

In Praise of Zazen

Hakuin

From the very beginning
all beings are Buddha.
Like water and ice,
without water no ice,
outside us no Buddhas.

How near the truth
yet how far we seek,
like one in water crying, "I thirst!"
Like a child of rich birth
wandering poor on this earth,
we endlessly circle the six worlds.

The cause of our sorrow is ego delusion.
From dark path to dark path
we' ve wandered in darkness—
how can we be free from birth and death?
The gateway to freedom is zazen samadhi—
beyond exaltation, beyond all our praises,
the pure Mahayana.

Upholding the precepts,
repentance and giving,
the countless good deeds,
and the way of right living
all come from zazen.

Thus one true samadhi extinguishes evils;
it purifies karma, dissolving obstructions.
Then where are the dark paths
to lead us astray?
The pure lotus land is not far away.

Hearing this truth, heart humble and grateful,
to praise and embrace it,
to practice its wisdom,
brings unending blessings,
brings mountains of merit.

And when we turn inward
and prove our True-nature—
that True-self is no-self,
our own Self is no-self—
we go beyond ego and past clever words.

Then the gate to the oneness
of cause and effect
is thrown open.
Not two and not three,
straight ahead runs the Way.

our form now being no-form,
in going and returning we never leave home.
Our thought now being no-thought,
our dancing and songs are the voice of the
Dharma.

How vast is the heaven
of boundless samadhi!
How bright and transparent
the moonlight of wisdom.

What is there outside us,
what is there we lack?
Nirvana is openly shown to our eyes.
This earth where we stand
is the pure lotus land,
and this very body the body of Buddha.

Philip Kapleau, Rochester Zen Center

In Praise of Zazen (*Zazen Wasan*) by Hakuin

Poem with Comments

TEXT

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COMMENTS

Buddhanature is inherent within all sentient beings. We don't need to change our nature to become enlightened. We only need to be transformed to a different state—by meditation. But ignorance of our original nature holds us back.

Awakening is not to be sought outside our own minds.

The truth is already here. It cannot be gained or acquired. It is not that you are unenlightened and can become enlightened. You are already enlightened. You just don't know it.

A parable in the *Lotus Sutra* tells of a son who has left home under a misunderstanding and is not aware of the riches that are waiting for him, if he would only return home.

In samsara there are six realms of rebirth: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and denizens of hells. We can experience all of these psychologically in this life. For instance, anger or vengeance can turn us into demons—and then we suffer the results.

Suffering and the unsatisfactoriness of existence are caused by ignorance. Ignorance is one of the three poisons and the first link in the chain of dependent origination. Birth and death are the cyclical existence of samsara. They are also the final link in the chain of dependent origination. Ignorance needs to be overcome by seeing into our true nature which is buddhanature. Our true nature is obscured by the false thoughts that fill our minds due to attachment to sensory data. These thoughts are like waves that disturb the surface of a clear pond.

Seeing into our true nature will transform us. Zazen, or sitting meditation, is the means to this transformation.

Zazen means seated meditation. *Zen* is the Japanese transliteration of *Chan*. *Chan* is the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyana*. *Dhyana* refers to meditation that is established in deep practice. *Samadhi* is when meditation has become stable and unwavering. *Mahayana* is the great path of the Buddha. Hakuin is saying that meditation is the essence of the path the Buddha taught.

Eightfold path	Threefold training
1. Right understanding	Wisdom, insight, discernment
2. Right intention	
3. Right speech	Moral discipline
4. Right action	
5. Right livelihood	
6. Right effort	Meditation
7. Right mindfulness	
8. Right meditation	

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The eightfold noble path taught by the Buddha can be grouped into three trainings: moral discipline, wisdom and meditation. Morality refers to the three steps of right speech, right action and right livelihood. The precepts are rules of moral conduct. They exist in many forms. A common short list for lay people is: no killing, no stealing, no intoxicants, no sexual misconduct, no lying.

Repentance is an important concept in Chan—taking responsibility for past actions and resolving to free oneself from incorrect attachments. Huineng says in the *Platform Sutra*, “In my teaching, forever to engage in no action is called repentance.” Avoid creating new karma.

