

Becoming One and Being Without Self:

The Practice of Samadhi & Dhyana in Zen Buddhism

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Introduction: The Shortcut Through Actual Practice

I will speak about some of the experiences you may have when doing Buddhist meditation. Everyone — people who meditate, and people who don't — finds themselves in various states of mind. It's useful to know something about them, to recognise these states and know what they are, and what they are not.

The focus here will be on two states: samadhi and dhyana. These are technical terms (the first is *samādhi* in Pali and Sanskrit, the second is *jhāna* in Pali and *dhyāna* in Sanskrit). But there's no need to worry about these terms. Very simply, samadhi is **becoming one**, the preliminary process of actually becoming one with the object of meditation. Dhyana, simply put, is a matter of **being without self**. We will clarify the relationship and the difference between the two by actually going through them in practice. There is no better way.

Buddhist thought can be extremely difficult and complicated, especially for a Western audience. For example, we may have read or heard about the four noble truths a dozen times. Yet it still may not quite gel. We may sense something very profound is being accurately described; yet it can still sound somehow strange and foreign, far away from our own experience. The actual practice of Buddhist meditation can be a great shortcut here. Very simply, through proper meditation each of us can discover and verify the basic truths of Buddhism for ourselves.

This is not just a matter of belief or faith, or of intellectual knowledge or understanding. Through your own experience today you can get at least a taste of living Buddhism. So I invite you, as much as you wish, to enter into this practice and realize it for yourself.

Daily Life & Practice

But first things first. Let's begin by each of us asking ourselves: Am I maintaining a proper, wholesome lifestyle?

If not, start now. Pursuing a spiritual path with a mind full of delusion and desire is like putting on weights to cross a river. Even worse, some people assume that all they need to do is "get enlightened" — they don't have to worry about other, worldly and mundane things. This is like trying to get out of quicksand by piling on weights.

There are preliminary meditative practices that can help you to work through these things. They are detailed in many books and in my lectures over the years, so I will not repeat. My point here is that living a proper, honest, moral life contributes to a pure meditation practice. And our practice in turn contributes to a wholesome, truly content, lifestyle. They are both crucial and should go hand in hand, reinforcing each other.

Samadhi: Enter, Sustain, Deepen

Meditation is not so difficult, though it does take time and discipline. If you learn it properly and give yourself to it for a while you will see that it is not difficult at all. Indeed, it is distracted and distracting mind that is the difficulty.

To begin, there are many good ways of becoming one — entering a state of samadhi — by focusing on one thing. For example, focusing all of our attention on the breath. Our awareness

tends to wander off and get scattered. So, we start by gathering our awareness, gathering all of that energy, and focusing on each out breath or on the number one, actually becoming one in the process. For some people, in the beginning it's quite difficult. But if you continue and train your mind to stop wandering off, a genuine wholeness, a focus and concentration naturally emerges. This is already a state of oneness, samadhi. Let's try it....

What has happened? The senses seem to have settled down. Normally mind is very scattered, distracted by various things within and without. Mind is constantly churning. As a matter of fact, all of our senses are: What we see, hear, taste, touch, feel and think, all is in a state of inherent instability or *dis-ease*. This fact, the first noble truth of Buddhism, soon becomes crystal clear through our own experience of Buddhist meditation.

Entering and sustaining this state of focused oneness or samadhi, there is a settling down and focus. You still hear, see, think, and so on, but awareness has become more refined, focused. It's as if the pace has slowed down, the view has gotten clearer, and you're not so caught up in things. You're still aware; in fact you're more aware. But mind is not so divided or distracted.

Yes, this is already a state of samadhi. If you're practicing properly, then before long you will notice this focus, this natural gathering of awareness. There's nothing mysterious about it. It's a fact that anyone can experience, simply by devoting some time to practice, for example zazen. The benefits of this already are great. Whatever you're doing, if you can be totally focused on the task at hand, so much the better. But that is not the end of Buddhist practice, not the goal of Buddhist meditation.

Once you have entered this — or any — state, it is important to clearly recognize what it is, and what it isn't. See it for what it is: Yes, there is a calm clarity and focus here. This shows we are, in a sense, going in the right direction. But it is also clear that this is itself a temporary state that we go into and come out of. It is clearly not the end or goal of Buddhism, not the end of *dis-ease*. It is at best a temporary lull. Experience it and know for yourself the value, and the limits. Then move on through.

If this state is sustained, deepened, and refined what will you experience? Try it for a moment and see; get a taste....

If you are properly practicing Buddhist meditation, what is the first sure "sign"? The early Buddhist meditation manuals state over and over again, the first sign is that you will enter a state of calm joy (*p**ti* or *somanassa* in Pali, literally "pleasant mind" or "joy"). That's right, joy! A calm yet joyous state spontaneously arises. Again, this is helpful because you know that you are going in the right direction.

