solar plexus should remain soft, even concave. Just let your breath settle deeply again and again into the lower abdomen, and hold something of its power there throughout your exhalation (“ahhh...”). Over time you will find that the exhalation naturally becomes longer.
9. As with the other practices, it is good to practice nanso no ho afterward.

If you practice this method in a dedicated manner the effects can be dramatic. It is truly one of the best practices to deepen and refine tanden soku. The more long, fine, and seemingly quiet your exhalation of the syllable A becomes, oddly the more powerful you will feel it to be. It is a deeply relaxing method, but the tanden-centered energy that begins to manifest can in fact still be shockingly strong.<sup>4</sup> This is something like the ocean when calm and glassy: though its surface appearance can seem placid, underneath there is still a dynamic current and sweeping movement. You will come in time to feel energy coursing beneath the surface of this method, radiating from the hara throughout your body.

A final thing I might briefly say about this manner of exhaling the syllable A silently with one's breath: it is something one might do at the moment of death. If one's physical and mental conditions allow, releasing one's mind and energy into an expansive state of awakened clarity by exhaling long in this way as one's last act is an excellent thing. Of course, the basis of such a practice would ideally be the state of samadhi unified with awakening. But even if someone has not been a dedicated practitioner and remains in doubt regarding awakening or is unable to sustain the recognition of one's nature in unity with samadhi, it would still be very helpful to just set one's mind upon the aspiration of the Four Great Vows\*—or even just to generate a simple intention or prayer to be reborn in whatever place and manner most benefits other beings—and to then pass into death exhaling A like this with deep relaxation and acceptance.

Much more could be said on that subject, but we will return now to our topic of refinement. The next practice we will examine is that of chanting.

## **Chanting Practice**

Chanting Buddhist sutras (called *okyo*\*) and other texts is a common Zen practice and a daily occurrence in monasteries. Laypersons also can benefit greatly from the practice. But while the intellectual insight to be had from studying and gaining a conceptual grasp of

Buddhist texts is important, let us here rather examine how to use chanting practice as a way of further refining tanden soku. Since chanting is a practice that creates sound, it usefully provides immediate feedback to us regarding the development of our breathing and the degree to which we are able to bodily vibrate with that sound. This allows us also to observe how the depth, resonance, and penetrating quality of our chanting changes over time as we integrate tanden soku.

To use chanting in this way it will be necessary to first understand the following points, some of which we have already encountered. After listing them, I will present some practices that can be used to approach each in turn.

- First, we should know that the purpose of chanting is not to create a rising, expansive sound that projects outward in the manner of singing. Rather, it is to cause one's own body cavities to resonate. That is, the vibration of the sound must be felt to go *downward*, into the body. The aesthetic quality of the sound, though it will naturally develop and become more attractive, is not actually our concern at all.
- Second, chanting is to be done with a long, tanden-centered exhalation. In the same manner that we just practiced breathing the syllable A silently using a long exhalation while maintaining pressure in the hara, we will now chant aloud while stretching out the exhalation as long as possible and with the body usage of tanden soku that we learned earlier. Chanting in this manner can lead us easily into samadhi.

Regarding the first point, then, there is a simple practice that can teach us how to project the vibration of our chanting down to resonate the body cavities. If we learn to do this it will also support and reveal deeper aspects of practices that we learned earlier, for example, when we intoned the A-UN sounds aloud. We will find that the sound of chanting, when done correctly, actually arises from the entire body rather than solely from the mouth. That is, we can learn to embody the mantric sound, and with it thus activated by the



vitality of our subtle energetics we can cause various practice methods to come alive.

In this first simple practice, we will not work with any text but just the vowel sounds A, I, U, E, O (pronounced here in the Japanese manner: “ah, ee, oo, ay, oh”). Here are the instructions:

1. You may do this practice in any seated or standing position or even while walking. Again, you can hold your hands in a meditation mudra\* (if seated) or in nigiri katami if you wish.
2. First we will work with each of the five syllables by itself. The instructions are the same for each: Open your eyes wide, spreading out your vision. Now setting up the tanden-centered breath, that is, using the body usage of tanden soku, intone the syllable loudly with as long an exhalation as you are able. Just as we silently exhaled the syllable A in the previous practice, here the syllables should be stretched out to join with the entire length of each exhalation. But the difference now is that we are using the voice.
3. In the beginning it is useful to be purposefully loud. Do not intone the syllables with a soft or timid feeling, but try to do so strongly and as loudly as you are able without causing tension.
4. As you intone a syllable, for example E (“ay”), try to feel the place in your body that the sound is vibrating. Can you discern that the pressure of the tanden-centered breath is driving the sound? Initially it is likely that you will feel the vibration of this “ay” sound primarily in your throat. Your vocal cords produce the sound, so this is normal. But now we will experiment.
5. Intone the syllable again. This time, see if you can also cause the vibration of the sound to be felt in the bottom of the throat, almost in the area behind the sternum. As you repeat the intonations, maintaining the body usage of tanden soku that drives the breath from the hara, see to what extent you can relax into each exhalation and intonation and cause that part of your body to resonate.

6. Now let us try to go deeper. Intoning the syllable again, try to cause the vibration to resonate also in the area of the stomach. Repeat until you have actualized this. Then, go even deeper: Can you actualize a feeling of resonance all the way down to the tanden, even to the area above the pubic bone?
7. With progressive practice like this, gradually the quality of the sound and its vibration in your body will change. You will start to feel that the body from the throat down to the bottom of the hara resonates with the sound all together and that the sound is actually being projected downward, through the body and even into the earth, rather than upward and out from your mouth. This will affect the energetic currents of the body as well, causing them to move in the same manner.
8. When you have tried this with each of the five syllables intoned separately and been able to sense change with each, then it is time to try intoning all of them at once. In one exhalation intone A, I, U, e, O (“ah, ee, oo, ay, oh”) in turn, without breaking the sound or separating the syllables from one another. The challenge here is to keep that deep, full-body vibration throughout the entire exhalation even as you change from one syllable to another.

You may see that this practice prepares us well for chanting longer texts. If we can keep a full-body intonation driven by the tanden-centered breath and body usage, we will be able to bring longer texts, containing varied patterns of sounds and pronunciation, dynamically alive in our bodies.

Now to our second point emphasizing that chanting must be done completely in unity with the long, tanden-centered exhalation and that our practice should serve to lengthen this exhalation over time. We could use almost any text for the next method, but here the dharani called *Shosaishu*\* may be ideal. This is because it is customarily chanted three times in a row, and its length happens to be ideal for the challenge we will first set ourselves: to complete each of those three repetitions using a single exhalation.

*Shosaishu*, by the way, is a very important dharani transliterating the original Sanskrit and carrying a specific mantric effect. We will examine that aspect of the text shortly. But for now it will be useful to just begin working with it while observing the main points that here concern us: to use the body usage of *tanden soku* throughout—vibrating the entire body from the throat down to the bottom of the *hara* with the sound—and now further to stretch out the exhalation such that we can chant all seventy-three of its syllables within the space of one breath.

Here is the text of *Shosaishu*. For ease of practice I have divided it by syllable, the way it is chanted, rather than by word:

NA MU SA MAN DA MO TO NAN O HA RA CHI KO TO SHA SO NO NAN TO JI TO EN  
GYA GYA GYA KI GYA KI UN NUN SHI FU RA SHI FU RA HA RA SHI FU RA HA RA  
SHI FU RA CHI SHU SA CHI SHU SA SHU SHI RI SHU SHI RI SO HA JA SO HA JA  
SEI CHI GYA SHI RI EI SO MO KO.

To use this, do the following:

1. First chant the text slowly using the breathing of *tanden soku*, stretching out each syllable for a second or more. Here it does not matter how many breaths you need to complete the recitation. Just work to maintain a seamless full-body vibration of the sound—resonating the body cavities all the way down into the bottom of the *hara*—as you turn over each syllable.
2. Next, while not losing that quality of full-body vibration, see if you can chant the entire dharani once through within the space of one exhalation. It may not be difficult to do this when chanting softly with little strength, but remember that we are striving at first to chant with loudness and engagement of the whole body and breath: don't hold back with your voice!
3. When you are able to accomplish this, then chant the dharani three times in a row like this. At the conclusion of each of the three repetitions, when it is time to inhale before beginning the next, practice doing so quickly within the space of one beat. As when we silently breathed the syllable A, it is likely that you will

experience this inhalation to be almost effortless since you will likely have exhaled fully during your chanting: the partial vacuum created by that means that inhalation will occur almost automatically.

4. When you are able to chant *Shosaishu* strongly three times in succession, vibrating the whole body and using only three breaths, you have made progress. Now practice chanting it two or even all three times in succession using a *single* exhalation.
5. You may also at this point start to practice chanting when walking or during physical work. If you can maintain the deep vibration and tanden-centered breath during chanting within physical movement, you are really doing well. This also points to a way that we can start to integrate tanden soku in daily life and ultimately for it to become constant and unconscious, something we will examine in the next chapter.

A further step after this would of course be to bring the body and breath usage we are practicing into a full series of chants, for example, the monastic morning ritual called *choka*.<sup>\*</sup> Working with each of the okyo and dharani in that series and learning how to hold them all deeply within the hara, vibrating both one's body and the surrounding space using their varying sounds, opens the door to a lifelong study. Unifying this activity of chanting with the samadhi of your practice, you will start to grasp the deeper ramifications of this profound training.

These, then, are some practices we may use to begin refining the tanden-centered breath. Unifying your focused mental attention with each exhalation, within the vessel of correct and relaxed posture, and just throwing yourself into each silent breathing of the syllable A or each syllable of a chanted text is a wonderful way to progress. As you do so you will experience for yourself that tanden soku becomes easier, lighter, and stronger. You will also begin to experience the samadhi of chanting that arises when body, breath, and mind are joined and the subtle energetic currents are continuously gathered at the tanden, radiating from there in unity with sound.

Finally, there is something else you should grasp from chanting practice when it comes to fruition like this: that the samadhi of our Zen practice—perhaps most easily cultivated in zazen—must manifest in many other practices as we move from the meditation cushion, to the chanting hall, and to all the other activities of the day, without gap or loss of energetic power. When you begin to practice in that way, it can be said that you are truly doing Zen training. Such seamless integration is the focus of our next chapter.

## Seamless Integration

**IN THIS FINAL** section of the outline of internal energetic cultivation practices centered on learning tanden soku, we arrive at the most difficult—and longest—stage of our training. Our concern here is no longer to establish the habit of natural diaphragmatic breathing (fukushiki kokyu) or to learn the basic body usage of tanden soku. Nor is it our concern here to increase the depth and energetic vitality of that breath, or even to begin refining it. It is presumed now that we have been able to have some success doing all of those things. Here, instead, we begin to explore the exhaustive work necessary to integrate tanden soku until it becomes effortless, unconscious, and so subtle as to be more an energetic feeling than an overt physical usage.

And we will do this work for years. What I am describing now is the never-ending training after the body usage of tanden soku has been mastered, and well after we have begun using it within our training. Now we face the test of truly embodying the cultivation we have been studying.

In one sense there is little I can say on this subject. When we reach this stage of practice, we arrive at a place in which each practitioner must kufu—struggle with great effort and creativity—to find a path forward that works for that individual's conditions. In fact this is something true for Zen training as a whole: there is a time after

awakening, and after one's formal practice under a teacher has ended, that one must train for a long time with great diligence in order to completely embody what one has experienced. But reaching that stage of the path is like arriving alone at the edge of a chasm: only practitioners of great determination will be able to leap across.

Yet if we can succeed at such a stage of training, we will arrive at the most profound levels of attainment. In terms of our internal energetic cultivation, it could then be said that nothing need be held at the tanden or in the hara any longer. No concern need be given to the breath. Having completely penetrated the training, one's entire body and all one's surroundings seamlessly become the energetic center.

It is my hope that all of us could attain such a state of unconscious practice and seamless cultivation. That being said—and though I myself must also continue to practice toward that end—I will below share a few thoughts regarding this never-ending training.

## **In Zazen**

Perhaps the most important realm in which it may be said our complete integration of tanden soku must be shown is on the meditation cushion, in zazen. Regarding this, there are quite a lot of oral (and anecdotal) instructions describing the desired goal. One such saying is that an experienced meditator should breathe only two to four times per minute, well below even the low end of the average person's at-rest respiration rate of twelve to twenty times per minute. Another is that one's breathing in zazen, which is done through the nostrils, should be so fine that a feather held in front of one's nose would not be seen to move.

To breathe so slowly and lightly may sound impossible, or at least extremely difficult. But it is not. When you earlier worked with the practice of breathing the syllable A, it is likely that you were able rather easily to breathe at a pace of about four breaths per minute. While it is not necessary for us to obsess about the per-minute

respiration rate, let us experiment with it in order to build our confidence. Here is a method you can use with a timer or watch.

1. Settle yourself to perform the practice of breathing the syllable  
A. With your timer or watch in front of you, you will now practice to regulate the length of both inhalation or exhalation.
2. When you are ready to begin, inhale for a period of five seconds through the nostrils. At the conclusion of the inhalation there are naturally a few moments where the breath is gently held as the hara is set and the inhalation turns to exhalation, so that will add a second or two to the clock.
3. Exhale now in the manner we learned, breathing the sound “ahhh...” voicelessly out through the mouth, this time for at least ten seconds. Again, at the end of the exhalation after the stream of air has ended there are a few moments when the energetic current continues, and you may just rest in that. This will also add a few seconds to the clock.
4. When you are ready, inhale again and repeat as above. Continue for the space of one minute, observing how many respiration cycles you perform during that time.

Following these instructions, you will likely find that you can easily breathe three or four times a minute without undue stress or agitation. It is really interesting to realize this. During zazen, as our meditation deepens and we are able to relax deeply into the meditation posture, it will eventually be just as easy to breathe slowly and with deep calm through the nostrils.

Let us see if we can prove that as well, once again using a timer. Seating yourself in your customary zazen posture, try the following:

1. This time we will breathe through the nostrils for both inhalation and exhalation, as is normal during zazen, and using the body usage of tanden soku.
2. Inhale once again for a period of about five seconds, allowing the breath to be slowly drawn down to expand the hara, and



then set it there as we have learned.

3. When you are then ready, exhale through the nostrils for a period of about ten seconds, stretching your breath out to follow the timer.
4. In the beginning you may find that your rate of breathing is faster than this, but as you relax you will be able to settle into it without much difficulty.
5. When you observe that you have done so, now try timing yourself in a different manner: setting the timer or watch to give an alarm after five minutes, place it someplace where you cannot see it. Then as the timer runs just breathe slowly and calmly as above, counting the number of your respirations silently to yourself. See what number you have reached after five minutes when the alarm goes off.

I believe that practicing like this you will soon find that even when breathing through the nostrils in zazen, you can quickly learn to do so at a rate of four times a minute. This is a very respectable rate of respiration for meditation. Of course, breathing is only one aspect of zazen practice. But what is important here is that deep, slow breathing of this kind will help you to unify yourself with the practice of breath counting, the koan, or whatever other meditation method your teacher assigns to you.

The practice of tanden soku actually allows us to breathe more slowly because it uses a greater percentage of the lung capacity by far than the common, untrained way of breathing. The relaxation that it causes, and the manner I have described in which the body's energetic currents are made to gather at the tanden and radiate from there, also simultaneously calm and enliven us.

A time may even come, as the samadhi of your practice manifests powerfully in zazen, that it will seem your respiration ceases for a time as I mentioned earlier. One reason for this is that the periods between inhalation and exhalation, when the breath is seemingly still, will increase in length as your training deepens. But another is that your respiration will continue to become more and more fine,

even to the point that you no longer notice it, as you enter into deep engagement with your meditation method. None of this is something you must look for or impatiently attempt to create; I only mention these things here so they will not seem surprising or frightening if they occur.

