



# Introduction to Zen Practice

*A four part Introduction to the practice of  
Soto Zen Buddhism in the lineage of Matsuoka Roshi*

Harvey Daiho Hilbert Roshi



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# INTRODUCTION

This booklet is offered as a simple and direct introduction to Zen practice, based on a series of four Dharma talks given by Harvey Daiho Hilbert Roshi between Tuesday May 27 and Tuesday June 17, 2025. These talks were originally presented to students as a practical entry point into Zen Buddhism—not as theory, not as philosophy, and not as a belief system, but as a lived practice rooted in everyday life.

Zen is often misunderstood as something mysterious, abstract, or reserved for monks and temples. In these talks, Daiho Roshi brings Zen back to where it belongs: into the body, into daily activity, into the way we eat, work, sit, walk, speak, and relate to one another. Drawing from his own life experience, long years of practice, and his training in the lineage of Matsuoka Roshi, he presents Zen in plain language, with humor, honesty, and compassion.

The four parts of this booklet unfold naturally. The first part asks the most basic questions: *What is Zen? Where does it come from?* Beginning with the life of the historical Buddha, Daiho Roshi points to the heart of Zen as awakening to oneness, impermanence, and responsibility for how we live in the world. Zen is presented not as something to believe in, but as something to do.

The second part turns directly to practice. Here, the reader is introduced to the core forms of Zen training: sitting meditation (*zazen*), walking meditation (*kinhin*), work practice (*samu*), and eating practice (*oryoki*). These practices are not treated as rituals for their own sake, but as concrete ways to cultivate mindfulness, discipline, humility, and care. Again and again, the emphasis is placed on presence—doing what we are doing, fully and wholeheartedly.

In the third part, Daiho Roshi introduces the ceremonies and holidays observed in Zen, including *Rohatsu*, the commemoration of the Buddha's awakening. These observances are explained not as formalities, but as communal practices that support discipline, gratitude, and continuity with the tradition. Ceremony, like meditation, is shown to be another expression of practice.

The final part addresses the precepts—the ethical foundation of Zen practice. Rather than rules imposed from outside, the precepts are presented as ways of living that naturally arise from awareness, compassion, and the understanding of interdependence. They are not ideals to measure ourselves against, but guides for bringing clarity and care into our relationships and actions.

Throughout these teachings, Daiho Roshi consistently returns to one central point: Zen is not about gaining something special or becoming someone else. It is about waking up to the life we are already living, just as it is, and taking responsibility for how we live it. Practice does not end when we leave the cushion or the zendo; it continues in how we speak, how we work, how we eat, and how we treat others.

This booklet is intended especially for beginning students, but it may also serve as a reminder for long-time practitioners. It does not replace practice; it points toward it. Readers are encouraged to read slowly, reflect, and—most importantly—to sit, to work, and to bring mindful attention into their daily lives.

Zen is simple. It is not easy. But it is available to anyone willing to show up and practice.

Rev. Luis KaiUn Lista (Zen Student of Tim Ryuko Langdell Roshi)

**Part one:**

Zen Buddhism: What is it? Where does it come from?

**Part two:**

What are the practices of Zen?

**Part three:**

The ceremonies and holidays that Zen Buddhists celebrate.

**Part four:**

The precepts, these are the ways that we live out Zen Buddhism.



# Introduction to the talks

Tuesday, May 28, 2025

Let me first introduce myself. My official title is Reverend Dr Harvey Daiho Hilbert Roshi. That's my official title. Yet, I don't like those things. Call me whatever you want. People will always ask: How do I refer to you? and I answer: I don't know! I respond to anything. Hey you! works. If you think of me as a teacher, then the word would be Sensei. Harvey works fine, Reverend works fine, Roshi works fine. Doctor is a little too formal for me.

I came to Zen in a very unique way but an interesting way. I was an infantry soldier. When I was 17, I enlisted in the army, that was back in 1964. I enlisted for the infantry, I wanted to impress my dad I guess and become an infantry soldier. In case you don't know what an infantry soldier is, that's the guy who carries a gun and goes out. I went to Germany for 18 months, I came back, I was then sent to Vietnam. On May 29th 1966, I was sent in to assist a sister company of soldiers. They were surrounded by a battalion of North Vietnamese and about to be overwhelmed. The enemy was shooting at us as we were coming in on helicopters. We jumped out of helicopters, fired back and established a perimeter. All those kinds of things that you do as a soldier in this situation. And then, around five o'clock, they stopped shooting. It was a rainy season, so it was ankle deep to calf deep with water under the ground and not much cover but we did the best we could. The company commander sent a three person listening post or LP out about 100 meters out in front of us and their job was to alert us if the enemy were to cross head toward us. They had little field flashlights that had a red filter. Their job was as soon as they heard the enemy approaching to take their red filter flashlights and shine them as they were coming across the perimeter, that was a nighttime password.

Around midnight, the enemy just started shooting again. They had not gone anywhere, they were well camouflaged. But when they started shooting again, the three guys lost their minds because they were surrounded by the

enemy. They ran, dropped their flashlights and grabbed their rifles. They ran toward my position, I did not know who they were, I assumed they were enemy soldiers charging at us and I shot them. I killed one. Turns out he was a friend of mine, a guy named Richard Roundry, he was 19 years old. About half an hour later, I got shot in the head myself and landed on my ass. I felt my own brain, my own hands, scary enough.

I survived the night and I became rather rapidly an atheist. I was really angry at God. I was very angry at the government, I was angry at the Army, I was angry at pretty much everything.

I was really pissed off. I was paralyzed in my left side, I couldn't move my leg, my arm or my shoulder. They told me I wasn't going to live very long and so I was retired from the army at 19 years old and discharged. At that time there were no follow-up services for veterans and if you're old enough to remember, Vietnam veterans were not really well received when they got home. I got spit on a few times, I got pushed around a lot. I used to go out in the middle of the night to drink coffee and read books at a rough house. Sometimes cops would come in and rouse me. What are you doing out here, they would ask. And when I answered, I'm reading and I'm retired, they would laugh at me and push me up against the wall and beat me down.

I was first in an Army hospital, then I got transferred to a Navy hospital. There I happened to check out a book called *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts and I read that book. I read it seriously and it spoke to me. Here was a faith tradition that didn't require a belief in God or anything else. Frankly, it struck me, something I needed at the moment. I began practicing meditation in 1966 and I have been practicing since. That's how I got involved in Zen and meditation so to speak.

Way ahead, after I got my doctorate I started using meditation with my patients. In my own case and in the case of those trauma survivors, meditation proved to be a very helpful tool. But I had my own limits, so I sought out a teacher and found one about 90 miles away, up in the mountains. I would travel up almost weekly to practice with him for *Zazenkai* (One Day Intensive Retreat) and *Sesshin* (3, 5 or 7 Day Intensive Practice) for years. In 1999, he made me a disciple and then he actually made me a priest in December 2000. He gave me transmission in 2005, which entitles me to use the *Roshi* title. All that means is *old teacher*. He thus authorized me to teach and to establish my own order, which I did.

I created the Order of Clear Mind Zen, I represented and developed it over the years since. Okay, so much for me now. I should give you an opportunity to introduce yourselves.

Part One:  
Zen Buddhism:  
What is it? Where does it come from?

Tuesday, May 27, 2025

Welcome everyone. Good to see you, good to meet you. Let's see, it's really hard to answer the question *what is Zen?* and maybe a definition will unfold over the next few sessions and through your own practice, so you'll come to an understanding of what Zen is in practice.