What is the difference between this joy and the pleasures that we ordinarily experience? This calm joy arises naturally, effortlessly from the depths of our being. It is a joy that arises precisely because there are no gross conditions present. It is a joy that arises out of being relatively **at ease** — not chasing after, or being chased by, anything. It is a relatively unconditioned joy. It's not the pleasure of feeling that something has been done well, nor is it pleasure from some sensuous contact. It arises out of the temporary absence of craving. Craving is the cause of our *dis-ease* or suffering, as the second noble truth states. A wonderful discovery — we are clearly going in the right direction! But clearly not the goal of Buddhist practice, for it is itself a temporary state that we go into and out of. Recognize it for what it is, smile, then move on through.

Sustaining and deepening our practice, this state eventually gives way to experiences of more subtle joy and profound equanimity. Continuing sustained concentration, we can enter a state in which **one** is clearly aware, yet the experience is so unified and total that there is no experience of pleasure or pain. The benefits — and dangers — of abiding in this state are obvious. It is also obvious that this is not the goal or end of Buddhist practice.

What then is this state? I am totally absorbed in oneness. How do I know that? Very simple: For one thing, there's no pain or pleasure. It's not that I don't feel anything, but experience does not arise as pain or as pleasure. There is no such specific experience at this point because of the totality of the oneness.

This state can be experienced right now, if you give yourself up to proper meditation. There's nothing special about it. Don't mistake it for some kind of bizarre, esoteric experience. It is not. As a matter of fact, we have all at least touched this samadhi at one time or other, for example, when totally engaged in a sport or game, or when responding to an emergency.

If you experience that state in sustained meditation, see it for what it is. See the value; also see the limit. Clearly not the goal of Buddhism, it is itself a temporary state, not the end of all *dis-ease*.

Are These States Necessary?

Important point: It is not necessary to go through these states. So why am I talking about them? Some schools of Buddhism and some meditation teachers emphasize that these — and many other — states need to be gone through in order, one after the other, both when entering and when leaving meditation. Many states are examined in great detail and all must be experienced in their proper order. Zen Buddhism, among other Buddhist schools, rejects this. Why? Because one can get preoccupied with these states and their attainments, even enamored of them, stuck and obstructed by them.

So, are the other schools of Buddhism then wrong? Are all meditation teachers who emphasize these states deluded? Not at all. If they are genuine, they are simply speaking from their own experience. They themselves actually went through it in that order, and were probably taught it by someone who also did so. They are perfectly correct in teaching these states in that way, based on their own experience. We should listen, with deep appreciation, to what they have to say based on their own meditative experience.

Once again, it is not necessary to go through these states. So, why am I talking about them? Because, as a matter of fact, you will experience at least some of them. You will find yourself in these states — whether you intend to or not. It can be very useful to know about them so that you don't get stuck, don't confuse them for what they are not.

Look at Gotama Buddha's meditative experiences and it's clear: He went through these states himself, and acknowledged their relative merits. There's a lot of virtue, a lot of value in every one of these states. We can get so wrapped up in gross mental attachments and sensuous pleasures. As practice deepens and we experience the joy of not having to seek anything, we tend naturally to live a wholesome life. We no longer chase after things in an attempt to escape our own inner turmoil. Already this is so beneficial!

However, Gotama Buddha also clearly discerned that these states were not the end of *dis-ease*. Indeed, they become a part of the *dis-ease* if one gets hung up in them. So he did not stick with them but moved on through.

The experience of calm joy, for example, is wonderful. The danger is that without proper application people get stuck in it: "Don't bother me, I'm feeling good!" "I don't have to do anything, I'm just gonna' groove on this for a while!" Well, at that point it's not Buddhist meditation; it's self-indulgence. If you actually find yourself in this or that state, acknowledge it, be aware of what it is, and what it is not. Then let go. None of these states are the end or goal of Buddhism.

Two Stories

Let me tell you two stories from the early sutras. The first one is about someone called Skywalker. Not Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*. This one only goes back about 2,500 years. This Skywalker is the son of a *deva*, a kind of spirit or god with a small “g.” He’s called Skywalker because he can take tremendous strides, almost like flying through the air. He wants to put an end to all *dis-ease* or suffering. Remember that all conditioned states, not just the human realm, are inherently unstable. So he attempts to do this by using his superhuman powers and virtually flying to the end of this world. Soaring out into the vast reaches of the universe, only stopping to eat, answer nature’s call, and rest. He keeps on going for his entire lifespan of 100 years. At the end of 100 years, where is he? Skywalker realizes he travelled a tremendous distance — but he did not come to the end of this world and its inherent *dis-ease*.

So he goes to Gotama Buddha and asks if it is possible to travel to the end of the world and all its *dis-ease*. Gotama Buddha very precisely answers no, it is not possible, by travelling, to get to the end of this world, to the end of all *dis-ease*. However, Gotama continues, there is no way to end all *dis-ease* without reaching the end of the world. Then Gotama concludes: Yet within this very body five or six feet tall, with its senses and mind, is this world (and its inherent *dis-ease*), its origin, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. What is the point of this short sutra? I will leave it with you for now, and then return to it at the end.

