

Dance with Heaven & Earth

Life Lessons from Zen & Aikido



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Today, we use the word 挨拶 aisatsu simply to refer to a greeting, but to understand the sense of urgency that was originally associated with it, let us take a look at the history of Zen.

Zen was once banned in China, and if Zen practitioners were exposed, they were punished by death. Still, some continued to practice their path deep in the mountains. Others were desperate to become Zen practitioners, and went on a dangerous and lonely search, looking for teachers. It was rare that they actually found somebody willing to initiate them into the teachings of Zen. But when they did, this most precious, most unlikely encounter, and the happiness and relief they felt can be described with the character 挨 ai.

Nobody was allowed to talk about Zen, so even deep in the mountains, Zen teachings were transmitted silently from heart to heart, from teacher to student. This exchange, the teacher's genuine effort and the student's genuine gratefulness can be described with the character 拶 satsu.

Zen teachers and students risked their lives following their path, so imagine how deep the bond was they must have felt when they knew they could trust each other and share their search for truth. Imagine their relief, their deep feelings of friendship, and their gratefulness for each other's presence.

This is the sense of urgency we should feel when we offer a greeting to a fellow human being. Offering a heartfelt greeting is the first step we can take to determine the tone of our encounter.

Aikido and Zen

The word 一如 ichinyō consists of the characters for 'one' and 'like'. This is how the relationship between aikido and Zen can be described. Of course the two are separate disciplines. They each have their own history and form. They are not the same. But in essence, they are like one. The attitude we seek and the truth we try to experience and integrate into our dealings with the world are the same in Zen and aikido.

This is why the following pages are dedicated to communicating some basic building blocks of Zen that may be useful to the aikido practitioner and anybody else enjoying this book.

What is Zen?

Zen is a Japanese form of Buddhism. In Sanskrit, the word for Zen is 'zenna'. The Japanese character 禅 Zen was chosen to represent its sound. Its meaning has been translated into Japanese as 定 jō (Sanskrit: samadhi - a state in which the mind becomes one with the experienced object and exists in complete serenity), 静慮 jōryo (Sanskrit: dhyana - a meditative state of deep concentration), and 思惟修 shiyuishu (calm, even thoughts). All these words express the idea that the true nature of things can be recognized by human beings in spite of the attachment and desire that ties them to the duality of the world, and that mind and body can manifest this realization. To achieve this, the mind needs to be perfectly focused, yet all inclusive. As long as you only look at the surface of things and preoccupy yourself with their form, as long as you have likes and dislikes and distinguish between good and bad, you cannot reach this state. Overcoming distraction and duality and becoming one with the Buddha (佛 hotoke - see image) inside you is also called 解脱 gedatsu, or Nirvana. The true meaning of Zen is to inhabit this state with both mind and body.

Heart-to-Heart Zen

The Soto school of Zen believes in 教外別伝 kyōgebetsuden (special transmissions outside the scriptures), 不立文字 furyūmonji (no dependence on words or letters), and 以心伝心 isshindenshin (non-verbal heart-to-heart, mind-to-mind communication), meaning that the true heart of Zen cannot be understood relying on scriptures or oral explanations. The idea is to transmit it in a more direct way. It has to be experienced rather than learned intellectually. A vital message we can send to others to communicate with them from heart to heart is a sincere greeting. Fill each greeting with genuine respect, gratefulness, humility, and appreciation. This is heart-to-heart communication in its purest form.

Focusing Genuinely on No Purpose

When you do zazen, simply sit. Do not think about relieving stress, becoming a great fighter, or attaining enlightenment. Do not think about anything. Simply sit. Only then will you be able to experience fudōshin, mushin, or kū. True emptiness cannot contain a purpose.

Emptiness of mind can also be achieved in everyday activities. At Zen monasteries, 作務 samu (manual labor such as cleaning and gardening) is part of the monks' daily schedule.

Watch a chef peel potatoes. He does this every day. The knife sits snug in his hand, moves swiftly and smoothly. He has perfected the art of peeling potatoes so much, he can think of absolutely nothing, yet his hands keep peeling in a perfect, efficient, beautiful way.

Genuinely focusing all his attention on one activity, he is able to attain a state of mushin (no mind). Try to find activities in your daily life you can focus on so genuinely that you become one with the activity, allowing your mind to become empty. The important part is that you focus on the activity itself, not on its outcome. You clean, for example, not because you want a clean house. Instead, you dedicate yourself fully to the process. Clean!