Giving is the first of the six paramitas, or virtues of a bodhisattva, the one who has vowed to become enlightened in order to save all sentient beings. Here it stands for all the paramitas—generosity/charity, morality, patient endurance, devoted zeal, meditation, and wisdom—along with the many deeds of the bodhisattva. Meditation is described in the eightfold path in terms of right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation.

Hakuin is suggesting that meditation underpins all moral effort and makes it possible.

Karma is the results of actions (deeds, words, thoughts). Human life is precious because it affords the opportunity to free ourselves of karma—through meditation.

There are two wings of meditation: (1) meditative calming (quiescence) and (2) discernment (insight, wisdom). To be rid of the afflictions (vexations, hindrances, obstructions) is said to require the gaining of insight. However, a certain amount of calming is necessary to attain insight. Hakuin is saying that meditation lays the basis for the realization of truth, the clearing of the afflictions and the realization of liberation (the pure lotus land).

When we make the choice to become meditators we are creating positive karma. We do not meditate in order to gain things for ourselves. Positive karma will equip us to do good deeds without thought of reward.

The buddha taught that there are three right ways to understand reality:

- a) the truth of suffering—all sentient beings suffer as a result of ignorance (first of the four noble truths)
- b) the truth of non-self—we do not possess a permanent, unchanging identity or self
- c) the truth of impermanence—everything changes constantly

Meditation will loosen our sense of ourselves as permanently existing “selves.” We begin to melt the frozen self.

Meditation is “a special transmission outside the scriptures, not based on words or letters, a direct pointing to the heart of reality so that we might see into our own nature and wake up (Bodhidharma).” Let go of language and ideas—they get in the way of seeing reality directly.

	<p><i>Through wordless knowing my spirit shines; I watch the void and the world becomes calm</i> (Hanshan). Enlightenment comes completely and spontaneously from within, in a process that is inexplicable, unteachable and not mediated by doctrines or words.</p>
<p><i>Then the gate to the oneness of cause and effect is thrown open. Not two and not three, straight ahead runs the Way.</i></p>	<p>To be a “self” separates you from everything else which is “other.” Meditation teaches us to see the world in non-dualistic ways. All things are one.</p> <p>In meditation, if your mind is attached to any of the thoughts that arise, you will be divided between the mind that grasps and the thought that is grasped. Aim to be non-dual—no yes and no, no likes and dislikes.</p>
<p><i>our form now being no-form, in going and returning we never leave home. Our thought now being no-thought, our dancing and songs are the voice of the Dharma.</i></p>	<p>Once we can see the truth we realize that all things are empty, that is, lacking in separateness and permanent identity.</p> <p>“Nothing is separate from this very place. Why journey away?” (Dogen). Don’t try to do anything or get somewhere in meditation. Just sit.</p> <p>Turning inward is a process of letting the thoughts stop of their own accord. Do not try to stop them. Relaxation and paying attention to what is happening inside will allow the thoughts to calm down and settle.</p>
<p><i>How vast is the heaven of boundless samadhi! How bright and transparent the moonlight of wisdom.</i></p>	<p>Meditation is “a direct pointing to the heart of reality” (Bodhidharma). Hakuin is suggesting that in samadhi one can enter deep states of absorption in which limitless space, consciousness, and emptiness open up. We wake up to the reality of life that extends everywhere.</p> <p>The moon stands for the wisdom that dispels ignorance.</p>
<p><i>What is there outside us, what is there we lack? Nirvana is openly shown to our eyes. This earth where we stand is the pure lotus land, and this very body the body of Buddha.</i></p>	<p>The Buddha’s enlightenment came as a result of meditation. There is no need to seek outside yourself for realization. We are originally endowed with the self of a buddha—the true self. Meditation shows us the way to remove obstructions and realize the awakened mind. We are already enlightened—once we get there.</p> <p>The place of practice-realization is in you.</p> <p>Body and mind are not separate—no dualism.</p> <p>Simply sitting in meditation—regardless of enlightenment—allows ultimate reality to be manifested in space and time. Your sitting is already perfect zen.</p> <p>Nirvana is more than removing afflictions and become tranquil. It is the enlightened mind that pursues action in the day-to-day world to lessen the suffering of others.</p> <p>The Buddha taught for fifty years after his enlightenment experience.</p>