Though I will not present it here as a practice, I suppose you could also test the other saying I mentioned earlier and see if your breathing is so well integrated in zazen that it does not disturb a feather! A similar thing that you may have the opportunity to observe, though, is the stream of steam that emerges from practitioners' nostrils when sitting in a cold meditation hall during winter. It is true that the rate and manner of our respiration must change to fit the seasons, and during winter we can even breathe in a particular way that generates heat in the body allowing us to endure cold conditions (another topic, not dealt with here). But something you might notice is that the white steam that issues from the nostrils is different for each practitioner: beginners may be seen to produce frequent sharp puffs, since their respiration is shallower, faster, and more forced. Advanced students should have longer, steadier streams of exhalation. And the most advanced practitioners may be seen to produce streams that are very fine and extremely long, or even difficult to see at all. It is fascinating in wintertime to be able to see the actual exhalations of meditators visibly manifest like this. The point of course is not to judge others but to learn how to improve ourselves.

## **In Daily Activity**

Now let us consider how we might integrate a subtle and constant tanden-centered breath in daily activity. Doing so means that samadhi can be brought seamlessly into all our activities, which are then permeated and enlivened by the bodily kiai of our practice.

When we discussed chanting earlier, I mentioned that it is a good thing to practice maintaining the deep, full-body vibration of each syllable of a chanted text while walking or doing physical activity.

But this is true for the basic training of tanden soku itself. We might start, for example, by trying to maintain the tanden-centered breath while walking slowly. It will be very useful of course to practice kinhin in unity with tanden soku. But it is also wonderful to simply walk briskly around our neighborhoods while doing so, especially using the integrated manner of walking we examined earlier that can itself help us to enter samadhi. Once we are able to stabilize our tanden soku in movement like this, then activities like sweeping, wiping a countertop, raking leaves, or working in a garden—any physical tasks, really—will also become excellent opportunities to observe the breath and to practice keeping it set seamlessly, with increasingly subtle power, in the hara. I should say that recreational or athletic activities are excellent too: things like running or riding a bicycle can be used in this way. Traditional martial arts indeed require such mastery.

At the same time, of course, we should just open all our senses and throw ourselves unreservedly with full attention into whatever activity we are doing. In this way we can discover a practice of Zen in daily life that is far beyond the mere lip service often paid to those words.

To sum up this sort of training using the words of one of my teachers: “In all your activities, just constantly refine breath and posture.” Whatever we are doing, if we set up our mindfulness to constantly observe what is going on in our bodies, remembering to return again and again to deep tanden-centered breathing and practicing that body usage within whatever situations we encounter, we will eventually be able to integrate it completely. Sitting reading a book can then become a time to effortlessly sustain seamless tanden soku and samadhi. We can practice not losing it while taking a shower. Even in sleeping, we will eventually not depart from holding a subtle energetic power at the tanden that radiates freely throughout the body.<sup>1</sup>

A final reminder as you practice this kind of training within daily activity: do not forget the usefulness of the obi. You might easily be able to wear it underneath your clothing without attracting notice.

An old practice that might even be useful here is to place a pebble or other small object underneath the obi over the tanden, against which you can gently push with the hara throughout the day. This provides extra tactile feedback assisting your practice. Leaving aside the traditional kind of obi, though, even a conventional belt could be used if is tightened sufficiently and worn at the correct height. The buckle might even serve as a focus.

And with that, we have completed the chapters outlining a basic course of study in internal energetic cultivation. Practicing according to this plan, and with a qualified teacher's guidance, there is no doubt that you will be able to learn the breath cultivation that is so important in Rinzai Zen practice—tanden soku—and will eventually begin to experience within your own body the intensely vital, fierce energy that dissolves obstructions and carries the flavor of genuine, embodied Zen training. In the meantime, you will have also learned to work with a number of practices that have great value standing alone, for example, Hakuin's *nanso no ho* and *naikan no ho*, chanting, and so on. I truly hope it will all be beneficial to you.

In the following chapters, please try to keep in mind the general understanding of the body and breath that we have explored thus far. We will now examine other practices within which you may apply these principles: the development of the physical center, a series of standing practices integrating breathing, the reciting of dharani and mantra, and finally the bodily manner in which koan practice is done in Rinzai Zen. But all of it rests upon the foundations we have explored thus far, and I hope you will be able to make them your own.

## ***Hara Tanren: Forging the Center***

**I WOULD LIKE** now to explore some of the ramifications of the cultivation we have done so far—and specifically our development of the hara and tanden-centered breath—on the body’s actual function and appearance. To do this we will explore in a simple way how the body can most efficiently exert and absorb physical force. The lessons we learn from this will serve to further reinforce, refine, and crucially test the body usage we have already studied.

What we will examine below falls into an important category of practices called *hara tanren*, or methods for “forging” the hara. There are many such hara tanren practices. But I have chosen one in particular for this chapter because it is comprehensive, and in fact it somewhat encapsulates the outline for practice we examined in the previous chapters: we will see how the training to establish and cultivate the physical center begins with a basic foundation to integrate the body. Then follows the establishment of the specific body and breath usage centered on the hara, followed by an increasing refinement of that body usage. The fulfillment of the final stage of developing the center, as we shall see, is a seamless and unconscious integration of it that transcends methods and practices.

This chapter will likely be of interest especially to those wishing to integrate physical culture within their Zen practice. Traditional martial arts are a most obvious kind of physical culture that have

some historical connections to Zen in both China and Japan.<sup>1</sup> We will not here be studying any kind of martial application, but I do wish to say one thing from that standpoint: there are many teachers of martial arts that exhort their students to “be centered,” “use the center,” “move from the center,” and so on. What is meant by such phrases likely varies widely. But taking the practices we have examined thus far as a guide, we should affirm this: ideas of the so-called center are mostly useless if they remain conceptual or merely visualized. From the standpoint of Zen practice the center is not a concept or imagined point at all but rather an exacting way of using body and breath that must be painstakingly mastered. Doing so can indeed open the door to a new world of movement and psycho-physical functioning, and this is the place where Zen and disciplines of physical culture—like martial arts—may meet. For the reader engaged in the practice of some physical discipline who wishes to actualize these things concretely, the following may therefore be especially useful.

This practice details four stages of developing the center:

- Integrating the body
- Establishing the center
- Progressively dropping power to the center
- Erasing the center

To explore these stages and test the hara’s functioning, we will in these exercises use a partner whose role is to simply provide gentle force to our bodies or resistance to our movements.

## **Integrating the Body**

Here are instructions for the first stage of developing the center, in which we recognize that the body must first be structurally integrated:

1. Both partners sit in the seiza position if possible, as this is the easiest for learning the method. If not possible, sitting closely facing one another in chairs could also be fine.
2. Extending your arms naturally, allow your partner to grasp them at the wrists and apply horizontal, linear pressure—directly toward you—with both hands simultaneously. Resist this force as best you can by keeping your arms extended. If your posture is incorrect, particularly with excessive lordosis, you will soon find yourself uprooted: your partner's force will be felt to pass through your arms to your shoulders. The unintegrated posture in this case causes the upper and lower body to then be disconnected, and the entire structure thus loses connection with the earth. The result: you are easily uprooted and pushed over. (Figure 50)



Figure 50: Unintegrated posture is easily uprooted by the partner's pushing force.

3. Now practice integrating the body. We are not concerned yet with usage of the breath, using the hara, and so on. We wish first to just learn to resist our partner's force with the entire body as a whole rather than with the arms alone. To accomplish this, first be sure that your pelvic alignment is correct with the sacrum allowed to drop as we have examined. There will be no excessive curve in the low back. When this correct posture is established, it means that your partner's pushing force will be channeled *downward* through your integrated frame into the earth rather than stopping at the shoulders. When this happens, you will feel that the more your partner pushes, the more your shins and insteps (sitting in seiza) are driven *into* the floor. That



is, your partner's force only serves to glue you to the earth, instead of uprooting you from it. In essence, your partner is now pushing against the earth through your body. (Figure 51)



Figure 51: An integrated posture transfers the pushing force into the earth.

So that completes the first stage: establishing the foundation of an integrated body. Once this is accomplished and manifests consistently, we may proceed to the next stage.

### **Establishing the Center**

In the second stage we will learn to establish the center—rather than the gross strength of the limbs—as the source of our strength.

1. This time, as you extend your arms and your partner pushes directly into you, keep your body integrated in the manner we learned. Further, set your breath in the hara using the body usage of tanden soku. Doing this you may be able to feel that your partner's force flows through your arms to join the power you are holding in the lower abdomen. Again, the more your partner pushes, the more you will feel the bottom of your body pressing against the earth. But now you will also feel that the pressure in the hara increases as your partner pushes. In effect, the hara—which unites upper and lower body—can be felt to absorb some amount of that pushing force with the earth.
2. Incidentally, due to the effect of our partner's pushing force we might here more easily observe visible signs of hara cultivation that are quite interesting. I have mentioned that when power is set in the hara in the manner we learned through tanden soku, that area of the body will appear naturally full—round and taut like an unused leather ball, as Hakuin said—and the navel will point at an upward angle. Note also the concavity in the area of the solar plexus that was mentioned earlier. (Figure 52)

You may contrast this with the appearance of a body when the hara is not engaged or developed: the navel will point more or less straight forward. If the posture is disordered, as with excessive curve in the low back, it may even point downward. (Figure 53)

I do not want to make too much of these things here, and certainly it is not my intention that Zen students should go about examining and judging one another on the basis of what directions their navels point or how concave their solar plexuses are! I should say, however, that these are among the physical changes that can be observed in the body of a practitioner who has brought embodied Zen practice to some fruition. Incidentally, they also reveal something more about how Buddhist iconography encodes aspects of our psycho-physical path that, with the accompanying oral instruction, can be used to guide our practice.



Figure 52: A cultivated hara: the solar plexus is concave, the navel points upward.



Figure 53: An uncultivated hara: the navel points forward or downward.

That, then, is the second stage of establishing the hara as the center. Even as your partner attempts to push with great strength, you will find that you can increasingly learn to transfer that force downward into the lower abdomen, where it is absorbed and nullified.

### **Progressively Dropping Power to the Center**

With the hara established as a source of strength, we can now practice to progressively drop all tension and strength into it from the arms and upper body. That is, we will allow the hara to increasingly become the primary center of physical power in the body, removing power everywhere else as much as we can.

1. As your partner continues to push, try to release all unnecessary physical power from your arms, chest, and the rest of your body, dropping everything down into the hara. You will still keep your arms extended, of course, but practice doing so with the minimal muscular activation necessary. After a time, you will find that it is possible to stay rather relaxed, using only a little muscular power to keep your arms raised and extended, but allowing the hara rather than the arms to increasingly serve as the true center of your resistance. The arms in a way become an extension of the hara-centered power, and their strength can be felt to flow from their structural and energetic connection to the hara.
2. Now ask your partner to grasp your arms again but this time *to prevent your arms from moving at all*. (This should not devolve into a competition to push one another over: your partner is simply trying to prevent any movement on your part.) Despite this resistance, you will now try to move your arms about: forward, back, up, and down. Experiment first with trying to do so using their muscular strength alone. You will likely find yourself easily stopped. Then, try to drop unnecessary tension from the arms, reestablishing their connection to the strength you have established in the hara. When you are successful doing this you will find that you can indeed gradually move your arms to some degree: your freedom and strength are much greater when the hara functions than when you attempt to use the strength of the limbs alone. You will even be able to uproot your partner if you wish. (Figure 54)



Figure 54: Moving freely even when resisted.

This third stage can, in fact, be greatly refined over time. With practice, you will eventually find that increased cultivation of the hara's power and progressive dropping of tension in the body as a whole allow you to move quite easily even with great resistance. It also means that your movement telegraphs less and becomes increasingly subtle and hard to discern.

For someone practicing martial arts, of course, this is an important realization: that using a unified, relaxed body with the hara established as the center is much more powerful, fast, and refined than the use of gross muscular power alone. Skilled martial artists may cultivate this ability to a very high, and sometimes even shocking, degree.

## **Erasing the Center**

There is, however, a fourth and final stage. Speaking again for a moment from the standpoint of martial arts, we must say that dropping all power from the body to the hara has one limitation even when it is mastered: an opponent, if possessing superior development and sensitivity, may be able to seize upon our subtle holding of the hara and use it as a point of control. That is, no matter how profoundly we cultivate the hara and drop all power to it, it still remains as a point of fixation—a place we are holding power—that could possibly be sensed by someone of higher skill and used to move or unbalance us.

Thus, we must aspire to a final stage of seamless, unconscious integration. In this case it means that we must train to the point that we can drop even the hara completely, *erasing it finally as a center*. The entire body, the opponent's body, and all our surroundings thus must become the true center. There is then nothing particular for an opponent to seize upon, because there is no place that is not our own center; the opponent can try to grasp us, but in the act of doing so is already defeated.

Setting aside concern with martial arts now, this final level of developing the physical center can be compared to the stage of seamless integration of tanden soku we examined earlier: a stage in which cultivation becomes unconscious, constant, and so refined in zazen as to be difficult to discern. The fruition of cultivation centered at the tanden is to realize that there is no particular energetic center, and thus there is no place that is not the very center of the universe. Everyplace we stand becomes just this centerless center, the place where Shakyamuni points to heaven and earth saying, "I alone am the honored one!"<sup>2</sup> That, at least, is a way to describe this realization in a Zen manner. But again, realization in Zen must be embodied, not theoretical. In the practice we are examining now, it means that the moment our partner grasps us we must have already completely absorbed his or her center into ours.

As earlier when discussing the training of tanden soku, it is difficult to say much about this stage, and certainly if one has not

developed the center to a profound degree it is useless to talk about. But here is the final part of the practice:

1. As before, extend your arms and allow your partner to grasp you, attempting to prevent any movement. With your body integrated and the hara established, drop all unnecessary tension and strength.
2. In one moment, then, cease your holding of the hara. It is not that the pressure and strength there is abandoned or released; rather, your deep relaxation and dropping of power to the hara comes to include the hara itself. Drop even that last vestige of holding and physical fixation. See, then, how your movement is possible.
3. As a challenge, now place your hands on your thighs and allow your partner to grab them there, placing his or her full body weight down onto them to restrain you. Though this position is obviously advantageous to your partner, if you have caught the principle here you should be able to rise up from your seated posture despite his resistance, moving both arms and body freely in an integrated, relaxed manner. Because you no longer hold power in the hara in an obvious way, your partner will find it difficult to resist this and may be easily unbalanced. (Figures 55–56)





Figure 55: Challenging resistance: arms pinned against one's legs.