只管打坐 **Shikantaza**

If the surface of a lake is completely still, the moon appears in it without the slightest distortion. If there is a half moon, the water reflects a perfect half moon. If there is a sickle moon, the water reflects a perfect sickle moon. We call this 水の心 mizu no kokoro (mind of water).

While this concept does express a Zen ideal, you should have no objective in mind when you devote yourself to zazen. Simply sit and do your best at all times without comparing yourself to others. You are the universe. Breathe calmly, keep good posture, and let your thoughts flow by.

This individual devotion to zazen, the simple act of focusing 100% on sitting, is called 只管打坐 shikantaza, which constitutes the central pillar of Soto Zen. Simply sit, being your best possible self.

Zen Evolution

In Zen, there are five stages of development.

The first stage is 外道禪 gedōzen. You are simply living your life without a set perspective. You are experiencing the world outside the Way.

The second stage is 凡夫 bonpu. You have understood that the world is ungraspable and entered the Way. We have this sensation in the dark, when we cannot see what is what. You have understood emptiness.

The third stage is 小乘禪 shōjōzen. You have grasped the logic of life: when you do something good, something good will come back. Whatever energy you send out will return. Your efforts are focused on yourself. You polish your personality and purify your spirit.

The fourth stage is 大乘禪 daijōzen. You extend your efforts to creating harmony with others. You become part of a communal effort towards peace.

The final stage is 最大乘禪 saidaijōzen. You have returned to your original self. We call this 新起源 shinkigen, or 'new beginning'. You have returned to 自性 jishō, your Buddha nature. Your mind has become serene. A new beginning. A clean slate.

印 In - Hand Gestures

印 In are hand gestures derived from ancient Indian traditions. In English, the Sanskrit term 'mudra' is more common. In are used in many spiritual, physical, and artistic disciplines including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, yoga, Indian dance, and Asian martial arts. Their purpose ranges from health promotion to spiritual and religious symbolism, greeting, prayer, esoteric and magical practices.

In yoga, in are used to assist practitioners with specific breathing exercises. In Buddhist iconography, they are associated with concepts like 'protection' or 'knowledge', or with certain representations of the Buddha. Religious sects like Shingon Buddhism use them for esoteric practices. Martial arts like kung fu and ninjutsu use them to focus the mind, strengthen the body, and assist practitioners on dangerous and difficult missions.

It has been found that in stimulate the mind in the same way language does. They are physical manifestations of human spirit, a physical attempt to communicate more deeply with others, with the guiding powers on our spiritual path, and with the universe. In are aimed at expressing and enacting a human ideal the practitioner strives for, and at seeking a connection with the sources that can guide him towards his goal.

Zazen

Zazen is a type of seated meditation. Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, called 'Shaka', 'O-Shaka-san', or 'Shakuson' in Japanese was enlightened after meditating under the Bodhi tree. As he used seated meditation to become enlightened, many schools of Buddhism place great emphasis on the use of zazen. In Soto Zen, zazen is considered the most important part of the practitioner's spiritual life, practiced in meditation sessions called 坐禅会 zazenkai.

Practicing zazen is often associated with enlightenment, dissolving duality, freeing oneself of desire, and becoming one with the Buddha nature that lies hidden in each of us. The main characteristic of Soto Zen, however, is its teaching that there is no objective to zazen. The meaning of zazen according to Soto Zen is to sit simply in order to sit (只管打坐 shikantaza).

In the following, you will find an explanation of the etiquette and form used at a Soto zazenkai. Please note that this is only one way of practicing zazen. Every temple may have its own rules, and the specific meditation protocol may vary. Please follow the rules that apply wherever you choose to practice.

Before the Zazenkai

Take off your watch, accessories, and shoes. Enter the meditation hall (zendō) with your hands in shashu¹, stepping in with your left foot on the left side of the entrance. With your hands in gasshō², bow towards the altar and go to your spot. When walking, keep your hands in shashu. Refrain from talking inside the zendō. Do not cross in front of the Buddha statue but walk around it. Use a meditation cushion (zafu)³ that has the right shape and size for your body. When sitting down, make sure you line up properly with the people next to you.

Once the zazen practitioners have taken their positions, the supervisor of the zazenkai⁴ enters, makes his rounds in the zendō, and examines whether everybody is sitting correctly. This is called 検単 kentan. When the supervisor is right behind you, unite your hands in gasshō. When he has passed, return them to hokkaijōin⁵. To signal the start of the zazenkai, a bell is rung three times. This is called shijōshō. After the bell has been rung nobody can enter or leave the zendō until the zazenkai is over.

