

# Beginner's Course - 2

Preparing for Zen Practice



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## Lesson 2: Preparing for Zen Practice

### Requirements for the Zen Practice:

#### **Emptying the cup – having an open mind with a zeal for curiosity.**

*A famous Zen story is that of emptying the cup.*

*One day a University Professor visit a Zen master at his home and had tea with him. As they were talking, the Zen master was pouring tea into the University Professor's cup. Even though the cup was full, the Zen master continued to pour it until it overflowed and spills out on to the table.*

*The University Professor noticed that and said: "Stop, why are you overflowing my cup? There is enough tea in there already."*

*The Zen master replied: "Just like the cup, your mind is completely filled with pre-conceived notions and past concepts you have learned. When that happens, you cannot fill it with anything new further."*

Before embarking to learn and practice Zen, one must keep an open mind, test the practice, try the practice to see if it works for them before dismissing it.

The practice of Zen is about emptying the cup and treating all experience as a completely new one. Only through that way, we can observe and study Zen in its fullest extent.

#### **Understanding of the basic tenets of the Buddha's teachings. Strive for not just an intellectual understand but also one of experiential understanding in seeing it in one's own life.**

Although the teachings of Zen is about practice and outside of the scriptures, but in reality, the practice and teachings of Zen is always based on the essence of the Buddha's teachings. Before you arrive at the awakening realization in Zen, which is the fruit of Zen practice. It is advisable that you learn the fundamental aspects of the Buddha's teachings and use it as a map to guide you in your interaction with the teacher, in your practice with others and in your own life. The teachings of the Buddha is a guide map, it is not the essence of the truth, to fully realize those teachings is to practice it. However, don't be too attached to the words and concepts of the teachings, discern it for yourself and see if it helps you in your daily life. Try whatever works, keep that and leave the rest. The Buddha taught many ways for different types of people to arrive at the understanding of the truth. Like giving different medicine for different illness of the mind, one type of medication will not suffice to apply to all. So if it doesn't apply to you, don't discard it as being wrong, see it as a medicine that you don't need, because you don't have the same condition. Someone else will find it useful in their practice.

Always strive for the experimental understanding, not just for the conceptual intellectual understanding of what is taught. This can only happen if you apply it as your daily practice and life.

## **Making a vow to end your own sufferings and to help all beings end theirs. Practice generosity.**

The Buddha's teachings are about the cause of suffering and how to end sufferings. It is not about gaining knowledge, not about becoming a more spiritual person or becoming this or that. Many people make the mistake of taking on to their ego identity the role that they learn or play in a community. Because they sit and meditate, practice a little or learn a little from books or Dharma talk, they take the stance of being "holier than thou". They expect their external circumstances to change in some ways, people to like them more, their spouse, children or family to treat them differently.

Others expect that they will gain profound insight and get frustrated that they don't. While some would expect to experience blissful or transcendental states of meditations or out of body experience, others would be a little crazier and want to have ESP, special powers from their meditative practice. The more devoted ones want somehow that the Buddha will protect them from harm or external happenings which do not go their way. This is not the goal of a Buddhist practice. Not the goal of a Zen practice. If you are expecting all these, don't practice Buddhism or Zen. This practice is not for you.

The most profound practice of Zen is to totally empty your cup and relieve yourself of all expectations of your practice. Just keep an open mind and allow everything to be naturally. Experience life as a child, be curious and observe. Preconceived expectations of results of practice will definitely cause you to be disappointed and never reaching the fruits of your practice, which is the end of sufferings. They are nothing but mere distractions.

## **Willingness to be truly alive and discover the Dharma within one's life through one's own experience. Practice appreciation of all things you experience, the people you meet, the gifts of life around you.**

The Buddha's Dharma exists in many different forms. We usually have habitual patterns which repeat itself over and over again in our own life without our conscious knowledge. It is through the meditative practice that we truly see into these patterns of the mind. Nothing in our life happens by accident. Everything is there to teach us a profound spiritual lesson. Observe your own life, learn from it, view it from the light of the Buddha's teachings to test and see if it is true. Be totally honest about it.