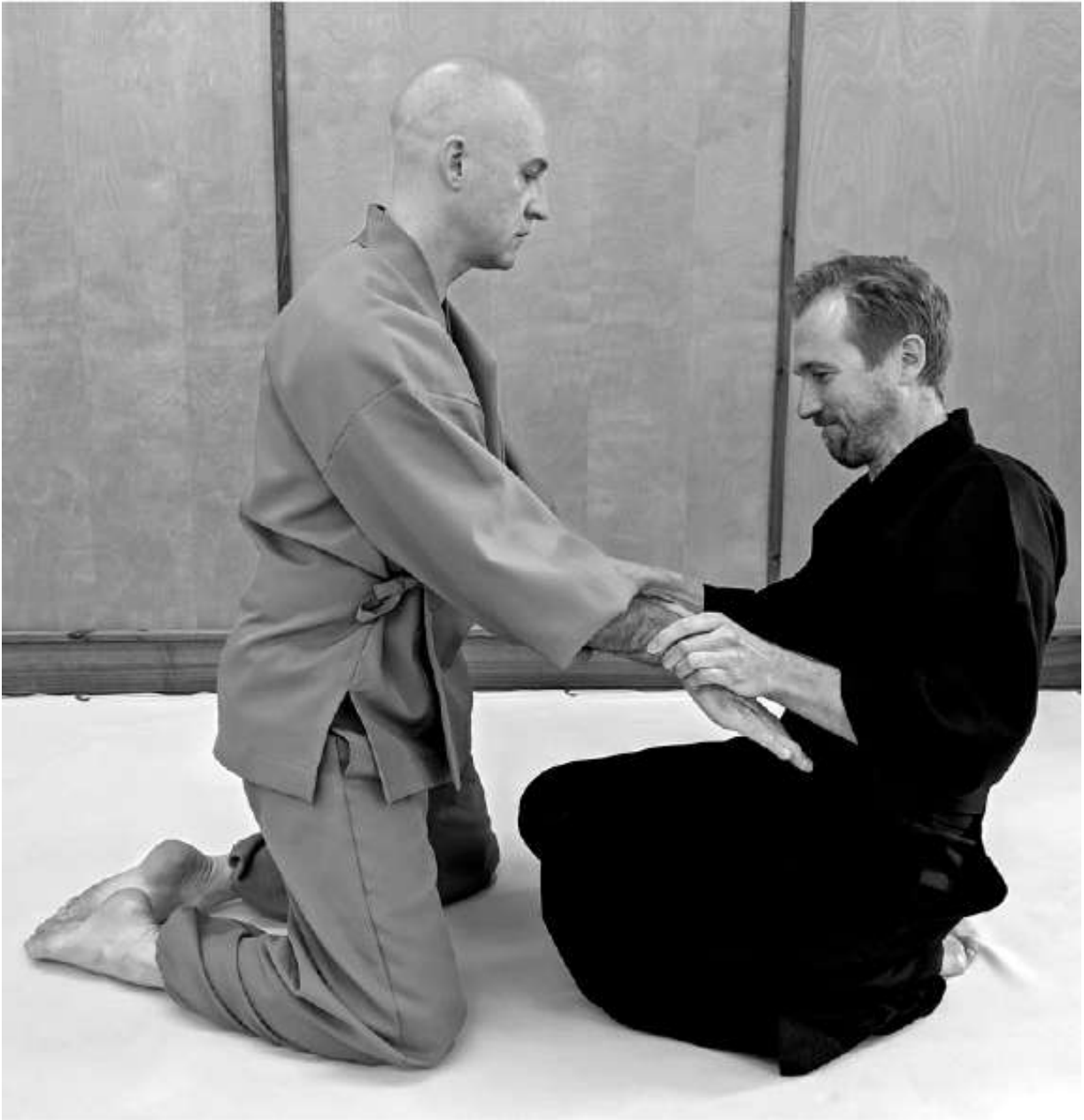


Figure 56: Rising up in an integrated way to unbalance the partner.

4. As a final challenge you may even tell your partner to place your arms in whatever place seems most advantageous to defeating your movement, such as behind your hips. See then if you are able to move freely without being restrained. (Figures 57–58)



Figure 57: More challenging resistance: arms pinned behind the hips.



Figure 58: Even in this situation, we can move freely.

This, then, will serve as a brief exploration of the category of internal energetic cultivation practices we call hara tanren. Once you have grasped the way of establishing power at the hara using tanden soku, and how this can inform and transform your physical movement, it is likely that you could devise many such methods that may suit whatever physical discipline you have chosen to study. The forms that we must master in Zen—such as the ways of standing, walking, and bowing—integrate everything I have described here, when correctly practiced. If you can grasp these principles within your own body, all Zen methods will in fact open up to you even more profoundly. The quality of the clarity that will manifest, and the depth of samadhi that we may come to realize, increases dramatically

within a body that is balanced, integrated, and functioning in the way that these practices can teach us.

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All of this just reveals, again, the essential point underpinning everything: that Zen is a path accomplished through the body, and that the body's functioning can thus reveal in various ways the degree to which we have experienced the fruition of that path.

## ***Do-In Ho: Selected Practices***

**NEXT I WOULD** like to share a few practices that are in a category called *do-in ho*.<sup>\*</sup> The term *do-in* may be translated as “guiding and pulling” and refers not only to the movements of the body within these practices but to the circulation of energy that they cause.

Different Zen lineages often pass on methods like these under various names, as may have been accumulated by lineage forebears. The challenges of rigorous Zen training, particularly long hours of seated meditation, make such exercises incredibly useful for maintaining health and vitality. But of course, these are not just health exercises: they are themselves powerful practices of internal energetic cultivation and an excellent way to enter samadhi in movement.

My own lineage has a particularly rich collection of such things. At Korinji—the monastery where I currently serve as abbot—we maintain a curriculum of *do-in ho* practices that is divided into three sections. These are fairly representative of what falls under this general class of practice, so I will describe them.

- **Massage forms:** to release tension, dissolve physical obstructions, and correct energetic imbalance. These are especially useful for relieving the tension that can arise from hours of *zazen* and physical labor.

- Movement forms: a sort of calisthenics that cultivate posture and strengthen the body in a functional manner.
- Breathing forms: a series of movements integrated with tanden soku that stretch the fascia, muscles, and nerves and cause the energetic currents of the body to circulate. These may be practiced slowly with gentleness or rather intensely according to need.

To give instruction in all of those things would itself require an entire book. For our purposes here, I have thus chosen to share four of the breathing forms. These are among those using the simplest movements, though they are by no means lacking in profundity. But I have mainly chosen these four because I believe they are especially useful for beginners as a complement to the practices we have already examined.

Here are general rules for practicing these forms:

1. One should stand in a relaxed manner, observing points that we have previously discussed: maintain an integrated pelvic alignment, do not lock the knees, let your weight rest on the centers or balls of the feet, and keep your vision spread out.
2. Though there are several ways one could breathe when using these forms, here we will simply inhale and exhale gently through the nostrils. We should at least do so using fukushiki kokyu. But if you have additionally been able to gain some skill in tanden soku, that may be integrated here: after inhaling, set the breath in the hara and maintain that fullness throughout the exhalation phase in the usual manner. Another type of breathing that could be used is the dynamic A-UN practice we examined earlier.
3. There should be no tension or excessive physical power used at all in the movements. These forms should leave you feeling soft, light, and energized rather than tense and exhausted.
4. You may repeat them as often as you like, but there is no need to do more than ten or so repetitions of each form at a time. You

may do one form according to your feeling, or do all four as a series.

And now to the forms themselves.

### **Breathing through the Palms and Feet**

This is the first in the series of standing breathing forms used at Korinji. In many ways it is essentially a standing version of Hakuin's naikan no ho practice that we examined earlier. If you have been able to grasp the physical points of that exercise while prone, you will likely be able to apply them here standing upright.

1. Stand naturally, with your feet approximately shoulder width and arms hanging loosely at your sides. Again, maintain the correct way of standing and keep your vision spread out.
2. Inhaling through the nostrils, you will now do two things in unison with the inbreath: gently tilt your hands upward at the wrist and spread the fingers widely so that the palms face the floor. Be careful not to raise your arms or shoulders but keep them relaxed and hanging downward, letting just the hands move. Simultaneously, gently lift and spread wide the toes of both feet. (Figure 59)
3. The feeling as you perform these movements is that you are drawing energy through the palms and feet to the hara, where it is concentrated. You may in fact visualize this if you wish.







Figure 59: Inhalation: raise and spread the hands, and spread open the feet.





Figure 60: Exhalation: relax the hands and feet, and press with the big toes.

4. To exhale, let the hands relax slowly downward in unison with the outbreath, let your feet relax, and gently press the big toes of both feet into the earth until the exhalation ends. (Figure 60)
5. When you are ready to inhale again, relax and repeat as above.

## **Dropping the Chest**

This breathing form teaches us how to drop tension from the shoulders, chest, and solar plexus, and so it is extremely useful as we are working with tanden soku. It is also a good practice to do if you are experiencing the symptoms of unbalanced, rising energy, such as sensations of heat or tension moving upward into the throat or head. Practicing this form very gently a dozen or so times followed by a session of nanso no ho practice could be an excellent remedy for that situation.

1. Stand naturally as before, but with your hands held out in front of you about shoulder width as if you were holding a large ball. The arms should not be extended straight, but rather let the elbows hang downward with gravity and without tension. The fingers of your hands should be pointing straight upward. (Figure 61)



Figure 61: The arms held in a relaxed position, as if holding a large ball.

2. Inhaling, slowly rotate your arms at the shoulder joint to tilt upward in unison with the breath. You should keep the angle of the elbows fixed: each arm moves as a whole. In other words, your arms will keep the same form throughout the movement but will just rotate at the shoulder so that the elbows point outward instead of down. (Figure 62)
3. Now exhaling, let the arms rotate slowly downward back to their original positions in unison with the breath. But as you do so, let all tension drop from the shoulders, chest, and solar plexus. With practice you will be able to feel that the downward

movement of the arms causes the chest muscles to also drop, while the solar plexus releases and becomes soft.



Figure 62: Inhalation: the arms rotate at the shoulder, pointing the elbows outward.

4. When you are ready to inhale again, repeat as above.

### **Extending *Ki* Outward**

This third breathing form can actualize an expansive, outward movement of energetic power. If you find yourself feeling beset by delusive thought, overcome with negative emotions like sadness,

lacking motivation, or experiencing other such conditions that can accompany the contraction of one's vital energy, this practice can help you to change your state. There are a number of possible variations, but shown here is the simplest.

1. Stand naturally as before. This time your arms will be extended down in front of your body, with the palms facing the earth and the fingertips lightly (or nearly) touching. (Figure 63)

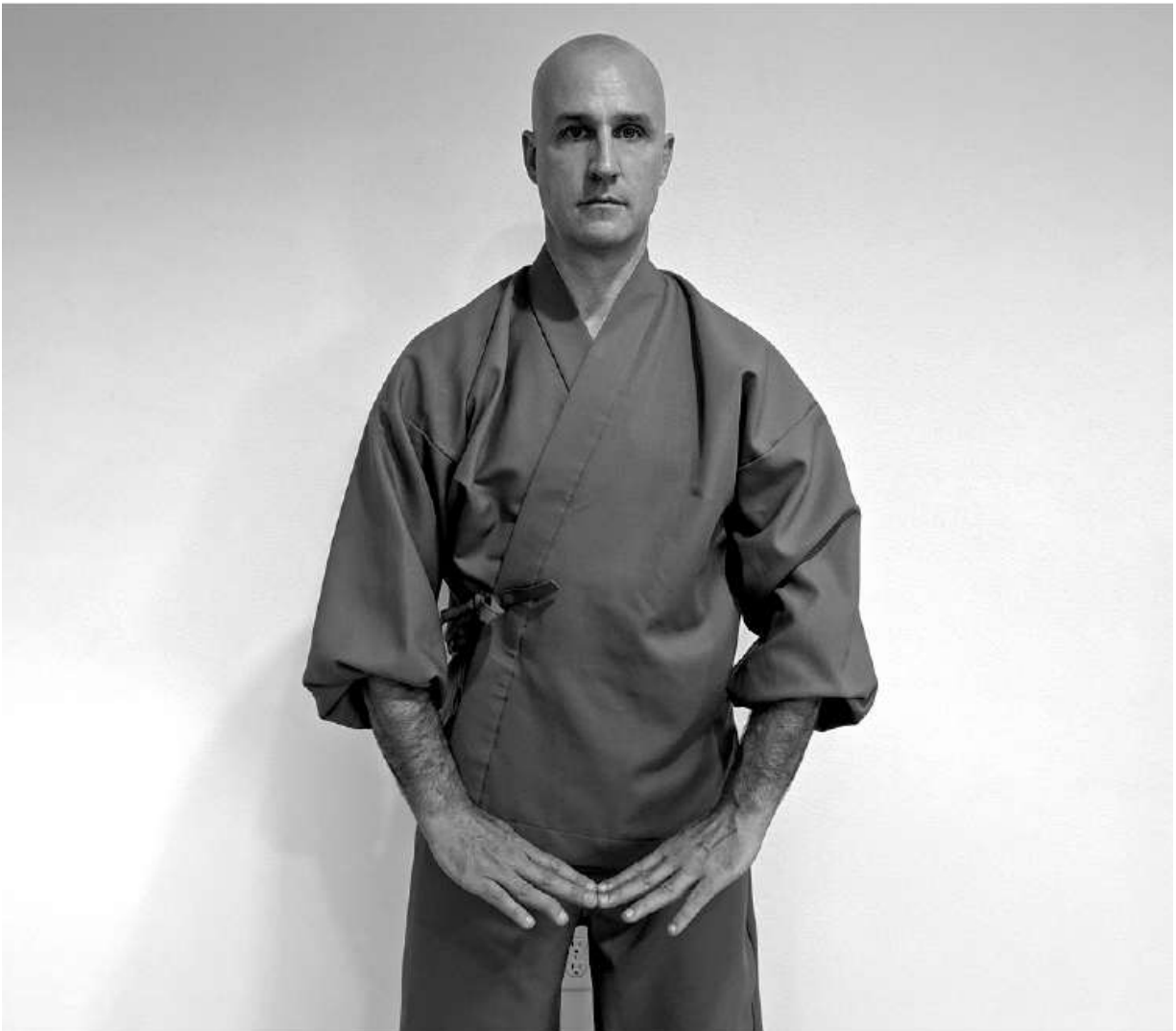


Figure 63: Starting position with fingertips lightly (or nearly) touching.

2. Inhaling, raise your arms forward and up slowly in unison with the breath until your hands are above your head. Time the

ending of the inhalation to coincide with their arrival there. Be careful not to raise the shoulders up or introduce tension into the body: there is no need to overextend the arms stiffly. Although your arms are raising, the energetic current should still move downward with the air as the hara expands. Stay relaxed and grounded. (Figures 64–65)



Figure 64: Raising the arms forward and upward with inhalation.





Figure 65: At the end of inhalation the breath is set in the hara.

3. Exhaling, extend your arms out and down with fingers spread and pulled back such that the palms face out as the arms are lowered slowly with the breath. The feeling is as if you are extending a fiery energy out to encompass the surrounding space. Again, you may visualize this if you like. (Figure 66)



Figure 66: Exhalation: lowering the arms, extending energy out through the palms.

4. At the end of your exhalation, allow your hands to come together at the fingertips with palms up as shown (Figure 67). Then turn the palms over, returning to the beginning position, and repeat as above when you are ready to inhale again.



Figure 67: End of the movement: fingertips meet at the bottom.

## **Pointing to Heaven and Earth**

The final breathing form we will examine uses the famous posture of the Buddha when he pointed simultaneously to the sky and the

ground and exclaimed the words I mentioned earlier: “In heaven and earth, I alone am the honored one!” Leaving aside that wonderful story and its profound meaning that must be penetrated in practice, the movement of pointing in this form serves to balance tension that can accumulate unevenly on one or the other side of the body.

