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TEISHO

SOME WORDS ABOUT SESSHIN FOR NEWCOMERS TO ZEN PRACTICE  
by Robert Aitken, Roshi

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious  
issues.

Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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Soon your sesshin will begin. The word sesshin is a compound sino-  
Japanese term  
made up of two ideographs, setsu and shin. Shin means mind. Setsu has  
several  
meanings - touch, receive, convey. Usually sesshin is literally  
translated to  
touch the mind, but it also means to receive the mind, to convey the  
mind. All  
of these meanings are included in that one expression, sesshin. It is a  
time to  
put everything aside, to forget everything and to focus all one's  
enquiring  
spirit through the medium of the practice, counting the breaths or koan  
work.

To touch the mind of course implies an individual action. To receive the  
mind  
and to convey the mind show how the action of realisation is not self-  
centred.

In fact, you are simply the agent of realisation. If you enter sesshin  
with the  
spirit, "I must become realised", then you are setting up a conflict with  
the

basic fact. Fundamentally, heaven and earth and I are of one spirit.

All  
things and I are one. Dogen Zenji asked, "What is the mind? The mind  
is  
mountains, rivers and the great earth, the sun and the moon and the  
stars."

And of course it is all people, all things, all plants, all animals. And  
particularly in this instance it is your brothers and sisters in the  
dojo. Your

own individual effort is very important but unless it is effort with the  
spirit

that you are the agent of realisation, it is self-centred.

Sometimes I hear people say after sesshin, "Well, I certainly worked  
through a  
lot of things during that sesshin," and I think to myself, "That wasn't  
such a

good sesshin for you." Sesshin is not a time to work things through. Things may be worked through in your practice but if you set yourself toward working through things, that is to say, reviewing old traumas, then you are not using your time effectively.

Sesshin is a time to focus wholeheartedly on one thing, just that count, just that koan, nothing else. You must forget yourself in that practice and then things will be worked through.

Yasutani Haku'un Roshi used to caution us at the beginning of every sesshin that there are three basic rules for sesshin. These rules are not established for the sake of ritual or ceremony. They are rules that have been worked out empirically over many hundreds of years in the operation of Zen seclusions. The first of these rules is no talking, not even whispering. There is something about the human voice that is very distracting. Your ears prick up and your concentration is lost. Don't talk at all. During a work period you may have to ask, "Where do you keep the mop?". or maybe you don't have to ask for it. Maybe if you use some initiative, you can look around and find it yourself. If some emergency comes up, then you may speak to one of the leaders privately, succinctly in a soft voice. Remember that your leader has his or her own practice too. Too much complaint, too much emergency, will have a poor effect on the entire sesshin.

Please remember that personal crisis can be a great opportunity in zazen. The only emergency that can take you from sesshin comes when one gets a telegram that someone is gravely ill at home, or something of that kind. Other emergencies should be worked through. One becomes very sensitive during sesshin and convinced that a neighbour is wriggling just to distract me or the monitor is hitting me too hard or not hard enough, or the meals don't contain enough protein or they're too salty or not salty enough or I'm not getting enough sleep or my legs hurt too much and so on. Well, all of these things, except the latter one, can be just set to one side as delusion. If your legs hurt too much then you may sit in a chair. But remember that just like working out in a gym, you cannot stretch your legs to the point where you can sit comfortably unless there is a certain amount of pain. You cannot develop yourself unless you

become a little tired or a little sore. So push yourself. Zen is the middle way and it is important not to get blown out so that you come to the point where you simply cannot ever do zazen again. So, find the middle way between extremes and sit in a chair if you must.

The second rule is no looking around. I want to tell you a story about that. The first Roshi in the United States was a man named Sasaki Shigetsu, also known as Sasaki Soku-an Roshi. He established the American Buddhist Society which later became the first Zen Institute of New York, and it was his wife, Ruth Fuller Sasaki who wrote Zen Dust with Miura Roshi. A man named Emanuel Sherman was a student of Sasaki Roshi. The Roshi gave him a zazen robe. The war came along, Sasaki Roshi was interned and he later died, and Sherman rather fell away from the practice of doing zazen. Then in 1957 when my wife Anne and I were teaching in Ojai, California, Nakagawa Soen Roshi came to hold memorial sesshin after the death of his friend Sensaki Nyogen Sensai in Los Angeles. I persuaded Sherman, who was also living at Ojai at that time, to come with us to the sesshin, and he wore his robe. Roshi asked him before sesshin, "Where did you get that robe?" and Sherman told him, "It was given to me by Sasaki Shigetsu Roshi in New York when I studied with him before the war." He turned over the lapel of his robe where something was written in Chinese characters and said, "I've always wondered what this said." And Soen Roshi read the inscription and asked, "Did Sasaki Roshi write that?" Sherman said, "Yes, he did." Soen Roshi said, "What a great roshi he was." Sherman said, "What does it say, what does it say?" Soen Roshi said, "It says, 'don't look around'."

You see, if you are seeking to touch the mind, eye contact is very distracting from this practice. You are seeking fundamental communication and the distraction of ordinary social interaction can be destructive.

The third rule is "no social greetings". This follows naturally from the first two. The original Japanese says something like, "no social signals." In other words, if two people come to a door at the same time, there is no need for one person to gesture to the other to go first. One person goes first and another follows, like two drops of water in the stream, very naturally. You don't use

social signals in a crowd of people but if you are walking through a crowd of people you can make your way without touching anybody, without any signals, without any word. People move aside naturally and you move aside naturally. That's the way it should be in sesshin. If you follow these three rules, no talking, no looking around and no social greetings, you will have a good sesshin.

