

BASIC STRUCTURES OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism is an Indian system of thought that was transmitted to China by Central Asian traders and Buddhist monks as early as the first century A.D. Later it passed into Korea by the fourth century and Japan by the sixth. Its influence on all three cultures was enormous. In this course, we do not have time to explore the role that Buddhism played in China and Korea, and although we will observe some of its features in early Japan, we will not have time to focus on its great influence there. Instead, we will devote one class to a discussion of the basic features of Buddhist thought. Buddhism, in its long history, branched into many competing philosophical schools, religious traditions, and monastic sects. There are literally dozens of very different versions of Buddhism in East Asian history and in the world today (although, oddly, Buddhism died out in its native India at a rather early date). In our class on Buddhism, we will only deal with the most widely shared features of the tradition.

This reading has been prepared to give you a very basic idea of the way in which Buddhism exerted an impact on Chinese society during its early period. It will also prepare you to more easily understand some of the ideas that we will be discussing in class.

The Origin of Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism was a prince of a North Indian tribe who lived about the year 500 B.C. (about the time of Confucius in China). His name was Siddhartha Gautama and he was a member of the Shakya tribe; he is often called Shakyamuni. His religious name, the Buddha, means “the awakened one,” and at the heart of the Buddha's teaching was a call to people to adopt certain practices that would show them that they were living in such deep ignorance that they could be said to be asleep to the truth--only those who followed the Buddha's path could awaken to reality.

During the Buddha's lifetime, as later, the predominant religious tradition of India was Hinduism, a religion that includes an extensive array of devotional practices that bring people closer to a world of superhuman gods, and also a strong strain of ascetic self-cultivation practices, including many forms of yoga, that are designed to purify the soul and bring the person closer to an ideal state of being. Among Hinduism's many complex features is a belief in the “transmigration of souls”: that is, the idea that after our physical death, our eternal soul migrates to a new form, through which it is physically “reincarnated.”

Siddhartha Gautama's teachings grew from an unusual mid-life crisis. Sheltered by his royal family from all the pain and suffering of life while young, an unexpected encounter with the miseries suffered by others shocked the adult Gautama into a radically new view of human existence, a perspective from which only suffering seemed real and all the comforts to which he was accustomed seemed an illusion. Disillusioned with palace life, he left to follow the example of Hindu yogins, retreating to the forests of North India to lead a life of meditation and self-denial. In the wilderness, Gautama developed new methods for meditation and a new vision of life, mind, and the universe. These form the core of the philosophy of Buddhism.

The Buddha's Core Ideas

When Gautama emerged from the forest as the newly enlightened Buddha he immediately began to preach his revelations: the Buddhist law of truth, or the *Dharma*. While the many different schools of Buddhism each have their own versions of exactly what the Buddha said, and there are many points of disagreement, some points are agreed upon by virtually everyone.

The Four Noble Truths. The Buddha's most basic insight was consistent with the personal crisis that had led him into the forest: life, which at times seems so full of good things, is actually a process of endless suffering. Even if we are not actually hungry or in pain, even if we live in sumptuous luxury, we actually endure ceaseless emotional hunger and pain. The reason why is that we are creatures of wants: our longings for things or people that will please us and satisfy our needs. The Buddha, through the vision of meditative trance, had become convinced that the world of things is actually illusory, that the beauties of the world are mere mirages that we project upon a meaningless universe of dust. We long for these illusory things, and knowingly or unknowingly, we live our lives enduring the fact that what we long for must always, in the end, elude our grasp.

Thus, for Buddha, all life is suffering--and the story gets worse! The Buddha adopted from his Hindu religious environment the doctrine of *samsara*, the belief that all existence is an endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth.* Therefore, when the Buddha tells us that we must endure nothing but suffering all our lives, he is not speaking of decades of unhappiness; suffering is forever. In the Buddhist picture, life is not much different from hell, except the flames are missing, so it's easy to mistake where you are.

* *Samsara* is a Sanskrit word. In this reading, I use simplified Sanskrit versions of key Buddhist terms, which is the form in which they are best known. Sanskrit was the classical language of ancient India.

The Buddha preached this picture of life in a formula known as the Four Noble Truths, the most basic doctrine of Buddhism. These truths tell us, 1) that life in *samsara* is suffering; 2) that this has a cause--our longing for illusory things; 3) that this suffering may be ended by following the path of the Buddha; 4) what that path is. The first two truths comprise the basic worldview of Buddhist thought. The final two truths point towards the practical core of Buddhism: its path towards salvation through self-cultivation in the manner of the Buddha's own struggle to enlightenment.