1. Stand naturally with the hands in gassho position. (Figure 68)
2. Inhaling, allow one hand to point slowly straight downward, and the other straight upward, extending the arms in unison with the inbreath. Time the ending of the inhalation to coincide with the full extension of both arms and index fingers. Again, no force should be used: this is a stretch, not a movement using strength. At the very end of the movement you will feel energetic impulses reaching all the way to the tips of the index fingers. Be sure to keep both shoulders down and the spine vertical, without tilting or leaning to one side. (Figure 69)

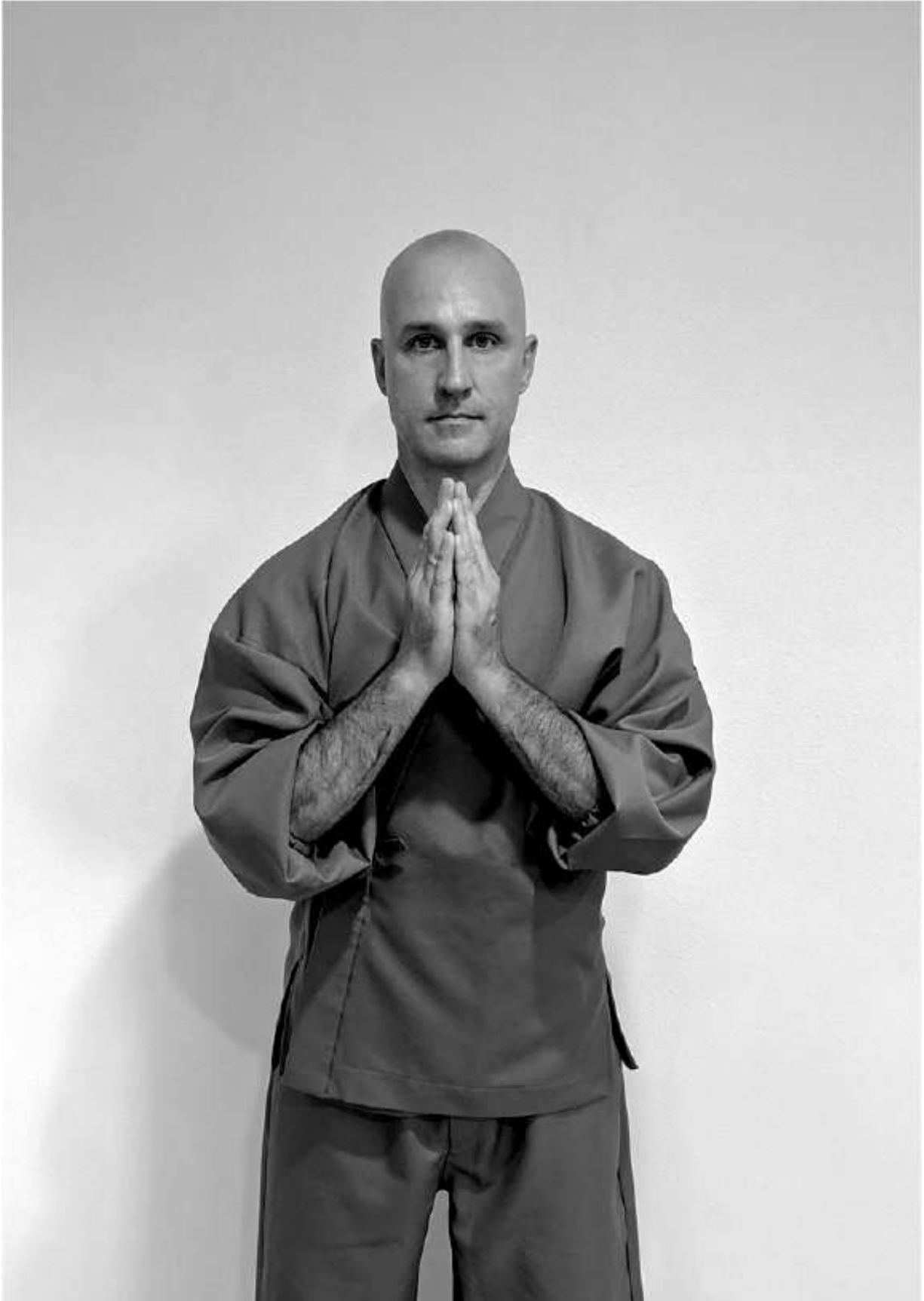




Figure 68: Starting position, hands held in gassho.

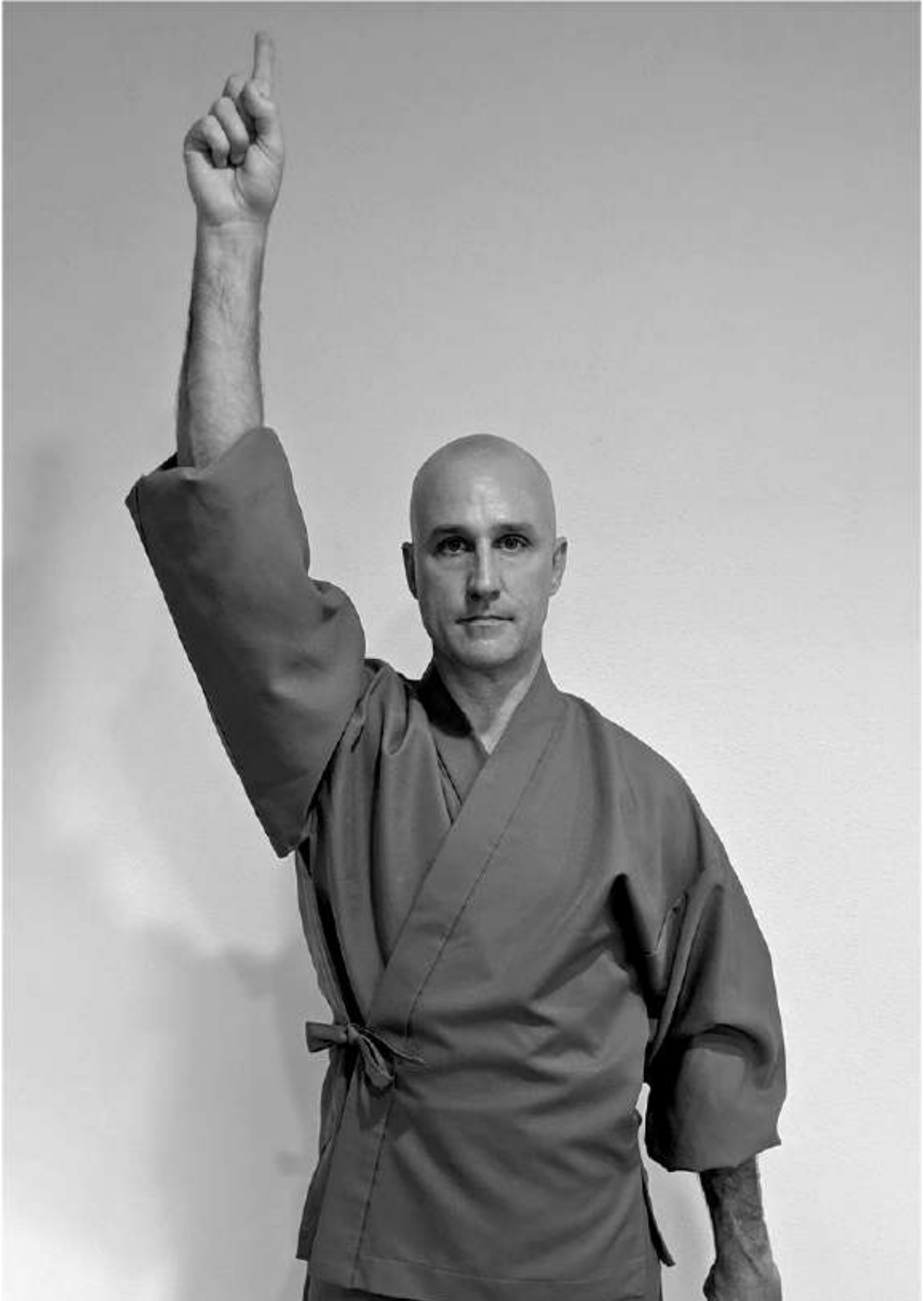




Figure 69: Pointing to heaven and earth simultaneously while inhaling.

3. When exhaling, simply release the stretched extension of the arms and return them slowly with the outbreath to gassho.
4. When you are ready to inhale again, repeat as above. But this time switch which arms extend upward and downward. As you continue to repeat the exercise, switch arms in this manner each time.

These forms can work wonders and are incredibly useful for conditioning the body to endure the physical training of Zen. At Korinji, do-in ho forms are practiced each morning immediately before the first session of meditation. They are very effective then for banishing sleepiness. Later in the day, or in the late evening when it is time for *yaza*\*—solitary practice often done outside on the monastery grounds or in the surrounding forest—it is a good thing to see students sometimes rise from their seats, perform a few



repetitions of a breathing form, and then return refreshed to continue seated meditation. I believe these practices can be just as useful to you in your daily life.

In the next chapter, we will more deeply explore a category of practice upon which we have touched numerous times: mantric sound.

## ***Dharani* and Mantra**

**HERE LET US** examine the practice of chanting dharani and mantra, and let us explore how our training in internal energetic cultivation can inform this. Since their use is something common to most Buddhist schools, it will certainly be useful for us to have some familiarity with these things. But from the standpoint of embodied Zen practice, we should especially discern the effects upon the body-mind of mantric sound. This will allow us not only to activate dharani and mantra within our own bodies and experience their benefits, but also to understand their deeper uses in things like Zen ritual, as well as how they can be used to help others.

We have already discussed qualities carried by the mantric syllables A-UN. In fact, all syllables have some such qualities. What is truly interesting is that the patterns of sounds preserved in some mantra, dharani, and okyo—which though chanted in archaic Sino-Japanese in the Zen tradition are often transliterations of Sanskrit—transmit those qualities and enable us to bodily experience them. In the practices we examined earlier, when you intoned silently or aloud the syllables A and UN—or the vowels A, I, U, E, and O—did you discern any change in your body or mind from the sounds themselves? Some sounds, we find, calm us while others excite or energize. We may feel drawn to a particular sound more than others depending on our state. If you practice these things long enough, especially using the

method of vibrating sound downward into the body cavities that we examined earlier, you will increasingly notice this very interesting phenomenon.

When we start to experience this it opens up a whole new level of understanding and significance. We begin to grasp why chanting texts in Zen is not primarily a practice of memorization, a contemplation of the meaning of the texts, or an act of devotion toward some bodhisattva or deity (though it can also be any of these things). Instead, the main function of chanting in Zen is to cause experiential change within the body-mind of both chanter and listener. Again, what we should understand is that this change is an effect of mantric sound itself, not the conceptual meaning of the text we are chanting.

This last point is especially important. It reveals why it is rarely useful to translate these texts to chant them in English or other languages: such translations, though in some cases making clear a meaning that can be important to study, erase the preserved mantric sounds. It is thus generally best to study translations separately where appropriate, and to let the chanting practice itself be done in the original Sino-Japanese (or where applicable, Sanskrit). In that way chanting can retain its power as a psycho-physical practice that, like zazen, integrates tanden soku and gives rise to samadhi.

All of this may sound odd to modern practitioners, especially in the West where chanting is perhaps foremost among the training forms that are commonly altered in the interest of adapting Zen to modern culture or language. So again, I will repeat that I do not think it useless to work with some texts in one's native tongue; to recite the *Heart Sutra*\* aloud in English, for example, is certainly helpful for digesting the deep conceptual meaning of the words. But even so, the text should also be chanted in the original Sino-Japanese because this preserves something of its mantric qualities and power of transformation that I am discussing.

To give an example of this, the last line of the *Heart Sutra* is in fact a mantra: GYATE GYATE HARA GYATE HARA SO GYATE BOJI SOWAKA in Sino-Japanese (GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA in Sanskrit).

One could certainly translate these words in a rough manner and unpack some meaning from them (and attempts are often made to do so). But we quickly learn that chanting something like “Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, awakening hail!” has no power whatsoever to transform us (or others). We also find that, using those English words, it is difficult to cause the body cavities to resonate with the sound in the manner we have studied. This is not because English is an inferior language in some way. It is simply the fact that English is less suited to the body usage of chanting that we have examined.

What does all that matter? I said that it can indeed be useful to recite the translation of a text like the *Heart Sutra* in order to approach the conceptual meaning of its teachings. But there is something more important than this: gaining an experiential grasp of the text’s essential point, arrived at not intellectually but within the samadhi of practice. The intellectual understanding will be useful to communicate the teachings to others, but the experiential understanding—an arising within one’s body-mind of the actual wisdom to which the *Heart Sutra* points—is the indispensable foundation of the Zen path and a prerequisite of all effective teaching. We can do without the former kind of understanding, but if the latter is lacking, Zen dies completely. And here is the main point: though it may sound hard to believe, it is in fact possible to arrive at that experiential grasp of wisdom, within one’s own body, *through the mantra itself*.

The *Heart Sutra* mantra, in other words, contains a quality that when chanted with one’s whole body-mind, engaging the subtle energetics of the body, gives rise to samadhi and opens the door of awakening to the deep import of the text itself. The mantra encapsulates and transmits the essence of the sutra: this is the traditional understanding. And in the Zen understanding of what practice entails, what is simply required is for us to know how to engage bodily and unify ourselves wholly with the mantra. When we accomplish this, we will feel the mantra itself moving through our own bodies.

This explains a bit more my statement that although we may study a translation of the *Heart Sutra*, we should also chant it as handed down to us. Entering into the mantric sound of the text rather than mulling over its meaning, and arriving then at the mantra that is itself the “heart” of the *Heart Sutra* (and that sutra also being an essential, condensed summation of the entire Prajnaparamita\* class of sutras), it is possible for us in one instant to grasp within our own experience that to which the *Heart Sutra* points. In fact, I might mention here the famous “one letter sutra” that, it is said, sums up all the teachings found in the many thousands of lines of the Prajnaparamita sutras: it is simply the Sanskrit syllable A.

This is interesting. That it could be thought possible in Buddhist practice to sum up all the Prajnaparamita sutras within a condensed text like the *Heart Sutra* is one thing; but to say even further that the essential point of those sutras can be arrived at experientially through reciting the mantra alone, or even simply through reciting the sound of a single syllable, is remarkable. It points to the deeper meaning of chanting that we are exploring, and it illuminates the importance of learning how to activate the sounds preserved within dharani and mantra in a yogic manner, that is, with one’s whole body-mind.

I recognize that all of this may be difficult for some readers to believe. But now I will say something more about this way of embodied chanting—grounded in *tanden soku* and thus engaging the subtle energetics of the body—that some readers may find even more difficult to accept. By chanting in this way, we are not in fact chanting alone. We join with the energetic field—the *ba*—generated by the many practitioners, past and present, who have extended their own bodies and minds into those same patterns of mantric sound, reciting them again and again within the *samadhi* of their practice. In other words, this field created by the effort of those practitioners in both past and present time and space continues. The sounds of mantra and dharani unlock this. And we may enter it.

All dharani, mantra, and *okyo* are like this. If we chant *Shosaishu*, it is fine if we know that it has historically been regarded as a dharani

with the power to avert crisis and disaster, that different rituals make use of it, and so on. One might even try to translate the original Sanskrit, picking apart some literal meaning of the mantric utterances. But none of that is actually useful to activate the function of *Shosaishu*. Rather, when we enter into the recitation of *Shosaishu* with the whole body-mind unified in samadhi, joining with the patterns of mantric sound that it preserves and using them to resonate our own bodies, we may connect in a profound manner with the energetic field of the dharani that has been created, entered into, and sustained by all the practitioners of the past who held *Shosaishu* as we are now doing. The text serves to link us to this, and we may thereby be transformed by it. The mantric quality of the text—activated by our way of practicing that engages the whole psycho-physical being and causes us to vibrate with and ultimately embody the dharani in samadhi—is what opens this door.

What I am speaking of is a special quality of our Zen path of embodied practice. And it points again to a reason why Zen is considered a rapid path.

Someone once said to me that this understanding of chanting practice in Zen seemed part yoga (because of its exacting usage of body and breath) and part magical spell (because of the manner in which one is believed to participate in and channel the power of the text and the seemingly magical effects thereof). I have thought about it for some time, and I suppose that description is fair as far as it goes. But the point is that we can each arrive at this experiential understanding ourselves. Doing so, you will not need to depend upon my description or any traditional understanding. You will know for yourself. To resonate with the mantric vibration of the *Heart Sutra* mantra, or that carried by the mantra of a figure like Fudo Myo-o, is to do more than just experience some understanding of what that sutra says or that deity represents. It is to begin to embody the wisdom about which the *Heart Sutra* speaks. It is to connect with the living reality that we call Fudo Myo-o, and it is to arise as Fudo Myo-o within your own body.

To again sum up the way to use dharani and mantra in Zen, it is to unify one's body-mind with the dharani or mantra, entering samadhi by means of the breath in accord with the mantric vibrations each carries, and so to cause that vibration—riding the subtle energetic currents—to completely penetrate the very tissue of one's body and one's entire being. When reciting a dharani or mantra, we should physically feel it all the way down to our toes.

It may not be terribly useful to say much more about this. But to begin our own exploration of the matter, there are a few things we can do to start looking more closely at the mantric qualities of sound preserved in different texts. In this case, let us return to the syllables A and UN since we have become somewhat familiar with them and their qualities. We will now try to discern how different dharani or mantra can have a predominance of specific mantric sounds like these.

