



*"The highest mountains are the abode of the lions;  
In the deepest waters the dragons dwell."*

## *Lions Gate Buddhist Priory*

### *NEWSLETTER*

*January 2020*

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Lions Gate Buddhist Priory is a branch of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (OBC). Our practice is Serene Reflection Meditation (Sōtō Zen) and emphasizes basic Buddhist meditation and the keeping of the Precepts within the training of everyday life.

Rev. Kōten Benson, the Prior since 1986, is a Dharma Heir of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, founder of the OBC, who died in 1996. He was ordained in 1978 by Rev. Master Jiyu, and recognized by her as a Buddhist Master in 1983.

The Priory has three monks in residence and is located at Dragon Flower Mountain, one hundred and sixty acres of land in the Botanie Valley, near the village of Lytton in the B.C. interior. The land is off-grid and conditions are primitive as we strive to plant a mandala of Buddhist training in the mountains. There are regular retreats; visitors and guests are always welcome. Lay members and friends of the Priory meet regularly in Vancouver and Lytton, B.C. and there is a meditation group in Edmonton, Alberta.

The Priory is a registered charitable society supported entirely by donations from members and friends.

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# Article

## How to Meditate: Part IV

Rev. Master Koten Benson

*The following text is the fourth of a series of Dharma Talks offered by Rev. Master Koten to the community of Lions Gate Buddhist Priory in 2016. It was transcribed and edited by Tracy Kitagawa, Michele Feist, Pierre Kohl and Rev. Master Aurelian, with minor revisions made for ease of reading.*

Homage to the Buddha  
Homage to the Dharma  
Homage to the Sangha

This fourth segment is about posture. It is important to bear in mind that Dogen lived in a time and place where most people sat on the ground, so that a cross-legged posture was actually not that difficult for them. It is also important to bear in mind that in China, even though they sat on chairs in the monasteries, they still sat cross-legged. My purpose in mentioning both these things is to point out that one emphasizes form but does not cling to form. The important aspects of the seated position in meditation are universal in Buddhism and all the different traditions emphasize the following points.

Having an upright body is best but not absolutely essential, because of course one can meditate lying down when one is ill, disabled, or injured. Sitting upright means to hold the back upright and the only way you can

really do that is by having the lower part of the spine pushed in, which means that you must completely relax the stomach and the abdominal muscles.

Sitting upright enables body and mind to come together. Good posture in meditation helps with attitude of mind, which is very important, and in turn one becomes more aware of the body when sitting, standing, or walking.

Another aspect of posture in meditation is that we sit with our hands placed together. Now one could say that we do it because of tradition - because that is the way the statues of the Buddha are depicted sitting in meditation. We do not, therefore, tend to sit as some traditions do, with our hands placed on our knees or in various other positions. In the Serene Reflection tradition we place our hands together to put the emphasis on bringing everything together, and resting.

The instructions in Dogen's *Rules for Meditation* say to put your left hand on top of your right hand. In some traditions the left hand is placed under the right, but the Bodhisattva who is the embodiment of meditation or shikantaza is described and depicted as placing the left hand in the palm of the right. This is, to again emphasize, resting in the Great Peace. So, when we sit down to meditate by placing our right hand in our laps, which for most people is the most active or dominant one, we are putting activity down. We simply lay down the active mind. And then you lay stillness on top of it, as it were. Then, adjust the hands so that the thumbs rest lightly together. There is no need to forcefully press them together. One can see how it is done from the various statues of the Buddha throughout the Buddhist world which show the Buddha sitting in meditation.

To review: we sit down and we compose ourselves. We straighten the back to ensure that we are sitting upright and to avoid back pain from slouching. It is sometimes difficult, in the initial phases of learning how to meditate to find the correct way or a good way, to set the back. Sometimes even after practicing for many years when you sit down in meditation you find the back is not quite right and you either have to do some adjustment or just not worry about it. Then, having straightened the back you lay down your activities. That is, you lay the right hand down in the lap. And then you lay stillness on top of it.

Now Keizan, in response to the question, “Where do we place the mind in meditation?” says we place the mind in the palm of the left hand. When he says we place or rest the mind in the left hand he does not mean that we try to take our mind, as if it were some part of our body, and push it down into the left hand. He simply means that we lay our activities down and then we lay down the even more subtle aspects of it: lay one’s burden down, lay the hand of activity down, and lay everything else down.

If you look at the various mudras, hand positions, that you see in the Buddha statues, all of which represent aspects of meditation, you will see they can all be easily done from the initial resting of the hands in the lap.

There are five basic mudras. The first one being the hands in the lap. The next one is when the right hand moves from the lap, out over the right knee, and then smoothly down to touch the earth. This mudra is helpful in bringing the mind back from distractions, enabling one to stabilize and return to simply sitting.

The third mudra is when the right hand emerges under the left, rises up and presents the palm forward. This is the mudra of fearlessness, of courage, and of encouragement, which one can make use of whenever one feels agitated or fearful.

The fourth mudra is when the right hand emerges from underneath the left and moves down the right thigh with the palm open. It is an expression of generosity and openness and can be used when the mind and body become cramped in meditation.