Philosophical and Religious Aspects of Buddhism

Most of us who first hear the Four Noble Truths have an initially negative response. Not only do the first two paint an unrelievedly depressing picture of life, but they do not seem to most of us true.

After all, life has many obvious pleasures: food, love, music, cable. Why focus solely on the bad side? Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the Buddha was strictly correct about the illusory nature of things. For example, many people have strong convictions about the real existence of tables and chairs. It is not certain how the historical Buddha responded to audiences who may have raised these objections. However, one of the principal activities of those who did choose to heed the Buddha's message and follow his teachings was the elaboration of a rich and sophisticated set of philosophical arguments that were designed to demonstrate the coherence of the Buddha's claims about the nature of the world. These arguments form the basis of Buddhist philosophy, which includes distinctive doctrines of metaphysics (theory of the basic structures of reality), psychology, ethics, and logic. (Our class discussion of Buddhism will focus on making sense of certain aspects of Buddhist metaphysics and psychology.)

Although some of Buddha's early audiences surely doubted his words, others were inclined to adopt his portrait of life as suffering. The poor and the sick would more easily see a message such as Buddha's as one of hope rather than despair, and Hindu yogins who had withdrawn from society would have seen in the Buddha's picture of an illusory world confirmation of their own decisions. For such people, the last two Noble Truths represented a path to salvation, albeit a very difficult path, involving years of self-denial and rigorous meditational training.

But the Buddha's own picture of salvation seems to have been so bare that few others would have found it enticing. For the Buddha, the ultimate goal of any conscious being was simply release from *samsara* and the cessation of suffering--and that was it! No afterlife, no paradise, no talk with Elvis. Nothing. In fact, "nothing" was the only description offered of the state of

permanent release from *samsara*: the state of *nirvana*. *Nirvana* was simply no longer being. For those who do not share the Buddhist belief in reincarnation, *nirvana* looks very much like death.

While all of us have bad days, few would respond by undertaking years of rigorous self-denial leading to personal extinction. Therefore, those who followed the Buddha realized early on that to enlarge the audience of their faith it would be necessary to make the path easier for most to travel and the end goal more attractive. These Buddhist disciples gradually built up a very large corpus of sacred texts and devotional practices that added to Buddhism inspirational religious features. Self-cultivation came to involve more than meditation--one could approach *nirvana* now through doing good works, chanting holy scripture, praying to scores of Buddhist saints, and contributing tax-free gifts to Buddhist monasteries. And *nirvana* too was gradually redesigned into a sort of super-physical space in which the souls of perfected people enjoyed the company of the gods and saints for eternity, in surroundings as comfortable and gemlike as the palace from which Siddhartha Gautama had once fled.* Through the development of a philosophical core that could defend the very counter-intuitive claims that the Buddha made about reality, and the development of a religious tradition that greatly enhanced the attractiveness of Buddhism's salvational message, Buddhism supplied itself with tools that enabled it to emerge from India and sweep over all of East Asia, becoming a dominant religious tradition there for over a thousand years.

Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism

The earliest forms of Buddhist practice focused on the search for personal salvation through rigorous meditational practices. Early Buddhist texts, or *sutras*, all of which were written as the direct preachings of the Buddha himself, elaborated a detailed series of meditational exercises, corresponding to various forms of trance states and various levels of enlightened wisdom. Ultimately, the practitioner would achieve release from *samsara* and, upon the death of his or her physical body, extinction in *nirvana*. End of story.

But as Buddhism developed over its early centuries, this ideal of the individually perfected yogin, called an *arhat*, was increasingly viewed as inconsistent with the implicit ethical message of the Buddha's own career as a teacher of his way. After all, the Buddha did not *only* strive for his own personal release; clearly, by spending the remainder of his post-enlightened life attempting to

* These ideas were not without problems. Buddhist philosophy is very firm in rejecting the existence of the soul or any enduring principle of personal identity in life or in *nirvana*. But the philosophical and religious aspects of Buddhism, like two spouses, learned to live together without worrying overmuch about perfect consistency.

awaken others by preaching the Dharma, Buddha demonstrated real concern for the suffering of others. Surely, the ultimate personal ideal should include some such teaching. In time, the religious understanding of some forms of Buddhism came to include a belief that the Buddha's calling in this life had, in fact, never ended. Rather, with the death of his physical body and his release into *nirvana*, some followers claimed, Buddha had made a decision to remain partially bound to the wheel of *samsara*, delaying his own final release so that he could move in and out of this life in order to “ferry” others towards release.

