

Fukanzazengi

Universal Instructions for the Practice of Zazen

Study Guide and Commentary

INTRODUCTION

Zen Master Dōgen wrote the *Fukanzazengi* in 1227 shortly after his return to Japan from China, producing edited copies based on the original over the next twenty-five years. His intent was to provide a meditation manual for Zazen practitioners.¹ The title is often translated as “The Universal Recommendation for the Practice of Zazen” or something similar.

This brief document summarizes the essence of what Dōgen learned in China and taught during his lifetime. He considered the practice and mastery of seated meditation, or *Zazen*, to be the authentic transmission of the Buddhadharma, passed down through the centuries from master to disciple in an unbroken stream of enlightenment. This manual of practice for *Zazen* has been used for over seven centuries to instruct and renew the efforts of his followers. It is recited daily in Soto Zen monasteries and centers as a continuing means of learning for monks and laity alike.

This study guide of the *Fukanzazengi* consists of a brief commentary on each paragraph, with historical data and analysis provided as seems appropriate. The manual contains references well known at the time of writing or contained within the folklore of the Zen school, that require some elaboration for the meaning to be grasped. What follows should not be considered exhaustive, merely a guide for introspection, reflection, and further study.

The translation that follows is arranged in fourteen paragraphs divided into four sections. The division is arbitrary, adopted to give a structure for ease of understanding, and is not supported by any independent scholarship.

¹ See Carl Bielefeldt, *Dogen's Manuals of Zen Meditation* [Los Angeles, CA, University of California Press, 1988] for a detailed scholastic study on the history, use, and content of the *Fukanzazengi*.

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FUKANZAZENGI

1. The Way is basically perfect and all pervading. How could it be contingent upon practice and realization? The dharma-vehicle is free and untrammled. What need is there for people's concentrated effort? Indeed, the Whole Body is far beyond the world's dust. Who could believe in a means to brush it clean? It is never apart from one right where one is. What is the use of going off here and there to practice?

2. And yet, if there is the slightest discrepancy, the Way is as distant as heaven from earth. If the least like or dislike arises, the Mind is lost in confusion. Suppose one gains pride of understanding and inflates one's own enlightenment, glimpsing the wisdom that runs through all things, attaining the Way and clarifying the Mind, raising an aspiration to escalate the very sky. One is making the initial, partial excursions about the frontiers, but is still somewhat deficient in the vital way of total emancipation.

3. Need I mention the Buddha, who was possessed of inborn knowledge? The influence of his six years of upright sitting is noticeable still. Or Bodhidharma's transmission of the mind-seal – the fame of his nine years of wall sitting is celebrated to this day. Since this was the case with the saints of old, how can people of today dispense with negotiation of the Way?

4. You should therefore cease from practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate yourself. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will be manifest. If you want to attain suchness, you should practice suchness without delay.

2. 5. For sanzen, a quiet room is suitable. Eat and drink moderately. Cast aside all involvements and cease all affairs. Do not think good or bad. Do not administer pros and cons. Cease all the movements of the conscious mind, the gauging of all thoughts and views. Have no designs on becoming a Buddha. Sanzen has nothing whatever to do with sitting or lying down.

6. At the site of your regular sitting, spread out thick matting and place a cushion above it. Sit either in the full-lotus or half-lotus position. In the full-lotus position, you first place your right foot on your left thigh and your left foot on your right thigh. In the half-lotus, you simply press your left foot against your right thigh. You should have your robes and belt loosely bound and arranged in order. Then place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm facing upwards on your right palm, thumb tips touching. Thus, sit upright in correct bodily posture, neither inclining to the left nor to the right, neither leaning forward nor backward. Be sure your ears are on a plane with your shoulders and your nose in line with your navel. Place your tongue against the front roof of your mouth, with teeth and lips both shut. Your eyes should always remain open, and you should breathe gently through your nose.

7. Once you have adjusted your posture, take a deep breath inhale and exhale, rock your body right and left, and settle into a steady, immobile sitting position. Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Non-thinking. This is the essential art of zazen.