The second story is from a sutra known as *Angulimala*. It’s about a man who studied a spiritual path and went astray. His teacher became jealous of his spiritual prowess and so convinced his disciple that he needed to offer 1,000 severed little fingers of the right hand to complete his training. To accomplish this, he ended up killing people, cutting off the little finger of the right hand of each of his victims and making a necklace with the fingers. Thus he came to be called *Anguli-mala*, literally “garland of fingers.” Eventually he killed 999 people and cut off 999 fingers. According to the story, at this point he came upon Gotama Buddha, the all-enlightened one, out on his begging rounds. Angulimala thought, what a great thousandth finger this would make!

The strong and quick Angulimala starts running as fast as he can after Gotama Buddha. Gotama Buddha simply continues walking; apparently nothing has changed. However, no matter how fast Angulimala runs, he can’t seem to catch up or even get any closer to Gotama Buddha. Finally, frustrated and confused, Angulimala comes to a halt and yells: “Stop, contemplative, stop!” Gotama Buddha, still walking, turns his head and replies: “**I have** stopped. Now **you** stop.”

Angulimala knows that this is Gotama Buddha, one who speaks truth, so he asks Gotama: I have already stopped, yet you tell me to stop. You are still walking, yet you say that you have stopped. How is it that you have stopped and that I have not?

Gotama Buddha explains that I have indeed stopped, put an end to all method of suffering and violence toward all beings. You, Angulimala, have not.

According to the sutra, Angulimala sees the wrong of his ways, has a genuine change of heart and becomes a monk under Gotama Buddha. I will return to this story at the end.

From Samadhi To Dhyana, and Beyond

The samadhi-states I described are states that the self can enter and abide in for a time. Some are more subtle and refined, but they are all states experienced by the self.

Now I’d like to move from samadhi or becoming one, to dhyana or being without self. I don’t want to over exaggerate, but the difference is crucial. Unfortunately, the terms samadhi and dhyana have not been used consistently in the Buddhist tradition. Hardly surprising when you consider the differing schools, cultures and historical periods involved. In early Buddhism the

samadhi states of oneness I described are usually called “form-dhyana,” in contrast to “formless dhyana.” I prefer the term samadhi or states of oneness rather than “form-dhyana” because the delusion of self remains somewhat intact, although it is being unified — and dissolving in the process.

With genuine dhyana, however, the delusion of self is, at least temporarily, gone. These formless dhyana are what I am calling simply, dhyana, or being without self. But again don’t worry about the terms. Instead, I invite you to enter, or at least get a taste. This is what they are like from inside:

First Formless Dhyana: Boundless Space

Let’s begin by again entering samadhi. Mental activity calms down, accompanied by focus and clarity. A sense of joy arises. As samadhi deepens, the joy melts into deep equanimity. The final samadhi state, as we saw before, is that of being totally one, without any admixture of pleasure or pain.

If we don’t stop there, this state falls away, revealing the first formless dhyana, “boundless space.” That is exactly what it is like. Remnants of the space-time continuum, spatial-temporal consciousness, remain. But it is as if all content has been emptied — like boundless space. This is not unconsciousness. It is a very subtle form of “consciousness” or “awareness,” if these terms be used. But for all intents and purposes there is no self here, nor is there anything in opposition to self.

Is this the end or goal of Buddhism? Or is this state itself temporary and subject to conditions? See for yourself...

Yes, it clearly is: Although the delusion of self for all intents and purposes is gone in this profound state, this profound state itself is only temporary. It is clearly not the full and final end of the delusion and *dis-ease* of self. And indeed, Gotama experienced it as such, described it precisely, then moved on through, just as we do.

Second Formless Dhyana: Consciousness Unbound

The second formless dhyana is “consciousness unbound.” Even the sense of spatial-temporal consciousness is gone. But again it’s not unconsciousness. Rather, it is as if consciousness itself is unbound. It’s not touching, in contact with, anything. Not unconscious, but not conscious of anything at all. A very deep, very subtle “state,” if such a term is used. Ordinary reflective consciousness is gone. Even basic spatial consciousness is gone, though a subtle kind of awareness remains. This, too, is a state we enter and come out of. This is not it. So we move on through.

Third Formless Dhyana: Not-a-thing

The third formless dhyana is “not-a-thing.” There is no spatial-temporal consciousness. Nor is there any conscious content at all. So Gotama rightly describes this as nothingness or not-a-thing. There’s no longer any conscious awareness — yet not mere unconsciousness. Clearly aware, but in a way that is impossible for ordinary consciousness. There is not-a-thing. Neither a subject aware, nor an object to be aware of, no matter how subtle. Neither the boundlessness of space nor the realm of consciousness unbound. But still a temporary state I go into and out of. This is not it. Move on through.

Fourth Formless Dhyana: Neither Perception Nor Non-Perception

The fourth and final formless dhyana is “neither perception nor non-perception.” Perception refers to any of the senses: thinking, feeling, seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, and so on. There is nothing perceived, nor is there any perceiver. An utterly tranquil, composed and collected state — there is no sense inflow or outflow whatsoever. But neither is it mere blankness of unconsciousness. It is, indeed, neither perception, **nor non-perception**. Completely clear like a burnished mirror or the autumn moon. It’s not even an “experience,” as the term is commonly used.