**Zen is life!**

A very famous teacher, Jiyu Kenneth Roshi, wrote a book called *Zen is Eternal Life*. In it she basically lays out the idea that everything we do, if we do with a certain mind, is Zen. But Lets back up Zen itself. The word Zen is from the Chinese word *Chan* which itself comes from the Indian (Sanskrit) word *Dhyana*. *Dhyana* means meditation, so *Chan* means meditation. Then in Japan it became Zen. Thus Zen is really meditation, yet it's much broader than that. In a sense it's very specific, it points to the actual act of meditation. On a broader sense it means *Being Awake* and *Present or Mindful in all of your daily activities*. Whether you're walking, sitting, lying down or whether you're working. It doesn't really matter, your practice is to be present. Wake Up! The idea is to be awake, to be here now. To startle a student into being present, Rinzai Zen teachers will often punch somebody or yell at him to wake him up and make him present, here and now. Yet, that's not what we do in our Soto Zen school, which is the kind of zen I practice. Our student and teacher relationship is much more focused on assisting somebody to be awake to be present through the teachings, through the practice.

Zen Buddhism is a Buddhist practice. And what is Buddhism itself? First of all, there is no such thing as Buddhism even though we use the word, get that clear! Because *-ism* refers to a set of beliefs, like an ideology. Yet, the Buddha Way is a practice. If you were in some place like in an Asian country and told someone you practice Buddhism, they would look at you and go *What?* You walk the Buddha's Path, you practice the Buddha's Way. So there's no *-ism* involved, there's no firm set of beliefs. There were some writers who wrote things about it. They write about how to do it, what it is, where it comes from but it's not the same as a canonical set of beliefs. Indeed, in the different Buddhist schools there's no Pope, there's no hierarchy necessarily that's firm or well established for every school of Buddhism. For example, I'm a teacher, I'm just like any other guy practicing Zen. I have no authority over you as a Zen Priest.

Now, where does this all come from? About 2600 years ago, there was a guy named Siddhartha Gautama, he was born into a royal family in Nepal and grew up sheltered. So sheltered in fact that the king, his father moved him from one castle to another depending on the weather yet he did not want Gautama to suffer at all. In order to do that, he forbade Gautama from going out into any towns or villages. Thus, for a very long time, Gautama never saw anything bad, he was protected. While he was a prince, he trained in martial arts and archery, he was said to be an excellent student. He was proficient in a number of things. Yet his problem was that he was a curious guy. He always wanted to know things. So, one day, he figured out a way to get out of the castle and entered the town. There, he saw some things that totally changed his view on the world and life. He saw old age, he saw death, he saw sickness, he saw extreme poverty. He saw all these things that are part of everyday life in many places and it touched his heart profoundly. I think this is a really important point, Gautama was someone who was compassionate from the get-go. Everything he saw touched his heart so profoundly, he decided that he had to figure out a way to end all this Suffering (sk. *Dukkha*). Now how much *Chutzpa* is that? How full of himself could any guy be to think *I'm going to go out and solve the problem of suffering in the world?* Think about that for a moment. Here's a guy who believed that he could find a way to end suffering. Oh my god!

In the tradition of the times, he escaped from the castle and the king, his father, and left. But you must know he was married and he had a son named *Rabula*, which by the way means "chained person". So, he left his son and his wife and everybody else. He simply left them and went out into the forest. The tradition at the time was that you go out in the forest and become a mendicant, a kind of spiritual beggar. In order to do that, he shaved his head off his hair,

gave up all his fancy clothes, his jewelry and everything else that princes have and donned the simplest robe he found. Can you imagine going from a prince living in royalty and wealth beyond belief and just giving it all up and having nothing but a robe on you, out in the forest by yourself. That's what he did.

He went from being a beggar—a *bhikkhu*, which is the word for beggar or *bhikshu*. In the Japanese tradition, he is called a *So*, meaning a monk or priest. My full Dharma name is actually So Daiho, "Great Dharma Priest."

Anyway, he became a monk, a beggar, and he traveled around and found different teachers. The legend is that he mastered all their teachings, but he found them all wanting. From his perspective, they didn't provide an answer to ending suffering; they didn't end suffering for him.

The last group he joined was a group of ascetics. They practiced "minimal living"—and I mean, he didn't eat much. He lost so much weight that legend has it he was eating bird dung and starving himself. That didn't work either.

One day, while he was struggling, he went to a river and heard something really interesting. He heard a sitar teacher teaching a young student. You know what a sitar is? It's a stringed instrument famous in India. He heard the teacher say: *"If the strings are too tight, they'll break. If they're too loose, they won't play."*

In that moment, the Middle Way was born.

Right then, a young girl walked by with some porridge, and he ate. This really irritated his ascetic buddies. They didn't like that. "What are you doing? You're eating!" But they noticed something was different about Gautama; he was more alive, you might say.

### **The Morning Star and Oneness**

He walked a long way. He didn't have enlightenment yet, but he figured he had to do something about this. Who knows what he actually said 2,600 years ago, but he ended up sitting under a tree—we call it the Bodhi Tree, the "Tree of Awakening." Its descendants are still there in India today.

He sat under this tree and decided he was not going to get up until he had an answer to this question of how to stop suffering. So he sits, and he sits, and he sits. Legend has it he sat for about eight days. On the morning of the

eighth day, he saw what they used to call the "Morning Star," which we know as Venus. It was brilliant.

Bang. Something happened immediately. He realized that the Morning Star and he were the same. They were one. Everything in the universe is one, not separate.

Imagine that realization: that there is no separation between me and you. The only separation, really, is the amount of space between the molecules in our bodies. Do they still do this with printing presses? If you look at a newspaper picture with a magnifying glass, you'll see dots. When you walk away, the dots form an image, but the image is nothing more than spaces between dots.

We could say we're all nothing but space, or we're all nothing but a collection of dots, either close together or far apart. But we're one. Arising from that was a deep sense of compassion. If we're all one, how can I hurt you? If I hurt you, I'm hurting myself. If I bring evil into the world, I'm bringing it for all of us. If I do something good, I'm bringing good for all of us. We are all defining humanity through our behavior and our actions.

### **Zen Outside of Words and Letters**

This is the Buddha Way. He got up and was henceforth called the Buddha, the "Awakened One." He didn't take that title; people gave it to him because of how he walked, how he sat, and what he did.

The Buddha didn't just sit on a cushion. He got up off his ass and did something in the world. He traveled all over teaching people the Way. I really have a problem with Zen teachers and students who sit in a zendo on a weekend, and then get up and act like idiots. Just like I have a problem with Christians or Jews who go to church or synagogue, act all pious, and then go out into the world and do the same damn things they did before.

The Buddha got up and did something. He took his light out into the world.

One thing you should know about Zen that separates it from other Buddhist traditions is that Zen stands outside of words and letters. There was a man named Bodhidharma. He was a monk in India who traveled to China. He taught that Buddhism was not about the sutras; it was about **practice**. That's not to say words aren't important, but they are not the be-all and end-

all. Scripture is not the most important thing—your practice is. If you don't practice, you might as well go away, because you're not going to "get it." You may understand it from reading, but you won't realize it. Zen is about *being* it. You are perfect just as you are. That is a Buddhist teaching. Nothing added, nothing taken away. Now, we do have impediments to our perfection, and we have to practice to help get rid of those.

## **Emptiness and the Four Noble Truths**

Everything changes. Everything is impermanent. This is a hard one for us from a Judeo-Christian perspective: there is no permanent soul. There is nothing that migrates from one state of being to another when we die.

In the Theravada perspective, the idea was to practice so you become a "never-returned," reaching extinction so you didn't have to suffer by being reborn into this world. But Mahayana Buddhism is different. In Mahayana, when you get to the point of dying, you should not wish *not* to return; you should return in order to be of assistance to others. Our main goal is to practice for the sake of others.

Now, let's talk about Emptiness. If I pick up this cup and drink all the tea, we might say it's "empty." That's not what emptiness means in Buddhism. Emptiness means there is no *permanence* to anything. Everything is going to fall away.

This leads to the Four Noble Truths.

1. Life is suffering (Dukkha): We suffer from the day we're born in one respect or another.
2. The cause is change: Everything is impermanent. What hasn't changed in your life? Your love for your parents has evolved; you are not the same person you were at ten years old.