38. The zazen I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the Dharma-gate of repose and bliss, the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment. It is the manifestation of ultimate reality. Traps and snares can never reach it. Once its heart is grasped, you are like the dragon when it gains the water, like the tiger when it enters the mountain. For you must know that just there, in zazen, the right Dharma is manifesting itself and that from the first dullness and distraction are struck aside.

9. When you arise from sitting, move slowly and quietly, calmly and deliberately. Do not rise suddenly or abruptly. In surveying the past, we find that transcendence of both unenlightenment and enlightenment, and dying while either sitting or standing, have all depended entirely on the strength of zazen.

10. In addition, the bringing about of enlightenment by the opportunity provided by a finger, a banner, a needle, or a mallet, and the effecting of realization with the aid of a hossu, a fist, a staff, or a shout, cannot be fully understood by discriminative thinking. Indeed, it cannot be fully known by the practicing or realizing of supernatural powers either. It must be deportment beyond hearing and seeing. Is it not a principle that is prior to knowledge and perceptions?

11. This being the case, intelligence or lack of it does not matter; between the dull and the sharp-witted there is no distinction. If you concentrate your effort single-mindedly, that in itself is negotiating the Way. Practice-realization is naturally undefiled. Going forward in practice is a matter of everydayness.

412. In general, this world and other worlds as well, both in India and China, equally hold the Buddha-seal, and over all prevails the character of this school, which is simply devotion to sitting, total engagement in immobile sitting. Although it is said that there are as many minds as there are people, still they all negotiate the Way solely in zazen. Why leave behind the seat that exists in your home and go aimlessly off to the dusty realms of other lands? If you make one misstep you go astray from the Way directly before you.

13. You have gained the pivotal opportunity of human form. Do not use your time in vain. You are maintaining the essential working of the Buddha Way. Who would take wasteful delight in the spark from the flint stone? Besides, form and substance are like the dew on the grass, destiny like the dart of lightning - emptied in an instant, vanished in a flash.

14. Please, honored followers of Zen, long accustomed to groping for the elephant, do not be suspicious of the true dragon. Devote your energies to a way that directly indicates the absolute. Revere the person of complete attainment who is beyond all human agency. Gain accord with the enlightenment of the Buddhas; succeed to the legitimate lineage of the ancestor's samadhi. Constantly perform in such a manner and you are assured of being a person such as they. Your treasure-store will open of itself, and you will use it at will.

Section 1 Background Information

PARAGRAPH 1 Definitions of the Way followed by amplifying questions

The Way is basically perfect and all-pervading. How could it be contingent upon practice and realization? The dharma-vehicle is free and untrammled. What need is there for people's concentrated effort? Indeed, the Whole Body is far beyond the world's dust. Who could believe in a means to brush it clean? It is never apart from one right where one is. What is the use of going off here and there to practice?

This paragraph restates in four different ways Dōgen's naturally arising koan of "If we are already Buddha, why do we have to practice?" Or put in other words, "If the Way is already perfect and we are never apart from it, why do we have to practice?" Dōgen ultimately contends that the transcendental knowledge we desperately seek is present from the very first time we engage in sitting. This knowledge is not divorced from the human world and arises within practice/realization.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

If the Way is basically perfect and all-pervading, why do we have such a tough time locating it?

Do you know your naturally arising koan?

PARAGRAPH 2 Cautionary statements that point out the difficulty of an accurate understanding

And yet, if there is the slightest discrepancy, the Way is as distant as heaven from earth. If the least like or dislike arises, the Mind is lost in confusion. Suppose one gains pride of understanding and inflates one's own enlightenment, glimpsing the wisdom that runs through all things, attaining the Way and clarifying the Mind, raising an aspiration to escalate the very sky. One is making the initial, partial excursions about the frontiers, but is still somewhat deficient in the vital way of total emancipation.

If a gap arises between the Way and ourselves, then we need to evaluate our situation and recommit when necessary. Confusion and doubt present themselves endlessly. Humility and great patience contain the power and knowledge to keep centered on learning and applying the principles of Zen practice. Ultimately moral improvement results from diligent discipline.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Name a few possible discrepancies.

Do you have any thoughts about what total emancipation consists of?