The fifth mudra is when the two hands rise out of the meditation mudra and join together in front of the heart to form the turning of the wheel of the law. This is the taking one's meditation into daily life and the non-separation, as I have talked about before, between sitting in formal meditation and engaging in the activities of daily life. I cannot emphasize enough that meditation is not something that you do, like puzzles, sudoku, or stamp collecting or yoga, for a certain period of time in a given location. Meditation is not like any of these activities at all.

When teachers look at how well a student is meditating or what sort of progress they are making in their practice, they look at the impact in their daily life. This is, as Dogen says at the beginning of *Rules for Meditation*, no matter how calm your mind becomes in meditation, no matter how much, while in the formal posture, you can let go, no matter how "enlightened" you are when you sit, if your meditation is not brought into daily life, if you do not practice in daily life, the difference is like that between heaven and earth. This is one of the meanings in the opening section of his instructions.

Another aspect of the sitting posture is that the mouth remains closed. Again, we are not trying to do anything fancy with the body and mind. Some people, in learning meditation, become very attached to the idea of a magical posture. They think, “here we are, doing the magical posture that magical people have done in the far past.” In the time of the Buddha, when pretty much everybody sat on the ground, to sit in full lotus wasn’t any big deal at all. It was just how people sat. To view meditation as doing something magical with our bodies is not helpful at all.

Incidentally, the reason Dogen says, in his instructions, to place the tongue against the back of the top teeth, is that in India, meditation was thought to be a form of physical torment of the body. It was considered the ultimate meditation to block the nasal passages with the tongue. And people would, and still do, sever the connecting membrane between the tongue and the rest of the mouth over a period of time enabling them to bend the tongue completely backwards. This may seem unbelievable to many of us in the West but keep in mind that we have our own ascetic practices. Dogen is emphasizing, as did the Buddha, that meditation is done with *this* body and mind, with the body and mind that we have now. We need not seek or wait for a different or perfect body and mind.

In Japan Soto is called Farmer Zen because the practice can be done by everyone. It is done with the body and mind that is young; the body and mind that grows old; the body and mind that becomes decrepit and can only meditate when lying down. As the body and mind die and pass away, we can still practice meditation. Therefore, the idea that meditation is only for the mentally well-adjusted or those physically able to sit in the full lotus

position is completely and utterly foolish.

When we sit in meditation we sit with our eyes slightly open. One could say this is tradition too, because, as we can see in the many statues of him, the Buddha sat with his eyes slightly open. But we also sit in this manner because, as I emphasized earlier, meditation has to be done within the context of daily life, and not simply as a special activity. If you develop the ability to be still only when your eyes are completely shut then how will you remain still when you are on top of a ladder painting or in your car driving? When you find yourself distracted in daily life it is obviously not always possible to close your eyes in order to return to stillness. You need to be able to be still when your eyes are open. Eventually you can be still while having a conversation, while running about, while doing all sorts of different activities.

Remember to relax the stomach and the abdominal muscles. For most people a slight protuberance of the gut will develop over time. If you are worried about that then what will you do when you come to the point of the body and mind breaking down? Where will your ideas of perfection be then? In *Rules for Meditation*, Dogen continually reminds us that human life is impermanent. We hear that and think it is a philosophical or a poetic statement. *Everything* is impermanent, including human life. If you seek an ideal state and then try to hold on to it, it will pass away fast. I myself know people who were healthy and in peak condition who became sick and died young. None of us are immune to illness. We have illness, as Dogen points out, because we are born, not because we necessarily did something wrong.

So, the eyes are opened slightly and lowered. You rest the eyes without staring about. All of these things that I have mentioned - the hands, the spine, the eyes - are all ways of bringing yourself back to just sitting. When your mind becomes distracted during meditation check the back, the hands, and the eyes.

## News

On the mountain winter has arrived, and it's an excellent time for being still and looking inward. We have had a fair amount of snow and some very cold temperatures at times, but we have managed to keep our road clear and deal with the various challenges we have encountered, such as keeping warm enough, frozen water pipes, vehicles in the ditch, plowing snow, and trucks not starting.

Rev. Master Koten travelled to Edmonton in early November to visit the meditation group. While he was there he conducted a retreat, attended the regularly scheduled meditation meetings, and offered spiritual counselling to various congregation members. We are grateful to everyone who offered accommodation, meals, and their time and training to make this visit a success.

Despite the colder weather, we have welcomed a steady stream of visitors from the local area and from Vancouver, Kelowna, and Edmonton.

Visitors are always welcome, whether it's "just for tea" or for longer stays.

Our festival ceremonies continue to be held on Sunday mornings, including the Founder's Ceremony, Remembrance Day, and Buddha's

Enlightenment on December 8. In early December, we held an animal funeral for Misty, a cat which we encountered on the highway that had just been hit by a car and died a few minutes later. We buried her in the Animal

Cemetery. And on New Year's Eve we had a meditation vigil and ceremony at Prajnatarata Hall, during which Rev. Master Koten revolved the Scripture of Great Wisdom and we recited the Kojin Shingon Dharani 21 times. Rev. Master Koten offered a short Dharma Talk when the ceremony ended. The evening, though cold, was well attended by members of the local and Vancouver congregations. Afterwards, we all went up to Bodhidharma Hall for festive snacks, and people rang the temple bell to welcome in the new year.