I once bought a brand-new Harley-Davidson motorcycle. I was so afraid of dinging it that I suffered! I didn't want it to get old or get a scratch. But the reality was that it was going to get a ding sooner or later. It would get old and rusty, just like me. The more invested I was in keeping it pristine, the more I suffered.

We call that attachment. The more we are invested in holding something tight and trying to prevent it from changing, the more we suffer.

3. The end of suffering: There is a way to end that suffering. In the book *Opening the Hand of Thought* by Uchiyama Roshi, he talks about letting go of the thoughts we have about ourselves and the world. You have to open the hand of thought—relax into the life you have. It doesn't mean you accept racism; you accept that it *exists* so you can take meaningful action to mitigate it.
4. The Eightfold Noble Path: This is the "Middle Way."

### **The Eightfold Path: Map and Compass**

The aspects of the Eightfold Path are written in a sequence, but they don't necessarily happen in that order.

Right Understanding is the first. Think of it like this: If you're out in the woods camping and you have a compass and a map, you have to orient the map to the environment. You turn the map so it corresponds with magnetic north. Now the map, the compass, and the environment are integrated.

Right Understanding is like that. We orient our mind, body, and environment to the world so that our Right Thought isn't distorted. As a cognitive therapist, I used to talk about the relationship between perception, thought, and behavior.

If I perceive the tea is hot and I burn my mouth, I might have the thought: "*Damn it, Catherine made this too hot!*" Then I feel anger and my behavior is to yell. But it is *my* responsibility what emotion and thought I have about my perception. Often they are automatic because we filter perceptions through core beliefs.

Growing up, my dad was a drunk who told me I was stupid. I carried that belief. Once, while teaching at Cleveland State University, two students got up and walked out. My automatic thought was: "*I must be dumb. I'm doing this wrong.*" I felt panic and started using "fifty-cent words" and quoting books to prove how smart I was. It turned out they just had to go to the bathroom! It had nothing to do with me. But unless we sit still and pay attention to our thoughts, we are stuck.

This leads to Right Speech. We don't speak in ways that harm others. In Indian culture, this is called *Abimsa*—do no harm. All of Buddhism is about doing no harm.



# 3

## Part two: What are the practices of Zen?

Tuesday, June 4, 2025

### **On Being Present and Mindfulness**

At times mindfulness is a very difficult practice because, as I said, we Americans and Belgians and all kinds of people behind there, we focus on a task to get it done, and then the next task, and the next task, and so on and so forth. We work through the day that way. Or, we're thinking—while we're doing one task, we're thinking about another, or thinking about something else. Um, you might be doing some work practice or other and then think about, "Oh, did I turn off the coffee pot?" or "Did I forget to put the dog in?" or, you know, some other kind of thought. You know, that takes us away from the moment.

So the practice is to stay focused on what you're doing right now. What are you doing right now? Right now, like, oh, you're sitting listening to me speak. But maybe your thoughts wander. That happens. When your thoughts wander, what do you do? You bring yourself back to this moment—my voice, my image, or whatever—and you practice being present. Okay. So in our practices, we have three main practices: eating practice, work practice, and sitting and walking practice. Okay. These are the main things.

### **Eating Practice: Oryoki**

Eating practice is called Oryoki, I think, and that just means "eating practice," basically. Now, it's done in a very specific way. We have—if you're in a zendo during a *sesshin* or *zazenkai*, some retreat thing, and they're practicing

Oryoki for lunch, which is the main meal—you have a bowl set. Three bowls and a large cloth, a smaller cloth, and a napkin. A little holder that holds your utensils, which would contain a little spatula-like thing [the *setsure*] that you use to clean your bowls, chopsticks, and a spoon. Those are your utensils.

You lay them out in a certain fashion—I can't show you here because of space limitations, you know—you lay them out, just trust me, you lay them out in a certain fashion. And then there's a whole set of chants that go as you're chanting. And then sometime during the chants, there's one where the Tenzo, which is the cook, will bring out a bowl—or his assistant—will bring out a bowl of some kind of food, and that bowl is ladled into yours. You have three bowls laid out: one, two, three. And you give a certain hand signal to say "enough" or "more," whatever. But be aware that whatever you take, you have to eat. Whatever. At the end, you're going to be cleaning your bowls with water anyway.

We'll move on. Then a second bowl comes off, and that's soup. Then the third bowl is soup—well, in most temples they're vegetarian, and that's what we do. It consists of maybe a salad, a bowl of soup, or some kind of noodles. But the Tenzo has to be aware when they're cooking that the people have to eat with their chopsticks. So, I had an occasion once where somebody served ramen noodles and they didn't break them up. So it was long things you had to pick them up with your chopsticks, which was not easy! Get them up high enough, get them in your mouth, and drop them down. It was fun, but it shouldn't have been that way, either here or there.

So the eating practice consists both of the serving and the eating, but also being aware—if you ever are called upon to be a Tenzo assistant or something—to plan the meals in a certain way so they can be eaten. But, you know, some places they practice an eating practice that was promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh, where you—and I attended a *sesshin* once where a fellow did this—you had to chew fifty chews before you swallow. That's a lot of chews! It ended up becoming liquid, basically.

But the idea—remember, the idea behind all this is to be mindful of what you're doing. Being mindful of the taste of the food, of its texture, and so on. Being appreciative. I have a prayer that we use on a more or less daily basis: being aware of the many hands and many lives that brought us this food. Being aware that food comes to us through work, through cooperation, money exchange, and all those kinds of things. We have to remember that the lettuce was grown by somebody, picked by somebody, packaged by somebody, put in

trucks driven by somebody. The oil and gasoline or whatever goes into those trucks was drilled and processed by somebody, and so on.

So the idea of the universe (*recording not audible*) it's a whole world. Remember there's a book, I think it's called *One City*, where it starts out with him in his kitchen. He's talking about what's in his kitchen and he opens up the cabinet doors and looks at where all this stuff comes from: Guatemala, Brazil, Vietnam, China, you know, North Carolina, Vermont... all over the place. So, food—we should be aware. Zen practice is to be aware that this food comes to us through many hands and many lives throughout the world, perhaps. So the act of eating is a communion with the entire world. You understand that?

Look at where your food is coming from. Just look at that. Where is it coming from? This tea I'm drinking is a green tea that's grown in China and processed and shipped. So, you know, I'm consuming something that Chinese people grew, harvested, processed, packaged, and shipped. And the tankers that brought it here—those sailors and all those guys were part of this tea. The sun shown on the land is part of this tea. The water that watered the land, the rain, the clouds that shaded it... all that is part of this tea. So eating practice is not just simply eating; it's in communion with the entire world. We should be mindful of that. We should practice that mindfulness as we sip our tea. We're aware that we're sipping tea made by many hands and many lives, and therefore we should be grateful that we have it.

Many people don't have food. How many people are starving around the world? Even in the United States, people are starving; they don't have enough to eat. I was a social worker in South Carolina and I got to tell you, I visited many homes where people did not have much to eat at all. Children were skinny, they were malnourished. Not a pleasant sight. Difficult to work with. But there it is. We should be grateful for what we do have, as opposed to thinking about what we'd like to have. I'd like to have X, Y, and Z every day, but I have options. Many people don't have any options. So be mindful of food and eating, and all that it means.

### **Work Practice: Samu**

I talked briefly about work practice. Oh, by the way—after meals are finished, the Tenzo brings in a pot of hot water. Offers water to each person. You take this little spatula and you wipe the bowl clean, pour the water into the next bowl and wash that, pour the water into the next bowl and wash that, and then you drink it. You drink it. And then you wipe the bowls clean with a cloth,

and then fold that up in a certain way. They're all folded into the kit, so that when you unfold it (*recording not audible*) anyway, you then refold it, repackage it, tie it. And it's tied in a certain way so that when it's tied, it looks like a lotus. Difficult to learn! Okay? You can learn. I had a student once who for years had difficulty tying that, but she finally made it, you know? But the point is—or I guess one thing to be mindful about—is that nobody does anything until all the bowls are clean, and all the bowls are folded, and all the bowls are tied.