I had one person who came up to me to ask question, he was frustrated about his lack of progress in practicing spirituality. He continues to have depressions, anxieties, and sufferings in his life. I told him to meditate. When the illness is acute, apply more medicine. Meditate for 1 or 2 hours a day. Observe the emotions, let it flow through your body; investigate to see where it came from.

However, he was afraid of doing so. He resisted regular meditation. He resisted looking into his patterns because it brings up painful feelings. So repressing it is a lot easier, it is habitual. I gave him medication for his sufferings; he refused to take them, being very discouraged that he didn't get over his acute mental states. If a person is ill, refuses to take medication then complains about pain and their illness, it doesn't help.

The practice of Zen is about facing your fears, facing your feelings, your emotions, and thoughts patterns no matter how dark, good or bad. We have to be honest that this is what is happening in our life. This honesty is not to judge ourselves to but to help us to heal. Repression and avoidance will not suffice. We must dive into life and accept all the good and bad experiences as is and repress nothing. We must bring this clarity of mind gained from our meditative practice as the light to shine on all the happenings in our life. Observe it, not judge it, and allow the realization and understanding of them to naturally come to us. The answer is there, we're just too busy being lost in our habitual patterns of mind to hear it. This is being truly alive.

### **Willingness to have a regular daily practice.**

The human mind and habitual patterns is complex. However, the goal of a Buddhist practice is not about psychologically examining every aspects and part of mental functioning. It is to understand inner conscious reality and realizing that which is the ultimate truth inside ourselves that we meditate, this discovery can only happen when we stop the incessant analysis of every little bit of our thoughts. Continual analysis is more thinking. When you journey inside, you will face the good, the bad, the scary parts, the parts you don't want to see. Let it be and allow it to pass, acknowledge it but not judge it or analyze it. Let the dust settle and discover what happens when it does.

This act of being willing to face our reality within requires courage and determination at first, however, with the clarity of mind, the insights you gain from your practice will propel you to naturally practice with little efforts at a certain point in your practice.

### **Being totally honest about the process and progress of one's practice.**

Many people make the mistake of claiming that they are spiritually developed when indeed they are not. What a futile attempt. What for? It doesn't help you. It might help your ego a lot but it doesn't help you.

When we're honest about our practice, we keep going at it, we never settle for anything less than the total eradication of suffering. This is how the Buddha discovers his profound truth. He didn't settle for less.

If you're not meditating regularly, acknowledge that you don't. Doesn't help to feel guilty about it, just do something about that. Guilt is completely useless. It doesn't help us change our habitual mind patterns. Being honest about the process of our practice means not holding on to judgments to beat ourselves over the head with it. It is about changing that pattern and doing something different.

## **Finding oneself a suitable guiding teacher, to guide one on the path of practice.**

I cannot stress how important it is to have a guiding teacher. I'm going to be blunt in explaining the relationship between spiritual teachers and their students. Some people may not like to hear it, but this is the reality of the relationship. Without teachers who taught us how to read and write, very few people would be able to do so. Buddhism is the same, especially Zen Buddhism. It is about direct experience and practice. Zen teachers are usually someone who had practice for many years. A teacher is not one who is perfect according to our mind's expectations. Students cannot expect them to know everything, but at least know more than the students themselves in terms of direct experience into the Buddhist practice.

Students need to observe, watch and see if a teacher is one that is suitable for them to accept their personal guidance, you can receive teachings for an assortment of different teachers, but the guiding teacher is the one who intimately guide you and ultimately help you get to where you want. This very important act usually comes from the heart, not from the head. Trust is very important in this respect. Be mindful about this relationship, that students are not projecting unfulfilled needs on to their teacher. As well a guiding teacher should have the maturity to understand and not have his or her own mental needs projected on to their students. Be mindful of mental projections of unmet needs in the student teacher relationships.

A good teacher would never have expectations or force a student to do things they are not willing to choose themselves. Guidance is different from directing.

In this modern age, a guiding teacher can be accessible through many means of communication. Geography is no longer a restriction. So choose your guiding teacher wisely and always be mindful of the dynamic of this relationship.