We held our annual Winter Monastic Retreat from December 8 to December 15. Although it was rather cold, we did most of our sitting meditation at Prajnatarata Hall. Rev. Master Koten offered Dharma Talks and informal discussions throughout the week. We are very grateful for this opportunity to be still.

Rev. Master Koten left for Shasta Abbey in early January for a three-month visit, and we wanted to celebrate his 65th birthday and wish him a good trip before he departed, so we held an "early birthday party" for him on December 29. A total of 13 people came, including folks from Vancouver and friends from Lytton. It was a festive and lively celebration with good food and cheerful company. Thank you to Sherron for organizing this!

We continue to visit the Vancouver meditation group regularly on the last Sunday of the month, and we meet regularly on Sunday morning and Tuesday evening in the Lytton area. We also attend a local interfaith

meeting on the last Sunday of each month. For information, please contact us.

The Priory's schedule of retreats and ceremonies for the upcoming year can be found on our website. Here is the link:

[https://www.lionsgatebuddhistpriory.ca/ceremonies\\_and\\_retreats\\_LGBPa\\_dj2.pdf](https://www.lionsgatebuddhistpriory.ca/ceremonies_and_retreats_LGBPa_dj2.pdf)

## IN GRATITUDE

The Priory, its community, and its activities are entirely supported by the generous donations of congregation members and friends. We receive no outside funding from government agencies or the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. We are very grateful for everything that we receive.

In addition to monetary donations, over the past few months we have received the following: nuts, water, cheese, apples, herbs, milk, eggs, yogurt, bananas, avocados, oranges, V-8 juice, salad mix, spinach, vegetable salad, tomatoes, tofu, vegetarian chicken, vegetarian ham, butter, cheese, various chocolates, caramels, fruitcake, instant oats, croissants, cookies, pastas, protein noodles, coffee, bagels, chocolate truffles, chilli sauce, sweet and sour sauce, mango curry, Alfredo sauce, Marinara sauce, Martinelli's sparkling juice, Brie cheese, nutritional yeast, oranges, mangoes, fresh pineapple, asparagus, mushrooms, hummus, veggie wieners, homemade cookies, apples, broccoli, sweet peppers, pears, maple syrup, mandarins, persimmons, kale, cauliflower, zucchini, parsley, cucumbers, lemons, pumpkin seeds, Indian snacks, ginger, kiwi, Indian restaurant food, chickpeas, various canned beans, sunflower seeds, cake mix, macaroni and cheese, granola, raisins, marzipan, prune juice, cranberry juice, mango

juice, freeze-dried chives, candies, Twizzlers, ju-jubes, pizza, soy sauce, Stollen, spring rolls, pepper, mayonnaise, frozen strawberries, olive oil, frozen durian, chocolate cherries, crackers, instant Mocha coffee, melons, baba ganoush, nougat, dried fruit, rice noodles, lentils, dry cereal, frozen fruits, cashews, a lunch bag, writing tablet, mugs, Starbucks cards, outdoor lights, a gauze bag for making oat milk, cat tuna, dog treats, sardines for pets, a meditation platform.

Thank you to Derek for the use of his scaffolding while painting Mandala Hall, and to Kenny Wong at Jade Springs Grocery for pipe insulation when we had frozen water pipes. Thanks also to everyone who offered food, transportation, and accommodations to traveling monks, and to all who have offered their labour, skill, time, and training to support the Priory, the merit of which is priceless and limitless.

## SCHEDULE & UPCOMING RETREATS



The congregation of Lions Gate Buddhist Priory is meeting regularly in Vancouver; and in Lytton the monks are offering meditation each Tuesday evening at the Chinese History Museum at 145 Main Street, Lytton. Meditation instruction for beginners will start at 6:00 pm followed by meditation and walking meditation at 6:30. Tea will follow. No previous experience is necessary. All are welcome. In Lytton there is also a ceremony on Sundays at 2625 Botanie Creek Road, starting at 10 am.

For further information or to arrange for meditation instruction please contact [lionsgatebuddhistpriory@gmail.com](mailto:lionsgatebuddhistpriory@gmail.com)

A meditation group of the OBC is located in Edmonton, Alberta. For information please contact:

EDMONTON BUDDHIST MEDITATION GROUP

WEB: [www.serenereflection.org](http://www.serenereflection.org)

### Shasta Abbey

Abbey closed for the month of January, including Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>

Feb. 7 - 9	Introductory Retreat
Feb. 18 - 20	Silent Meditation Retreat
Feb. 27 - Mar. 1	Taking the Precepts to Heart Retreat
Mar. 11 - 13	Silent Meditation Retreat
Mar. 22 - 29	Jukai: the ten Precepts Retreat

Shasta Abbey also offers resident lay training throughout most of the year, under arrangement with their Guestmaster. Please contact the Guestmaster if you are interested in this option.

For more information please contact:

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