Next: Samu. Often we go to a retreat and we pay money—sometimes some places a lot of money—but you also have to work. Something that you don't expect. If you go to a retreat in the usual sense, all you gotta do is reflect on yourself, do yoga, or whatever. Enjoy the day. This is not how a Zen retreat goes. A Zen retreat is not about focusing selfishly on making yourself a better person. That's not the point, you don't go sit with the idea of gaining anything. So the *sesshin* is not about gaining anything, although it's partly about discipline and practice.

We Americans have a lot of (*recording not audible*) we like to hear "discipline free" and "free to do whatever we want." Not so in the Zen world. A Zen retreat is about discipline. So there are periods during the day which are called samu. During samu, your period of *zazen* ends—a bell or clappers sound—and then the work leader will give you instructions about what your job is. These will be pre-decided by the head priest. He or she will have already arranged a list of things. Typically, as I said, it's maybe dressing the altar, dressing the cushions (*Zabutons* and *Zafus*), the floor might be cleaned, some outdoor work, raking. When I was in the temple, we would have to go outside sometimes and rake pebbles and things like that.

But this is important, and it's not really a question of what it is. I mean, one of them I used to get tasked with—my teacher used to tell me to clean the toilets. And I would clean the toilets. Get down on my knees and clean the toilets. Okay? This is what I did.

We might ask you to clean or polish the Buddha, or empty out the incense burner. This incense burner—there are little stubbles where the incense is burned down, and your work practice would be to clean out the stubbles, which is not easy, believe me. If you've ever done it, we bend a fork and use that fork to dig in and lift up so you don't lose any of the ash, because the ash is precious. Ash is precious. Then you take the little stubbles and set them aside.

Anyway, then you would also have to clean the burner itself. This is a brass burner. You have to clean it with Brasso or some other kind of brass

cleaner, and then polish it. Not just putting the Brasso on and wiping it off—you have to polish it, buff it, polish it. And the same would be with the Buddha. Now, with the Buddha, the work there is a little bit tricky because the Buddha we have, most Buddhas, have hair or something tied up on top in a little knot. And to get into the ears and under his chin and around his eyes, you have to use Q-tips. You clean with the Brasso and then polish it, buff it with Q-tips. So it's really a major job. And then buff the whole thing.

So there are a lot of little tasks that can be done. When you're charged with doing Zabutons or Zafus, you use a vacuum cleaner. Zabutons are large rectangular pads, usually about four inches thick, and then the Zafu, the stuffed cushion, is sitting on top of that. You have to fluff those and reshape them, because when you sit on them they kind of get bent in. So you have to fluff them up and straighten them up, and make sure they're in a line, all even and all that. So it's difficult work.

And as I said before, people sometimes rush through it. I guess they want a break or something. But there's no end to it. You just go back and do it again. Do it again and do it again. Same thing. Whatever it is you're doing, you do it over and over and over. And the idea there is that in our heads we begin to sometimes develop some resentment. "Damn, man, I polished this Buddha three times! What are you talking about, do it again? It's really shiny, it was all nice and buffed." That's not the point. You're missing the point. Point isn't to get it done. The point is the work itself.

Now, if you can go out into the world and apply that to your work, that would be wonderful. Consider that. When you're filling out a form, let's say—fill it out with mindful attention. Not about getting a form done; it's about doing it correctly, deliberately, mindfully, and so on. If you're meeting with a client—if you're a person that has to work with clients—you gotta be present with your client. You have to be fully there. Not somewhere else, but fully there. And so you begin to develop an ability to stay present and focus on the task in the moment you're doing it. Not rushing around to get done, not wishing this client would go away because you don't like them. That in itself is something to look at. And that's something you look at when you're doing samu in the zendo: your resentments, your difficulties with the practice leader or the task itself.

Like cleaning the toilets. I was a PhD, and they were asking me to go in and get on my knees and clean toilets. I don't know about you, but that was a little bit of a difficulty for me, I admit. But I had to work with it because I had to clean the toilet to clean the toilet. That was my job. Regardless of who I

thought I was or what I thought I should be doing, that's what he assigned me and that's what I had to do.

Understand what I'm saying about that work practice business? Critical. Critical practice in Zen. Even as I'm retired, I'm working. I'm working with you right now. I had to prepare and consider: how am I going to address these things? I have another study group—same work. Even though I'm retired, I still work. I have to feed my birds every morning, water the plants. Just because you're retired doesn't mean you stop working. Doesn't mean you stop being mindful. So the discipline of this practice carries on throughout your daily life, whether you're an employee, an employer, or retired. Doesn't matter.

### Q&A on Eating and Work Practice

**Roshi:** I forgot something—one of you suggested that at the end of each of these things, I ask if you have any questions or comments. So, let's go back. Anybody have any questions or comments about eating practice? All comments are welcome.

**Student:** I was surprised by the fifty chews.

**Roshi:** Yeah, we don't do that! I was like, how could I chew on one thing fifty times? It would take (*recording not audible*) Thich Nhat Hanh had a little task that he suggested in one of his books: put a raisin in your mouth. Chew it fifty times. Just a raisin. One raisin. Wow. Give you an idea of the process of eating it and what happens to the raisin. It's kind of like—and this is a little off, maybe—but it's like one of the things that the Buddha used to do with his people. He would take them to burial places, and the body would be lying there, and he would have his disciples sit there for day after day and watch the body decay. Literally. Be present when the body is decaying. Similar thing to eating a raisin. You're witnessing the dissolution of one life and its entering into another life. That body is decaying and its minerals are going into the ground feeding the trees, the worms, the bugs. Then they would take the robes off [the bodies], wash them, dye them, cut them into strips, and make robes out of those cloths. That's what the early Buddhist robes were—made out of burial cloths. Sewn into this pattern right here. Same pattern as this *rakusu* [Roshi gestures to his *rakusu*]. All of this suggests that there is a oneness to everything and a change that is inevitable.

**Student:** I have a question. I understand being mindful of where the food comes from, but—and this is kind of an idle question—what's the point

of caring about how I hold my bowl? Is it simply discipline, or what's the point of those little details?

**Roshi:** Okay, first of all, you're not "holding" the bowl—the bowl is on a *tan* in a zendo. It's sitting there. Then you do pick up the bowl to eat, especially if you're using rice. I guess there's no point other than *feeling* the bowl.

**Student:** I mean, I'm supposed to hold the bowl like this [gestures], and it mattered where my thumb was. Why?

**Roshi:** Why? Some of these rituals are handed down through the centuries. Every lineage has their different ways of doing things. It gets a little complicated sometimes because I've been to several Zen centers and they would do it differently. And you would think to yourself, "They're doing it wrong," but they're doing it their way, which is the right way for them. Bottom line is: it's about mindful attention on the one hand, and discipline on the other. You don't necessarily ask the Zen teacher, the Roshi, "Why do I hold it this way?" You just hold it that way because that's what you're instructed to do. Now deal with it! Deal with it.

All right, anybody else? What about work practice?

**Student:** You were talking about Samu at the temple. I'm at home and I'm cleaning the house. That's also Samu, isn't it?

**Roshi:** Yes. Any work you do, you can consider Samu. And in fact, I would urge you to do so. We're learning to practice mindful attention to the task at hand. Remember there's a cycle in our heads: a perception kicks off a thought, which kicks off a feeling, which kicks off a behavior. It's being processed through what I call core beliefs. So you begin to pay attention. Like, I know you have those stairs and you have to clean each stair step. I had that in my mountain house. You have to clean each step. And it takes certain discipline to not try to race through it. These tasks are boring! So what? Do them anyway, with mindful attention. I really believe there should be a certain gratefulness that we have work to do—that we are actually able to clean a house or feed our kids. It should have a certain amount of gracefulness.

Another word that seems to drop off the world in the United States: gracefulness. Be graceful. Another way of saying it is "with a certain pizzazz." You're there. Okay, fine. Sometime, as in my case, you won't be able to—you'll have to rely on somebody else. You know how humiliating that can be at the beginning? I have to ask for help with bird seed or dog poop. I can't do that

anymore. I literally don't have the physical capacity. I used to run 26.2 mile races; I barely walk around my yard now. Be grateful for the health and functions that you *do* have while you have them.