PARAGRAPH 3 Commitment to the Way of Buddha – the Way of Awakening

Need I mention the Buddha, who was possessed of inborn knowledge? The influence of his six years of upright sitting is noticeable still. Or Bodhidharma's transmission of the mind-seal – the fame of his nine years of wall sitting is celebrated to this day. Since this was the case with the saints of old, how can people of today dispense with negotiation of the Way?

The old masters' life examples open our understanding that diligence is an essential ingredient of a successful practice. The teaching of the sages melts misunderstandings. "Six years" refers to the time Buddha devoted himself to avoidance of the extremes of self-indulgence and deprivation that eventually became the basic principle of the Buddhist ethic of the Middle Path. The "nine years" of Bodhidharma's wall gazing imparted to the Zen school the message that Zazen is a deep and vast undertaking, not to be taken up with a light heart.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is inborn knowledge?

Why is Dōgen questioning, "*How can people of today dispense with negotiation of the Way?*"

PARAGRAPH 4 Orientation and fruits of practice

You should therefore cease from practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate yourself. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will be manifest. If you want to attain Suchness [Thusness], you should practice Suchness without delay.

To live in the ordinary world practitioners should cultivate worldly letters and penetrate all they imply. Practitioners gain intimate knowledge of the realms of sentient beings, phenomena, and universal principles by directly encountering the Universal Aspect of Mind without media. This practice is known as shikantaza. The form of shikantaza is one of spiritual power, independence, and freedom. Emotions and intellect are refined and sensitized, open to the appreciation of human endeavor and the beauty of nature. Remaining committed to the practice of shikantaza removes the karmic barriers to “body and mind drop away.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is the backward step?

Do you have any thoughts on the nature of *Suchness*?

Section 2 Introduction to Shikantaza

PARAGRAPH 5 Initial guidelines

For Sanzen, a quiet room is suitable. Eat and drink moderately. Cast aside all involvements and cease all affairs. Do not think good or bad. Do not administer pros and cons. Cease all the movements of the conscious mind, the gauging of all thoughts and views. Have no designs on becoming a Buddha. Sanzen has nothing whatever to do with sitting or lying down.

Sanzen means the sum of all Zen training practices taken on in life, especially Zazen practice with a teacher. In the practice of Zazen, the various contents of the mind stream are allowed to arise and subside without interference. An impartial awareness notes the occurrence of whatever is happening. Impartiality means not attempting to change the flow in any way, neither chasing pleasant experiences nor running away from those that are disagreeable. Learning to see events as they occur just as they are without judgment or involvement allows us to identify the barriers that stand in the way of our continuity of awareness. This means to set aside our concerns of the moment, separating the self from a habitual identification with our usual mental patterns. The issues of daily life, however, do not go away just because we turn our attention away from them; their form and manifestation are studied and skill-in-means are established to resolve their negative afflictions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What does the orientation, “*Cease all the movements of the conscious mind*” mean?

Any thoughts on impartiality?

PARAGRAPH 6 Directions for physical posture of Zazen

At the sight of your regular sitting, spread out thick matting and place a cushion above it. Sit either in the full-lotus or half-lotus position. In the full-lotus position, you first place your right leg on your left thigh and left foot on your right thigh. In the half-lotus, you simply press your left foot against your right thigh. You should have your robes and belt loosely bound and arranged in order. Then place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm facing upward on your right palm, thumb tips touching. Thus, sit upright in correct bodily posture, neither inclining to the left nor to the right, neither leaning forward nor backward. Be sure your ears on a plane with your shoulders and your nose in line with your navel. Place your tongue against the front roof of your mouth, with teeth and lips both shut. Your eyes should always remain open, and you should breathe gently through your nose.

The upright sitting posture is recommended as the best for achieving composure. The posture of tranquility and insight opens the gate of inconceivability and is the basis of communicating Buddhist principles and their function. The instructions transmitted by Dōgen were those of the Ancestors and Soto Zen Masters. They are not arbitrary, but born of experience and taught as the best method to employ to enhance samadhi. The dominance of the left over right (leg and placement and hand mudra), serves to strengthen the functioning of the right brain (intuition) over the left (analysis).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is your experience in actualizing Dōgen's instruction on posture?