¹ shashu 叉手 - for standing or walking: left thumb in the center of the palm, fingers wrapped around it; left hand in front of the solarplexus, right hand wrapped around it

² gasshō 合掌 - prayer pose: hands together in front of the chest or nose

³ zafu 坐蒲 - thick round cushion used as a wedge between buttocks and tatami during zazen

⁴ zazenkai 坐禅会 - a zen meditation session

⁵ hokkaijōin 法界定印 - used in zazen: left hand on right, palms up, thumbs touching

合掌 **Gasshō**

This in stands for prayer. It expresses respect, faith and devotion. The two hands represent duality. Bringing them together is a a symbol of the One Mind, the Buddha mind, or the mind of the cosmos we belong to. It also represents the request and the pledge we make when we pray, asking an external power for help while promising that we will contribute as much as we can to the outcome we hope for.

Hold the palms and fingers of both hands together, pointing straight up. Your fingertips should be either at the same height as your nose, or in front of your chest bone, and about 4 inches away from your body. There should be a slight tension in your elbows, while your shoulders remain relaxed. Keep your back straight at all times.

叉手 **Shashu**

This is the hand gesture used for walking meditation (hokōzen/ kinhin) or while standing or walking in the zendō. Fold the thumb of your left hand inwards onto your palm. Wrap your fingers around it. Place your left hand in front of your solar plexus, palm facing your body. Wrap your right hand around it. Form a straight line with your forearms, elbows protruding left and right of your body. Relax your shoulders and let ki flow through your hands, so you can feel a connection of slight mutual pressure between them.

法界定印 **Hokkaijōin** - 'The Cosmic Mudra'

This is the in used for sitting in the lotus position or in 正座 seiza⁶. Hands rest in your lap, palms up, fingertips facing. Slide your left hand onto your right. Your thumbs meet and form a circle. Let the tips of your thumbs touch lightly. Do not use strength or push, but never let them come apart.

⁶ seiza 正座 - Japanese formal kneeling position: thighs on calves, buttocks on the back of the feet, straight back

隣位問訊 **Rinimonjin - Greeting the Zen Practitioners Next to You**

Greet the people to your left and right. When you arrive where you will sit down for your meditation, turn to your neighbor and bow with your hands in gasshō⁷. Then bow to your other neighbor. They will return the same greeting.

対坐問訊 **Taizamonjin - Greeting the Zen Practitioners Opposite You**

Greet the people opposite you. After you have greeted the people beside you, keep your hands in gasshō and bow to the people on the other side of the zendō. They will return the same greeting.

⁷ gasshō 合掌 - prayer pose: hands together in front of the chest or nose

警策 **Kyōsaku** - A Striking Tool

警策 **kyōsaku** is short for 警覚策励 **keikaku sakurei**, meaning ‘attention booster’. The **kyōsaku** is a 2 ft staff used to hit zazen practitioners when they need help staying focused. If a practitioner feels himself getting sleepy, or notices that his attention is waning during zazen, he can unite his hands in **gasshō** and ask to be hit with the **kyōsaku**. If the person supervising the **zazen** sees that a practitioner has bad posture or has fallen asleep, he can take the initiative and hit him with the **kyōsaku**. In both cases, the right shoulder is touched lightly to warn the Zen practitioner of the pending strike. The practitioner then tilts his head to the left to open access to his shoulder. After being hit, he leaves his hands in **gasshō** and bows before returning them to **hokkaijōin**⁸.

⁸ **hokkaijōin** 法界定印/cosmic mudra - hand gesture used in zazen: left hand on right, palms up, thumbs touching

坐蒲 - **Zafu**

The zafu is a thick, round cushion meant to function as a wedge between your body and the floor that allows your spine to remain straight, while your knees touch the floor throughout the session. Before you sit down, put its edge on the tatami and turn it around, squeezing it lightly, fixing its shape. After the session, return it to its original shape and position in the same way. On one side it has a white tag, which serves as a name tag for zazen practitioners at this temple, so it could carry somebody's name. Proper zazen etiquette requires to bring your own zafu. When you finalize the position of your zafu, the tag should be in the middle, facing away from you.

面壁 **Menpeki - Facing the Wall**

Turn towards the wall. After you have greeted the people next to you and the people on the other side of the room, sit down on your zafu. Place the center of the zafu under your spine. Push the tatami with one hand and turn towards the wall.

