

The Way of Zazen

By Shodo Harada Roshi

Every year when December approaches, monks everywhere tremble in anticipation of the arrival of the rohatsu osesshin. In Zen dojos everywhere people intensify their training energy in preparation for this osesshin, held from the first to the eighth of December. The rohatsu osesshin is the consummation of a year's training, a time when everyone faces the final reckoning of a year of practice.

The Buddha was enlightened on the eighth of December when he looked up at the morning star, the planet we call Venus. The brightness of this planet was seen by Buddha from the depths of one week of samadhi. The Buddha received that brightness with the same eyes of zazen that enable us also to realize perfect enlightenment.

One week straight of this deepest possible samadhi was burst through by the brilliance of that morning star. A whole week's experience of that world of complete spiritual death, the great death, that state of mind of the world beyond death. Into that world burst the brightness of the morning star, plunging into the Buddha's eyes and giving rebirth to the Buddha's consciousness.

He cried:

That's it! That's it! That's me! That's me that's shining so brilliantly!

How deeply he was moved and what wonder he felt. From this comes all of the Buddha's Dharma. From within this state of mind the Buddha said:

How wondrous, how wondrous! All beings are endowed with this pure nature! What a wondrous, astonishing thing has been realized! All the ten thousand things, all the flowers, all the trees, all the rocks, all things everywhere are shining brilliantly! What an amazing thing! It's the same landscape, but how brilliantly it is illuminated! What freshness in everything!

From within this deep illumination of the mind of Buddha all of the Buddha's wisdom was born. All of Zen is held within the deep impression of the Buddha's mind at that moment.

People vow to experience this very same experience of the Buddha as they approach the rohatsu osesshin. In every single Zen dojo people put their lives on the line to be able to experience the exact same state of mind, on the eighth of December, as that of the Buddha. This is the firm vow with which they come to the rohatsu osesshin.

There is a record of Hakuin Zenji's teachings called the Rohatsu Jisshu. This is a collection of his teachings given on each evening of the rohatsu osesshin week. Hakuin Zenji taught from his own experience to encourage his disciples and to give them energy for their practice. This collection of teachings is the work of Hakuin's disciple, Torei Zenji. It is not published in general and is used only in the zendos for the monks because of its strictness and severity. In the text we find written the way to do zazen, the way of entering samadhi, and the way of breathing (susokkan). They are all taught in great detail.

I would like to comment on Hakuin Zenji's teaching, using the Rohatsu Jisshu text, adding my own experiences in the hope that it will be helpful for each person's practice.

We begin by using the text of Hakuin's teaching from the first night of the rohatsu osesshin. He spoke to the many disciples lined up in front of him in this way:

For those who wish to enter deep samadhi, it is best to put down thick cushions, sit in full lotus and wear loose clothes. Make your spine straight and your posture erect but comfortable. Begin by doing susokkan, the best possible way for entering deep samadhi, focusing your ki in your tanden. Next, concentrate intensely on your koan until you dig out the roots of your self-conscious awareness completely. If you then continue to practice zazen day after day, kensho will be realized as certainly as you hit the ground when you strike at it. Put everything you have into it. Deep samadhi, deep samadhi. We all speak about kensho, but if we don't develop our samadhi, don't work inventively on developing our deep samadhi, it all becomes something far away up in the sky.

The Sixth Patriarch and Rinzai Zenji both taught that only kensho was of greatest importance and that samadhi and liberation were not to be considered as problems. They said that there is only kensho to be concerned with and that is all that is necessary; that enlightenment is the most important thing and that this is the essential point of Zen.

The experience of the Buddha was deep enlightenment. When he saw the morning star he experienced his true nature clearly. Without such a thing there is no Zen or Buddhadharma. But, just to say kensho doesn't mean that we can realize it.

This is not an era of such spiritual clarity. It's a time when there is a flooding of information into all parts of society, and our daily life is complicated and confusing. Our minds have a very difficult time feeling things deeply. If our minds don't become truly purified and lucid then kensho is impossible. If our antennas are completely coated with rust, no matter what signals may come

along they can't be picked up. If our mirror is not clear, no matter how wonderful the scenery, it cannot be reflected. The problem is the degree to which our minds are purified and unattached. Only to the degree to which they are clear and lucid can we receive these signals.