Nirvana or Cessation

However, even this is something that I go into and out of. When this is let go, **here** is complete cessation: The final delusion of self dissolves — and nothing remains to hold it together.

The classic description in the Buddhist sutras is the metaphor of seeing through the house of *samsara* (the endless round of birth-death), its full and final collapse — like a house of cards. Not an objective seeing of something, but a **seeing through**: That which sees and that which is seen are transformed and dissolved in the process. The house is likened to self’s abiding in the suffering of *samsara*, the house builder is our craving, the ridgepole is ignorance, and the rafters are selfish passions. To paraphrase Gotama’s exclamation upon awakening (according to verse 154 of the *Dhammapada*), “Oh housebuilder, you have been seen through! You will not build this house again. Your rafters are all broken, the ridgepole shattered. Unconditioned, this is the end of all craving.”

This is not an experience that self can possibly have, nor is it merely a lull in self-experience. Thus it has also been described as like a flame gone out when the fuel has burned up (*nibbāna* in Pali, *nirvāṇa* in Sanskrit). It makes no sense to ask which direction it went: north, east, south, or west, above or below, inside or outside. It does not apply.

Here is the end and goal of Buddhism. And the beginning of the life of a Buddha engaged in selfless activity.

Practical Pointers & Review

As mentioned, it is not necessary to enter all of these states. As a matter of fact, even in the Pali Canon of early Buddhism there are examples of people who saw through without going into such states.

However, entering samadhi, consciously entering into a state of oneness, is a very helpful preliminary preparation. It’s obvious isn’t it? Without being able to focus and unify all of our energies, we can’t really do anything completely. This certainly applies to sustained Buddhist meditation.

What is the first problem that a meditator usually runs into? Discursive thought. In the beginning it can even seem to increase; the harder we try to concentrate, the more these memories, thoughts and feelings seem to pop out of nowhere. They’re not a real hindrance, but they can take a lot of energy away from the immediate task.

Our own insecurities and unresolved issues may well be involved in this kind of bubbling up. Sometimes they need to be dealt with, but I’ve already gone into this in previous lectures so won’t repeat here. Basically, by sitting through, we can find equanimity — that deep, calm samadhi in which discursive thoughts fall away, dissolve of their own accord. You can do this by paying full attention to them then letting them dissolve, or by withdrawing from them.

For many people, the simplest method is returning to one or returning to the breath once we realize that we have gotten lost in discursive thought. In the beginning it can be tedious and

frustrating, but if we continue on, it becomes natural and effortless. This shows that we are going in the right direction, and gives us inspiration to continue on.

For some people, the next problem is, as that calm, stable joy becomes more evident, we get attached to it, start to dwell in it. It should not happen, but it often does. Because of the busyness of the world or our mind, we seek shelter from the storm, escape in that calm composure. If we pay attention, it doesn't take long to see that we're not dwelling in equanimity — we're actually creating tension. We're closing ourselves up to escape from something. That's not Buddhist practice. There are very clear warnings against dwelling in and becoming attached to that calmness and composure as an end in itself.

A very important point is emerging, isn't it? Once you thoroughly experience any of these states — penetrate to the very bottom — you don't have to dwell in them again. Done properly, you only have to go through them once. But if you get wrapped up in them, you can get stuck there for years, or even for life; a tragic mistake. Dwelling in any of these states, however sublime, enjoying their many fruits and attainments, is not the way of Buddha. If practice is not thorough and properly done, you simply go around in circles, or get stuck somewhere.

Watch the weight on a fishing line with no float or bobber. The weight may only be a few ounces, but what happens? It's beautiful. It hits the water and then it sinks down, slowly yet smoothly. It doesn't stop at one foot and enjoy the view, does it? It simply continues on. It naturally goes down of its own weight, of its own accord. That's samadhi. Done properly, when you begin sitting you are very soon at the deepest level you have been. It's only a matter of starting all over again and going through stages if you've gotten stuck there, instead of going all the way through.

Another important point: There's no need to deny any experience you have. On the contrary, **fully** experience it, and then you won't get hung up in it. Odd as it sounds, it's true: You can only be attached to something that you're separate from — and longing for. No matter how sublime the state or experience, once self-attachment or self-indulgence arises, you're stuck. A great danger that Buddhism continually warns us against. Go all the way through — experience it to the very bottom. Then you can't help but let go — it dissolves of its own accord! In this sense Zen Buddhist practice is a genuine shortcut, simple and effective, direct and straightforward.

If we practice properly, what happens? Not only do we not get stuck anywhere in our meditation, we can freely enter any of those states as the need arises in our daily lives. This is a “worldly benefit” and not something to belabor. But it's true; they all become available to us. When we listen to music, for example, our mind spontaneously enters music-samadhi. When we come across, or are ourselves involved in, a car accident, we immediately respond. Truly open and clear, we can hear and respond to the suffering of others.