What follows is a simple exercise. If you are alone you will need some device that can record and play back your voice. But if you have a practice partner, that person can take the role of the voice recorder as I will explain below. Here are the instructions:

1. We will work here with two short texts, *Shosaishu* and *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*.<sup>\*</sup> The former is the dharani that we have already examined. The latter is not actually a dharani or mantra; when translated, it is a relatively straightforward praise of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion. But it has nevertheless historically been used in a manner essentially similar to a dharani. So it will be useful to us.
2. First let us examine the words of each text. Repeated here is *Shosaishu*:

NA MU SA MAN DA MO TO NAN O HA RA CHI KO TO SHA SO NO NAN TO JI TO  
EN GYA GYA GYA KI GYA KI UN NUN SHI FU RA SHI FU RA HA RA SHI FU RA  
HA RA SHI FU RA CHI SHU SA CHI SHU SA SHU SHI RI SHU SHI RI SO HA JA  
SO HA JA SEI CHI GYA SHI RI EI SO MO KO.

And here is the text of *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*, also broken down in the manner that it is usually chanted:

KAN ZE ON NA MU BUTSU YO BUTSU U IN YO BUTSU U EN BUP PO SO EN JO  
RAKU GA JO CHO NEN KAN ZE ON BO NEN KAN ZE ON NEN NEN JU SHIN KI  
NEN NEN FU RI SHIN.

Read both of these over a few times, carefully and slowly.  
Does anything strike you about the patterns of sound in one  
compared to the other?

3. Examining more closely, you may see the point. Try chanting these to yourself silently or out loud a few times each. (Customarily both are chanted three times in row, so that may be perfect to do now.) This time as you chant, try to discern what mantric sounds are *predominant* within each text. Another way to say it is this: which of the sounds A, I, U, E, and O (“ah, ee, oo, ay, oh”) seem to run through the text of each chant in the most noticeable way?
4. What you will discover is that *Shosaishu*, when the syllables are chanted together with continuity, has a predominant A (“ah”) sound running through it. *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*, however, has U (“oo”) and O (“oh”) sounds predominant. And this is obvious now when we look at the actual words in that light: *Shosaishu* does indeed contain many syllables with the A vowel sound: NA, SA, MAN, DA, NAN, HA, and so on. Meanwhile *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo* contains many syllables with U and O sounds: ON, MU, BU, TSU, YO, U, and so on.
5. Something really interesting to do now is to chant each of these texts again, while in the background a steady drone of the sounds A or U plays (or is voiced). If you are alone, record yourself just intoning the sound “ahhh...” in an extended way, for a minute or two. (If you are with a partner, you can of course just ask that person to voice the sound for you.) Then, with that sound in the background, chant *Shosaishu*. Next, do the same with an “oooo...” sound, recorded or voiced: have it in the background as you chant *Shosaishu* again.
6. What you will find is that the background current of sound seems to clash with and weaken your chanting of *Shosaishu* when it is the sound “oo” being played or voiced. But when the



sound “ah” is heard in the background, *Shosaishu* seems to harmonize with and be strengthened by it. This confirms that *Shosaishu* is a dharani that will vibrate in our bodies and minds predominately with the mantric syllable A.

7. Now do the same for *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*. What do you find? You will experience, in fact, that this text harmonizes with “oo” or “oh” sounds, while the sound “ah” playing in the background seems dissonant. This confirms that *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*, when chanted in the embodied manner we have studied, transmits a vibration closer to the mantric syllable U.

A mildly interesting experiment, you may think. We have established that each of these texts carries a predominant mantric sound. But what is the use of it?

Recall that I have said (and you may have experienced yourself by this point) that the syllable A in general causes a clarifying, expansive, and wakeful quality of clarity to manifest, while UN (and similar sounds) causes an effect in body and mind that is deeply strengthening, solidifying, and grounding. In fact, when we examine the traditional uses of these two texts and the powers ascribed to them, we learn something quite interesting.

*Shosaishu*—which as we observed carries the A vibration—is traditionally used to impart clarity in situations of crisis; it is a chant even said to have been used by samurai before going into battle in order to overcome the contracting paralysis of fear. *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*—as we found, vibrating predominately with the sounds U and o—is traditionally used to help those who are ill: when someone is weakened in mind and body due to physical or mental suffering it is chanted to powerfully strengthen, ground, and so create conditions for healing.

In other words, the traditional uses of these two texts when chanted correspond with the observed effects of the mantric sounds that each text carries. Another way to say it is that their mantric content has defined their uses.

Realizing this, we may embark on a truly interesting study. Examining each of the dharani, mantra, and okyo used in Zen practice and ceremony, it could be possible for us—through this kind of observation, as well as more deeply through experience as we practice chanting each text and observe their effects on the body-mind—to discern various mantric qualities carried by each. As we experience for ourselves the effects of vibrating those sounds with our own bodies, we can start to grasp how each text might be used to help in different situations and why some have traditionally been used in specific ways in the past.

Many interesting questions then arise for us to explore. For example, the *Ryogon-shu*\* dharani and its heart mantra, ending with sharp mantric exclamations not unlike the katsu shout, are traditionally used in Zen ritual to exorcise negative energetic forces or entities from a place: Why is this? Several mantras connected to Fudo Myo-o are extremely interesting in the manner they combine various mantric sounds to create a specific effect: Why those combinations? The mantra of Juntei Kannon\* is said to have the effect of removing obstructions in body and mind connected to one's past karma: Does it indeed cause such body-mind purification to occur, and if so how is this tied to the pattern of vibrations it sets up when recited?

Studying in this way we may indeed start to experience that the field of a dharani or mantra I have described, which can also be considered the field of the bodhisattva or deity connected to or represented by it, is a living thing into which we can enter here and now. The deep study of mantric sound, vibration, and resonance—in Zen, we may say, essentially a study of how to work with and channel kiai, or energy—is something that our bodily training of internal energetic cultivation opens up to us. And it is a study that we could never exhaust.

Though we have only touched upon it here in the most basic way, I hope this will serve to impress upon you the profundity of the practice of reciting dharani and mantra, as well as other texts commonly chanted in Zen. I also hope that it will inspire you to look

at these practices more closely, and that it will encourage you to actualize their practice yourself.

In the next chapter, we will finally examine the embodied manner of working with one of the most famous and important of Zen practices: the use of koans.

## Approaching Koan through the Body

**THE METHOD OF** koan practice for which Zen is so famous is founded—like all Zen practices—upon the embodied, yogic approach we have repeatedly discussed. But again, even among Rinzai Zen students who work with the koan method extensively it seems that this embodied understanding of the practice is often missing. In this chapter we will therefore examine the method of koan practice from the standpoint of the internal energetic cultivation that we have taken such pains to grasp.

Naturally, any explanation I give regarding koan practice cannot replace the instructions received from one's own teacher. So I will just present here a summary of the instructions I received from mine. Since I have confirmed within my own experience the usefulness of these points, I feel some confidence that I will not mislead anyone by doing so. But I additionally hope that readers who are already engaged with koans may find these points useful in their practice to penetrate that method more deeply.

I might first say that it is encouraging that authors in the West writing about koan practice seem finally to be abandoning some of the more common misunderstandings that have surrounded it. These are confusions often voiced not only by beginners and self-taught practitioners but also (or especially) by some scholars: for example, that the purpose of koans is to bypass or short-circuit logic,

that they are literary games or puzzles to be solved, that they encode Buddhist teachings using a kind of twilight language of the ancient Chinese literati meant to be decoded and intellectually grasped, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

But regarding the late Song dynasty Zen that came to Japan, the manner of engaging bodily with koans and with wato—the “word head” (key word or phrase), often taken from a koan, that can serve as a focus of practice—was already clearly expressed at the beginning of the *Mumonkan*,\* perhaps the most famous of the Chinese koan collections. In his commentary to the well-known first koan of that collection, “Joshu’s Mu,” the compiler, Mumon,<sup>2</sup> himself explains straightforwardly how one should endeavor to practice with the wato “Mu” and in fact with koans in general. Let us examine this text.

The text of that first koan itself is short:

A monk asked Joshu, “Has a dog the Buddha Nature?” Joshu answered, “Mu.”<sup>3</sup>

By way of brief explanation: “Buddha Nature”\* refers to the nature or foundation of awakening that is not lacking within all sentient beings and so allows for the possibility of their liberation, if they can only actualize it. The Japanese word mu, *wu* in Chinese, is a negation: “no” or “not.” But leaving aside a conceptual examination of the words, here is the portion of Mumon’s commentary to this koan in which he explains how to use it in practice.

Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word “Mu.” Carry it continuously day and night. Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of “has” or “has not.” It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try. All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously

united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream. Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth.... Now, I want to ask you again, “How will you carry it out?” Employ every ounce of your energy to work on this “Mu.” If you hold on without interruption, behold: a single spark, and the holy candle is lit!<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter I would like to unpack Mumon’s words. Examining them, we must discern how it is precisely the methods of internal energetic cultivation that make the practice he describes possible. We must come to see that Mumon’s words are incredibly kind and straightforward and, in fact, are meant to be taken quite literally: he describes clearly how one must use this koan method. How odd, then, that there should be so much confusion and so many Zen students who remain unclear what to do! Again, what seems lacking are living oral instructions from teachers that can serve to clarify Mumon’s words in light of the overall path.

Beginning then with the first line:

Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin.

In these first few precious words, Mumon sums up the situation completely and presents the core of koan practice freely, hiding nothing at all. To work with this practice of penetrating the wato “Mu” you must use your whole being. “Three hundred and sixty bones and joints” and “eighty-four thousand pores of the skin” taken together means your entire body-mind.

What does this mean practically? It is that one must unify the whole body-mind with the wato. Joining with the koan in samadhi, exhaling the wato “Mu” with each breath through the whole body and down into the tanden, and causing it thus to ride upon the radiating energetic currents that permeate the body, this “Mu” must be encountered within and digested by means of every fiber of one’s flesh and bone. There is a common instruction given in this regard

that one should put the wato or koan in one's belly and work on it there. But even more than these words for beginners, we should say that the koan must eventually come alive within one's entire frame through tanden soku: the bodily way of breathing "Mu" with one's whole being that causes it to percolate through the entire body-mind.

In this way, with time and perseverance, one eventually comes to feel the wato or koan as the sensations of the skin, to hear it as the sounds that strike one's ears, and to see it within every sight that strikes the eyes. Every thought that arises is not apart from the wato. Every exhalation, like a bellows, causes the fire of the wato to blaze up and radiate from the tanden to circulate throughout the body. One must make of one's body—whether sitting or standing, eating or sleeping—something like an incense burner in which the wato ceaselessly smolders, causing its scent to permeate everywhere.

From these words you may already begin to see how our practice of internal energetic cultivation allows us to unify ourselves with the koan like this. It is only the samadhi that results from such engagement of the whole body-mind, with the cultivation of the energetic center as we have examined, that makes it possible to such a degree. In short, we work on the koan at the tanden, with the hara, as a way to join ourselves bodily with it in the most profound, embodied samadhi possible. Any other approach means that we will engage with the koan mainly with our conceptual minds, or at best by using a shallow samadhi established without full bodily engagement. And any insight arising from such practice will be equally shallow.

What I have just described in only a few words, though it may seem like nothing special, is in fact a precious, hard-won treasure bequeathed to us by many generations of practitioners. This way of practicing, resting upon the Zen understanding of how to engage one's whole body-mind that has been our constant concern during our examination of internal energetic cultivation, is precisely the true, direct, rapid, and dependable way to penetrate the wato and arrive at awakening. How could anyone not value teachings like these or appreciate Mumon's incredible kindness? To think that his

exhortation to use all our pores, joints, and bones is merely poetic language is indeed a grave error.

Now to the next words:

Summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word “Mu.”

What is meant by “summon up a spirit of great doubt” is something that could be discussed at some length (and many Zen books indeed do so). But it is enough here to say that great doubt does not in the context of Zen practice mean a kind of skepticism. Rather, it means that one’s wish to grasp the root of liberating wisdom—that is, to penetrate the fundamental human existential question and arrive at a resolution thereof—must manifest in the most sincerely profound and intense manner possible if we wish to bring this practice to fruition.

That being said, I believe many beginners worry that they do not have such a fierce kind of doubt or sufficiently powerful motivation to practice. But here I would like to reassure them. We should understand that if our initial motivations for practice are basically correct—that is, if we have given rise to at least some degree of existential questioning regarding this very odd, transient, unstable existence of ours seemingly taking place in time and space, and if we have observed with at least some sympathy of feeling that it is not only ourselves that suffer but myriad creatures all around us—that will be enough “great doubt” to initially fuel us. Then, as we are able to integrate the bodily manner of holding and digesting the koan that I have described, it will cause an increasingly intense feeling of poignant inquiry to arise.

We do not, in other words, have to worry if we do not initially feel anything beyond what seems a mild urge to dissolve delusion and arrive at liberating wisdom. I have described above the inner aspects of what is meant by “concentrate on this word ‘Mu,’ ” that is, to digest the koan with one’s entire being in a samadhi that arises from engagement of the whole body-mind. But the interesting thing is that



manner of practice itself has the power to fan our initial doubt or inquiry, which might be small rather than great, into flame. As we essentially become the wato or koan with our entire being by means of body and breath, we will find that the question of what that being truly is arises within us in an increasingly vivid, inescapable, and wholly bodily manner, fueled by the dynamic kiai that radiates from our practice.

Carry it continuously day and night.

Here we arrive at words that further reveal, in Mumon's typically straightforward manner, the ongoing path of practice. Incidentally, they also clarify a prerequisite for using the koan and wato methods.

To "carry it continuously day and night" means that when one is able to unite with the single word of the wato "Mu" (or, if one is working with a koan that does not have a wato, then with the general content and feeling—that is, the energy or the field—of the koan) in the whole-being manner I have described, then one must exert extreme effort to do so seamlessly. One must establish a continuity of embodied practice that extends throughout the entire day and night.

Practically speaking, this means that for the koan method to be effectively taken up one should first, as an absolute minimum, have attained sufficient stability in zazen to hold one's focus upon the wato or koan uninterruptedly, unifying oneself with it on each exhalation, for at least the length of a typical meditation period (thirty to forty-five minutes). Most commonly in Rinzai training, beginners with some dedication are made to first practice using a foundational method for about two years. (Typically this is the practice of *susokukan*, breath counting.) The reason for this is to establish such meditative stability, to begin working with breath and posture deeply, and in general to cultivate conditions within the body-mind that will permit the koan method to come alive.

That being said, the main point to understand is this: carrying the wato or koan continuously within each moment of our days, whether in zazen, when chanting, eating, daily work, and ultimately even in

sleep, we must come to inhabit it seamlessly with the entire body in the manner I described above. Extending our effort like this, we must ultimately enter the profound samadhi discussed earlier, in which body and mind—along with all sense of time and space—drop utterly away. It is our cultivation of breath and posture with the gathering of the subtle energetic currents at the tanden that open the door to this kind of all-encompassing samadhi most rapidly and with greatest success.

I should briefly mention something else here. Though certainly we must encompass daily life within our practice to reach such a state of all-encompassing samadhi, it is also true that if we do so we may eventually arrive at a place in which it is impossible for a time to function in daily life. Our unification with the wato or koan may become so complete that we have to set aside other activities, giving ourselves over fully to absorption in practice. This is not something often mentioned to Zen students, but I think it fair to warn them about it. Of course, it may be that it is not often mentioned because not many students practice in such a manner that this place of complete unification and absorption is reached.

Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of “has” or “has not.”

What should certainly be obvious by now is that we do not attempt to penetrate the wato or koan with the intellect at all. To “form a nihilistic conception of vacancy,” that is, a mistaken view of the Buddhist teaching of emptiness arising from Joshu’s negation, or “a relative conception of ‘has’ or ‘has not,’” that is, a dualistic fixation upon the answer Joshu gave and its meaning, are completely false approaches. If one is sitting with the wato “Mu,” mulling over what the meaning of that answer could be, trying to discern what Joshu intended when he uttered that word and how such a thing could reveal kensho, then one has misunderstood entirely.

