

The Zen Path of Practice-Realization

Suggested Practice Guidelines by Kokyo Henkel

Introduction

Dogen Zenji, the founder of the Soto Zen lineage in thirteenth century Japan, taught that practice (selfless activity, both on the meditation cushion and in daily life) and realization (verification of the joyful openness of awakening) are not two. One moment of wholehearted practice is one moment of realization, without the slightest gap between them. Dogen wrote, “Although this inconceivable truth is abundant in each person, it is not actualized without practice, and it is not experienced without realization.” In our lineage, transmitted to us through India, China, and Japan, for many centuries the path of practice-realization has been mostly expressed through full-time monastic training and study. These days many people throughout the world are exploring the potential of wholehearted Zen practice-realization while living an ordinary lifestyle outside the monastery – with all the complexities of careers, families, media, entertainment, and much more. From a Zen perspective, everyone’s buddha-nature is complete even before beginning practice, but there can be a gradual deepening of trust in this completeness, direct verification of this completeness, extending this trust and verification into all aspects of daily life, as well as deepening of kindness and compassion for others based on such trust. Some practitioners may be drawn to follow a more structured progression of practice and study that can be developed and maintained in both formal and informal practice, throughout daily life. These guidelines are for anyone who would like to fully and sincerely take up the Zen path of practice-realization similar to the way it has been expressed for over a thousand years – for the relief of suffering, for the unfolding of kindness and compassion, and for the benefit of all beings.

Practice-Realization of Foundational Buddha-Dharma (1-3 years)

Purpose

Establish a basis of ethical discipline, meditative concentration, and basic understanding of Buddha-Dharma (four noble truths and eightfold path, three refuges, impermanence).

Commitment

Informally take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; attend full moon precepts renewal ceremony when possible; develop healthy skepticism about Dharma, testing it like a jeweler tests gold for its authenticity.

Practice

1. Establish a daily zazen practice (at home or Zen Center, at least 30 minutes/day, 5 days/week): learn to find a comfortable sitting posture and practice mindfulness of breathing, body, feelings, mental states, sounds and other sense-objects – attention to present experience, letting go of thoughts of past and future.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and/or sesshin (multi-day retreat) (3 days/year): silent meditation retreats allow access to deeper dimensions of mind that daily zazen usually does not reveal.
3. Establish and maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) relationship with one or more teachers to explore zazen, practice in daily life, and Dharma understanding (meeting once every two months).
4. Attend Wednesday evening Dharma talk and discussion when possible (at least once/month), and a class series; learn zendo roles of jiko, fukudo, and doan; become a member of Zen Center (no fixed monetary amount necessary, just make an ongoing connection with the community and thereby support the temple).

Study (you may request from Kokyo a CD of all these texts in pdf format)

Foundations of Buddha-Dharma: Discontent and the End of Discontent (read at least two books):

1. What the Buddha Taught (on four noble truths, eightfold path, etc.) – Walpola Rahula
2. The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching (on four noble truths, eightfold path, etc.) – Thich Nhat Hanh
3. In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon – Bhikkhu Bodhi
4. Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice – Shunryu Suzuki
5. Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen – Shunryu Suzuki

Audio class series (<http://archives.sczc.org/>)

1. Dogen on Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures (Shobogenzo Kie Sanbo) (Aug-Sep 2016)
2. Dogen on the Bodhisattva’s Four Ways of Embrace (Shobogenzo Shishoho) (Sep 2014)
3. Dogen on Actualizing the Fundamental Point (Shobogenzo Genjo Koan) (Oct-Nov 2010)

Practice-Realization of the Bodhisattva's Way of Compassion (1-3 years)

Purpose

Develop the aspiration to realize awakening for the benefit of all beings (bodhichitta), openness to others, and compassion (sixteen bodhisattva precepts, four bodhisattva vows, six paramitas, repentance, devotion).

Commitment

Informally take up four bodhisattva vows; attend full moon precepts renewal ceremony when possible (at least 6 times/year); request to formally take refuge and receive the bodhisattva precepts from a teacher (jukai ceremony, including sewing a rakusu robe and studying the precepts in dokusan meetings).

Practice

1. Continue daily zazen practice (40 minutes/day, 5 days/week): learn to practice mindfulness of the whole present experience, calm-abiding without a specific meditation object like the breath.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and sesshin (multi-day retreat) (7 days/year); take up self-designed commitment of Practice Period at Zen Center (6-8 weeks/year).
3. Maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) relationship to explore the precepts (meeting 2 times/month).
4. Attend Wednesday evening Dharma talk and discussion when possible (at least once/month), and a class series; attend an ongoing study group (Monday morning study, Friday koan group, monthly "Jewels in the World"); offer time and energy to the sangha (sangha work days, sangha support net, global sangha cooking for the homeless, zendo roles, tenzo retreat cooking, serving on the Board, etc.); volunteer or charity work.

Study (you may request from Kokyo a CD of all these texts in pdf format)

The Bodhisattva Path: Limitless Compassion (read at least three books):

1. Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts – Reb Anderson
2. The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics (on bodhisattva precepts) – Robert Aitken
3. The Practice of Perfection: The Paramitas from a Zen Buddhist Perspective – Robert Aitken
4. Living by Vow: A Practical Introduction to Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts
5. The Lotus Sutra – Gene Reeves, Burton Watson, or Bunno Kato, etc.