And when we have to listen to a long, boring lecture, for example about some esoteric topic? What does self do? It stifles itself with thoughts of boredom, what it could be doing instead, how it could do things better, and so on. What if we could fully **be** with our present situation, whatever it is, then respond from there? For example our boss or someone we don't get along with? What if we could totally be with that toilet when it overflows? I'm not a plumber, or a psychotherapist, but the practical applications are endless, aren't they?

Becoming One & Being without Self: The Connection & the Difference

What is the difference between samadhi (or oneness) and dhyana (or being without self)? Entering samadhi is a kind of self-conscious activity; self is focusing on something, self is becoming one. It is a wilful process of gathering and focusing on one thing, refining and deepening that experience of oneness.

There's no need to force anything. You have all that you need. It's just a matter of gathering into one the enormous energies that you do have. This often occurs spontaneously when we're doing something that we love: sports, listening to or performing music, and so on.

But to do that in sustained meditation is a self-conscious discipline. It takes time, patience, and effort. It doesn't just happen, although glimmers of it may spontaneously appear. We have to focus our attention, especially in the beginning. Why? Because mind is so used to dispersing and scattering.

Simply, patiently gather together the enormous energy that you already have. It's like gathering all into one ball. You might think that you don't have sufficient concentration for this. All you need in the beginning is a small snowball's worth. Don't waste time and energy worrying over whether or not you have enough to start with. It is enough, if used properly.

How do we do that? Living a wholesome life moment-by-moment, mindful and aware. Patiently roll that small snowball of mind on the vast meadow of pure, white samadhi-snow. At first it may feel like we have to roll it up a steep hill, tiring and tedious. It may even roll back down and we have to start over. That's okay. Eventually it will be like rolling it down a hill, naturally gathering momentum and mass as it goes. Before we know it, all has been gathered into one vast ball of snow — cool and refreshing.

And if we continue? At the endpoint of samadhi, mind will be totally unified, with no inside or outside, no awareness of pleasure or pain, as mentioned. If one does not get stuck there, all of a sudden that huge mass of snow will become light as a feather — just like that! This is not a matter of self-effort.

This is where the last remnant of self-samadhi dissolves into selfless-dhyana. One of the dangers here is that we mistake this for some kind of enlightenment, as often happens with so-called *kenshō*-experiences or insights. Whereas samadhi requires a kind of self-discipline, in genuine dhyana that self, for all intents and purposes, is gone — at least for the time being.

But that does not mean that we don't have to practice anymore! In the flush of the experience it may seem that way: There is no one to practice, there is no thing to practice — how marvellous! **On the contrary, here is where we must practice even harder and with even more care.** Although the type of practice naturally differs. Practicing together with Dharma friends — friends on the Way — can be of great help here, as we are doing now. The farther you go, the deeper it gets.

Once again, it is not necessary to go through all the states mentioned. It is important to know where you are on the path. There is a time to work on gathering awareness into one. There is also a time where even oneness disappears. It is crucial to know how to practice there as well. It may take time — days, weeks, even months — to come out of a certain state, but once you do come out of it you then know that that is not it. It cannot be something self goes into, or out of. It may be a genuine entrance; fine. Don't turn it into a locked fortress.

Where Is Angulimala?

Now let's return to Angulimala, who killed all those people and cut off all those fingers. The story describes how even a mass murderer can have a genuine change of heart and be transformed. A precious teaching — for mass murderers.

But is that all? Could it possibly be saying something to us? We don't kill people. We don't collect their fingers. Do we ever possess, and get possessed by, certain things and ideas though? We don't wear them around our necks. But possessing and being possessed by them, we may well hurt other people in the process.

Remember that last finger — that was the real killer. Angulimala desired Gotama Buddha's little finger. Is the thought of enlightenment something you want to possess for yourself? Perhaps there's a little bit of Angulimala in us all.

Travelling With Skywalker

What about that Skywalker story? We're not space travelers. Perhaps Skywalker wasn't either. Are you perhaps traveling through inner space hoping to attain something for yourself? Are you unwittingly bringing the delusion of self along for the ride? If so, no matter how far the spiritual journey goes, it will be in vain.

Remember Gotama's pointed and precise reply to Skywalker: Yes, you can only end *dis-ease* by getting to the very end. However, you cannot do this by traveling.

How then is it done? Gotama explains: With this very body. For with this very body is the whole world of *dis-ease*, its origin, ceasing, and the way to it. In other words, the four noble truths are all right here with each one of us. Gotama's clearly not talking about mere states of mind, however sublime. Nor is it merely a matter of walking like Skywalker, running like Angulimala — or sitting like a Buddha.

Stopping

What do these two sutra stories of Skywalker and Angulimala have in common? Chasing after something. And not being able to get it. This sums up, in one word, what Buddhist meditation is all about: **Stopping**. Self-delusion — the delusion of self — brought to rest, once and for all. Putting an end to the whole *dis-eased* mess. A complete and full stop. Needless to say, we can keep moving even with our legs wrapped up like pretzels. Just once stop and see what lies underfoot. See into the bottom of what you call your self. Then you can truly start anew, working in the world without tripping over your own feet.

