

WHY ZAZEN—AND HOW

By Zenrin Robert Lewis

Why: To live, to realize, to actualize, who you are by nature—this is the point of effective Zen practice. Called your Buddha-nature, it is who you already are and always have been. Living your Buddha-nature with calm wholehearted intensity, you see what’s actually happening here the way it is. Calm intensity is a contradiction in terms, but dedicated zazen goes beyond words: it naturally leads to the calm intensity that breaks through koan barriers. Those breakthroughs are what koans are for: clearing away impediments to your seeing it like it is.

How: In his First Rohatsu Exhortation, Hakuin says “you who practice Zen samadhi” must (1) sit in the full lotus posture on a thick mat, (2) loosen your clothing, (3) erect your spine and let your body become settled, (4) begin breath-counting concentration, (5) fill your tanden (your lower abdomen) with *ki* (the energy alive within), and then (6) directly engage your single koan.

Briefly put: sit, loosen, erect, count, fill, engage, which sounds like a curriculum— taking things in order, mastering them one by one—to get somewhere else, to become somebody else. That’s no way to realize who you always have been. But it just *seems* to be a curriculum because it is put into words. And glancing over these six, 1 looks impossible, 2 is trivial, 3 seems to contradict 1 and 2, 4 looks like kindergarten math, 5 like superstitious hoey, and 6 appears not to fit in the series at all.

But in practice, these six actions slowly but surely come together as your body becomes massively used to them. Your body learns slowly, but once it gets it, you’ve got it for good. If you keep practicing these six with steady application, they’ll become simultaneous, even become one—and that one is what I call *real* zazen.

The six are synergistic: each helps the other five. For example, a (1) posture so grounded and yet effortless that it feels like full lotus means you can (3) gently, gradually push the small of your back forward until you feel a definite pressure there. Then your belly, free of tension and soft but taut like a balloon—and even your whole front—opens up. That lets (4) counting silently from one to ten on the purifying out-breath (going back to one as needed) slow down, which means you calm down. And that is helped by (2) getting free of the “strait jacket” of tying/cinching yourself in too tight—which motivates taking the time “out” to loosen your clothing.

Hakuin brought back to life the essence of Zen’s “Golden Age” a thousand years before his time, including *real* zazen: he sat four hours a day (!) and often through the night (!). So he ought to know, if anyone does, where our zazen practice is headed. Like an experienced pathfinder, he’s given us these six things we would develop anyway on our own given the time. He was so old (his body was failing him) that all he had left to express himself with was words, but his advice can be trusted.

I was sitting in a zendo with my left knee screaming at me. Neither blaming the knee nor the power of positive thinking helped at all. Desperate misery. But desperation is the mother of imagination:



I imagined a current of relaxation from “central” (my noggin, I thought *then*) to the disaster area. And it worked. Was that current actually a current of freedom from tension, of energy alive within, the *ki* in number 5? And then where, centered below your navel, do you imagine your *tanden* is? Do you really want me to tell you where your *tanden* is?

Bodhidharma said, “Don’t gasp!” Your lungs serve as emergency equipment: a sudden threat (like a T. rex close behind you) brings on a gasp: a sudden in-breath of oxygen so you can think fast. And then panting gives you energy to flee from the threat. But gasping and panting are distractions in zazen. So forgive yourself, of course, if you gasp—but with the steady determination to go deeper, beyond it.

Engaging your koan (6) frees you of something blocking you, so working on more than one koan at once makes no sense. Hence “engage your *single* koan.”

Hakuin says, “Give it everything you’ve got! Give it your all!” That one-pointed intensity sounds like tension, straining—contradicting the calm freedom from tension referred to above. But with honest, ongoing application, the two fuse: you—who you are by nature—find the Middle Way: the reality hidden in both that is beyond the power of words to represent: words are left behind.

Gempo Roshi said, “If you do zazen (pause) and you don’t feel a definite pressure (pause) right here (smacking the small of his back from behind with his forearm three times) —then you are not doing zazen!”

So apparently, easing gradually into number 3 is the most accessible thing to get started with, and then number 4 seems worth getting used to —with the idea that the other four, being synergistic, will then become more accessible. But that’s just my take on it: You must do it of, by, and for yourself—let it happen yourself! I dare you.