Audio class series (<http://archives.sczc.org/>)

1. Brahmajala Sutra on the Ten Major Bodhisattva Precepts (Oct-Nov 2016)
2. Asanga's Treatise on the Bodhisattva's Three Pure Precepts (Feb-Mar 2014)
3. Vasubandhu's Treatise on the Bodhisattva's Vow and Six Paramitas (Dec 2014)
4. Avatamsaka Sutra on Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Conduct and Vows (May-Jun 2016)
5. Dogen on Arousing Aspiration for the Unsurpassable (Shobogenzo Hotsu Mujoshin) (Feb 2014)

Practice-Realization of Deep Inquiry into Nonduality (1-3 years)

Purpose

Take up the study, contemplation, and living application of the profound view of selflessness, emptiness, and nonduality as taught in the perfection of wisdom (prajna-paramita), middle-way (madhyamaka), mind-only (chittamatra), and buddha-nature (tathagatagarbha) traditions of the great vehicle (mahayana).

Commitment

Informally take up four bodhisattva vows; attend full moon precepts renewal ceremony when possible (at least 6 times/year); be available to fulfill the role of head student (shuso) for a Practice Period (which involves helping a practice leader to lead Practice Period and giving Dharma talks). Memorize zendo chants.

Practice

1. Continue daily zazen practice (40 minutes/day, 5 days/week): learn to practice meditative inquiry, for example, looking for and not finding an independent "self" anywhere in the body or mind.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and sesshin (multi-day retreat) (10 days/year); take up self-designed commitment of fall or winter Practice Period (6-8 weeks/year).
3. Maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) to explore nonduality (meeting 2 times/month).
4. Attend Wednesday evening Dharma talk and discussion when possible (at least once/month), and a class series; attend ongoing study group; offer time and energy to the sangha (sangha work days, sangha support net, global sangha cooking for the homeless, zendo roles, tenzo retreat cooking, serving on the Board, etc.)

Study (you may request from Kokyo a CD of all these texts in pdf format)

Middle Way of Dependent Arising and Emptiness; Mere Manifestations of Mind (read at least four books):

1. The Heart Sutra – Karl Brunnholz, Red Pine, Kazuaki Tanahashi, Mu Soeng, or Edward Conze, etc.
2. The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, or Jay Garfield, Mark Siderits & Shoryu Katsuda, etc.
3. The Third Turning of the Wheel: Wisdom of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra – Reb Anderson
4. Inside Vasubandhu's Yogacara: A Practitioner's Guide – Ben Connelly
5. Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso

Audio class series (<http://archives.sczc.org/>)

1. Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra (Aug-Sep 2015)
2. Nagarjuna’s Treatise on the Middle Way, Ch 18 on Self (Jun-Jul 2007), Ch 24 on Truths (Nov-Dec 2015)
3. Samdhinirmochana Sutra: Foundational Scripture of the Mind-Only School (Feb-Apr 2011)
4. Lankavatara Sutra: Mind, Transformation, and Buddha Nature (Jul-Aug 2012)
5. Dogen on Mind Itself is Buddha (Shobogenzo Sokushin Zebutsu) (Jul 2011, April 2019)

Practice-Realization of Zen: A Separate Transmission Outside the Scriptures (1-3 years)

Purpose

“Point directly to mind, see your true nature, be buddha;” take up investigation of Zen stories (koan), transmission of light, ceremony and ritual expression.

Commitment

Informally take up four bodhisattva vows; attend full moon precepts renewal ceremony when possible (at least 6 times/year); set up a home altar and regularly make offerings to it; take up personal specific vows such as giving to each homeless person one meets or not eating meat; explore possible priest ordination.

Practice

1. Continue daily zazen practice (40-80 minutes/day, 5 days/week): learn to practice turning the light around (eko hensho), just sitting (shikantaza), self-enjoyment samadhi (jijuyu zammai) – a.k.a. nondual awareness.
2. Attend zazenkai (one-day sitting) and sesshin (multi-day retreat) (10-15 days/year); take up self-designed commitment of fall or winter Practice Period (6-8 weeks/year).
3. Maintain a dokusan (practice discussion) relationship to explore Zen (meeting once/week).
4. Attend Wednesday evening Dharma talk and discussion when possible (at least once/month), and a class series; attend ongoing study group; offer time and energy to the sangha (sangha work days, sangha support net, global sangha cooking for the homeless, zendo roles, tenzo retreat cooking, serving on the Board, etc.); attend Green Gulch Farm 3-week Intensive or 2-month Practice Period, or Tassajara 90-day Practice Period.

Study (you may request from Kokyo a CD of all these texts in pdf format)

Zen: Pointing Directly to Mind, Manifesting True Nature (read at least five books):

1. Trust in Mind: The Rebellion of Chinese Zen (Sengcan’s Song of the Trusting Mind) – Mu Soeng
2. The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-neng – Red Pine, Thomas Cleary, or Philip Yampolsky
3. Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi – Taigen Daniel Leighton
4. The Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues – Thomas Cleary
5. Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen – Kazuaki Tanahashi, etc.
6. Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dogen – Kazuaki Tanahashi, etc.
7. Commentary on Dogen’s Genjokoan – Shohaku Okumura, Hakuun Yasutani, or Shunryu Suzuki
8. Record of Transmitting the Light: Zen Master Keizan’s Denkoroku – Francis Cook or Thomas Cleary
9. Women of the Way: Discovering 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom – Sallie Tisdale
10. The Art of Just Sitting: Essential Writings on the Zen Practice of Shikantaza – John Daido Looi

Audio class series (<http://archives.sczc.org/>)

1. Third Ancestor’s Song of the Trusting Mind: The First Zen Teaching (Dec 2015)
2. Dongshan’s Jewel Mirror Samadhi and Five Relationships (Feb-Mar, Jul-Aug 2013)
3. Dogen on the Wholehearted Practice of the Way (Shobogenzo Bendowa) (Oct 2015)
4. Dogen on the Universal Recommendation for the Ceremony of Zazen (Fukanzazengi) (Dec 2016)
5. Dogen on Radiant Light (Shobogenzo Komyo) (Mar 2018)