### **Sitting Practice: Zazen**

Sitting and walking practice—that's next. Sometimes the most focused-on practice. *Zazen*. *Za* means "seated," and *Zen* means "meditation." Seated meditation. It's real simple. It's not easy. In the Soto tradition, we practice. Meaning we try to practice or develop a wholehearted practice. Just sitting. Hitting the wall. The still point.

There are some places, some teachers who say you have to practice it this way: sit on a cushion, your legs crossed—left foot on your right thigh, right foot on your left thigh. You kind of look like a pretzel! Then your hands are placed in what's called the Cosmic Mudra. Hands are together like this, and it forms a kind of egg shape. Thumbs are lightly touching. Elbows are extended—should feel like you could bring an egg under your armpit. Back is erect. Shoulders are back. Head is erect, chin slightly tucked.

If you're sitting on a chair, it's a three-point thing. Have your bottom on the front part of the chair. Feet—left foot, right foot—solidly down. Feet apart, form a kind of triangle. Back is upright. Shoulders back, chin slightly tucked. Hands in the mudra. I should be able to come along with a piece of paper and slide it between your thumbs; that's how lightly they should touch. Mouth is closed, eyes are half-open, half-closed. Your tongue should be pressed lightly against the front part of your teeth. That's supposed to help reduce salivation. Sometimes it works.

So, three aspects to the practice:

1. Posture: Sit upright. Period. Sit upright. Don't rest on the back of the chair. In a certain way, your mind is upright.
2. Breath: Breathe in through your nose. Do not try to regulate that breath, at least in the beginning. Breathe in and breathe out; allow your breath to find its own natural rhythm. You just let it go. "Breathing in... breathing out." Saying that to yourself as you're doing it. You can feel yourself already relaxing.

3. Mind: This is the most challenging. Why? Because our brain is a sensory receptor. It receives data whether we like it or not. Right now I'm hearing my wife out there in the living room watching some kind of movie. I got a dog down here. Ears, nose, tongue, skin—all that data comes into your brain and back out again in the form of thoughts and feelings. We don't try to regulate our thoughts in Zazen. We simply notice: it arises, it falls away. It arises, it falls away.

But there's a difference between having a thought and thinking. Having a thought is just having a thought. "Thinking" is when you attach that thought to another, and another. You're watching a movie in your head. Sitting there supposedly practicing Zazen while watching a movie in your head is not Zazen! So what do you do? You don't "think." How do you not think? By noticing a thought and letting it go. My teacher and the Buddha—even Maezumi Roshi—taught it's kind of like leaves floating down a stream. You can pick up that leaf and look at it, but sooner or later you gotta put it back. Put it back in the stream right away. Don't pick it up, just watch it go.

That is the discipline of Zazen. That's why people can say, "Well, Zen is easy," in terms of "I'm going to sit down and meditate." But it's not. It's simple, but not easy. Facing a wall for any extended period of time is not at all.

I was in charge of the mental health people at a school system once, and I had some teachers who had some ADHD hyperactive kids. All boys. They sent them to my office: "Can you do something with these guys? They can't sit still." I said to the teachers, "Yes they can." She said, "No they can't." I put them in a room. There was a clock on the wall. I said to the kids, "We're going to sit still. Don't move for a minute. Do it. I bet you can't sit there."

Well, they did! They pushed against me telling them they couldn't. "Paradoxical intention"—it's a therapeutic technique. And then I expanded it from one minute to two, then three, then four, then five. And then I called the teacher in and she was able to see these "little rug-rats" sitting still for five minutes and not moving. Now, if those kids can do it, you can do it. But it isn't easy! I'm going to tell you that right up front. This practice is not for everyone. Why? Because you're facing a wall. What are you doing? You're facing yourself. You got nothing there but you.

Whatever is there is going to come up. I've had students start crying, even though they're facing some trauma or sadness. I had one student in a thirty-day *sesshin*—believe it or not, thirty days—who couldn't stop laughing! It was very distracting. She was from Naropa University, quite a girl. She would

sit and start giggling. While she was laughing, we were trained to practice, so we had to process our thoughts and feelings about that distraction. "Will she ever stop laughing?" Things like that come up.

A siren, a police car, a bus (*recording not audible*) people think, "Maybe I need to go to the mountains." I would say that's a wrong move. You don't live in the mountains. You live where you live. To be mindful even if you have distractions—that's part of the discipline.

### **Walking Practice: Kinhin**

There's one other practice: Kinhin, which is walking practice. Walking practice is done just like *Zazen*—very mindful, in a certain form. The practice leader, the Ino, will clapper together and it'll make a sharp sound. That's the signal for the beginning of Kinhin.

You stand, turning, and your hands are in a posture called *Shashu*: the left hand thumb is closed [inside the fist], the right hand is on top. Sometimes it's very formal—elbows are up and straight out. Sometimes it's a little more relaxed. But the point is: left hand closed fist, right hand on top.

When you're walking Kinhin, that practice can be very helpful because it acts to stabilize your walk. You'll be walking very slowly. Very slow. Picking up your right foot, placing the heel down. As the heel goes down, the foot rolls forward. Then picking up your left foot—heel down, foot rolls forward. Very slowly. Usually, you walk in a circle around the *zendo*. Sometimes we walk outside. I have a path in my yard; we go out there and walk very mindfully around the entire backyard. Sometimes it takes ten minutes. If you're not careful, you can lose your balance, and one of the ways you help that is by pressing your hands together. It stabilizes you.

Outside of the *zendo*, I practice Kinhin anywhere. Grocery store, pushing a cart, anywhere really. The point is to be mindful. Mindful of your steps, your body, the physicality of your muscles, your skeleton. Keeping your body erect. Practice mindful walking. How hard is that? Pay attention to walking.

### **Closing Words and Q&A**

It's almost time to go. Any questions or comments about these practices? How did you receive this lesson? You might call this "talking practice." Okay, so turn off your mutes. Let's hear it.

**Student:** Hi, good to see you.

**Roshi:** Well, maybe I'm such a good teacher you just got it all! But the real test isn't whether you're listening; it's whether you're incorporating it and practicing. As Zen students, you should practice Zen. Pick a time and make it religious. That's what you do at that time. You can create a sitting space. I have two places I sit: one in my zendo and one outside on a bench. Sit. Place your hands in the mudra and sit. Don't move. That's the really hard part.

Sometimes at my mountain retreat, I would sit in a meadow and I would have flies up my nose and in my eyes. It was really tempting to swat. Part of the discipline is not to move. I didn't move. What am I going to do now? I just moved my body—I felt the muscles as I went from here to here, I feel my overall robe touching my face. I'm aware of it. This is our practice. That's why we say "Zen is everyday life."

All it is is mindful attention. It's like learning to ride a bike. You fall down a few times, you pick it up and ride it again until you're no longer even thinking about *how* you bike, but you're mindfully aware that you're riding.

Well, thank you very much. Next week: ceremonies and holidays that Buddhists practice, at least in my order. And then I'll talk about ordination.

Part three:  
The ceremonies and holidays that  
Zen Buddhists celebrate

Tuesday, June 10, 2025

**Recommended Reading and Resources**

Since a student asked, I want to suggest some books to you if you're interested in pursuing anything further about this. I wrote a book that's available on Amazon called *Zen in Your Pocket*. That book has three sections, basically. One is the Zen of everyday life. The other is the Zen of trauma. And the third is the Zen of visibility. I try to apply Zen concepts to not only everyday life—which is what we're talking about here—but also in terms of addressing traumatic experience in your life. And then, if you have a disability, or you know people who have a disability, Zen can assist people with disabilities. I have exercises in it and things like that. It's not expensive; it's a paperback.