Now I want to say a few words about the dojo. Dojo is a term that you are familiar with because it is used by people in akido, karate, judo and so on. It's even in the English dictionary. It is a sino-Japanese term made up of two ideographs. "Do" is the Japanese pronunciation of Tao, as in Tao-te-ching or Taoism. And Jo simply means place. The place of the Tao. Tao means "way". Arthur Whaley translates the Tao-te-Ching as the way and its power. But Tao does not mean only a way to - it does not simply mean a means. The opening words in the Tao-te-Ching are, "The way that can be followed is not the true way." So we should understand what Tao means.

When Kumara-jiva and other great translators set about rendering Buddhist Sanskrit into Chinese they had to find Chinese words that were equivalent to particular Sanskrit expressions. They used the word Tao to mean not only path but also realisation. They used Tao to translate Bodhi. So Tao is not only the path to realisation, it is realisation itself. Actually Dojo is a translation of the Sanskrit word Bodhi Manda. Bodhi is enlightenment, Manda is spot or place, the place or spot of enlightenment and it refers to the spot under the Bodhi tree where the Buddha sat when he saw the morning star and had his great realisation.

So, your meditation hall, your dojo, is your sacred place. Your cushions are your own personal dojo, your own personal Bodhi Manda, your own personal spot of realisation. Thus it is very important to keep the dojo as a sacred place of realisation. It must be spotlessly clean, it must be in regular order with a figure as the focal point of devotion - a Buddha or a Bodhisattva. Before the Buddha or Bodhisattva, you should have incense, flowers and a candle. The candle represents enlightenment, the flowers represent compassion, the two sides

of any genuine religious experience. The incense is an offering to the Buddha,  
as of course candle and flowers are as well.

In front of every Rinzai Zen monastery in Japan there is a sign that carries the name of the temple, the name of the mountain, for all temples have a mountain name as well as a building name. There is also the name of the sect, the Rinzai sect and the name of the Branch, like the Myoshinji Branch and then the words Semon Dojo. Semon means "special". So it is a special place of enlightenment. When I hear people say, "I don't need a special place of enlightenment, I can do zazen anywhere," I feel they are not ready to do zazen. The mind is just too tricky and if you say you are doing zazen all day long, that means you are not doing zazen at any time. You need a special corner, if only in your own bedroom, to make sacred. The process of religious practice is one of sharp incisive focus. It is one of all-out devotion. This doesn't mean that you go around all day long in your everyday life with a long face but it means that when you practice, you only practice. You include things in that practice which are conducive to the practice, and you exclude other things. In this way you cultivate your own Semon Dojo.

Now about practising without a teacher. This is extremely difficult, so please keep yourself within bounds and follow the directions in the orientation as closely as you can. When you first sit down, please take a couple of deep breaths, all the way in and hold it and then all the way out and hold it. You may do this through your mouth, although this is the only time when you should breathe through your mouth. Then when you've taken these one or two deep breaths, rock back and forth, first widely and then in decreasing arcs until you are erect. And then lean far forward and thrust your rear end back and then sit up. Now you are ready for your breath counting. Unless you have already worked with a Roshi, I would think that you should stay with breath counting. If you have taken the koan Mu for yourself and worked on it for some time, then that will be all right. But please don't switch around and experiment now with breath counting, now with Mu, now with the Sound of One Hand, now with the Original Face before your Parents were Born. It becomes too diffused.

So if you are counting your breaths, just count your breaths. But if you have taken up Mu, then count your breaths for one or two sequences and then begin with your Mu practice. Key Mu to your breaths in the same way that you key your count to your breathing. There comes a time when you can forget about breathing and just face Mu. Your breath at that time will be very small.

Your practice is not merely to focus on something. You must become that thing itself. If you are counting your breaths, then count "one" for the inhalation, "two" for the exhalation and so on but let the count do the counting. In other words, let that point one count one, let that point two count two, let that point three count three and so on up to ten and then repeat. It's like the musician seeks to let the music play the music but he or she must practice a long time before that can happen. So you must practice letting the count do the counting.

Mumon said about the koan Mu, "Carry it with you day and night." What does this mean in practical terms for the student at sesshin? It means that you should be doing Mu or counting your breaths, from morning to night and that you should put yourself to sleep with it. If you're chopping vegetables, you need to concentrate only on chopping. You can't think about counting your breaths at such a time or you'll be cutting off your thumb. In any very demanding work, please focus on that. You can't focus on Mu while you're explaining irregular French verbs. You can't concentrate on counting your breaths, really concentrate, if you're driving a car. So focus entirely on what you are doing if the task is very demanding but there aren't so many demanding tasks at sesshin. Chopping vegetables and cooking may be the most demanding of those tasks. So keep yourself with your breath counting or with your Mu at all times and then when you go to bed, lie down and hold Mu lightly, or hold your breath-counting lightly and put yourself to sleep in this way and your zazen will continue in some fashion during your sleep.

There are two ways to get through a sesshin. One is to concentrate on survival and the second is to focus on each moment as it comes up. Either way will get you through the sesshin. But only the second way will give you an effective

sesshin. If you focus on survival then you will be disappointed after  
your  
sesshin, because you will know that you have wasted your time just  
thinking  
about getting through it. Forget about getting through it, just focus on  
that  
one, on that two, on that three, that's all - nothing else. Have a good  
sesshin!

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