But even if one is not attempting to penetrate the koan in an intellectual manner like that and is straining to hold one’s solely mental focus upon the wato as if trying to cut off any other intruding

thought, it is still mistaken. The result of both of these common approaches is merely exhaustion, or else a kind of excited state often leading to distracting experiences that one tends to believe are a “breakthrough” of some sort. They are, in fact, worthless.

What we must know is that the point of the koan or wato is not to give rise to some answer or experience at all. There is nothing we must know or see through the koan. Our purpose is rather, as we discussed in the introduction when examining what is meant by kensho, to cause our very manner of knowing and seeing itself to change. When this change occurs, in fact almost any answer we give could be acceptable. And every experience we have, even the most mundane sight or sound, will then resonate with the revealed meaning of the koan. But the only way for this to happen is to penetrate the koan—again, to join with it—in bodily samadhi rather than with the mind alone.

It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try. All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream.

And here Mumon vividly and accurately describes the approach to and experience of that all-encompassing bodily samadhi. The wato or koan eventually swallows us whole, and concepts of so-called I and not-I fall away. We arrive then at a place of absorption in which one can appear to others a complete fool, or else mindless like a zombie. People may then ask what is wrong with you, but though you may know they are there, you will not be able to speak to them at all.

Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth.

Finally, the deep samadhi of the wato or koan shatters. Coming alive again from this, you will recognize within your own body that

wisdom we call kensho. This is the time that your teacher's confirmation and guidance will be crucial.

Now, I want to ask you again, "How will you carry it out?" Employ every ounce of your energy to work on this "Mu." If you hold on without interruption, behold: a single spark, and the holy candle is lit!

Mumon, in a final act of kindness, takes pains to again remind us about the essential point: use your entire being, the whole body-mind, and with the inner energy you have cultivated enter the path of just dissolving completely and bodily into the wato or koan, holding it in your muscles, nerves, and bones. With nothing held back, establish this seamless energetic continuity through each moment of time that passes; in all places and activities, manifest it within each square millimeter of your body's frame, and encompass the expanse of universal space within the boundless kiai arising from your inner cultivation. This is the way of practice we call koan kufu.

If you do this without interruption, then indeed there is no doubt: when conditions are correct it is as if, within an infinite void of impenetrable darkness, flint and steel inexplicably and suddenly meet. Dying completely, returning then to life, you will find that your own hands hold the illuminating light that dispels primordial delusion. You will be able to exclaim aloud that the Buddha and all the great masters of the past did not deceive you at all. What an incredibly joyful and indescribably miraculous thing!

Then, of course, your truly difficult training will begin.

And with that we have arrived at the end of part two of this book, dealing with the practices of internal energetic cultivation. In all the chapters of both parts, I have attempted to share openly of teachings and methods I received from my own teachers, holding nothing back. I do recognize that the manner in which I have done this may be similar to that of Tozan in the eighteenth koan of the *Mumonkan*. As Mumon comments there,

Old Tozan attained the poor Zen of a clam. He opened two halves of the shell a little and exposed all the liver and intestines inside.<sup>5</sup>

But again, it is my hope that the innards I have exposed so brazenly will be of benefit to Zen and to you. If you are able to bring any of these methods we have examined to life within your own body-mind, I bow to you with tremendous gratitude. It will then be you who allows me to repay something of the debt I owe to my own teachers. And you will repay for both of us something of the debt owed to all the ancestors of our sublime Zen lineages.

The conclusion that follows is a *teisho*\* (dharma talk) relevant to both the subjects of direct pointing and internal energetic cultivation.

# Conclusion

## *Kyosei's Voice of the Raindrops*

*Kyosei asked a monk, "What is the noise outside?"*

*The monk said, "That is the voice of the raindrops."*

*Kyosei said, "Men's thinking is topsy-turvy. Deluded by their own selves, they pursue things."<sup>1</sup>*

### **[From a Teisho Given at Korinji Monastery]**

Today at Korinji it is raining, so I want to ask all of you: What is that sound outside? "Well," you answer, "that it is the sound of the rain." Of course, that's true. It's raining out there. In here we are dry and sitting on cushions. Our legs are tired, we are tired. But out there, in the wind and rain, it's another world. We can imagine it: the maples and the birches are swaying; the rain is coming down onto the grass; the stones down by the gate are probably slippery. All the animals—the deer and the rabbits, the coyotes and owls—are taking shelter from the rain.

All of that sounds very reasonable. But you are a fool, little better than a ghost, if you think that's the end of the matter.

"Well," you say, "Zen is just common sense, right?" That is a kind of popular understanding of Zen. People say things like that all the time, thinking they understand: "You've eaten? Well, wash your bowls! Have a cup of tea!"

That kind of Zen talk is useless. People who parrot things like that don't know that what the world calls "common sense," while

certainly common, is not sensible at all.

If you are one of the people who goes around saying things like that and think that's all Zen is—that just something like that is what the Patriarchs and masters of our lineage sacrificed so much to transmit—then it would be better for you to get out of here. Go outside into the rain; run through the bushes and thickets. Go crawl into the thorns; crawl down in the mud by the stream in the rushes; let the rain come down over you. You might have a better chance then.

This reasonable, commonsense way of seeing is in fact a killer. How reasonable it is that I am in here and able to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and know all the many things that are out there. And of course, I have names for all of those things. In fact, as I see it, they are *my* things. The rain out there is definitely one of my things. That's *my* rain out there. I hear it: it's rain, of course. My rain, I'm here; it's there; I am experiencing it. It's called "rain"; that's what we call it. This way of seeing is the same for each of you, isn't it?

*[Gives a katsu shout]*

Where is the rain now?

In the early days of Zen in Japan, a shout could be used to knock someone out and then to revive them. It could even be used to kill. My power is not so great as that. But I can easily kill the rain with deluded seeing and then with a shout perhaps bring it back to life, at least maybe for some of us.

Kyosei said we are all fools and that our thinking is topsy-turvy, backward, confused. He was completely right. We are deluded by our own selves, and so we chase after things. Deluded by self, there are *things*. We follow them, love them, hate them, give them names, organize them, plot over them.

But a Zen practitioner isn't like that. A real practitioner doesn't follow after things and phenomena. A real practitioner is followed by phenomena.

Spread out your vision now, as much as you can, for a few moments. Ready?

Go.

Now stop. During those few moments, what were you thinking?

What is that sound outside now?

If you can answer this genuinely, it's a real start. Then you could understand how it's possible for us to vow to save all suffering beings. You could understand that all the sounds that strike our ears are mantras and holy teachings. All the sights that meet our eyes are buddha images, and all the places that we enter are Pure Lands. All the thoughts in our minds are just the original face of our own nature, and all the actions that we do are just the activities of an enlightened one. Then you can say that you understand something about Zen. There's still a lot to do then, but it's a start.

When you get to that point, I hope you remember that our path doesn't ever stop reaching upward. It is never satisfied with a small realization. But simultaneously—and forever—it also reaches downward, endlessly, to lift up all the beings. If you see the rain genuinely, you can see them genuinely too.

Sometimes students ask me about direct pointing in Zen. People ask me to point something out, to cause them to have an experience. I've actually received requests like that a few times by email: "Can you make me have kensho?"

But I wish people had more confidence. They don't know that they *are* the direct pointing. They don't recognize that the holy one who reveals the truth and the bodhisattva who works endlessly, lifetime after lifetime, to benefit beings isn't out there in the rain. They don't recognize that the original face of Zen isn't attached to someone else's head.

[*Pointing with shippai*] What is that sound?



# Glossary

## Abbreviations

Jpn.: Japanese

Chn.: Chinese

Skt.: Sanskrit

**Amida Buddha** (Jpn.; Skt., Amitabha). A buddha who, it is reported in several sutras, made vows to establish a buddha-field in which sincere seekers could be reborn amid ideal circumstances for realizing enlightenment. This happy realm is the Pure Land of Sukhavati (Skt.), said to exist beyond the boundaries of our world and far to the west.

**A-UN** (Jpn.; Skt., *a-hum*). A Japanese transliteration of the first and last Sanskrit letters, to which various meanings and mantric qualities are attributed. For the purposes of practice, we may pronounce the syllables approximately as “ah” and “oon.”

**ba** (Jpn.). “Field” or “place,” in Zen practice denoting the proximity of a realized person, which has the power to transform the conditions of those within it.

**bodaishin** (Jpn.; Skt., *bodhicitta*). The “mind of awakening,” the aspiration to attain liberation for oneself and others. The arising of such aspiration marks the beginning of the bodhisattva path.

**bodhisattva** (Skt.; Jpn., *bosatsu*). Literally, “awakening being.” In Mahayana and Zen teaching, this is a being who vows to strive endlessly, life after life, for the liberation of others. Zen practitioners take such vows as a foundation of their path.

**Buddha** (Skt.; Jpn., *butsu*). “One who is awake.” When capitalized, this refers to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, one of the three treasures (along with dharma and sangha) in which Buddhist followers formally take refuge. More broadly, the term in Mahayana refers to many fully realized beings throughout the universe. Zen expresses an additional, inner meaning as well.

**buddha nature** (Jpn., *bussho*; Skt., *buddhadhatu*). A term referring to the foundation, nature, or location of buddhahood, which is not apart from deluded sentient beings.

**Chan** (Chn.). See zen.

**choka** (Jpn.). The morning ceremony conducted in Zen monasteries and temples. In Rinzai Zen this typically includes chanting of an excerpt from the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, various long and short dharani (like *Shosaishu*), the Four Great Vows (*Shikuseiganmon*), and *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*.

**dharani** (Skt.; Jpn., *darani*). Literally, something that “retains or holds.” Some dharani are passages contained within longer sutras that when chanted are believed to carry the essential meaning and power of the longer work or of an enlightened being that they invoke. In this regard dharani are similar to mantra.

**dharma** (Skt.; Jpn., *ho*). A word used in various ways but most generally referring to the Buddhist teachings, one of the three treasures (along with Buddha and sangha) in which Buddhist followers formally take refuge. Zen expresses an additional, inner meaning as well.

**Diamond Sutra** (Skt., *Vajrachhedika Prajnaparamita Sutra*; Jpn., *Kongokyo*). A Mahayana sutra expounding the core teachings of nonself and boundlessness in a particularly direct, pithy way. It has been among the most important sutras in Zen.

**do-in ho** (Jpn.). “Methods of guiding and pulling.” A general term for physical practices like self-massage and breathing exercises unified with movement.

**dojo** (Jpn.). “Place of the Way,” commonly referring to a practice hall. The word has been used to translate the Sanskrit word *bodhimanda*, a “place of awakening” where buddhas and other awakened beings realize the truth.

**Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo** (Jpn.). The “Ten-Phrase Life-Prolonging Sutra of Kannon,” a short text in praise of the bodhisattva of compassion often chanted in Rinzai practice. Its recitation was recommended by Hakuin as a means to attain longevity and avert misfortune.

**Four Great Vows** (Jpn., *Shikuseiganmon*). The bodhisattva vows taken by all Zen practitioners: (1) to liberate boundless beings, (2) to cut off endless delusion, (3) to practice infinite dharma gates, and (4) to attain buddhahood.

**Fudo Myo-o** (Jpn.; Skt., Acala Vidyaraja). Fudo Myo-o is a wrathful manifestation of Dainichi Nyorai, the *dharmakaya* or primordial Buddha. He is an intensely ferocious-appearing figure, surrounded by flames and bearing a sword (that cuts delusion) and a rope (to subdue negative beings). Fudo is venerated especially in Japan.

**fukushiki kokyu** (Jpn.). Natural abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing, commonly called “belly breathing.”

**gassho** (Jpn.; Skt., *anjali*). The gesture of reverence in which one’s hands are placed palm to palm in front of the chest.

**godai** (Jpn.). The five elements as enumerated in Japanese Buddhist thought: earth, water, fire, wind, and space/voidness, in Japanese *chi, sui, ka, fu, and ku*.

**goma** (Jpn.; Skt., *homa*). A fire ritual used in esoteric Buddhist practice, such as that of the Shingon, Tendai, and Shugendo traditions. It is derived originally from Vedic fire sacrifice ritual in India.

**great doubt** (Jpn., *daigidan*). An intense spirit of self-inquiry, with the aim of piercing through obstructing ignorance and arriving at a fundamental answer to the most profound existential question. In Rinzai practice this is something understood to arise bodily: a conceptual great doubt is insufficiently deep or strong. Great doubt, along with great faith (*daishinkon*) and great determination or effort (*daifunshi*), are often mentioned in Zen teaching as the three indispensable qualities for a practitioner.

**hai** (Jpn.). A prostration in which one bows down to a kneeling position on the floor and performs the symbolic gesture of raising the feet of a revered figure (for example, one's teacher) above one's head. See also sanpai.

**han** (Jpn.). A wooden sounding board, usually hanging just outside the zendo, that is struck to mark various events in the Zen monastic day. The han is often inscribed with this exhortation: "The question of birth and death is great. / How swift is impermanence! / Time waits for no one. / Be careful not to indulge in idleness."

**hara** (Jpn.). The lower abdomen, considered the seat of the body's physical and energetic power. The tanden, or navel energy center, lies within this.

**Heart Sutra** (Skt., *Maha Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra*; Jpn., *Makahannya-haramita Shingyo*). A short sutra setting forth the essential Prajnaparamita teachings in an exceedingly concise, direct manner. It is an important text in Zen, and among those most commonly chanted in Zen practice and ritual.

**in** (Jpn.; Chn., yin). See in/yo.

**in/yo** (Jpn.; Chn., *yin/yang*). In Chinese philosophy and cosmology, a teaching encompassing the dualities of dark/light, rest/activity, feminine/masculine, and so on that mark the organization and manifestations of existence.

**inka shomei** (Jpn.). The seal of transmission, sometimes called "mind seal," that in Rinzai Zen signifies that a student has

completed formal study and been recognized as a lineage holder. In Rinzai Zen only persons with inka shomei can take disciples or serve as the abbot of a training monastery.

**inkin** (Jpn.). A brass or bronze bell mounted upon a handle and struck with a metal rod. It is used especially in meditation halls to mark the beginning and ending of practice periods.

**isshin denshin** (Jpn.). “Transmit from mind to mind,” a phrase referring to the intimate manner in which the realization of wisdom is conveyed from teacher to student.

**jikijitsu** (Jpn.). The trainee in a Zen meditation hall who is responsible for directing the practice, keeping time during the periods of meditation, and maintaining discipline. The word translates to “sincere daily” (i.e., the “sincere person of the day”). The role is thus one that rotates, though naturally it will be taken up by practitioners that are sufficiently experienced.

**jikke** (Jpn.; Skt., *vasana*). “Habit energy,” the ingrained karmic traces from this and many past lives. Kensho does not necessarily dissolve all of these, which is the rationale for post-kensho practice taking awakening as its basis.

**joriki** (Jpn.). “Samadhi power,” the psycho-physical energy of sustained meditative absorption that manifests through intensive practice. Beyond the mere cultivation of intense concentration, joriki implies the power and freedom that arise when the body-mind functions with lessened self-centered fixation.

**Juntei Kannon** (Jpn.; Skt., Cundi). A figure in Buddhist iconography especially venerated in East Asia; in Japan he/she came to be viewed as a form of Kannon, thus the name Juntei (Cundi) Kannon. The Cundi mantra is popular especially in Chinese Buddhism.

**kan** (Jpn.). The intuitive clear seeing that manifests with actualized awakening.

**Kannon** (Jpn.; Skt., Avalokitesvara). Also in Japanese: Kanzeon. The bodhisattva of compassion, commonly an object of

reverence in East Asian Buddhism, including Zen.

**katsu** (Jpn.; Chn., *ho*). A sharp, piercing vocalization that has been used in Zen for various things, among them to express realization and as a means to bring students to awakening. The power of the katsu is related to the development of internal energetic power centered at the tanden.

**keisaku** (Jpn.). A long, flat stick used to strike meditators sharply on certain points located between the spine and scapula. This is not injurious, and it has the effect of releasing tension and increasing wakefulness.