How do you prepare yourself when taking the position for a sitting period?

PARAGRAPH 7 Directions for training of mental culture

Once you have adjusted your posture, take a deep breath inhale and exhale, rock your body right and left, and settle into a steady, immobile sitting position. Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? – Non-thinking. This is the essential art of Zazen.

Dōgen’s not-thinking is observation of the internal world without making distinctions about thoughts as they arise. It is an all-encompassing attitude of mind that does not attempt to modify thoughts and feelings, but endeavors to know their makeup and function. With the absence of judgmental distinctions, conditioned states are seen clearly and undisguised.

The simple act of observation, devoid of analysis, is the dawning of the Universal Aspect of Mind. Inevitably, practitioners inquire of themselves, their peers, and their teachers, “How can posing the observational question of ‘what is going on here?’ by itself bring about meaningful change?” The answer is that consistent and diligent application of the observational mind of not-thinking liberates thinking from bondage and attachment. Being able to consciously articulate what is going on, and to cultivate a new perspective of the mind stream – an attitude that trusts the intuitive information that arises from contact with the previously unknown Universal Mind – begins the process of freeing oneself from the afflictive effects of conditioned states.

Without habitual modes of preference making, thinking and not-thinking, once experienced as opposites, are now experienced as a complementary pair capable of acting in beneficent harmony. This harmony is nonthinking itself, the natural result of observing thinking. One thought of harmony is a moment of Buddhahood. The Personal Aspect of Mind of thinking and the Universal Aspect of not-thinking are shown to be inseparable, equal, and in an unending concordant relationship.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is your personal understanding of “*How do you think of not-thinking? – Non-thinking?*”

Section 3 Outcomes of Practice

PARAGRAPH 8 The basics of the mind of Zazen

The Zazen I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the Dharma-gate of repose and bliss, the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment. It is the manifestation of ultimate reality. Traps and snares can never reach it. Once its heart is grasped, you are like the dragon when it gains the water, like the tiger when it enters the mountain. For you must know that just there, in Zazen, the right Dharma is manifesting itself and that from the first dullness and distraction are struck aside.

Understanding the complementary nature of the relationship of dualistic pairs has wide-ranging effects. Replacing the perspective of “opposites” with “complementary” when dealing with dualistic pairs is not an abstract concept. It burrows into the intimate fabric of everyday relationships. For example, one issue that consistently comes up in the Zen study of lay practitioners is the perceived conflict between the demands of family life and career with the time for dedication to Zazen. Often practitioners say, "I don't have time for my practice." This view encapsulates an incomplete understanding of how the dualistic pair of the mundane (daily life) and the sacred (Zazen) interacts. Recognizing them as complements brings the unity of nonthinking directly into such activities as making supper, playing with one's children, creating a spreadsheet, and watching the moon set with your significant other. The unifying practice of Zazen itself, however brief it may be, contains and supports the hopes, dreams, loves, anxieties, and confusion that all practitioners encounter.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is your view on Dōgen's assertions of:

It is simply the Dharma-gate of repose and bliss.

It is the manifestation of ultimate reality.

PARAGRAPH 9 Encouragement to cultivate strength of Zazen

When you arise from sitting, move slowly and quietly, calmly and deliberately. Do not rise suddenly or abruptly. In surveying the past, we find that transcendence of both unenlightenment and enlightenment, and dying while either sitting or standing, have all depended entirely on the strength of Zazen.

Contemplation, otherwise known as tranquil meditation or Zazen, transforms one's life from mundane only to witnessing the sacred. When rising at the end of a sitting period, the continuity of awareness of sitting becomes the mind of walking; tranquility and insight permeate physical movement. The mind of sitting when advanced as the mind of action provides intuitive perception to deal with the world of complex movements, confusion, even death, without losing the continuity of awareness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How is dying aided by a strong Zazen ability?

PARAGRAPH 10 Zazen is best done with others to receive and share the benefit of mutual activity.

In addition, the bringing about of enlightenment by the opportunity provided by a finger, a banner, a needle, or a mallet, and the effecting of realization with the aid of a hossu, a fist, a staff, or a shout, cannot be fully understood by discriminative thinking. Indeed, it cannot be fully known by the practicing or realizing of supernatural powers either. It must be deportment beyond hearing and seeing. Is it not a principle that is prior to knowledge and perceptions?

