

Commentary on the Fukanzazengi, middle section
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Dogen knew better than to mess with the basic meditation instruction that had led him safely and reliably to his own profound awakening. He dropped it into the Fukanzazengi almost intact, word for word the way it had been set down in the Chinese meditation manual his Chan teacher had provided for him.

We in the West tend to think of this as “cheating,” to simply lift something someone else has written and incorporate it wholesale into your own writing, especially without acknowledging the source. This notion of texts as individual creative products “owned” by their authors is a distinctively Western notion of authorship. Where are the footnotes, the acknowledgments, the citations?

But although he wrote, originally, creatively, and brilliantly, Dogen was not an author, he was a teacher, and responsible teachers have always offered their students the very best wisdom they can find from any source whatsoever. We are remorseless borrowers from the infinite treasury and magnificent expressions of the wisdom and compassion that our species has produced. With profound care for their students, teachers bring forth what they believe will help open their eyes, their minds and their hearts. We are no different, in bringing you these texts for study.

The fundamental Zazen instructions Dogen received, and that he urgently provided for his students are the very ones we use today. They have been handed down over the past 800 years faithfully from hand to hand, from teacher to student. Our students sometimes ask, “can I...?” Usually meaning “do I have to...?” Do I have to hold my hands just so, do I have to sit on a cushion, do I have to find a quiet place, do I have to stop thinking so much?

Is it so important how you sit? Your teachers will smile and say of course not. You don't *have* to do anything. You can do anything at all, and you can see how that experiment turns out. Of course you have to work within your own capacities and limitations. You sit in a chair if your body requires it, for example. But what exactly is Dogen instructing us to do, actually? To find a quiet room, to eat and drink moderately, these are ways of taking care of ourselves, of setting an

intention for practice. And practice, while it can certainly infuse everyday life, is not *just* everyday life. There is a deep intentionality in it that expresses itself in how we arrange ourselves and our lives to stop and pay attention in a special way.

The instructions given for Zazen are the only real, practical “how to” Dogen provides in all of his writings about practice-realization, as he puts it. And Zen teachers ever since Dogen have basically provided the same instructions to generation after generation of Zen students. You’ve read them or heard them hundreds of times if you have been practicing for a while. Virtually the same instructions take up two whole chapters of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Suzuki. He says, “*These forms are not the means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture is itself to have the right state of mind. There is no need to obtain some special state of mind.*” Why is this so important, so central? After all, the Buddha taught a lot of different things: precepts and the four noble truths, and the 8-fold path and the 12-fold chain of dependent origination. He advised kings and farmers and merchants, men and women on a host of topics.

What is it about this simple act of sitting meditation that makes it the centerpiece of Zen Buddhism? Why make such a big deal out of *how we are sitting*? Why be so specific as this: place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm facing upwards on your right palm, thumb-tips touching. Hey, we are Americans! We will do whatever we want to do with our hands! Let me do whatever works best for me! I prefer it this way, this works for me.

There’s a trap in this kind of thinking, and it’s a trap the instructions are designed to help you avoid. You know what you *want*, you just don’t know what *works*. *Your preferences are irrelevant to the great movement of awakening*. So, relinquishing our opinions about these instructions, our beliefs about ourselves in fulfilling them, and simply exploring what they open to, is our very first step of true practice. This is allowing zazen to do zazen.

If your own opinionated, self-centered usual way of being, thinking, and doing were all that effective, you would have enlightened yourself long ago. Perhaps it is time to consider another possibility. So we begin, and we try and fail in innumerable ways, to do even this simple, small act. And a strange thing happens. The longer we practice, the more important these “beginner” instructions become. Each sentence begins to carry a deep logic that is not

based on our simple-minded glossing of them, as we rush on to read what Dogen *is really getting at*. But just stop, look carefully, and reflect on this:

For sanzen, a quiet room is suitable. How profound is that simple statement. It means negotiating space, relationships, and discovering whether we can even, in our lives, find a quiet room. Maybe we have to go over to Appamada to find a quiet room. We realize this is something we are longing for, that there is a need deep in us for just this, a quiet room in our busy, crazy, distracting, noisy lives. Notice he does not say, “a quiet room is required.” Of course we can do zazen, or let zazen do us, rather, in an airport or even a busy office, but a quiet room, I think we can all recognize, is *suitable*.

Eat and drink moderately. Hey! We are Americans! We eat and drink as much as we want. In fact more than we want, and far more than we need. We are deranged, as a culture, about the simple act of feeding ourselves. Animals do not eat more than they need, unless...they are confined. Then, boredom and despair sets in, and they become just like American office workers. Whoops! That was probably insulting to American office workers. *Eat and drink moderately.* If you pay attention, that is the natural way of being. Yet we are far, far from living even this very simple statement. Still, it is the path to physical well-being. A sick body, a lethargic body, a body struggling with the ailments brought on by our patterns of eating and drinking hinders our ability to function with freedom in our lives. Eat and drink moderately: you can watch your own tendencies during meals right here, when abundant food is spread out before you, your tireless negotiations to get food just as you like it.