This does not mean that the goal is to develop our own quiet world. The goal is to realize one's true nature. For doing this we need to develop deep samadhi. For this reason people of training constantly need to concentrate on their zazen and employ this mind of practice as the base of their daily life and all activity.

Hakuin began his teaching:

For those who wish to enter deep samadhi.

The Sixth Patriarch gave us a concise definition of teaching that samadhi is:

To detach oneself from all external stimulation and to be undisturbed within.

When we look outside, we see trees, flowers, mountains, and people, and we cannot erase this scenery. We cannot erase the things that appear before us. We can't "close" our ears, and we feel many things—hot, cold, joy, and pain—and smell fragrances. In this way we live totally connected with the environment that surrounds us; we cannot separate ourselves from it.

The most important thing is not to be attached to that environment. This does not mean to cover our eyes, it does not mean to cover our ears, it does not mean to stop smelling, nor does it mean to stop feeling. It means that our minds must become taut and concentrated beyond all of those stimulations. It means not to be distracted, not to use our minds meaninglessly, not to loosen our attention. It means to find our center and with our total concentration to gather our focused energy.

Not to be attached to external form, not to be unsettled within, not to think this and that, not to be cluttered with extraneous things, not to think about gain and loss and whether we are happy or sad. This can be called Zen. We are always thinking something in our minds. If we always leave our minds full of these thoughts our minds will never become clear, but we also cannot instruct our minds to stop thinking. This means that we should always keep our minds taut and perfectly attentive.

Hakuin gave us the instruction for susokkan, which has the truly great function of clearing the mind. He said:

In any case do not be attached to the outside world, and within our minds do not think of this and that. To have our minds precisely concentrated only on what we are doing, this is what is called deep samadhi.

As Hakuin instructed:

For those who wish to enter deep samadhi, it is best to put down thick cushions, sit in full lotus and wear loose clothes.

For those who wish to enter deep samadhi a thicker cushion is best. For someone who is only going to sit for ten to thirty minutes a thick cushion may not be so necessary, but here at Sogenji we may sit for as many as twelve hours, and if we continue this for a week of osesshin, a thin cushion will not be sufficient. Therefore it is best to sit down on a thick cushion.

Put your legs in full lotus. For zazen there is both half and full lotus. If at all possible full lotus is preferable. Putting up both legs carefully and tucking them in deeply is best. It's best because your legs don't move out of position. For those doing half lotus it is easier to injure your legs. If you sit for a long time your legs may hurt and you will want to move them. If you move your legs your body's center line becomes crooked. If you sit in a crooked way for an extended time your balance becomes lost and in extreme cases your legs become and remain numb. In the end it becomes impossible even to do zazen. This happens because people don't put their legs up deeply and carefully into the correct position. When you tuck them in deeply you may feel pain at the beginning. Zazen is one form of yoga, and you must not go against your muscle structure. If you want to sit in a way in which your legs do not go against your muscle structure, you must tuck them in deeply. To put your legs up loosely will not work; they must be tucked as far up on your thighs as possible. Push out your lower abdomen (tanden) as far as possible and sit with your hands in front of your abdomen, one on top of the other and thumbs touching.

To sit in loose clothing is preferable. If you constrict your body in any way your breathing becomes difficult. People who wear tight belts or tight trousers should loosen them as much as possible. Straighten your backbone and stretch it up toward the sky. A line between your knees forms one side of an equilateral triangle. Put your pelvis at the opposite apex of the triangle and stretch your spine up from that point. In this way you make your spine erect and set your neck and head on top of the spine. Tuck in your chin and poke the top of your head straight up into the sky, and the heaviness of your head will decrease. If you do this your balance will improve. If you sit like this your abdomen will naturally be pushed forward, and also because your backbone is straight, your abdomen will move forward.

Hakuin further instructed, saying:

Make your spine straight and your posture erect but comfortable.