The other book, if you're really interested in pursuing Zen education from the point of view of the Order of Clear Mind Zen, is the *Shingi of the Sangha*. This book here, the *Shingi*—you see, when I go to the book, this book is "singing" from here—this is available on Amazon, too. I wrote this book over a period of like eleven years. It's the standards for the Order of Clear Mind Zen. In it is practically everything you need to know about our order, from ordinations to what happens during Zen services. As I was saying, it is a compendium. You can look up almost anything. It's got a glossary in it for words that are used in Zendo, which is helpful if you were to travel to other Zen centers.

I had an experience a couple of times where I went to a Zen center and they did some practices that my teacher never taught me. It was really kind of

embarrassing on one hand, but kind of interesting on the other. I just had to kind of follow along. I thought, "What are they doing?"

One of those things was something called *San Pai*. *San* means "three," and *Pai* means "prostrations." You do a full-body prostration down on your knees, stretch out your arms, raise up your hands, and then get back up and go back down again, three times. My teacher never did that during our Zen service. So I was really surprised by that. I found out later that his wife, who was also a Zen teacher, did *San Pai*—but she did them privately, not as a part of the service. I thought that was interesting. Anyway, you'll run into things like that if you go to various Zen centers; there are different things in different ways. You'll think your way is the right way, and they think their way is the right way, and so forth. So, you just kind of "go with the flow."

A little later in this section, we're going to talk about ordinations. Every major lineage has different levels of ordination, and I'll talk about that a little bit when we get to that sector. But at the beginning, we're going to talk about the three major Zen Buddhist holidays that we honor or celebrate—however you want to look at it—during the year.

### **Rohatsu: The Celebration of Enlightenment**

The first one I want to talk about is something called *Rohatsu*. *Rohatsu* is the celebration of the enlightenment of the Buddha. I told you, I think at the beginning, a little bit of the story of Buddha sitting under a Bodhi tree and, on the eighth day, seeing Venus—the Morning Star—and attaining enlightenment. We basically celebrate that experience.

What happens during *Rohatsu* is usually a *sesshin*. A seven-day *sesshin*, typically. A *sesshin* is a period of intensive meditation. It varies from center to center. The more disciplined and rigorous the center, the more rigorous the *sesshin*. When I first started practicing with my teacher, he did *sesshins* in a very rigorous way. We had to stay in the Zen center, in the Zen temple. We slept on the floor—all of us, male and female, didn't matter. We woke up at four o'clock. We began practicing at four-thirty, and we practiced all the way until nine o'clock at night. At the evening bell, we went to bed, woke up the next day, and did the same thing.

Usually, there are at least eight hours of *Zazen* during one of those *sesshins*. Typically, there are 25-minute periods of sitting, broken up with maybe a five- or ten-minute period of *Kinbin* walking meditation, as I talked about last

time. It's rather challenging. I would not suggest a person attend a *sesshin* unless they have practiced for a while, because it can be quite painful, to put it that way. Unless you're used to sitting with that kind of pain, you'll quit, go home, and never want to sit again. So, that's not a good idea.

I often say, you know, I was a marathon runner, and you can't run 26.2 miles without first running a mile. You have to build it up over a period of time. But even when you've trained for the 26.2, it's still a long, hard run. Discipline is the point. There's no talking during a *sesshin*. You eat in *Oryoki* style. You can meet with the teacher during periods of what's called *Dokusan*. That's an interview with the teacher, and usually, it's focused directly on your practice. That is very highly stylized depending on the center. In some places, you line up, a bell rings, and you enter the teacher's room and bow three times. The teacher asks you a question, like, "What's your practice?" Or if you've been given a *koan*, you're supposed to address your *koan*. Then the teacher will basically—as soon as you start talking—ring a bell and kick you out! It becomes a very frustrating mental experience. Then you sign up to go to the next one, and so on.

In our order, we more often practice a three-day *sesshin* rather than seven, because people can't take off work. I've come to realize that people have to work; they can't take off a week, three times a year, just to do *Zazen*. We might want to take a vacation with our families or something like that! So, we usually start on a Friday evening and we close on a Sunday afternoon.

Now, I'm going off the track a little bit here, but I want to explain that there's also *Zazenkai*. *Zazenkai* is usually a one-day period of practice. It usually starts in the morning and ends in the evening. Since the pandemic, the timing depends on several factors like time zones. When we do our Zen service, the guy in Alabama is doing it at 11 o'clock, the guy in Florida is at 12 o'clock, and in California, it's 9 o'clock. It becomes a real struggle to figure out when to start and close, but that's an administrative question.

I would suggest that you do attend a *Zazenkai* sometime. And also, attend in person if it's possible. I have to tell you, there's a dramatic difference between sitting with a group and sitting by yourself—and a dramatic difference between sitting in a group on Zoom as opposed to in person. The energy is just different. I don't know how to explain that. It just is. You can test it; it's a very different experience.

The other thing I would recommend is visiting different Zen centers. It's important to get a feel for how different teachers behave relative to students.

At some places, you would never have an opportunity to talk to me—the Abbot, the Roshi. You just don't get to talk to me; you would talk to a junior priest. I'm not that way. You can talk to me anytime. I'm approachable. You can text me or call me; I am available to you because that's my job. I teach this practice. I don't believe in being up on a pedestal. I don't care if you call me Roshi, Sensei, Reverend, Doctor, or "Hey You" or "Harvey." It really doesn't matter. Get me off that pedestal. I'm a real person who's had real-life experience, and I'm here to help you with your real-life experience through Zen.

Back to *Robatsu*: it is the celebration of enlightenment. There's nothing particularly different about the Zendo setup during that time; we just practice. There will be *Zazen*, *Kinhin*, *Oryoki*, and *Dokusan*. One thing that does happen in some places is that on the last night, you sit all night long. You practice all night, just like the Buddha did, to come to some realization—hopefully. I'm not going to call it "enlightenment," that would be a stretch, but some deep understanding of yourself in relation to the teachings of the Buddha.

On that note, it's important for you to keep one thing in mind: *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.* We're serious about that. What that means is we all have ideas about enlightenment; we all have ideas about what a Buddha is. None of them are "Buddha." They're all ideas. They're all delusions. The idea is to strip away any ideas you have about anything and just be present and allow your "body and mind to fall away."

This is really hard for us because we want to achieve something. And yet, we should come to the practice with no idea of gain, with no idea of achieving anything. Remember: if the strings are too tight, they'll break; if they're too loose, they won't play. Relax into your practice. Even on that last night, sitting up all night, you are relaxing into your practice, letting your body and mind fall away. At some point, hopefully, you'll have some deeper understanding of yourself and your relationship to the world around you.

### **Hana-matsuri: The Buddha's Birth**

Next is *Hana-matsuri*. *Robatsu* is in December, usually around December 8th. *Hana-matsuri* is the celebration of the Buddha's birth. Depending on your tradition, it occurs in April or May, but in the Mahayana tradition, we celebrate it around April 8th.

It's also the "Flower Festival" in Japan. During the service, we will have a pool of sweet tea on the table, a statue of a baby Buddha, and a bowl of

flowers—usually white flowers. In Asia, white is often considered a color of death and funerals, but here it is just the traditional flower. At some point, the *Ino* (practice leader) will ask people to stand in a line. Each person approaches the baby Buddha statue, places a flower in the water, takes a ladle of sweet tea, pours it over the head of the baby Buddha, bows, and steps aside.

In Japan, this is a time to remember your ancestors. We also have *Obon* and *Obigan*. One is a celebration of the equinox, and the other focuses on "hungry ghosts." We concern ourselves with our ancestors and people who have passed on who may have struggled. We celebrate with white cakes wrapped in paper. You approach the table, open a cake, crush it, and offer it to the hungry ghosts. Then the *Tenzō* (cook) will take that tray of cake crumbs outside to offer them.

The idea of a "hungry ghost" is a strange character. He has a big head, a big belly, and a tiny little throat. He's always hungry, but he can't get enough. He can't swallow enough to fill that belly. It relates to the suffering of greed in our world. It's about never getting enough—always needing more, pursuing more. It's the delusion of not being satisfied with what we have.