**keisu** (Jpn.). A bowl-shaped bell used in Buddhist ritual.

**kensho** (Jpn.). “Seeing one’s nature,” a decisive awakening not different in substance—though often in depth—from that attained by the Buddha under the bodhi tree. Kensho is considered the entrance into authentic Zen practice, as well as the basis of subsequent practice to completely embody awakening.

**kentan** (Jpn.). Formal inspection of trainees in the zendo by the Zen master.

**ki** (Jpn.; Chn., *qi*). The vital or inner energy; universal life-force.

**kiai** (Jpn.). 1. Vital energy as it manifests in practice forms and other activities, in persons, places, objects, and so on. Kiai thus can be discussed in terms of both quantity and quality. 2. A sharp shout used in martial art training, not unlike the katsu.

**kikai** (Jpn.). “Sea of energy”: the area surrounding the navel energy center (tanden). Because of this, that center is called the kikai tanden to differentiate it from other centers.

**kinhin** (Jpn.). Walking meditation practice, typically done between periods of zazen. It has the function of refreshing the body but is also a practice for integrating meditative absorption with activity.

**koan** (Jpn.; Chn., *gong’an*). Literally, “public case.” Koans are anecdotes, stories, or passages from texts, many of which relate the activities of famous Zen masters. When taken up as a

practice method the student must examine these within samadhi and give life to them by experientially grasping their import. Rinzai Zen is well known for developing the koan method to a high degree. See also **wato**.

**koshi** (Jpn.). The lower trunk of the body, encompassing the abdomen, hips, and low back.

**kuden** (Jpn.). Oral instruction passed between teacher and student, which in Zen forms the basis of practice transmission.

**kufu** (Jpn.; Chn., *gongfu*). Kufu, as a term describing Zen practice, has the meaning of grappling or struggling wholeheartedly in a manner that engages all aspects of one's existence. Koan practice, for example, is called *koan kufu*.

**mantra** (Skt.; Jpn., *shingon*). Literally, "to protect the mind (*manas*)." The Japanese word *shingon* may be translated as "true words." Mantra are words and phrases that are believed to carry the essential power or qualities of a text, enlightened being, or deity and thus ultimately of awakened mind itself. Like dharani (which are typically longer), there are various understandings of how mantra function.

**mikkyo** (Jpn.). Literally, "secret teachings." The early esoteric Buddhist practices transmitted to China and later preserved in Japan, centered on the "three mysteries" (*sanmitsu*) engaging body, speech, and mind.

**mudra** (Skt.; Jpn., *inzo*). "Seals" or hand positions used in practice. Within various Buddhist traditions there are well-developed theories regarding the symbolism, purposes, and effects of mudra. In Zen practice they may be viewed primarily as a means to express kiai (vital energy) in different ways.

**muga** (Jpn.; Skt., *anatman*). "Nonself," the Buddhist teaching regarding the unfixed and boundless nature of beings. Experiential recognition of this truth constitutes awakening.

**Mumonkan** (Jpn.; Chn., *Wumenguan*). The "Gateless Barrier," a collection of forty-eight koans with commentaries compiled in China by the master Mumon Ekai (Chn.: Wumen Huikai, 1183–

1260). It is one of several primary sources for the koans used in Rinzai Zen practice.

**naikan no ho** (Jpn.). A breath and energetic-cultivation practice taught by Hakuin and transmitted within Rinzai lineages. It should not be confused with the modern psychotherapeutic method called Naikan Therapy developed in the 1940s, which is unrelated.

**nanso no ho** (Jpn.). The “soft butter method,” a healing visualization taught by Hakuin and transmitted within Rinzai lineages.

**Nio** (Jpn.). The two Nio are fierce, almost demonic figures, statues of which are often found at the gates of Buddhist temples. Among other things, they represent the intense energy required of a practitioner.

**Nio Zen** (Jpn.). A style of Zen practice taught by the Soto priest Suzuki Shosan (1579–1655). Nio Zen makes use of the energetic qualities (*kiai*) observed in Buddhist iconography such as the Nio; the student must absorb and embody such energy—in essence, becoming the figure—and in so doing can decisively cut through obstructing delusion.

**obi** (Jpn.). A belt or sash. In this case it refers to a wide belt—like that worn over the kimono and under the koromo in Zen monastic robes—that wraps around the lower trunk and is used to train the tanden-centered breath.

**okyo** (Jpn.; Skt., *sutra*). The Buddhist scriptures, commonly chanted in Zen ritual.

**Prajnaparamita** (Skt.; Jpn., Hannyaharamita). A class of Mahayana sutras explicating the profound teaching of emptiness that destroys dualistic fixation.

**Pure Land.** See **Amida**.

**Rinzai** (Jpn.; Chn., Linji). The Zen lineage named for Rinzai Gigen (Linji Yixuan, d. 866), from whom it descends. Along with Soto Zen it is one of the two major Zen lineages transmitted from



China to Japan; it was first established successfully there by Myoan Eisai (1141–1215).

**Ryogon-shu** (Jpn.). The dharani portion of the *Surangama Sutra*. It is an important text chanted in Zen for the purposes mentioned as well as on other important occasions. The mentioned heart mantra (Skt.) is OM ANALE VISADE VIRA VAJRA-DHARE BANDHA BANDHANI VAJRAPANI PHAT HUM TRUM PHAT SVAHA.

**samadhi** (Skt.; Jpn., *zanmai*). Meditative absorption, a key aspect of Zen practice.

**samsara** (Skt.; Jpn., *rinne*). Literally, “wandering through.” The cycle of existence; the endless round of rebirths experienced by beings entangled in delusion.

**samsaric**. See **samsara**.

**sanpai** (Jpn.). Literally, “three hai.” The trio of prostrations performed at various points in the monastic day. See also **hai**.

**sanzen** (Jpn.). Mutual exploration of the dharma with a teacher, that is, the face-to-face training under a Zen master that is the central or core Rinzai practice. More specifically the term can refer to the individual meetings with one’s master that take place periodically.

**sasshu** (Jpn.). The hand position commonly adopted in Zen monasteries when walking and during kinhin (walking meditation). The hands are folded in front of the chest at the level of the solar plexus.

**se mu-i** (Jpn.). “Gift of fearlessness,” a phrase describing the activity of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion.

**seiza** (Jpn.). “Correct sitting,” the traditional Japanese kneeling posture.

**sesshin** (Jpn.). To “collect [or gather] the mind,” an intensive Zen retreat lasting from a few days to a week or more. Sesshin is among the most important and rigorous of Zen training forms.

**Shakyamuni** (Skt.; Jpn., Shakamuni). Literally, “sage of the Shakyas.” The historical figure Siddhartha Gautama, called the Buddha.

**shikantaza** (Jpn.). “Just sitting,” a meditation method much used in Soto Zen that is somewhat related (though not identical) to an earlier practice called *mozhaio* in Chinese, or “silent illumination.”

**shingon** (Jpn.; Skt., *mantra*). 1. Literally, “true words,” the Japanese term for mantra. 2. As a proper noun, the Japanese Buddhist school founded by Kukai (774–835), through which early tantric teachings transmitted to China have been preserved to the present day.

**shippei** (Jpn.). A short, flat stick often carried by Zen teachers or held by them during sanzen. It has become a symbol of teaching authority.

**Shosaishu** (Jpn.; full name *Shosai Myokichijo Jinshu*). The “Dharani to Protect Against Misfortune,” a short dharani commonly chanted in Zen ritual for the purpose that its title describes. It has been said that this was also something chanted by samurai before going into battle, not only for protection but for its immediate effect of dissolving fear.

**Shugendo** (Jpn.). A syncretic Japanese tradition of spiritual practice that arose during the Heian period, combining esoteric Buddhist practice (*mikkyo*) with elements of Shinto, Daoist, and folk religious practice. Austerities undertaken in nature, particularly in mountains, figure prominently in Shugendo.

**sokushin jobutsu** (Jpn.). Literally, “becoming Buddha in this body.” The attainment of enlightenment within this life, without depending on a future existence.

**Soto** (Jpn.). The Japanese lineage descended from the Chinese Caodong school. Along with Rinzai Zen it is one of the two major Zen lineages transmitted from China to Japan; it was established there by Dogen (1200–1253).

**sottaku** (Jpn.). “Pecking,” referring in Zen to the activity of the teacher that helps a student to arrive at awakening, just as a mother hen pecks at an egg to help free the chick.

**susokukan** (Jpn.). The breath-counting method of meditation.

**sutra** (Skt.; Jpn., *okyo*). The Buddhist scriptures.

**taku** (Jpn.). Wooden clappers used to signal various events in a Zen monastery, including the beginning and ending of meditation periods.

**tanden** (Jpn.; Chn., *dantian*). The energetic center in the lower abdomen, approximately two inches below the navel. There are a number of such centers in the body, but for various reasons this lower tanden—called the *kikai tanden* (“sea of energy tanden”)—is most commonly engaged in Zen practice.

**tanden soku** (Jpn.). A cultivated method of breathing focused on the tanden, or navel energy center, that is central to Rinzai Zen practice. Its integration grants access to more subtle and deep samadhi, and it provides the basis for a genuine psycho-physical embodiment of Zen insight.

**Tathagata** (Skt.; Jpn., *Nyorai*). Originally a title of Shakyamuni Buddha (and also used for other buddhas in the Mahayana teachings). The term more broadly carries the meaning of “suchness” or the apprehension of reality “as it is.”

**teisho** (Jpn.). Oral teachings given by a Zen master within a formal context, such as during periods of intensive retreat (*sesshin*). Typically, *teisho* are experiential rather than academic in content.

**Tendai** (Jpn.). The Japanese Buddhist school founded by Saicho (d. 822). A descendent of the Chinese Tiantai school, it integrates also other teachings and elements including esoteric practices.

**Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra** (Skt.; Jpn., *Yuimakyo*). A Mahayana sutra especially influential in East Asia and important in Zen. Aside from its teaching content, it is beloved for its humor and for the fact that the main character, Vimalakirti, is a highly realized layperson rather than a monk.

**wato** (Jpn.; Chn., *huatou*). “Word head,” meaning a key word or phrase—often taken from a koan—upon which the student may be directed to focus inquiry within samadhi. Perhaps the most

famous wato is the word mu, taken from the first koan in the *Mumonkan*. See also koan.

**yaza** (Jpn.). “Night sitting,” the practice in monasteries of going out of the zendo after the formal daily schedule has ended to engage in solitary practice. This is often done outdoors in places like a garden or cemetery.

**yo** (Jpn.; Chn., *yang*). See in/yo.

**zazen** (Jpn.; Chn., *zuo chan*). Literally “seated Zen”—that is, formal seated meditation.

**zen** (Jpn.; Chn., *chan*; Skt., *dhyana*). 1. Meditation. 2. As a proper noun, the word has come to refer not only to the Zen school or lineages but more broadly to the wisdom of awakening itself.

**zendo** (Jpn.). A Zen meditation hall.

# Notes

## Introduction

1. Hakuin Ekaku Zenji (1686–1768) revived Rinzai Zen from a period of decline and organized its path of training into the present form. Today, all existing Japanese Rinzai lineages can be traced to that preeminent master. For this quote see Norman Waddell, trans., *Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994), 27.
2. “Body-mind” here denotes the practitioner’s whole being, encompassing at once the physical body, the breath (including the subtle energetic system), and the mind. Since a mark of genuine Zen training is that it engages and manifests change within all of these, I use the term throughout to remind that a solely intellectual or psychological approach to practice (though common) is not, in fact, the Zen path.
3. The practices chosen for inclusion in this book are among those currently transmitted at Korinji, a Rinzai Zen monastery in the United States for which the author serves as *shike* (abbot).
4. The reliance upon kuden is commonly seen also in many traditional cultural arts preserved in Japan such as swordsmanship, flower arrangement, and tea ceremony. This reflects not only a recognition that true transmission of knowledge in these disciplines occurs between living human beings rather than from texts alone; it has also served as a

means of safeguarding teachings, since only the trusted disciples of a teacher will be privy to instructions that are in many cases indispensable.

5. I might add that this can also lead to an overemphasis on, or even fetishization of, the practice methods that are retained.
6. Torei Enji (1721–1792) was a dharma heir of Hakuin. His text *The Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp* (Jpn., *Shumon Mujintoron*) lays out the entire Zen path in an exceedingly kind, detailed manner and has long been a standard text in Rinzai monasteries. As of this writing it remains available in an excellent English translation (see note 7) through the Zen Centre in London (<http://www.rinzaizencentre.org.uk>).
7. Yoko Okuda, trans., *The Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp* (London: Zen Centre, 1989), 15.
8. These words, “the entire universe is the true human body,” may be found in several places in Zen writings. Here I quote a short statement composed by Omori Sogen Roshi (1904–1994) defining the principles of training at Chozen-ji, a temple he founded in Hawaii.
9. From this paragraph and the one that follows we might also grasp that experiences accompanying the ingestion of psychedelic substances, no matter how useful they could be depending on the individual, cannot generally be compared with awakening.
10. Hosokawa Dogen Roshi (1947) is a successor of Omori Sogen Roshi. Initially entering the training hall of Tenryu-ji in Kyoto, he later became a student of Omori Roshi. After receiving inka shomei he emigrated to Hawaii to serve at Chozen-ji, the temple Omori Roshi had founded in Honolulu. One purpose of his teaching there was to transmit the koan practice and monastic forms; he eventually took the role of Chozen-ji abbot. During these years he also traveled frequently to the mainland United States to lead sesshin and teach his students there. Currently retired, Hosokawa Roshi continues as of this writing to advise

his Western students including several successors carrying his lineage.

11. Obaku Kiun (Chn.: Huangbo Xiyun, d. 850). See Ruth Fuller Sasaki, trans., *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 46–47.
12. Daikan Eno (Chn.: Dajian Huineng, 638–713), a student of the Fifth Patriarch, Daiman Konin (Chn.: Daman Hongren, 601–674), is counted as the Sixth and final Chinese Zen Patriarch. Following Eno the Zen school flourished, and its Indian roots were complemented by a distinctly Chinese spirit. Eno’s initial awakening and subsequent deepening of his insight are both recorded in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. The words he overheard from the *Diamond Sutra* that led to his awakening were “They [bodhisattvas] cherish thoughts that dwell on nothing whatsoever.”
13. Dokyo Etan (1642–1721), also called Shojū Rojin (the “old man of Shojū” hermitage), was the master of Hakuin. His severe treatment of Hakuin, and insistence not only upon profound kensho but also an exhaustive path of post-kensho training, are well described in Hakuin’s writings. See Philip B. Yampolsky, trans., *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 119.
14. Okuda, *Inexhaustible Lamp*, 400–403.
15. This being so, it is only after coming out from that condition that one could describe it as I have done: while still in that state there is no way to examine or describe anything at all, and even afterward it is impossible to say for certain how long one was resting within it.
16. Two hours of daily zazen practice, during which the student diligently applies whatever practice method has been assigned by the teacher, is considered a desirable norm for laypersons. Of course this is something beginners must work toward gradually.

## Chapter 1: Direct Pointing at the Human Mind

1. Muso Soseki (1275–1351), a famous Rinzai monk and founder of Tenryu-ji monastery, served as an advisor to the emperor Go-Daigo and then the Ashikaga shogunate. Perhaps the most famous and influential monk of his time, he was key in organizing the *gozan* system of Rinzai monasteries and contributed greatly to the cultural and artistic flowering centered within them. For this quote see Muso Soseki, “Sermon at the Dedication of Tenryu-ji Dharma Hall,” trans. William Bodiford, in *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Volume One: From Earliest Times to 1600*, ed. William Theodore De Barry (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 328–30.
2. Bodhidharma, who arrived in China from India in the fifth century and transmitted what would become the Zen teachings to a small circle of disciples, is counted as the First Patriarch of Zen there.
3. For a more extensive examination of Zen’s basic approach and intent by the author, including detailed practice instructions for beginners and advice for seeking a Zen teacher, please see *The Rinzai Zen Way: A Guide to Practice* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2018). In many ways that text may serve the reader as a foundation for this one.
4. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1988), 9. Mahakasyapa (Jpn., Makakasho Sonja) was the disciple of the Buddha said to be most accomplished in meditative practice and supernatural powers, and who assumed leadership of the community following Shakyamuni’s death. In Zen lineages he is listed as the First Patriarch of the teachings in India.
5. *Rinzairoku* (Chn.: *Linji yulu*), the recorded sayings and biography of Rinzai. For this quote see Ruth Fuller Sasaki, trans., *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 39.
6. Fuller Sasaki, *Record of Linji*, 42.
7. Chn.: Huiming.