結跏趺坐 **Kekkafuza - The Lotus Position**

Put your right foot on your left thigh, as close to your pelvic bone as possible. Then, place your left foot on your right thigh, again, as close to your pelvic bone as possible. Your knees should touch the floor. After crossing your legs, form hokkaijōin⁹ with your hands and rest them in your lap under your navel.

半跏趺坐 **Hankafuza - The Half Lotus Position**

For the half lotus position, only the left foot is placed on the right thigh as close to the pelvic bone as possible, while the right foot remains on the ground. What is important in both kekkafuza and hankafuza is that both knees are touching the floor, and a stable triangle is formed between the buttocks and the two knees to support the body.

⁹ hokkaijōin 法界定印 - used in zazen: left hand on right, palms up, thumbs touching

Upper Body

Your spine should be straight, your lower abdomen pushed forward, stabilizing your pelvis. Relax both shoulders, pull back your chin without putting any strain on your neck, and open the top of your head towards the sky.

Eyes

Do not close your eyes. Keep them naturally open and cast them downwards at a 45 degree angle, looking at a spot about 3 ft in front of you on the floor. Do not let your eyes wander. Keep your focus on this spot.

Mouth

Close your mouth. Imagine your palate near your eyes. With your tongue, touch your upper front teeth as if pronouncing an 'L'. Leave your mouth in this position and do not open or move it during the zazenkai.

欠気一息 **Kanki Issoku - Exhale Completely**

After taking on the right position for zazen, take a deep breath in through your nose and breathe out gradually through your mouth until all air has left your lungs. After taking a few deep breaths and exhaling through your mouth in this fashion, return to a natural way of breathing through your nose.

覚触 **Kakusoku - Awareness**

Let your thoughts flow by like a river. Try not to let them catch anywhere and progress logically or associatively. Try not to get emotionally involved. Simply observe them like something outside of you. Do not get involved in the pictures that appear in front of your eyes, the sounds that hit your ears, the smells that invade your nose, or the ideas that emerge in your mind. Neither pursue nor escape them. Allow them to enter and pass freely. The most important thing in zazen is to awaken (kakusoku) from distraction (thinking) or dullness (drowsiness) and return to the right posture moment by moment. As your breathing becomes calm, so does your mind. Do not let anything distract you.

経行 **Kinhin**/ 歩行禅 **Hokōzen** - Walking Meditation

Kinhin/ hokōzen is a type of walking meditation performed after practicing zazen. When the bell is rung twice during a zazenkai, this signals the beginning of kinhin. Unite your hands in gasshō, rock your body left and right, unfold your legs, turn right and stand up. Put your zafu back in place. Bow to your neighbors and the people opposite you. Form shashu¹⁰ with your hands. Starting with your right foot, advance half a foot's length between each inhale and exhale, quietly lifting the heel of the back foot before you place it in front of the other. Do not stomp or lift your feet. Keep them on the ground, slowly sliding forward. Advance clockwise around the zendō and maintain the same distance between you and your neighbors.

Pay attention to your breath and posture. Keep eyes and mouth as in zazen. When the bell is rung once put your feet together and stop. Bow. Continuing in the same direction, walk back to your spot at a normal pace. Bow to your neighbors and the people opposite you, and return to zazen.

¹⁰ shashu 叉手 - left thumb in the center of the palm, fingers wrapped around it; left hand in front of the solarplexus, right hand wrapped around it

The Bell

To indicate the start of the zazen kai a bell is rung three times. This is called 止静鐘 shijōshō. To indicate the beginning of kinhin¹¹, the bell is rung twice. This is called 経行鐘 kinhinshō. To signal the end of the walking meditation, the bell is rung once, which is called 抽解鐘 chūkaishō. To end the entire zazen kai, the bell is again rung once, which is called 放禅鐘 hōzensho.

左右揺振 Sayūyōshin - Rocking

This is done to ease the body into the meditating position before zazen, and again to ease it back into unfolding the legs and standing up afterwards. Before you start meditating, rock your body left and right like a pendulum starting with large movements, then letting them get smaller and smaller, until you have aligned belly button and nose and settled in a stable position in the center. Straighten your back, put your shoulder blades together and down. Your crown should be open to the sky.