## **The Path of Ordination**

The next section I wanted to focus on is ordinations. Every lineage has different degrees or levels. If you want to look this up, there is a text called *Zen is Eternal Life* by Jiyu-Kennett Roshi. She was one of the first female Zen masters recognized in the West. This book is huge—I've used it so much I had to fix the spine—and it has a great glossary and a chapter on the levels of ordination.

In my order, I simplify things. We have *Kie Sanbo*, then *Jukai*, then *Unsui* (discipleship), then priesthood, and finally the "Transmission of Light" or Gago Ceremony which is becoming a *Roshi*. Only a Roshi can do that transmission, but other priests can do other ordinations.

The word for ordination is *Tokudo*. In many places, *Tokudo* is only referenced in terms of priest ordination, but really it just means "ordination" or "certification." In the West, "ordination" has a specific connotation. When you take the first level, you take the "Three Refuges" (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) and the "Three Pure Precepts" (Cease from evil, Do good, Do good for all beings). If you do those, you are ordained in a sense. You are given a Dharma

name and become a full member of the order, but you are not a priest. You wouldn't be entitled to marry anyone or anything like that.

My teacher simplified the traditional levels into Initiation, Discipleship, and Priesthood. "Initiation" is what we call *Kie Sanbo* or *Jukai*.

In *Kie Sanbo*, you take the refuges and wear a *Wagesa*. It's a single strap that goes around the neck—a smaller version of a robe. All these robes are smaller versions of the *Kesa*. The *Kesa* is the big robe you see monks wearing that wraps all the way around. In China and Japan, they made it smaller into the *Rakusu*. It's this thing here. It's a number of panels sewed together in a pattern like a rice paddy. You have to sew it yourself out of black cloth. Then your teacher inscribes your Dharma name on the back of it on the day of your ordination.

The next level is *Jukai*. This is when you take all Sixteen Precepts: the Three Refuges, the Three Pure Precepts, and the Ten Grave Precepts. These are not "commandments," but guidelines: not to kill, not to steal, not to misuse sex, not to intoxicate the mind, not to fall prey to anger, and so on. At that point, you are a "Precept Holder." Usually, that's where people stop; those are "lay ordinations." You have a Dharma name and you are part of the group, but you are now obliged to follow those precepts.

If you decide to go further, we start calling it "training." You may want to become a Zen teacher or priest. You study with the teacher in that direction, and at some point, you are granted the level of *Unsui*. At that point, you are considered a "Reverend," but you aren't entitled to do ceremonies without approval. I've had disciples ask if they can officiate a wedding or a memorial service, or lead a sitting group. Depending on where they are in their training, I'll approve it or not. I rarely approve a disciple to marry someone because that's a legal thing—you have to be a full member of the clergy for that. But you can lead a sitting group, and I think that's great.

In my order, I ask people at this level to actually do some kind of service to fulfill that precept of "bringing about good for all beings." What are you going to do? Are you going to work in a soup kitchen? Volunteer at an animal shelter and sit with the dogs? What are you going to do to help?

It can be many things. Are you willing to write letters to your editor? Are you willing to go protest or join a demonstration in favor of some issue that you have? Something like that. I think the important thing is that we are an

"Engaged Sangha." Meaning, we want you to be engaged in the world. You're not just sitting on your ass in a Zendo. You've got to go do something.

Now, maybe for some of us—like me—I was a social worker, and then I was a psychotherapist. That was my practice. And part of that practice was to do some free service; to offer free service to people who couldn't afford it, or to do a sliding fee scale. That was, at that point, my engaged practice. After I retired from that, I worked in a soup kitchen for three years. I also worked sitting at the Federal Building downtown in my full robes, in the hot Tucson sun, with a small sign that said "Peace" during the back half of the Afghan wars. I did that for a number of years.

That was my engaged practice. You don't have to do exactly that, but you can do *something*. As long as you're doing something. Be engaged in the world. Make the world a better place. Why else are you doing it? Why else are you alive, really? In my opinion.

### **Shukke Tokudo: Home Leaving**

The next level of ordination is *Shukke Tokudo*. One of my students once asked me, "What does *Shukke* mean?" and I was a little upset with that because they should have already known this! *Shukke*—the word means "Home Leaving." Home leaving is about becoming a priest or, if you're in a monastic context, a monk.

I want to say something about this because I think it's really important. Home leaving is universal amongst religions. Abraham was asked to go across the mountains and found a new entity—to leave home, leave what he knew. Jesus did the same thing for forty days and forty nights... I understand that's what he did. We leave home—we leave what we know—in order to transform ourselves into something new. You can't transform unless you're willing to leave something. Unless you're willing to close one door and open another. Go through some kind of transformational process.

So, *Shukke* is about leaving what you know. Now you're entering into the land of being a priest. You're a clergy person. And I have certain understandings for myself of what that means. One of the things I think it means is being available to people who need me. Anybody can call me at any time and I'll come to them—night or day. My wife knows that. It's part of what you need to do when you become a priest; your spouse and your friends need to know what

this is going to mean for you and them. You have now a higher calling, if you will. You're in service to others, not in service to yourself.

To me, it was the most rewarding thing that I ever did in my life. Getting a PhD, even being a therapist for thirty-some years—this was far more rewarding. There were no strings attached. I'm just there with you. If I see somebody struggling on the street, I stop and try to help them. If someone has a flat tire, I'm going to stop and see if I can help, even if there's a suggestion it may be dangerous for me.

It's not for everyone, I can tell you that. But to take that step, you have to retake those Sixteen Precepts. I don't require people to shave their head, but I prefer that they do. Even women—I prefer that they do. I have a woman in my history who shaved her head; it was traumatic for her, and dramatic, but it was great. I don't think she ever forgot that. She was the first person I ever ordained as a priest.

### **Investigating the Precepts**

You can be a good human being without taking any precepts. Period. Full stop. But if you decide to study them with me, I'm not going to tell you what they mean. If you say, "I vow not to kill," I want to know what *you* mean by that. What are the limits of that? Are there certain senses where you might violate that vow intentionally? I don't know, and neither do you, frankly, unless you really investigate.

Another one is sexual misconduct. It used to be, not too many years ago, that homosexuality was considered a violation of that precept. It isn't anymore. It used to be, during the "Free Love" movement, that sex was just given without a relationship. I want to know that you know what you're vowing. I know what *I* mean, but I'm not the one taking the vow. You are.

### **Taking Refuge: Being Awake**

On every level of becoming a Buddhist, you have to understand what it is you're vowing. One of the main difficulties is taking refuge in Buddha. People get all kinds of confused about that. Taking refuge in the Buddha does not mean the *person* of the Buddha. That person is dead. So, what do you mean by taking refuge in Buddha?

In many old writings, the word "Buddha" was capitalized. Now, in many texts, they leave it lowercase. Because you're taking refuge in *buddha*. What does *buddha* mean? It means "awake." What you're doing is saying, "I vow to take refuge in being awake." Now, what does that mean for you? You and I would talk about that. You would come to terms with that for yourself so that you're not being a hypocrite when you take that vow. Same for *Dharma*, same for *Sangha*. What do those words mean to you?

### **Historical Lineage: Matsuoka Roshi**

To sum it up, these various holidays mark the passage of the calendar year. It's interesting that they fall when they fall. In winter, we have darkness and we need light—so we have Hanukkah, Christmas, and *Robatsu*. In the spring, we have rebirth—Easter eggs, symbols of new life—and in Buddhism, we have *Hana-matsuri*, the celebration of the Buddha's birth.

I'll mention briefly: Matsuoka Roshi was the founder of my lineage. He was one of the first Zen masters to come to the United States in the late 1930s. He was my teacher's teacher. Unfortunately, I never had a chance of meeting him; he died about a year or two before I met my teacher. There are two books of his teachings: *The Kyosaku* and *Mokurai*. I actually provided some of the teachings for those collections. It's an interesting history.