This is the best way to sit. People who see you sitting zazen should naturally feel a refreshed and bracing feeling. If you stretch up too much it looks uncomfortable. If the way you sit gives a person who is looking at you a messy and uncomfortable feeling, this is not the right posture.

People who see you should get a refreshed and vibrant feeling.

Hakuin instructed his disciples saying:

Begin by doing susokkan, the best possible way for entering deep samadhi, focusing your ki in your tanden.

These words are from Hakuin's very own experience, and because Hakuin's susokkan is a way of breathing with the tanden, it is the same as the way of breathing taught by the Buddha. Of course Hakuin was not the first to discover this! In India from ancient times until today it has been continued. In the practice of Zen, susokkan was never given much emphasis. Considered as something obvious, it was not thought of as something that was needed to be taught.

From doing extreme training, Hakuin had problems with his sympathetic nervous system. His ki would rise to his shoulders and he would become emotionally unstable. He discovered that by doing susokkan he could settle his mind, and in this way he realized that susokkan could be practiced to develop ki. He taught susokkan to everyone from beginners to well-ripened people of longtime practice. This susokkan must be well developed. So, Hakuin instructed:

Begin by doing susokkan, the best possible way for entering deep samadhi, focusing your ki in your tanden.

He makes it sound simple, but there are many types of samadhi. In yoga there are many ways of entering samadhi, but among these the best way to enter samadhi is susokkan. Hakuin has taught us this from his own experience.

Everyone who comes to Sogenji is taught susokkan as the base of their practice, and for those who work with it using it in their daily life is a matter of course. One can easily forget the correct way to do susokkan, so it is best to review it constantly and thoroughly.

The way to begin doing susokkan is as I have just explained:

First check your zazen posture. Then if your body is in the correct posture remove all tension and stretch the spine toward the sky. Remove all tension from the neck muscles and release all tension in your arms as well.

When you do this you will just become like the skeleton hanging in the science classroom, tied from its head and with its body loosely dangling.

In this relaxed condition:

Quietly exhale, focusing your concentration on the exhalation from your tanden.

Your tanden is that place approximately one and a half inches below your navel which you can feel if you press there. Here is the main center of the sympathetic nervous system. The source of human's ki can also be found here. If you work with this place thoroughly your ki will become fully developed.

If you are not centered in your tanden, your energy level falls easily, and your ki goes high up into your shoulders. It may continue into the neck muscles and your head may begin to tighten and hurt. Finally you may become dizzy, excited, and start crying for no reason or become irritated, finding it difficult to settle down. If this happens, your whole body starts trembling. From a disturbance of the sympathetic nervous system you may become neurotic. susokkan is the best way to keep the ki down.

Having relaxed all the tension in your body:

Focus on the lower abdomen, as if you were steadily blowing your breath from this place and, pulling your belly in, quietly exhale.

Exhale for as long as possible, to the very end of the breath and until your belly becomes completely flat.

When you come to the very end of the breath, naturally, without thinking, the inhalation will follow and your belly will fill up and expand in front of you. As your belly expands the inhalation comes in naturally. There is no need to suck in an inhalation.

Very comfortably:

Focus on a complete exhalation.

As your belly expands in front of you:

Inhale accordingly.

It's just like an eyedropper. There is a rubber bulb on top of a hollow glass tube. When you press the bulb the air goes out, and when you put it into water and let go of it the water is sucked into

the glass tube. This is how the eyedropper works. In the same way, flattening your belly completely is the way to exhale the breath, and the swelling out of your abdomen at inhalation is the same as letting go of the eyedropper's rubber bulb: air flows in naturally.

When you let go of your exhalation your abdomen naturally fills up again and with that action you inhale. Don't suck in air. If you do it naturally there should be almost no tension in the shoulders whatsoever and the air comes in easily. In a short time sufficient air will easily be inhaled.

If you become too tense or too self-conscious it becomes very difficult. If you are tense in your diaphragm your breath gets stopped there. Almost everyone stops his or her breath at the diaphragm and almost everyone tries to force his or her breath further from there. Getting rid of this forced power is one of the big problems at the beginning of learning susokkan.