These ideas represented a key turning point for Buddhism. First, they made Buddhism far more ethically appealing than it had previously been by sanctioning one single form of “attachment” to the world--a concern for the salvation of others--where the first forms of Buddhism had encouraged a fully self-regarding form of practice (although mutual support among a community of practitioners had always been encouraged). A new and cuddlier version of the perfected person, who was called a *bodhisattva*, superseded in many teachings the austere *arhat* ideal. Second, the idea of a type of existence with one foot in *samsara* and another beyond it created the fertile ground upon which grew notions of saints, multiple Buddhas, heavens, and devotional formulas. Increasingly, these forms of Buddhism became typified less by monks withdrawn from society, and more by temples filled with the images of Buddhas and saints, to whom worshipers offered incense, prayers, and cash contributions.

Proponents of this new type of Buddhism called their teaching “Mahayana,” or the teaching of the “big boat.” The teachings which clung to the narrower vision of the *arhat*, which are properly termed “Therevada” teachings, were derisively labeled “Hinayana,” or “small boat” Buddhist schools. As Buddhism migrated from India towards the rest of Asia, a pattern developed. The Therevada schools spread through the countries of Southeast Asia and Indonesia, where they remain important today. The schools that spread effectively into East Asia, however, were the Mahayana schools, and it is these teachings, with their visions of the compassionate *bodhisattva* whose goal is the salvation of all sentient beings from paramecia to people, that continue to exert a major influence in Japan, Korea, non-communist regions of the Chinese cultural sphere, and increasingly once more today in China itself.

Buddhism's entry into China

The entry of Buddhism in China was very likely brought about by the vast expansionist policies of a single Chinese emperor: the Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (reigned 140-87 B.C.). Emperor Wu was the first Chinese ruler to push his armies through Central Asia, and he brought China into

contact with many peoples who had previously been exposed only to cultural influences from Persia and India. Once the Han Dynasty armies had created a secure pathway from China into Central Asia, merchants from among these groups began to travel to China to trade, and this cross-Asiatic trade grew into a steady commercial stream along what became known as the Silk Road. In time, missionary Buddhist monks searching for new worlds of sentient beings to convert to their faith, began to travel along with these caravans, eventually arriving in China during the first century A.D. They carried with them not only their knowledge, but copies of the holy word of the Buddha: *sutras*.

When the first Buddhist monks arrived in China, the Confucian Han Dynasty was still firmly in control of a unified state. The monks, who had come from India and a variety of Central Asian states, were of interest for their exotic dress, languages, and because Han Confucians were fascinated by texts of any kind. However, China was at that time ideologically and politically stable and Buddhism found no ready audience there. During the late second century, however, the Han state began to crumble and social disorder began to appear. Life grew increasingly uncertain. After 220, China was once again divided into warring independent kingdoms, as had been true of the late Zhou many years earlier, and the Confucian ideology of the Han empire fell rapidly into disrepute.

The decline of Confucianism set off a search among the most educated scholars in China for new systems of thought that could provide answers appropriate to those dislocated times. During the third century, many of these people found the ideology they were looking for in the thought of Zhuangzi, whose descriptions of the boundless Dao and of unconventional heroes possessing quirky skills appealed very much to the jaded tastes of the privileged class. Members of this upper elite produced a set of eccentric writings, artistic works, and social conventions (or counter-conventions) that are known now as “Neo-Daoism.” We will look briefly at Neo-Daoism further in our next reading, but for now, the interest Neo-Daoism holds for us lies in the fact that it was the Neo-Daoists who first began to pay serious attention to the learning of the foreign monks who had been arriving from Central Asia for over a century, often taking up permanent residence in the major cities of China.

The Neo-Daoists and like-minded intellectuals began to work with Buddhist monks to translate the *sutras* which the monks had brought with them. We still possess these early translations, and it is very clear both that the monks made some effort to express the texts in Daoistic language that would appeal to the Chinese, and that the Chinese interpreted the texts as a sort of Daoist exotica. As a result, in a very brief time poorly translated Buddhist *sutras* had

become a major intellectual fad, especially in southern China, where wars and social upheavals had driven many wealthy Chinese families as displaced refugees. So deep was the Chinese misreading of Buddhism, that a widely accepted “historical fact” of the time was that the Buddha was actually Laozi, who, it appeared, towards the close of his (fictional) life, wandered off westwards with his *Dao de jing* in hand in order to “convert the barbarians,” who apparently mistook him for a North Indian prince. According to this point of view, Buddhist scripture was nothing other than the *Dao de jing*, volumes 2-10,000.