What is popular Buddhism? In a word, isn't it about **slowing down**: relieving stress, feeling refreshed, gaining insight, being mindful? Practiced properly, these bring us in the right direction. Running full speed, it can help to first slow down. Slowing down, we then stop. Here is the essence of genuine Buddhist meditation.

Zen is eminently practical, so the final question is: How do you get home from here? One way is to check the signs at every corner to make sure you are going in the right direction. Buddhist meditation manuals supply this if that's the way you want to go. You can also race through the intersections on your bike if you're desperate enough and willing to take the risk. This lecture has provided some of the main signposts and warned of some of the dangers along the way. Going through it together we've had a kind of dry run. The point is for each of us to safely arrive home. Starting out with no directions can have its dangers. On the other hand, forever studying the map will not do either. Only you can find the way home. Now forget all the words I said, and instead devote yourself to discovering it with your whole body. If I can be of some small help, I am here for you. Thank you for listening so intently.

Buddhist and Zen literature often addresses the dangers of becoming attached to certain insights or states of mind, even very deep ones. In the main lecture, I focused on the fundamental meditation practices of Gotama Buddha. This may seem a far cry from the classic Zen approach, which tends to shun altogether states of mind and levels of meditation.

In a sense, there are no states or stages in Zen Buddhism. Thus, Zen can seem so radical and abrupt. However, Western Zen people first need to learn and master basic Buddhist meditation practices. What often happens is that they think they are taking a shortcut through Zen; as a matter of fact, they end up stuck in a dead end. They have learned the Zen rhetoric about what they are **supposed** to be doing: Be *Mu*, Just sit, and so on. However, they lack the meditative discipline and know-how to consistently enter, sustain, and continually deepen samadhi.

Here are just two examples of the Zen rhetoric toward such things: “When there are no clouds for ten thousand miles, then even the clear sky deserves a taste of the stick” (see *Zen Sand*, p. 432). “Destroy that muddy hell called ‘self and other empty.’ Squash the varmint’s dead-end hole of ‘here and now’” (see *Zen Sand*, p. 613). I trust you can now see how important it is for Westerners to first be familiar with the profound meditation traditions of Buddhism before dispensing with them!

I urge you to practice sustained meditation, and live a wholesome life. This naturally creates the proper conditions for a thorough realization: Integrated, well rounded and well grounded. Without that kind of grounding, any experiences and insights can do more harm than good — breakthroughs can turn into breakdowns. Don’t greedily chase after them! Instead, patiently pour your self into your practice, moment by moment, without concern for results.

However deep or shallow the samadhi, it should always be crystal-clear, razor-sharp! Then it can be brought to life, whether one is an artist, a businessman, housewife or househusband.

Continue on like this and eventually your practice will not be limited to sitting in *zazen*. It will become constant, whether sitting, standing, lying down — or running full speed. Before it was difficult to enter; now it’s impossible to step out of it. Continue on here without hesitation or interruption.

Now let’s look into a classic example of the Zen approach: A monk comes to the master and says: “If I come without a thing — how about that?” The monk seems to think that the nothing he’s attained is really something, that he can rest in it. How does the master respond? “Throw **that** away!” In other words, “Drop it!” “Let go!” Even that which is not a thing must be thrown away. Don’t even hold onto that. It sounds strange but it’s true: If it’s not thoroughgoing, one can get attached to non-attachment. Self can even turn nothing into something. Thus sustained practice and Dharma friends can be so precious. Thus a retreat like this can be really worthwhile.

The monk didn’t understand, so he replied: “But I come here without anything. What’s there to throw away?” He wasn’t able to see through. So the master turned it around completely and said: “Then carry it along with you.” If you can’t see that you still have something to throw away, then you’ll just have to carry it around for a while. The master here was Jōshō. If it had been Rinzai in his prime, he might have shouted at the monk or even struck him. Jōshō was subtler. Without missing a beat he completely turned it around: Okay, then carry it along with you. And with these words the monk had a great awakening. What a superb expression, a living example of truly being without a thing — and not even clinging to that!

“Throw it away!” “Drop it!” “Let go!” It’s all right there. That’s one way classic Zen deals with those states. It doesn’t go into analyzing them and their relative values and limits. But are we classic Zen Buddhist monks and nuns who have spent decades fully devoted to a monastic

life, studying Buddhism and mastering meditation? Beware! Without sufficient knowledge and experience, dangerous misunderstandings are inevitable.

Discursive mind cuts all in two, three, four; there's a time and place for that, such as when you're counting change at the market. Samadhi rolls all into one; carves, forms all into one. Dhyana dissolves that one into nothing. Now, where are you when even that is gone?