### **Conclusion: Re-envisioning the Self**

This has just been an introduction. I'm not asking you to take precepts. Zen teachers don't do that. If you want them, you ask the teacher. This is just an educational class.

One of you mentioned that the idea of "Home Leaving" struck an emotional chord—that we have to leave home to re-envision ourselves. There's a story about a Zen master pouring tea until the cup overflows. I can't teach you if you're already full of stuff. You have to have an empty cup. We have a statue of *Manjusri*—he's usually sitting with a sword over his head. It's at the entrance of the Zendo to remind you that when you enter, you cut through your delusions. You cut through your ideas. You "leave home" so you are able to transform.

I re-envisioned myself from a combat soldier to a social worker, from a social worker to a psychotherapist, and from a psychotherapist to a priest. All along the way, I was leaving something behind. Everything is change. We are always constantly changing—evolving, hopefully.

My Navajo name is "Two Fires." I worked with the Navajo for two years on the reservation. I have a foot in a working-class environment and a foot in a professional environment. Trying to navigate that is difficult. When I visited my family, we didn't have anything to talk about after thirty minutes. They couldn't understand what I was doing as a doctor, and I had some prejudice about them—all they wanted to do was drink beer and watch football. I literally left that world. My Zen practice has been a lifelong practice of reintegrating those worlds.

It is a lifelong study. Thank you all for attending, and I hope to see you all next week. We will address the Sixteen Precepts themselves—what they are and so forth. Have a great, interesting, and loving week.

## 5

### Part four:

## The precepts, the ways that we live out Zen Buddhism

Tuesday, June 17, 2005

I want to begin tonight the way things usually begin here—not with doctrine, but with ordinary life.

I'm doing fine. I did get bitten recently by what looked like a brown recluse spider. It swelled up pretty badly, but it's already going down. If it gets worse—if it turns black, which would mean necrosis—I'll go see a doctor. Brown recluses are common out here in the desert Southwest. We've also just had the house sprayed, inside and out.

Alright. Let's talk about the precepts.

### **The Nature of the Precepts**

The precepts are offered to everyone who comes into the Zen dojo. No one is required to take them. When you take precepts formally, you're making a commitment. You become a Zen Buddhist and, in that sense, a formal student. Even then, the precepts unfold gradually. First come the initial precepts, then Jukai and the sewing of the rakusu. If you continue toward priesthood, there are deeper stages of commitment, eventually leading to ordination.

I've just conducted such a ceremony for a student who flew in from Alabama. He is now a fully ordained priest.

But I want to be very clear about this: none of this is required. I never ask anyone to become my student. I never ask anyone to take precepts. That initiative must always come from you. I don't proselytize. Zen is not about

recruitment. This class is not about conversion. It's about education and practice.

And most importantly, precepts are not commandments.

They are not laws handed down by a divine authority. They are not rigid moral rules like the Ten Commandments. Precepts are natural expressions that arise from practice and from living as a decent human being. As practice deepens, precepts arise on their own. They are what waking up looks like in everyday life.

### **The Bodhisattva Vows**

At the foundation of Mahayana Buddhism are the Bodhisattva vows. A bodhisattva is someone on the path to awakening—or someone who is already awake and chooses to stay engaged with the world for the benefit of others. Put simply, a bodhisattva is a good person who acts selflessly.

We chant these vows regularly:

*Beings are numberless; I vow to free them.*

*Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.*

*Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.*

*The Buddha Way is unsurpassable; I vow to realize it.*

These are not promises of completion. They are vows of commitment.

Beings are numberless. You will never free them all. That's not the point. The point is that you vow to engage in the work of liberation for as long as you live.

Older translations use the word save, but I don't like that language. It carries too much religious baggage. To free beings is not to rescue them from the outside. It's to help them wake up from their own delusions, to become more integrated, more fully human.

Delusions are inexhaustible. Human perception is always filtered through conditioning, memory, language, and habit. We live in dualistic thinking—subject and object, self and other. We name things and separate ourselves from them. From the absolute perspective of Zen, however, all things are one. Separation belongs to relative reality, not to ultimate truth.

This is hard for Western minds. It seems obvious that a phone or a computer is separate from you. But look closely and you'll see that the separation is only relative—just a matter of distance between molecules. Language itself reinforces delusion, especially English, which insists on subject-object structure. Even speaking without delusion is difficult.

The vow to enter the boundless Dharma gates points to the many ways awakening can occur. Meditation is one gate, but so are art, physical discipline, and creative work. When you paint, write, or move with full presence, the sense of a separate self often drops away. The action simply happens.

I once saw a play where the characters search for their author, only to discover that the author has disappeared. In real creativity, the author is absent. There is just the act.

The Buddha Way is unsurpassable. This doesn't mean Buddhism is superior to other religions. The Buddha Way—the way of awakening, compassion, and service—appears in many traditions. There is no higher realm than this life, lived responsibly and with care for all beings.

### **The Three Treasures**

We also take refuge in the Three Treasures: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Taking refuge in Buddha does not mean worshipping the historical Buddha. The word Buddha comes from bodhi, which means “awake.” To take refuge in Buddha is to take refuge in awakening itself.

If you truly live this refuge, the other precepts almost take care of themselves. When you really see that all things are one, harming another is immediately understood as harming yourself.

Of course, awakening requires practice. You have to watch how you objectify others—partners, teachers, students, men, women—and how quickly judgment arises. One very practical method is to set an intention in the morning

about how you want to live, and then review that intention at the end of the day.

Taking refuge in Dharma means taking refuge in reality. Reality teaches all the time. If you bang your head against a tree, the pain is Dharma teaching you something. Written teachings are Dharma when they express awakened insight into how reality works and how human beings behave within it.

Taking refuge in Sangha means taking refuge in community. Zen is not a solitary path. Originally, Sangha meant those who physically followed the Buddha. Over time, the meaning expanded. Teachers like Thích Nhất Hạnh spoke of all things as Sangha—trees, stones, insects—because nothing exists separately.

On a very practical level, Sangha is the community of people who practice together, support one another, and share responsibility. To take refuge in Sangha is to commit to mutual care.

### **The Three Pure Precepts**

From this foundation arise the Three Pure Precepts.

The first is often translated as “cease from evil.” I prefer to say: stop doing harmful things. The word evil carries too many distortions. The heart of this precept is non-harming.

This isn’t always simple. Harm is often unintentional. Because we can’t always foresee consequences, karma in Buddhism is based primarily on intention rather than outcome. Still, you have to examine your actions honestly.

The second pure precept is to do good. No teacher can define this for you. Each of you has to discover what doing good means in your own life, in your own circumstances.

The third is to do good for others. This is the precept of engagement. Awakening does not end on the cushion. You have to get up and act in the world. The Buddha did not stay under the Bodhi tree. He walked, taught, and embodied generosity through his life.

How you engage is up to you—volunteering, activism, writing, teaching, service. I don't judge political or social positions. What matters is sincere engagement grounded in care for all beings.

### **The Ten Grave Precepts**

The Ten Grave Precepts express these principles in everyday life. They include respecting life, not stealing, honoring sexuality, speaking truthfully, maintaining clarity of mind, refraining from harmful speech, practicing humility, generosity, working skillfully with anger, and honoring the Three Treasures.

Each of these has to be examined personally. “Do not kill,” for example, raises difficult questions about self-defense, food, and responsibility. Each of you has to determine where your own ethical line is.

The same is true for sexuality, speech, and intoxicants. These precepts cannot be reduced to rigid rules. They require awareness, honesty, and ongoing reflection. Life is ambiguous. Hard commandments don't work. Precepts do.

Living the precepts doesn't mean reciting them mechanically. It means allowing them to shape your character and clarify how you choose to live.

### **Closing Words**

Zen practice is not easy. It requires patience, diligence, and a willingness to look at yourself honestly. But through this work, you learn how to live more uprightly, more intimately, and more compassionately.

Precepts are not external constraints. They are mirrors. When they are fully lived, they are no longer something you follow. *They are something you become.*