At the beginning of zazen it helps to do this deep abdominal breathing up to ten times. To get rid of self-consciousness, you go out to the breath's final point as quietly as possible, and in doing this you work slowly on focusing and using your tanden.

As you breathe out:

Add the counting of one, two three, up to ten. One count on each breath.

As you breathe out, count:

Oooooooooooooooooone . . .

Twooooooooooooooooo . . .

Threeeeeeeeeeeeeeee . . .

Keep going until the count of ten and then return to one again. Thus is susokkan.

While counting your breaths you concentrate on the breaths constantly. It is important to follow these breaths with your concentration. By following these breaths carefully your concentration deepens, and because you are concentrating so totally, even when you look at the outside world you are no longer so attached to it—because your concentration is on your breath and counting, the external world doesn't interfere. Even if there are sounds around you, if your concentration is deep, you hardly notice them, or smells, flavors, and other external stimulations. It is the same with feelings, and especially the extraneous thoughts of this and that. These thoughts also decrease greatly.

Remember:

Focus totally on the breath and the counting.

And, just as the Sixth Patriarch taught:

Detach oneself from all external stimulation and be undisturbed within.

This detachment happens in conjunction with the susokkan. You become separated from the external world and unattached to its sounds and sights. Then your mind becomes free of attachment to extraneous thoughts. Here you find a truly highly developed taut state of mind within.

Daruma Daishi said:

Not concerned with outer things, without having any troubles inside, if one's mind is like a wall he would at the same time be in the Tao (truth).

This does not mean to become tense and tight in the breathing. It means to go to the ultimate point of each breath and not to be swayed by external things. There is then no place for any extraneous thing to be found—no trace, no crack. This is the world of zazen, the world of the Buddha's samadhi.

Hakuin taught:

Begin by doing susokkan, the best possible way for entering deep samadhi, focusing your ki in your tanden.

At the beginning, susokkan feels very undependable, but it's important not to stop and quit. Once you have begun your efforts you must go all the way to the final end. For this, osesshin is the best time.

If you do two or three osesshins almost anyone can master this susokkan. Anybody can do this much.

Seeing how far you can go in using this susokkan in your daily life is up to each person's individual efforts. But, if you are living out in society, sitting and then stopping again, it is very difficult to master susokkan. The practice is best when done on a regular basis.

susokkan is a point of practice that should be mastered in a short time. Once you have mastered it and made it your own, you won't forget it. Once it has ripened and you have tasted the flavor of its deep state you won't forget it.

Even though susokkan may feel unreliable and powerless at first, if you patiently and creatively work on it, little by little your breath will come thoroughly from your abdomen. After you exhale totally, you allow the abdomen to expand in front of you. Repeat this process over and over. At the beginning of zazen repeat it ten times. After that don't put any tension of self-conscious effort into it. Let it move naturally.

Although your breath may feel rather shallow when you first begin, in fact, if you look at it in comparison to the breath in usual daily life, it is much deeper. If you do this breathing over and over you develop it thoroughly. From that seemingly undeveloped abdomen a strong and energetic ki will come.

It is easy to be full of scattered ki that rises to the upper part of your body. But, with regular susokkan it can easily be gathered in the tanden and can then be felt as a strong and energetic ki. You can't make this strong ki through force. If you try to force it, it will get stopped in the diaphragm and your breath will become shorter and more difficult. You have to proceed with patient effort.

In the beginning it does not go well but, little by little, as you get used to doing it, not only while doing zazen, but also while doing your work and other activities, it will continue. Even when you are eating you are able to keep the concentration going. When you come to this point your ki becomes fuller and fuller. Finally, when you are exhaling and inhaling, the base of your tanden gives you a continuous strong supply of ki because you are breathing with your abdomen.

When your ki becomes truly well developed and is taut and full, your abdomen hardly moves at all. This is because you have nearly reached the ultimate point of your concentration. Especially at this point you must not let go of your efforts and must keep your concentration going, adding even more energy. If you do this your abdomen becomes fuller and more taut.

Here Hakuin instructs:

Begin by doing susokkan, the best possible way for entering deep samadhi, focusing your ki in your tanden. Next, concentrate intensely on your koan until you dig out the roots of your self-conscious awareness completely.