Although the Neo-Daoists misunderstood Buddhism, their patronage of Buddhist monks was a turning point in Chinese cultural history. In time, their support of individual Buddhists and of the establishment of Buddhist monasteries attracted increasing numbers of monks from the west, many of whom were more deeply schooled in emerging trends of Buddhist doctrine. As these immigrant monks began to produce sophisticated translations closer to the spirit of Buddhism, their Chinese audiences came better to understand the nature of Buddhism, and increasing numbers of educated Chinese youths, despairing at the prolonged civil chaos that surrounded them, withdrew from Chinese society and became Buddhist monks. By the end of the fourth century, native Chinese monks, though still dependent upon foreign tutors and translators, were establishing their own monastic communities and producing original doctrinal interpretations for a Chinese audience.

The growth of Chinese Buddhism

China's post-Han “period of disunity” lasted from 220 until 589, and from the mid-point of this period on, the growth of Buddhism was phenomenal. Several Chinese kingdoms adopted Buddhism as their religion of state and patronized monks and monasteries lavishly. Varieties of Mahayana schools imported from India took root in China, each with its own signature *sutra*, representing the Buddha's “ultimate” teaching, which superseded the teachings of all other schools. Chinese pilgrims traveled to Central Asia and India and brought back *sutra* after *sutra*, every one recording the “authentic” words of Siddhartha Gautama. Chinese monks and lay followers began to create innovative new interpretive traditions and demonstrated their full membership in the world Buddhist community by writing their own *sutras*, which, after all, were just as much the authentic words of the Buddha as the Sanskrit *sutras* coming from India (and much easier for Chinese to read!).

By the end of the period of disunity, Daoism had been completely overshadowed by Buddhism (indeed, new and unusual religious forms of Daoism had arisen during this period which

owed a great many of their ideas to Buddhism). China was covered with Buddhist shrines, many comprising large temple complexes that included living quarters for monks and nuns, temples where lay visitors worshiped images of Buddhist deities, pavilions and courtyards where religious festivals, parades, and carnival markets were held, and towering pagodas that lifted the image of the religion over the landscape. The great Tang Dynasty, which ruled over a reunified China from 618 to 907, patronized Buddhism as a state cult during the greater portion of its reign. If there was a universal religion in China it was Buddhism, and that religion had duly been passed on to Korea and to Japan, where it was already beginning to flourish.

The tremendous growth of Buddhism led to a reaction by various Chinese kingdoms of the time. Although rulers of some of these states were devout Buddhists, during the sixth century we see the first of a long series of suppressions and persecutions of the Buddhist community. There were a number of factors that governed these episodes. The most critical was the growing economic importance of Buddhism in Chinese society. Early in Buddhism's career in China, it had become an established practice that Buddhist monks and temples should be tax-exempt, and rulers of the unstable regimes of the era of disunity were generally unwilling to bring their legitimacy as kings into question by the impious act of attempting to assert fiscal authority over the sacred realm. Consequently, as time went on, Buddhist institutions were able to accumulate vast stores of wealth to which the state had no access. It became common for lay people to donate money and property to temples, both to earn increased access to paradise for their charitable works, and also to gain certain more tangible favors from Buddhist temples. Among the latter, for instance, might be included free use of lands that had been donated. This common practice allowed wealthy landowners to give away large tracts of land to monasteries, but to continue collecting rents from tenant peasants who farmed the land. Because the land was now officially the property of the temple, the yields could no longer be taxed and the landowner greatly increased his profits, of which the Buddhist temple received a cut. (Buddhism came to play similarly important economic roles in Korea and Japan.)

As the economic influence of Buddhism grew, governments became increasingly inclined to force reductions in the scale of Buddhist monasteries and nunneries. The Buddhist "church" came to offer an alternative career to many aspiring young men and women, competing in many ways with the rewards of wealth and status promised by a government career (which was, in any event, open only to men), and the growing population of tax-exempt monks and nuns were attracted to their "profession" as much by hope of worldly gain as by devotion to the faith. During the latter period of the Tang, as the dynasty suffered a series of destabilizing blows that

undermined its self-confidence, the government began to take drastic action against the Buddhist establishment.