Cast aside all involvements and cease all affairs. Ooops, was that my cell phone? Let me just take this one and I'll get back to you. Oh, I got a text from Jeff, I better answer it. If I could just check my Facebook page one more time, then I'll be all yours. You were saying...?

This isn't about dropping your work, your family, your busy life forever and entering a monastery. Can you, even for 30 minutes, or a handful of days, set aside all of those concerns and attend to just what is present in this moment? If you are working on your to-do list, or continuing that conversation with your partner in your head, if you are dreaming about your vacation time, or wondering whether an important email has been responded to, you are far from present moment experience. And it's not just “set aside,” it's *cast aside*. That means not

only intention, but some effort, some exertion, because the compelling enchantment of our everyday affairs is so seductive.

Now the really impossible one: *Do not think good or bad. Do not administer pros and cons.* Sure. No problem, right? Is there a single moment from when we first open our eyes and think oh, this is going to be a bad day, to the moment we finally drop into sleep, that we are not thinking good and bad? Just the first few sentences present almost insurmountable challenges, yet look how simple they are: find a quiet place, eat and drink moderately, set aside your preoccupations, and stop judging everything you encounter. Still, you will be working on these first few instructions the rest of your life. And it gets worse. *Cease all the movements of the conscious mind, the gauging of thoughts and views.* For pete's sake, how is that possible?

And then the kicker: *Have no designs on becoming a buddha.*

Well, great. What are we here for then? I mean, really, what is the point? Isn't that what this whole project is about? I know, I know we are not supposed to be striving, but let's face it, if we aren't going to get to be buddhas, what is this practice for? Well? What *is* it for? And what's wrong with having designs on becoming a buddha, really? It's kind of a noble goal, don't you think? I mean, it's not like your selfish neighbor, who just wants a big house and a nice car, right?

And if you're going to insist on having a goal, I suppose this one is harmless enough. It's just impossible, that's all. It's impossible, because you are setting up an ideal, which by definition means something *not here, not now, and not me.* Something separate from the seat you are in, the mind you are in, the body you are in right in this very moment. So go ahead and have designs on becoming a buddha, and you can do that experiment as long as you like. For those of you who have been practicing a while, how much closer would you say you've come to being a buddha? Four miles? How far away are you—six weeks, a year, one retreat more after this one?

And if, as Dogen claims, the Way is basically perfect and all-pervading, where could it be missing or far away or situated at some time in the future? In fact, *sanzen has nothing whatever to do with sitting or lying down. What?* The very next thing Dogen is going to tell us is precisely how to sit!

He's not only going to tell us what to do with our legs, but how to fix our clothing, set our hands, and align our ears and our nose. He has instructions for our eyes. He's even going to tell us what to do with our tongue, our lips, and our teeth. There's literally no part of the body left out of these instructions.

Well, so what, stick your tongue out if you like. Close your eyes, or sit slumped over. You will be doing an experiment, but you will not be doing *this experiment*.

It is like the woman who came to dinner at our house when I was a kid, and raved about my mother's cooking. She insisted on my Mom's recipe for Crab Newburg, which is, if you haven't tried it, a sensational dish, made with, of course a lot of cream and butter, as well as fresh cracked crabmeat. A few months later, my mom ran into her in the grocery store. "I tried that recipe you gave me" she said, "but my family didn't like it." "Really?" asked my mom. "Yes, well, I didn't use cream, I used cream of celery soup instead." My mom looked puzzled. "And then, I substituted margarine for the butter. We didn't have any crabmeat, so I used canned tuna. But my family didn't care for it."

We laugh, but isn't this how most of us treat our practice?

OK, suppose you can do all this, get yourself all arranged, in your quiet room, having eaten moderately and fixed your clothing, and you are even breathing, in and out both. You are all set. Now what. *Think of not-thinking*. Oh boy. More Zen nonsense. *How do you think of not-thinking? Non-thinking*. Is that the answer? Seriously? *Non-thinking*? Well, who is having that thought? We have to get behind the fusillade of thoughts to see what is firing them at us. In his commentary on the Fukanzazengi, Maezumi says:

"At least when we sit, we shouldn't think. Put thoughts aside. That's what it means. But this doesn't imply that he denies the value of consciousness. He isn't urging us merely to become like dead logs or stones. Without any thoughts or views, our consciousness can still clearly function. That's why the surface of the mind is compared to that of a very clear, bright mirror. We cannot say that if there's no reflection, there's no mirror; the mirror is there and simply reflects whatever is before it. Whatever comes up is clearly shown, and when the object vanishes, so does the reflection. Not a trace remains behind. That's the state of mind we're supposed to maintain during the practice of zazen. But it's hard."