- [8.](#) The Sixth Patriarch's words "Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil" mean to set down dualistic habit. For this episode see Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 110.
- [9.](#) Koan Daigu (Chn.: *Gaoan Daiyu*), 1067–1120. See Fuller Sasaki, *Record of Linji*, 42–43.
- [10.](#) Nan'in Egyo (Chn.: Nanyuan Huiyong, 860–952). *Shumon Kattoshu* is a collection of 272 koans that is an important text used in Rinzai koan practice. The date of its compilation in Japan is unknown, but it was first printed in 1689. See Yuho Kirchner, trans., *Entangling Vines: Zen Koans of the Shumon Kattoshu* (Boston: Wisdom, 2013), 153.
- [11.](#) The incident is mentioned in Hakuin's *Keiso Dokuzui*.
- [12.](#) The reader may by this point recognize that illustrations given in the text about the sky and clouds, the blades of a fan or propeller, and others are themselves examples of verbal direct pointing (though pointing out direct pointing, as I have just done, is uncommon).

## **Chapter 2: Selected Practices of Direct Pointing for Zen Students**

- [1.](#) Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1988), 101.
- [2.](#) See *Rinzai Zen Way* for detailed zazen practice instructions.
- [3.](#) In Rinzai practice students face toward the center of the room, and so the center of one's gaze will naturally rest lightly on the floor. In Soto practice, commonly done facing a wall, the gaze will of course rest there. But whichever method one uses, the instructions given here apply: one should not stare at the point upon which the gaze falls but spread out one's vision to encompass the entire peripheral field.
- [4.](#) The Rinzai Zen master Shido Bunan (1603–1676) was the dharma heir of Gudo Toshoku (1579–1661) and the teacher of

Dokyo Etan (1642–1721), who would become Hakuin’s master. See Thomas Cleary, trans., *Classics of Buddhism and Zen* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 468.

5. Experience of the jewel mirror samadhi and its seamless integration within daily activity are crucial points of Rinzai Zen training. See Hakuin’s *Keiso Dokuzui* for his teaching regarding Tozan’s five ranks, in which the import and practice of the jewel mirror samadhi are described.
6. See Takuan Soho’s *Fudochi Shimmyo Roku*.
7. See *Rinzai Zen Way* for detailed susokukan practice instructions.
8. See Robert Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti: A Mahayana Scripture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 18.
9. Omori Sogen (1904–1994) was among the most famous Japanese Rinzai Zen masters of the twentieth century. He trained first under Seki Seisetsu Roshi (1877–1945) of Tenryu-ji, and then completed his training under Seisetsu Roshi’s heir Seki Bokuo Roshi (1903–1999), whose dharma heir he in turn became. A master of swordsmanship and calligraphy as well as Zen, Omori Roshi was well known for his Zen, ken, *sho* (“Zen, sword, brush”) approach to practice integrating Zen training, physical culture, and fine arts. He served as president of Hanazono, the Rinzai university in Japan, and authored more than twenty books in Japanese. He founded Setai-ji monastery in Japan and Chozen-ji in Hawaii. See Dogen Hosokawa, *Omori Sogen: The Art of a Zen Master* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1999), xi. The gate in question is the main gate of Tenryu-ji in Kyoto.
10. Hosokawa, *Omori Sogen*, 98.
11. Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Undying Lamp of Zen: The Testament of Master Torei* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2010), 95.

12. The lay Zen and martial art master Toyoda Tenzan (1947–2001). He emigrated from Japan to Chicago while in his twenties, establishing an aikido and Zen dojo there and eventually becoming well known internationally as a teacher. He received inka shomei (certification as a Rinzai Zen lineage holder) in Omori Roshi's line from Tanouye Tenshin Roshi, and he was instrumental in helping that line become firmly established in the West.
13. In Soto Zen the keisaku is called the *kyosaku*. The general use is not different.
14. The “Mu samadhi” is the all-encompassing meditative absorption that arises especially in practice centered on koans like “Joshu's Mu” that are meant to bring the student to initial awakening. See Hosokawa, *Omori Sogen*, 28.
15. There are other important instruments in the monastery, for example the han, a wooden sounding board that usually hangs just outside the zendo. Similar oral instruction regarding the uses of these things exists.
16. Use of the word “timekeeper” for the jikijitsu, something common in some Western Zen circles, seems especially ridiculous when we consider these deeper aspects of the role.
17. Japanese title: *Unjigi*. See Yoshito Hakeda, trans., *Kukai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).
18. Fuller Sasaki, *Record of Linji*, 3.
19. Though I have not researched this, it seems reasonable to think that Sanskrit syllables used in forceful mantric exclamation, such as *phat*, could be the origin of this katsu practice.
20. One of my teachers in fact reported that he would at times silently or mentally perform the katsu shout in the meditation hall, directing it toward a struggling student in order to give that person energy to cut through obstructions. He said this was successful.
21. Hosokawa, *Omori Sogen*, 28.

22. Sekiso Soen (Chn.: Shishuang Chuyuan, 986–1039). Hakuin was famously inspired to rededicate himself to his spiritual quest upon opening a book by chance to an anecdote relating this practice of Soen.
23. *Takigyo*, a practice done while standing under the stream of a cold waterfall, is something we may examine in a similar light: the manner in which the mind stops upon entering the icy water is quite dramatic.
24. Okuda, *Inexhaustible Lamp*, 191.

### Chapter 3: Selected Practices of Direct Pointing for Zen Teachers

1. I cannot speak about the requirements of Soto Zen or other lineages. But in Rinzai Zen, among the minimum requirements is completion of the full *shitsunai* (curriculum of koan practice) transmitted in one's lineage, since the use of that method can only be wholly grasped "from above" after passing entirely through it. This requirement is widely known, and yet in the West there are indeed persons claiming to be Rinzai Zen teachers who have not done so. It is something about which prospective students should be aware and ask directly.
2. Bankei Yotaku (1622–1693), a Japanese Rinzai Zen master who taught in an original manner stressing realization of what he called the Unborn. Though his dharma lineage no longer survives, the depth of Bankei's realization is widely acknowledged, and his teachings have been influential. See Norman Waddell, "The Zen Sermons of Bankei Yōtaku: Part Two," in *The Eastern Buddhist*, n.s., 7, no. 1 (1974), 124–41, <http://jstor.org/stable/44361387>.
3. In Japanese this intermediate state is called *chu-in*.
4. Trevor Leggett, trans., *The Warrior Koans: Early Zen in Japan* (New York: Arkana, 1985), 153–54.

5. I am aware of someone married in this kind of Zen ceremony who was told afterward by the officiant (a Zen master in a branch of our lineage) regarding the katsu shout that had been given: “That’s the most I can do for you!”
6. Traditionally the *shike*, the Zen master in charge of training at a monastery, does not live and train side by side with the monks. He or she lives rather in the *hojo*, the abbot’s quarters, and so will go daily to the meditation hall for this formal inspection.
7. Another time that is recommended, for the same reason of energetic transformation, is just before dawn when in (yin) turns over to yo (yang), and the entire world manifests an increasing, wakeful energy.

## Chapter 4: Embodied Zen

1. Yampolsky, *Zen Master Hakuin*, 30.
2. Hojo Tokimune (1251–1284) served as regent of Japan during the time of the Mongol invasions of Japan, which were successfully repulsed. He was a great student and patron of Zen, and he was largely responsible for its future prominence in Japan. The Chan master Mugaku Sogen (Chn.: Wuxue Zuyuan, 1226–1286), called Bukko Kokushi, emigrated to Japan from China in 1279 at the invitation of Tokimune, whose advisor he became. He founded Engaku-ji in Kamakura.
3. The referenced episode is famous and came as the Mongols threatened to invade Japan. Bukko asked Tokimune how he would meet this challenge, and Tokimune replied with a katsu shout.
4. Leggett, *Warrior Koans*, 48–50.
5. It is worth noting that there has been some debate regarding the source of these things in China, with arguments for Indian, native Chinese, or mixed origins. What is clear is that popular notions of Zen as a kind of hybrid of Buddhist and Daoist teachings are false: influences on what we now call Daoism

from Buddhism—as observed in Daoist scriptures, practice, and monasticism—are great, while discernible influences on Chinese Buddhism from Daoism are few, and in terms of core teachings essentially none.

6. The Zen priest Suzuki Shosan (1579–1655) was a samurai for much of his life before becoming a monk. His way of intense practice to embody the energetic qualities observed in Buddhist iconography, called Nio Zen, became well known. See Winston L. King, *Death Was His Koan: The Samurai Zen of Suzuki Shosan* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1986), 285.
7. This is a reason that it is possible to deduce the presence (or absence) of awakening in an individual at least partly from the appearance and function of that person's body, such as the habitual posture, manner of breathing, appearance of the eyes, and so on.
8. See *Rinzai Zen Way* for more regarding how the simultaneous lengthening of the spine from both top and bottom is a key point of the meditation posture.
9. I might here mention the curious phenomenon of modern chakra, or energy center, maps, complete with color, astrological, emotional, and other correspondences assigned to each center. Though it is commonly claimed that these possess ancient pedigree, they are often largely modern creations with little relation to how such things are mapped or used in traditional practice. It is best to ignore such things completely outside the context of practice under a legitimate teacher.
10. Takuan Soho (1573–1645) was an eminent Rinzai Zen monk and famously the advisor to a number of feudal lords and master swordsmen. See Tenshin Tanouye, trans., *Fudochi Shimmyo Roku* (Honolulu: Daihonzan Chozen-ji/International Zen Dojo, 1989), 23.
11. There have even been prominent modern Zen teachers, both East and West, exhibiting this postural misunderstanding. Among the most notable cases is that of a deceased Japanese



teacher prominent in the West whose photos—and even a memorial statue—display excessive lordosis of such an extreme sort that it is clear very little meditative fruition could have occurred. Nevertheless, this posture is dutifully imitated by students in the organization he founded.

12. In *Rinzai Zen Way* this specific method is indeed presented as a way to begin learning the basic body mechanics of tanden soku.

## Chapter 5: Foundational Practices

1. Another cause of this I have observed is the desire many have to appear flat stomached. They keep their bellies pulled in tightly when around others, and this eventually becomes an unconscious habit hindering free movement of the diaphragm. Those who excessively train their abdominal muscles with exercises such as sit-ups can arrive at the same result due to the chronic tension they carry there.
2. If you would like to experience the reality of this, force yourself to breath for a few minutes in a very shallow manner, from the chest, and observe the change in your mental and physical state (assuming you do not already breathe in this manner, in which case you may notice no difference).
3. See *Rinzai Zen Way*.

## Chapter 6: Basic Tanden Soku

1. A number of common monk's belongings have hidden uses like this that may have been more important in former days, such as ritual items that could double as defensive tools.
2. This general type of belt is called *kaku obi* in Japanese.
3. Some Western Zen groups have adopted the use of “sitting robes” for nonordained students that are essentially koromo, though oddly often without the use of the obi and so without the training utility we are discussing. This has seemingly been done

for mainly aesthetic reasons, to establish a clean and uniform appearance among the trainees.

4. It is interesting to note that key aspects of tanden soku as preserved in Rinzai Zen training are nearly identical to those found in the “vase breathing” of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist practice.

## Chapter 7: Increasing Energetic Depth and Power

1. Winston L. King, *Death Was His Koan: The Samurai Zen of Suzuki Shosan* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1986), 330.
2. Hakuin’s naikan no ho should not be confused with the modern psychotherapeutic method called Naikan Therapy, developed in the 1940s. They are unrelated.
3. Norman Waddell, *Wild Ivy: The Spiritual Biography of Zen Master Hakuin* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999), 106. Here and in the quote that follows, “elixir field” refers to the tanden and “sea of energy” translates kikai.
4. Waddell, *Wild Ivy*, 102.
5. These contemplations were not in fact authored by Hakuin but are also found in *Shonan Kattoroku*. See Leggett, *Warrior Koans*, 191–92. For the translation used here see Waddell, *Wild Ivy*, 117–18.
6. Waddell, *Wild Ivy*, 103. The kind of ball Hakuin mentions is stuffed, and so after some use it will soften and lose its initial firmness.
7. Though I should mention that I am aware of at least one Zen teacher who instructs naikan no ho without the orally transmitted details of body usage, using Hakuin’s public instructions alone. In that case the method is simply a relaxed visualization—done lying down—that the energy of the body is moving downward toward the feet. This is not harmful, and may be a useful thing for many people.



8. A-UN breathing of this sort is also used in performance of the Hojo kata, four basic sword forms of the Kashima Shinden Jikishinkage Ryu, a school of traditional Japanese swordsmanship. Omori Sogen Roshi was in fact a teacher of this art, and he taught the Hojo kata—or at least, the manner of walking that is foundational to the kata—to his Zen students as a discipline to cultivate posture, breath, and intense energy.

## **Chapter 8: Practices of Refinement**

1. Yamaoka Tesshu (1836–1888). Noted as an accomplished master of Zen, swordsmanship, and calligraphy, Tesshu was a disciple of the Rinzai master Tekisui Giboku (1822–1899). An important figure during the Meiji Restoration, Tesshu has come to be viewed in Japan as a paragon of the lay Zen practitioner as well as of the nobler aspects of samurai culture. Omori Sogen Roshi was a Rinzai master of the modern era who was particularly inspired by the example of Tesshu. See Sogen Omori, *An Introduction to Zen Training*, trans. Dogen Hosokawa and Roy Kenichi Yoshimoto (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 63.
2. Omori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 63.
3. See *Rinzai Zen Way*.
4. Incidentally, experiences reported by practitioners suggest that this method may also be an excellent method to lower blood pressure, and in fact there are medically approved devices for that purpose centered on making a long exhalation.

## **Chapter 9: Seamless Integration**

1. Here I am reminded of Omori Roshi, who in fact suffered a stroke and spent some years in a coma before his death. His successor, my teacher Hosokawa Roshi, related that on one occasion during this coma he visited Omori Roshi in the hospital. Wishing to see what the state of Omori Roshi's

breathing was in that condition, Hosokawa Roshi placed a hand on Omori Roshi's hara: to his surprise it retained its fullness, revealing the extent to which Omori Roshi had integrated *tanden soku*.

## **Chapter 10: *Hara Tanren*: Forging the Center**

- [1.](#) Though often grossly overstated: ideas of Zen as “the religion of the samurai,” and of arts like swordsmanship as intrinsically Zen activities, are inaccurate popular notions that it is useful to set aside.
- [2.](#) It is said that Shakyamuni immediately after birth walked a few steps, pointed to both heaven and earth, and exclaimed these words.

## **Chapter 13: Approaching Koan through the Body**

- [1.](#) A notable exception to this, and perhaps the best explanation of the structure and function of koan practice in Rinzai Zen, is Victor Sogen Hori's introduction to his work *Zen Sand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).
- [2.](#) Mumon Ekai (Chn.: Wumen Huikai, 1183–1260).
- [3.](#) Joshu Jushin (Chn.: Zhaozhou Congshen, 778–897). See Katsuki Sekida, trans., *Two Zen Classics* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 27.
- [4.](#) Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, 28.
- [5.](#) Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, 71.

## **Conclusion: Kyosei's Voice of the Raindrops**

- [1.](#) Kyosei Dofu (Chn.: Jingqing Daofu, 868–937). See Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, 273. The dialogue is reported in case 46 of the *Hekiganroku*.

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