Angulimala gives up all evil doing, sees the error of his ways, asks to be admitted into the *sangha* or community of monks, and is accepted. But of course it's not that easy, is it? He killed 999 people. As the sutra goes on to explain, at one point he's going around for alms, on begging rounds (as Gotama was doing when they first met). Some of the village people recognize him and start throwing things at him. Because of Angulimala they lived years in fear and may even have had a relative killed by him. They throw tiles and stones at the now defenseless Angulimala. He's cut and bleeding, with his begging bowl broken and his robes torn and disheveled. Eventually he makes his way back to Gotama. What does Gotama Buddha say? "Bear with it! Due to your karma, you would have suffered for thousands and thousands of years. How fortunate that you are able to experience it in the present." Sure, it hurts. But he's able to get through it now. We're not talking about some future life. **See through now** — Don't be dreaming about past or future lives! By the way, according to the sutra this mass murderer entered seclusion and before long was able to see through. How about you?

You remember that last finger don't you? Wouldn't it be great if I could get that one — the Buddha's finger? Then I could be enlightened too! But you can't get that one, can you? You can't cut that tiny, little finger off. Although you run as fast as you can, practice as hard as you can, sharpen the mind-blade all you want: This one little finger cannot be grasped! Thank you, Angulimala, for pointing the finger at mistakes we may make in our own practice.

What about Skywalker? We're not space travelers. But are we craving attainment, are we blindly self-attached — seeking release through mental and spiritual realms which themselves only further bind us? Skywalker himself clearly knew from his own experience: I went all that distance but I just brought it with me. It didn't work. His example is extreme, but it can keep us from being taken for a ride on inner journeys.

We must come to the end. But we can't do it by travelling, even spiritually. We're in a sense always bringing the self along with us. So Gotama Buddha accepts part of Skywalker's question but rejects another part of it. He says: Yes, you're right in the sense that you do have to get to the end of it all, in order to get to the end of suffering. However you cannot do it by travel, by any journey whatsoever.

The climax of this short sutra — it's only a few pages — is Gotama saying how we do it. How do we do it? "With this very body you get to the end of the world." Gotama is not talking about some transcendent experience, some sublime state of mind: with this very body. In DØgen's terms, with this very body, mind and body fall away! With this very body get to the source of all suffering. With this very body put an end to all suffering, and with this very body there is the way to do it. In other words, all that is needed, the so-called four noble truths, are right here and now — just stop and see through now!

Buddhism is indeed about fully stopping. Coming to a complete stop, letting go of the whole delusive self-complex — and then working from there. But first you have to stop. As far as I can see — which isn't very far — all Buddhist meditation finally comes down to that.

Take the infamous koan practice of Rinzai Zen. In spite of what goes on nowadays, its genuine purpose is not meditating on a koan, contemplating it, having insights or breakthroughs. A koan is a finely-tuned instrument, a deadly weapon to bring the whole complex to a halt! It only springs to life and begins working when you yourself fully **become** the koan. Then, as it's said, you can't move forward, you can't move backwards — but you can't stay where you are.

Totally gripped by the koan, discursive consciousness has no place to take hold, so it naturally dissolves. But the koan remains, still demanding resolution. Then “the one great block of doubt,” as it is called in Zen, cannot help but form. We cannot escape it! Locking onto the koan is the shortcut in Rinzai Zen to directly penetrate the final formless dhyana known as “neither perception nor non-perception.”

This is what Gotama naturally did in his own struggle. According to the Pali Canon, Gotama attained the most sublime states of formless dhyana, “not-a-thing” and “neither perception nor non-perception,” through the instruction of his two teachers, Ólára Kålâma and Uddaka Râmaputta. Due to his own “great doubt,” however, Gotama immediately saw that such states were nothing but a temporary salve, so he left those teachers and went on in his quest. **What is most needed today is that attitude!** Without it, you can be given all the koans you want by the greatest so-called Zen teacher, but what good will it do? With it, you can come up with your own, living koan! Face it: Anything else is just borrowed plumage.

In more traditional Buddhist terms, meditation is on the three marks of all existence (unstable, impermanent and without self). The point is to actually **see** that what is meditated on is so. Even those very profound states of mind are unstable, impermanent and without self. Three ways of saying the same thing: To paraphrase JØsh — and Bob Dylan — throw it all away!

Where do all these Buddhist practices start? From where? From the present moment. Look at the so-called *genjØ-kØan*, the koan manifest right here and now, or breathing, the immediate presence of our breathing. Or mindfulness of pain in the knee or of taking a step. These practices are not creating anything. Every one of them simply deals with present experience. You don't have to create anything. You don't have to remember, recollect or even realize anything. Just be aware of what is actually here. Nothing more, nothing less. That's all you need. As DØgen says, “Do not intend to make a Buddha, much less be attached to sitting still.”

Your present condition is sufficient. You don't need to be in some other condition in order to practice. People waste their whole lives waiting for conditions to be right, for some teacher to come along and tell them what to do, so that they can then practice. A serious delusion. For those ideal conditions never seem to come, do they?

What are the ideal conditions for practice? A chunk of time, a special place, calm surroundings, Dharma friends to practice with? Look: We've got all those conditions right here and now at this retreat — don't waste it!

