

Commentary on Dogen's “Rules for Meditation.”

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If you wish to harmonise body and mind it is absolutely imperative that you study the *Rules for Meditation* in detail. First, and foremost, keep your eyes open—otherwise you can get into a trance state in which you can accidentally die.

Second, control mind function, will, consciousness, memory, perception and understanding—if any one of these is allowed to predominate the balance and rhythm of the meditation will be upset and you will get nowhere. Be alert enough so that, whenever one or the other of these conditions begins to appear, you do not become attached to it so that you follow it to the detriment of the meditation; awareness is the key-word here.

Third, it does not matter whether you are sitting or lying down although the latter should only be used constantly if you are sick; laziness must be guarded against at all times; right effort is always required.

Fourth, do not worry about thoughts coming and going; just do not grab at them and do not push them away; watch them

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flow by naturally and do not be concerned with or interested in them.

Fifth, take two or three deep breaths when you start to meditate and then allow the breathing to become natural; do not try to make it different from what is natural breathing for you. Correct breathing is absolutely essential if one would meditate properly and this is only achieved if the meditator knows how to follow the breath properly. If one would follow the breath properly one must, as it states at the beginning of the *Rules for Meditation*, take two or three good breaths and then remain sitting quietly, allowing the breath to be perfectly natural. But not nearly enough has been said about these two or three 'good breaths' because it is not the depth of the breath but the path it takes that is absolutely essential to proper meditation.

Because of the mistakes made with regard to the last mentioned this commentary is chiefly concerned with how to take those two or three deep breaths.

Shakyamuni Buddha, after trying many harsh disciplines, and finding them useless, decided to try the method of breathing He had used as a child of seven. He was immediately successful in His attempts to reach enlightenment; He succeeded that very same night. Every small child knows how to meditate properly; it is only after we have "educated" it that its body and mind become separated and this was just as true of Shakyamuni Buddha as it is of us. This separation of body and mind can be precipitated by many things besides "education"; anything, in fact, that instils greed for worldly gain through competitiveness (the main cause of the disharmony of body and mind and its resulting tensions which ultimately lead to ill-health). Constantly quarrelling parents, or parents that do not make a secure home for their children, can cause the separation a lot earlier than the age of seven. This being so, he who would

meditate properly must set up the breathing pattern that he used as a child. Here is how it is done.

The breath originates in the hara, an area roughly triangular in shape with its base in the area of the navel and its apex at the base of the sternum, the sides roughly corresponding to the sides of the rib cage. One should not count breaths when meditating; one should follow the course that the breath takes. Most people breathe without thinking about it but the meditator must consciously, at the beginning of each meditation, as well as at any time he loses his awareness during that meditation, follow one or two breaths thus:— Imagine, when taking these breaths, that at inhalation the breath starts at the base of the spine, continues up the spine and does not cease to move until it reaches the crown of the head which is the moment at which exhalation begins. The breath then continues down the front of the body during exhalation to the pubic area where inhalation takes over at the base of the spine. Thus the breath seems to travel in a circle, inhalation up the back of the body and exhalation down the front; it is absolutely vital that it travels up the spine and down the sternum.

This circular breathing is called “the turning of the Wheel of the Law”— and there is good reason for the name! If you set this back-flowing wheel, as it were, in motion during these two or three breaths then the whole pattern for meditation is correctly set and the breath will flow clearly, cleanly, and correctly and the meditation will be full and adequate.

There are some other things of importance here: in meditation this following of the breath is done consciously two or three times so that the breathing pattern may be established both physically and psychologically and then it must be left behind and the breathing allowed to settle naturally into the rhythm that is right for the individual.

Above all, do not try to follow the breath in this way during the entire meditation. That pattern should only be set up again if the mind wanders much or if the mind falls out of meditation; then two or three more breaths should be taken in the same way and the pattern again set up.

When one finds that this type of breathing is so natural that it is second-nature to him he will notice that there are tiny fractions of time, called the 'apertures' in the breath, between inhalation and exhalation. If he has been able to learn how not to be distracted by his thoughts he will be still enough to hear the still, small voice, the voice of the Lord of the House,¹ during these tiny intervals: it is by means of listening to the Lord in these small intervals that body and mind once again enter into harmony.

When a person has become good at meditating in this way, which is nothing other than sitting quietly as the *Rules for Meditation* state, he will find that he can hear the still, small voice in other places. When he is good at this the still, small voice, his true nature, will take over from the voice of his egocentric ego—the roles that these two have played since the meditator suffered the disharmony of body and mind as a child will be reversed and then genuine spiritual progress is possible. The Christians call this state 'having conversations with God'; the Buddhist calls it the harmonisation of body and mind—it is explained elaborately in the Gōi theory of Tozan.² The *Sandokai*³ should be studied deeply in connection with this.

Understand that none of the above can take place until the involvement in the noise of the human brain dies down; a person who is constantly chasing after his own thoughts and getting involved with them will be too busy to hear the Lord of the House!

Notes.

1. See Great Master Keizan's "Denkoroku" ("The Transmission of the Light"), chapters 1, 2 and 7 in *Zen is Eternal Life* by Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, 4th ed. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999).
2. The teaching of the Five Ranks by Great Master Tozan Ryokai, the founder of the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition in China, describes the relationship of the Eternal and the Apparent.
3. A Scripture by Great Master Sekito Kisen that describes the harmonisation of the "all is one" with the "all is different"; a translation of it is to be found in *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, comp. Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., 2nd ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990), pp. 59–61.