Your inner places, your deep mind, become totally fulfilled, and your abdomen also becomes full of active energy. When you are in this state of mind you can for the first time work on a koan. Working without a koan is also fine. People of old have taught us that without a koan you can reach enlightenment.

From deep within yourself focus carefully on the place where the breath arises. Watch that source point attentively.

That very point from which the breath is born, watch that point. Then with the question "What is this? What is this? What is this?" see it thoroughly. That ki which is constantly born anew from within us is never used up; it never runs out. Coming from that ki, one after another the breaths are born:

Grasping that source point firmly focus your concentration and consciousness on the question, "What is this?"

At the beginning you were counting numbers but finally, if the breath becomes taut and full, the counting does not matter. With that full flow of ki you ask the question, "What is this?" With this concentration you cut deeply within. You dig on constantly in the direction of the source of the breath. Keeping going in the direction of the source point of the breath, you cut away as you delve toward it. If you do this wholeheartedly you will almost completely lose track of the outside world. Your own centered mind will have no extraneous thoughts, only those breaths that come one after the other, until the place where there is even no consciousness of asking the question, "What is this?" It is as if you were glaring into it, never taking your eyes away.

Your state of mind truly changes into an expansive one. This fulfilled state of mind is like the deep, deep ocean, but it is not like a dark hole. In a state of clear transparency you are embraced in total illuminating brilliance. Even the awareness of this is almost completely gone and only the fulfilled taut feeling is left.

This state of mind deepens and deepens and finally that state of mind explodes, and it too falls off completely. This is called cutting away the deep roots. This is what Hakuin is talking about when he instructs:

Next, concentrate intensely on your koan until you dig out the roots of your self-conscious awareness completely.

Going through this cutting of the roots must be done first; only after that can you experience the same state of mind that the Buddha was able to realize and at that time know, for the first time, that place from which the Buddha's reborn consciousness arose. That very instant when he saw the morning star, that very world into which he jumped, is no different from the cutting away of those deepest roots.

At the ultimate point it is not death, but the fulfilled and transparent clarity that is truly sharp, and the life that is pure from within. In relating to the outside world it is like being completely reborn.

That reborn energy is of great strength and expands throughout the external world as well. This is the experience that the Buddha described. This is the true mind, the original mind that he realized was born from within.

One's original mind is that clear ultimate point, the very source point of that true mind. That which was not yet functioning awakens to the external world, and in every single thing it meets, it is stimulated and works accordingly. That point where it begins to function is of the greatest importance. If that function doesn't arise, then the experience's meaning dies, and that zazen, done so carefully, becomes meaningless.

When that brand-new fresh consciousness is reborn from within, when you are awakened to the true life within, you become the same as the Buddha. This happens not only in the midst of samadhi, but it is the very substance of kensho. With it comes the most important point of Zen and the Buddhadharma.

Yet, only when this expands into the external world does this true world of understanding become meaningful. For this we cannot be in a hurry. It is a matter of how far we can go in developing our full and taut energy. This is the total of everything. Since we are realizing this in the context of the bustle and stimulations of the external world, if we are in a hurry it is proof that we have not yet thrown away all external things. To do this completely is of the greatest importance and to work with this point, no matter how far we have to go, is the ultimate point of zazen.

Hakuin concluded with:

If you then continue to practice zazen day after day, kensho will be realized as certainly as you hit the ground when you strike at it. Put everything you have into it.

He said this not meaning to say how many years we must make efforts, nor how many months or days are necessary. According to each person's efforts and energy it develops. According to each person's power of concentration it deepens. There is no calculation that can be made. It can't be said that because we worked this many hours we will have these results.

Our consciousness being totally reborn is our goal. Heading toward that goal and using our total energy in its pursuit is what has to be done. Even if we make efforts and our goal is not realized, if it is as if we strike the ground with our hand. Without fail enlightenment can be realized. We can, without fail, realize enlightenment. Hakuin teaches this from his own experience. Everyone, all of us, can realize kensho. Anyone can realize this state of mind and anyone can be reborn from this state of mind. In this way Hakuin teaches us.

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