¹¹ kinhin 経行/hokōzen 歩行禅 - walking meditation

The End of the Zazenkai

When the bell is rung once, it indicates the end of the zazenkai. Unite your hands in gasshō, and bow. Then, place them on your knees palms up and, this time starting with the opposite side, rock your body left and right in increasingly bigger movements. When you are ready, unfold your legs, and face right. Kneel with the balls of your feet supporting your weight, return your zafu to the right shape and position, and stand up. Bow to your neighbors and the people opposite you and leave the zendō with your hands in shashu¹².

¹² shashu 叉手 - hand gesture used in the zendō when standing or walking: left thumb in the center of the palm, fingers wrapped around it; left hand palm down in front of the solarplexus, right hand wrapped around it from above

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Zen Glossary

bonpu	凡夫	second stage of spiritual development in zen
chūkaishō	抽解鐘	bell rung once to indicate the end of kinhin/hokōzen
cosmic mudra/hokkaijōin	法界定印	hand gesture used in zazen: left hand on right, palms up, thumbs touching
daijōzen	大乘禪	Fourth stage of spiritual development in zen
dhyana / jōryo	靜慮	alternative term for 'Zen': state of deep concentration
furyūmonji	不立文字	Sōtō zen teaching: things are not built on letters
gasshō	合掌	In used for prayer, expressing gratitude, humility, and devotion: hands together in front of the chest or nose
gedatsu	解脫	nirvana, complete detachment from desire and duality
gedōzen	外道禪	lowest/first stage of spiritual development in zen
hankafuza	半跏趺坐	half lotus position: left foot on right thigh
hokkaijōin	法界定印	cosmic mudra - hand gesture used in zazen: left hand on right, palms up, thumbs touching
hokōzen	步行禪	walking meditation (also see: kinhin 經行)
hōzensho	放禪鐘	bell rung once to indicate the end of the zazenkai
ichinyō	一如 -	like one
in	印	hand gesture
isshindenshin	以心伝心	Sōtō zen teaching: heart-to-heart communication
jishō	自性	original Buddha nature that exists in each human being
jō	定	samadhi - alternative term for 'zen': serene state of mind
jōryo	靜慮	dhyana - alternative term for 'zen': state of deep concentration
kakusoku	覺觸	awareness
kankiissoku	欠氣一息	breathing method used initially during zazen: exhale completely before breathing in
kentan	檢単	checking the practioners' posture before the zazenkai starts
kekkaфуza	結跏趺坐	lotus position: right foot on left thigh, left foot on right thigh
kinhin	經行	walking meditation (also see hokōzen 步行禪)
kinhinshō	經行鐘	bell rung twice to indicate the beginning of kinhin/hokōzen
kyōgebetsuden	教外別伝	Sōtō zen teaching: outside the teachings, separate from the traditions
kyōsaku	警策	2 ft staff used to hit zazen practitioners and help them focus
menpeki	面壁	facing the wall for zazen

O-Shaka-san	お釈迦さん	‘Buddha’ in Japanese
rinimonjin	隣位問訴	bowing to the zen practitioners next to you
saidaijōzen	最大乗禅	highest/fifth stage of spiritual development in zen
samu	作務	manual labor zen monks engage in as part of their spiritual practice
seiza	正座	Japanese formal kneeling position: thighs on calves, buttocks on the back of the feet, straight back
sayūyōshin	左右揺振 zazen	rocking the body left and right before and after zazen
shaka	釈迦	‘Buddha’ in Japanese
shakuson	釈尊	‘Buddha’ in Japanese
shashu	叉手	hand gesture used in the zendō when standing or walking, and for hokōzen/kinhin: left thumb in the center of the palm, fingers wrapped around it; left hand palm down in front of the solarplexus, right hand wrapped around it from above
shijōshō	止静鐘	bell rung three times as a signal to start the zazenkai
shikantaza	只管打坐	Sōtō zen teaching: practice zazen; sit only in order to sit
shinkigen	新起源	‘new beginning’ - return to one’s Buddha nature
shiyuishu	思惟修	alternative term for ‘zen’: calm, even thoughts
shōjōzen	小乗禅	third stage of spiritual development in zen
tatami	畳	straw mat used for flooring in traditional Japanese houses and temples
taizamonjin	対坐問訴	bowing to the zen practitioners opposite you
zafu	坐府	thick round cushion used as a wedge between buttocks and tatami during zazen
Zen	禅	a Japanese form of Buddhism
zazen	坐禅	seated meditation
zazenkai	坐禅会	a zen meditation session
zendō	禅堂	meditation room