He continues:

“When you do shikan-taza, sit as if you were engaged in a duel. In such circumstances, were you to be inattentive, you’d very soon be killed. Being so, what kind of intensity would you have? If you were physically tense, that would greatly interfere with your ability to fight. But in a duel, you must be physically relaxed, and yet have tremendous power of concentration. Sometimes while sitting, we become drowsy and drift into sleep, or day-dreams. But if we keep that kind of intensity, such drowsiness or scattering of attention immediately goes away and we are able to sit well again.”

We are humanly embodied, we live out a human life, but sometimes we become a bit casual about it, not realizing the intensity of someone in a duel, perhaps a duel with swords so fine we can barely see them. We are finite beings who have to come to terms with so many things, but fundamentally, we must all negotiate the way from birth to death. So Dogen wants to be sure we don’t miss it, the life and death importance and urgency of this practice. He says, after all of these very precise, even fussy instructions. *This in itself is the essential art of zazen.*

You cannot do zazen. Zazen does zazen. In sitting, in coming to a retreat, we are only putting ourself in the path of it in such a way that we can’t help being run through with what Hongzhi called, *the acupuncture needle of zazen*. Dogen appropriated that excellent Chan teaching and called it *Zazenshin*. We are human bodies and human minds on a spiritual path.

For a completely different perspective on what that looks like, I’ll share with you a contemporary teaching from Terry Brisson.

[Meat in Space]

"They're made out of meat."

"Meat?"

"Meat. They're made out of meat."

"Meat?"

"There's no doubt about it. We picked up several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, and probed them all the way through. They're completely meat."

"That's impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars?"

"They use radio waves to talk, but the signals don't come from them. The signals come from machines."

"So who made the machines? That's who we want to contact."

"*They* made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines."

"That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat."

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in that sector and they're made of meat."

"Maybe they're like the orfolei. You know, a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage."

"Nope. They're born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn't take too long. Do you have any idea of the life span of meat?"

"Spare me. Okay, maybe they're only part meat. You know, like the weddilei. A meat head with an electron plasma brain inside."

"Nope. We thought of that, since they do have meat heads, like the weddilei. But I told you, we probed them. They're meat all the way through."

"No brain?"

"Oh, there's a brain all right. It's just that the brain is *made out of meat*."

"So . . . what does the thinking?"

"You're not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat."

"Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat!"

"Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you beginning to get the picture?"

"Omigod. You're serious, then. They're made out of meat."

"Finally. Yes. They are indeed made out of meat. And they've been trying to get in touch with us for almost a hundred of their years."

"So what does this meat have in mind?"

"First it wants to talk to us. Then I imagine it wants to explore the universe, contact other sentients, swap ideas and information. The usual."

"We're supposed to talk to meat?"

"That's the idea. That's the message they're sending out by radio. 'Hello. Anyone out there? Anybody home?' That sort of thing."

"They actually do talk then. They use words, ideas, concepts?"

"Oh yes. Except they do it with meat."

"I thought you just told me they used radio."

"They do, but what do you think is *on* the radio? Meat sounds. You know how when you slap or flap meat, it makes a noise? They talk by flapping their meat at each other. They can even sing by squirting air through their meat."

"Omigod. Singing meat. This is altogether too much. So what do you advise?"

"Officially or unofficially?"

"Both."

"Officially, we are required to contact, welcome, and log in any and all sentient races or multibeings in this quadrant, without prejudice, fear, or favor. Unofficially, I advise that we erase the sounds and forget the whole thing."

"I was hoping you would say that."

"It seems harsh, but there is a limit. Do we really want to make contact with meat?"

"I agree one hundred percent. What's there to say? 'Hello, meat. How's it going?' But will this work? How many planets are we dealing with here?"

"Just one. They can travel to other planets in special meat containers, but they can't live on them. And being meat, they can only travel through C space. Which limits them to the speed of light and makes the possibility of their ever making contact pretty slim. Infinitesimal, in fact."

"So we just pretend there's no one home in the universe?"

"That's it."

"Cruel. But you said it yourself, who wants to meet meat? And the ones who have been aboard our vessels, the ones you probed? You're sure they won't remember?"

"They'll be considered crackpots if they do. We went into their heads and smoothed out their meat so that we're just a dream to them."

"A dream to meat! How strangely appropriate, that we should be meat's dream."

"And we marked the sector *unoccupied*."

"Good. Agreed, officially and unofficially. Case closed. Any others? Anyone interesting on that side of the galaxy?"

"Yes, a rather shy but sweet hydrogen core cluster intelligence in a class nine star in G445 zone. Was in contact two galactic rotations ago, wants to be friendly again."

"They always come around."

"And why not? Imagine how unbearably, how unutterably cold the universe would be if one were all alone."