The climax came in 845 when the Tang government proclaimed a massive suppression of Buddhism. The emperor withdrew the status of over 200,000 monks and nuns, closed over 4,000 monasteries and nunneries, confiscated millions of acres of temple lands, and registered 150,000 “slaves” attached to the temples, who had been under the protection of the Buddhist establishment, as taxpaying freemen. This would be the most dramatic attack on Buddhism until the Communist government closed all temples during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. The suppression came close to wiping out Buddhism in China, but so powerful were the forces of the religion that the government policy was relaxed the following year, upon the death of the emperor (who apparently died from Daoist elixirs of immortality that he had been in the habit of imbibing). The temples were soon replenished with returning monks and new postulants. But significant damage had been done, and although Buddhism remained an important force in China, it never recaptured the dominance that it possessed during the early and mid-Tang periods. The century before the great suppression of 845 remained the highwater mark of Buddhism's influence on China, and all significant philosophical and religious innovations that China contributed to world Buddhism occurred before that time.

Chan (Zen) Buddhism

Buddhism in China grew into a variety of powerful schools. These schools were distinguished by significantly different interpretations of Buddhism's basic message, different forms of meditational practices by monks and nuns, and different ceremonies of devotional practice by lay believers. Several schools continue to have influence in East Asia today. These include Tiantai (Japanese: Tendai) Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and Chan (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism.

Tiantai Buddhism represented an important type of Buddhist school: the text-oriented cult that stressed grasping the Buddha's message through an understanding of the sacred sutras that preserved the Buddha's many teachings. Because the sutras that had been brought from India and Central Asia were so diverse (they had actually been composed by widely different types of Buddhist thinkers over many centuries, although they were understood as the teachings of a single man), some Chinese thinkers undertook the daunting task of sorting out the many teachings of these sutras into a coherent hierarchy of teachings that pointed towards a consistent, ultimate message. Tian-tai was the most enduring of these schools, which endowed Buddhism with a

scholastic tradition that sometimes came to dominate over the purely meditational component of self-cultivation.

Pure Land Buddhism was a much different phenomenon. Pure Land was a popularized form of Buddhism which preached that salvation could be attained through purely devotional practices, such as the chanting of sutras or brief devotional formulas, the worship of Buddha images, and financial contributions to temples. Pure Land represented a non-intellectual form of Buddhism that appealed most directly to the enormous and illiterate peasant population of China. It taught the poor that through devotion they could escape their lives of misery and be admitted after death to the Western Paradise, the “pure land” where one enjoyed eternal comfort and joy, free of the toils of *samsara*.

Beginning about the seventh century, a highly sophisticated school formed in reaction to both the trends represented by Tiantai and Pure Land Buddhism. This was the Chan School, which is usually referred to by its Japanese name, Zen.

Zen Buddhism rejected the value of any textual approach to Buddhist enlightenment, and equally rejected any doctrine that promised salvation without the self-cultivation of meditation, after the manner of the Buddha himself. The word *chan* (*zen*) means “trance,” and the Zen School reoriented the focus of Buddhist teachings entirely towards the cultivation of perfect meditational techniques, known as “*zazen*.” For these practitioners, the Buddha’s radically different insight into the nature of the world as an impermanent realm of suffering could be grasped directly through the simple practice of quiet sitting, unadulterated by any doctrine whatever. This rejection of all doctrine was itself a doctrine of some sophistication, as it involved the refutation of all ordinary ways of describing what was real – any description of reality in language constituted a doctrine, and was thus intrinsically erroneous. Zen disciples tried to wean themselves of any dependence on language or its categories of understanding, an impulse that Chinese Zen clearly derived from the writings of Zhuangzi as much as from Buddhist sources.

One of the most outstanding features of Zen practice was a form of verbal play through which Zen masters tried to destroy their disciples’ reliance on linguistic formulations of knowledge. This device was called the *gong’an*, or *koan* in Japanese. It involved meditation upon certain questions that defied any rational response. Among the most famous are: “Where was your face before your mother’s birth?” and “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The absurdist implications of such *koans* was extended in Chinese Zen practice into types of weird and spontaneous interplay between masters and disciples that were often understood as revealing levels of enlightenment. For example, here is a record of an incident that took place between two famous

Zen monks, the ninth century master Huangbo and his disciple Linji (whose name is attached to the most famous school of Japanese Buddhism, Rinzai).

One day Huangbo ordered all of the monks of the temple to work in the tea garden. He himself was the last to arrive. Linji greeted him, but simply stood with his hands resting on the hoe.

“Are you tired?” asked Huangbo.