To grasp the truth of the statement, “When reality is recognized as universal cognizance is the start of knowledge” is to engage intimately with the activities of the Buddhas. This understanding is “deportment beyond hearing and seeing.” The study of the boundless venture of Zazen centers on learning how to manifest that knowledge in daily life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How does a “*finger, a banner, a needle...*” become an opportunity?

What is a “*deportment beyond hearing and seeing*”?

PARAGRAPH 11 Zazen benefits are accrued through daily conscious efforts.

This being the case, intelligence or lack of it does not matter; between the dull and the sharp-witted there is no distinction. If you concentrate your effort single-mindedly, that in itself is negotiating the Way. Practice-realization is naturally undefiled. Going forward in practice is a matter of everydayness.

Effortless knowledge arises from the Universal Aspect of Mind, bestowed like a gift. Striving constantly after gain is unnecessary; the breadth and depth of Zazen freely manifest within a maturing practice. The first encounter with the harmony of the Universal Aspect of Mind manifests the goal of practice. “*When one first raises the thought of awakening, one attains unexcelled perfect awakening.*” (Flower Ornament Sutra)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Why does the quality of intelligence not matter?

What is your understanding of “*negotiating the Way*”?

Section 4 Personal and Historical Roots of Practice

PARAGRAPH 12 Buddhist teaching is rooted in antiquity yet found close-by in the refuge of our awakened thoughts and deeds.

In general, this world and other worlds as well, both in India and China, equally hold the Buddha-seal, and over all prevails the character of this school, which is simply devotion to sitting, total engagement in immobile sitting. Although it is said that there are as many minds as there are people, still they all negotiate the Way solely in Zazen. Why leave behind the seat that exists in your home and go aimlessly off to the dusty realms of other lands? If you make one misstep you go astray from the Way directly before you.

The straight path to goodness is achieved by realizing Buddha's teaching of the impermanence of the self, the path that is itself negotiation of the Way. The dusty realms are anything that obscures our purposeful intention to awaken. Better to stay home and realize awareness is our only refuge as well as the gateway to all mysteries.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How have you organized your life and thinking to attain "*total engagement in immobile sitting*"?

What is your understanding of the "*Buddha Seal?*"

PARAGRAPH 13 Every-moment experiences are novel and unique.

You have gained the pivotal opportunity of human form. Do not use your time in vain. You are maintaining the essential working of the Buddha Way. Who would take wasteful delight in the spark from the flint stone? Besides, form and substance are like the dew on the grass, destiny like the dart of lightning - emptied in an instant, vanished in a flash.

The totality of every being is not separate from the intricate web of mystery, beauty, and universal cognizance. The “spark from the flint stone” marks the unrelenting unfolding of impermanence, a principle of life that requires constant effort to adapt to new circumstances, and at the same time is the gate to liberation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is your thinking on, “*You have gained the pivotal opportunity of human form?*”

How, if at all, have Dōgen’s remarks on impermanence affected your life and thinking?

PARAGRAPH 14 Zazen opens the world of thought, language, reason, and above all, intimate relationships.

Please, honored followers of Zen, long accustomed to groping for the elephant, do not be suspicious of the true dragon. Devote your energies to a way that directly indicates the absolute. Revere the person of complete attainment who is beyond all human agency. Gain accord with the enlightenment of the Buddhas; succeed to the legitimate lineage of the ancestor's Samadhi. Constantly perform in such a manner and you are assured of being a person such as they. Your treasure-store will open of itself, and you will use it at will.

The inherent reality of true thusness naturally realizes the wholeness of the “elephant” by study of the individual parts. Returning over and over again to this knowledge removes all doubt about the veracity of the true dragon’s essence. The practice of Zen is to bring enlightenment to all sentient beings, to awaken knowledge of all times past, present, and future, and to attain rapport with spiritual friends.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is your relationship to the “*true dragon*”?

What does, “*Your treasure-store will open of itself, and you will use it at will*” mean to you?