What is the most essential requirement for practice? Our present condition, that's all. No more, no less. Our present condition is always enough. Whether we have one leg or two, whether we are in great health or intense pain, whether we have the whole day free or are swamped with work. It's simply a matter of how we deal with those conditions. Please keep this in mind as you return to your daily lives.

Gotama Buddha used these states very efficiently. He knew the value and the limits of them. When he died, according to the *Maha-parinibbana Sutta*, The Sutra of the Great Death, he went through all of the samadhi and dhyana states I explained. He went through the final fourth

formless dhyana, neither perception nor non-perception, then to cessation. At which point Ananda, who had not yet seen through, said that Gotama had passed away. Another follower named Anuruddha, who had seen through, corrected Ananada by saying, No he has not passed away. He has entered cessation.

Then according to the sutra, Gotama went back through all the states from the deepest to the shallowest form-dhyana (or what I call samadhi). Without the delusion of self; yet he was fully there, fully experiencing it. Then he went back from this first samadhi to the final samadhi-state of neither pleasure nor pain. And there is where he finally passed away. He didn't pass away at cessation or at the deeper formless dhyana-states such as neither perception nor non-perception.

I've never heard or read anybody explain why. It could be explained as a final teaching for his disciples, of course. Technically speaking, in formless dhyana he would probably have continued in that state, like suspended animation, until he came out of it. But more importantly, I think he did it that way in order to let go **with full cognizance**. There's not one thing to let go in this final passing away. But that final samadhi-state is the best state to pass away, free of pleasure and pain, yet with full cognizance.

Like many people, Gotama Buddha was in great pain at the end of his life. Apparently he ate some bad food and this contributed to his already feeble condition. He even said that only when in deep meditation was he free of physical pain. And yet he chose to experience **his present condition with full cognizance**. Chew on that and you'll never go hungry again!

Endnotes

On dhyana/jhana in the Pali tradition, see for example

Who Is My Self?: A Guide to Buddhist Meditation by Ayya Khema (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997);

"A Mind Pure, Concentrated, and Bright: An interview with meditation teacher Leigh Brasington," *Tricycle*, Winter 2004, pp. 66-71;

"See Things Clear Through" by Upasika Kee Nanayon, *Buddhadharma*, Spring 2005, pp. 50-57;

"The Jhanas and the Lay Disciple According to the Pali Suttas" by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, BuddhaSasana Home Page;

An Introduction to Buddhism by Takasaki Jikido (Tokyo: TØhØ Gakkai, 1987), pp. 179-184: provides an excellent synopsis of how terms like samadhi, dhyana, and the like have been used in Buddhism.

For Skywalker, see *Rohitassa Sutta*, IV.45 of the *Anguttara Nikaya* in the *Sutta Pitaka* (Pali Canon).

For Angulimala, see *Angulimala Sutta*, #86 of the *Majjhima Nikaya* in the *Sutta Pitaka* (Pali Canon).

For an example from the Pali Canon of someone who saw through without going into various states, see *Bahiya Sutta*, #1.10 of the *Udana* in the *Khuddaka Nikaya* in the *Sutta Pitaka* (Pali Canon).

For Jōshū's "Throw that away," see *The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshu* translated by James Green (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), p. 121; *Entangling Vines: Zen Koans of the Shōmon Kattōshū* translated by Thomas Y. H. Kirchner (Kyoto: Tenryū-ji Institute for Philosophy and Religion, 2004), p. 5.

Dōgen's, "Do not intend to make a Buddha, much less be attached to sitting still" quoted in *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation* by Carl Bielefeldt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p 177.

Maha-parinibbana Sutta, #16 of the *Digha Nikaya* in the *Sutta Pitaka* (Pali Canon).

Edited transcript of lectures in 2005 for

Hannover Zen Group retreat, Germany, February 11-13;

Zen onder de Dom retreat, Steyl, Holland, February 18-20 & 25-27;

Zen Group De Romaanse Poort, Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, February 22;

Saarbruecken Zen Group retreat, Germany, March 4-6;

Zen Group Kannon-do retreat, Innsbruck, Austria, March 11-13;

Zen Buddhist Association of Copenhagen retreat, Copenhagen, Denmark, March 18-20;

Aarhus Sangha retreat, Aarhus, Denmark, March 22-23;

Buddhist Sangha of Bucks County retreat, Yardley Friends Meeting House, Yardley Pennsylvania, August 12;

Sairai Zenso retreat, Sussex New Jersey, August 16;

Philadelphia Buddhist Association retreat, Pendle Hill Quaker Retreat Center, Wallingford Pennsylvania, August 19-21;

Zen Buddhist Center of Washington, D. C. (Kashin Zendo) retreat, Dupont Circle Friends Meeting House, Washington, D. C., August 26-28;

Empty Hand Zendo, Community Unitarian Church, White Plains New York, August 29;

Honors College High Table, University of Central Arkansas, September 7;

The Socratic Society, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, September 8;

Ecumenical Buddhist Society of Little Rock retreat, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Conway Arkansas, September 9-10;

Judy Hoyem Zendo retreat, San Francisco California, September 17.