“I just started working! How can you say I'm tired?”

Huangbo suddenly lifted his stick and struck Linji, who seized the stick and with a push threw his master to the ground. Huangbo called the supervisor to help him up. After doing so, the supervisor asked, “Master, how can you let such a madman insult you like that?” Huangbo picked up the stick and beat the supervisor.

Meanwhile, Linji began to dig in the ground. “Let them use cremation in other places,” he said. “Here, I will bury you alive!”

Zen is today the most influential Buddhist school in East Asia. Its dominant wings, which divided long ago on the issue of whether enlightenment comes gradually or suddenly, have spread worldwide, and Zen schools can be found in many countries and in many states in America. Many of the most important missionaries of Buddhism in the West have been Japanese Zen monks, and this reading closes with a representative reading drawn from the teachings of one of the most articulate of these monks, Suzuki Shunryu (1905-1971). The short essay that follows pieces together several short sections from Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which is one of the clearest introductions to the nature of Buddhist meditation.

From, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

People say that practicing Zen is difficult, but there is a misunderstanding as to why. It is not difficult because it is hard to sit in a cross-legged position, or to attain enlightenment. It is difficult because it is hard to keep our mind pure and our practice pure in its fundamental sense. The Zen school developed in many ways after it was established in China, but at the same time, it became more and more impure. But I do not want to talk about Chinese Zen or the history of Zen. I am interested in helping you keep your practice from becoming impure.

In Japan we have the phrase *shoshin*, which means “beginner's mind.” The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner's mind. Suppose you recite the *Prajna Paramita*

Sutra only once. It might be a very good recitation. But what would happen if you recited it twice, three times, four times, or more? You might easily lose your original attitude towards it. The same thing will happen in your other Zen practices. For a while you will keep your beginner's mind, but if you continue to practice one, two, three years or more, although you may improve some, you are liable to lose the limitless meaning of original mind.

For Zen students the most important thing is not to be dualistic. Our “original mind” includes everything within itself. It is always rich and sufficient within itself. You should not lose your self-sufficient state of mind. This does not mean a closed mind, but actually an empty mind and a ready mind. If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.

Now I would like to talk to you about our *zazen* posture. When you sit in the full lotus position, your left foot is on your right thigh, and your right foot is on your left thigh. When we cross our legs like this, even though we have a right leg and a left leg, they have become one. The position expresses the oneness of duality: not two, and not one. Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind are both two *and* one. We usually think that if something is not one, it is more than one; if it is not singular, it is plural. But in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular. Each one of us is both dependent and independent.

After some years we will die. If we just think that it is the end of our life, this will be the wrong understanding. But, on the other hand, if we think that we do not die, this is also wrong. We die, and we do not die. This is the right understanding. So when we take this posture it symbolizes this truth. When I have the left foot on the right side of my body, and the right foot on the left side of my body, I do not know which is which. So either may be the left or the right side.

You should not be tilted sideways, backwards, or forwards. You should be sitting straight up as though you were supporting the sky with your head. This is not just form or breathing. It expresses the key point of Buddhism. It is a perfect expression of your Buddha nature. If you want true understanding of Buddhism, you should practice this way. These forms are not a means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture itself is the purpose of our practice. When you have this posture you have the right state of mind,

so there is not need to try to attain some special state. When you try to attain something, your mind starts to wander about somewhere else. When you do not try to attain anything, you have your own body and mind right here. A Zen master would say, “Kill the Buddha!” Kill the Buddha if the Buddha exists somewhere else. Kill the Buddha because you should resume your own Buddha nature.

When we practice *zazen* our mind always follows our breathing. When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say “inner world” or “outer world,” but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air goes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think “I breathe,” the “I” is extra. There is no you to say “I.” What we call “I” is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all. When your mind is pure and calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing: no “I,” no world, no mind or body; just a swinging door.

So when we practice *zazen*, all that exists is the movement of the breathing, but we are aware of this movement. You should not be absent-minded. But to be aware of the movement does not mean to be aware of your small self, but rather of your universal nature, or Buddha nature. This kind of awareness is very important, because we are usually so one-sided. Our usual understanding of life is dualistic: you and I, this and that, good and bad. But actually these discriminations are themselves the awareness of the universal existence. “You” means to be aware of the universe in the form of you, and “I” means to be aware of it in the form of I. You and I are just swinging doors. This kind of understanding is necessary. This should not even be called understanding; it is actually the true experience of life through Zen practice.

* * *