

One Student To Another, On Zazen and Thoughts

Joe Niati contacted the Kent Zendo to ask about zazen meditation practice. Jayce Renner, a Kent Zendo student, responded. The text below is based on their email conversations during February and March 2015.

Joe Niati:

I have been reading about shikantaza and the zazen art of just sitting. I read Dogen's instructions. In his treatise he says don't try to think and don't try not to think. I have been struggling with these words and don't really know how I should approach zazen. What is a good way of practicing zazen? I am already proficient in counting the breath. Unfortunately, making a trip to Kent, Ohio would be difficult for me. Any feedback and suggestions on how I should practice would be great thanks!

Jayce Renner:

Thanks for writing. Good to hear you're sitting and doing zazen.

I'd suggest trying to find a trustworthy teacher or Zen group near where you live to support your practice in person. Or if possible, attend a beginner's retreat with a teacher so you can create a relationship.

Without more info, it would be hard for us to advise you. Over email, it might be very difficult. You might try giving our teacher Tim McCarthy a call. His phone number is (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

I find Dogen at times can be mysterious. If you haven't already, you might try reading other books like Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind or Nothing Special or Three Pillars of Zen. These books offer lots of practical advice.

Perhaps a more typical "Zen" answer to your question would be: keep sitting! ;)

But seriously, please let me know if I can help further, and please stay in touch.

JN:

I will definitely check those books out. I will try to look for a Zen teacher! I also practice a form of qigong called zhan zhuang or standing meditation where I hold certain postures for extended periods of time; allowing everything that arises to part of my standing experience. When you say “keep sitting!” should I maintain the same mentality I do when practicing standing meditation? That is, should I just sit down face a wall and kind of just sit? I know your instructions are simple, but for some reason my mind just can’t accept that, to sit in zazen.

JR:

Speaking as one student to another, it sounds to me like you should do the practice that seems to call you most. I’m not very familiar with qigong. But to use your own words, allowing everything that arises to be a part of your sitting experience, sounds good, if you want to try shikantaza. I wouldn’t sit for more than 40 minutes at a time, without standing or walking. “Kind of just sit” might be a little too loose, yet, in the end “just sitting” is “just sitting.”

Which mind can’t accept zazen? Perhaps that’s just where your practice is at. Or perhaps standing is simply more important for you. I can’t tell which, but maybe it’s a question for you. Sitting can have many different qualities that come and go too.

I hope that all helps. If not, I’m going to Zen hell for sure.

JN:

Thanks for your response. It was really helpful. When sitting facing a wall should I just allow my mind to wander or be as it is? Or should I try to block my thoughts out?

JR:

While maintaining the sitting posture, I try to let my thoughts come and go, not blocking them, but noticing them, without judgement.

My teacher, Tim, talks about a bird cage. The mind is like a chirping bird. But if you close the door on the cage, the bird can chirp all it wants to, and you know the bird is safe, and you don't worry about it. Maintaining the posture is like closing the bird cage. The mind just goes on and on. But it's not a problem.

JN:

Thanks for the advice. I think I have all I need to really begin my zazen practice. So if I got this right, it's maintaining zazen posture, noticing my thoughts, and staring at a wall, haha. That's all I need to do?

JR:

I think that's it in a nutshell. It can take 5 minutes to learn and a lifetime to master, so to speak.

JN:

What do I do when my mind wanders? What do I do if I keep thinking that I'm doing this wrong, and I feel like I'm just sitting idly and nothing is happening?

JR:

I'd suggest you notice the mind wandering, notice those thoughts ... and keep sitting. That's just the content of your practice, nothing to worry about. I think these thoughts are fairly common among everyone doing zazen, at one point or another. So you aren't alone at all in that experience. I still wonder if I'm "doing it right" sometimes. When that happens, I try to notice that and return to just sitting.

JN:

Does one have to maintain the mudra with the hands? Or can one just rest the hands on the thighs while sitting?

JR:

What will support your practice best? Personally, I maintain the mudra during sitting. It's a part of the zazen posture, so it's recommended.

At the Kent Zendo, we allow people to change the posture if they wish, so long as it doesn't disturb others. Other Zen groups would find that to be heretical.

JN:

How does one "notice the mind"?

JR:

I think it's something to grow into, but also know that beginners and even experienced sitters can tend to worry too much about thoughts during sitting, in my humble opinion.

Also, the books I recommended would generally address this topic too.

Sorry I can't help more on that one.

JN:

I feel like the practice of shikantaza kind of sounds like Vipassana without concentrating on the breath or any object whatsoever. To me this sounds like staring at a wall and letting the mind wander. If this is so is it actually possible for the mind to come to a complete halt all by its own? By that I mean what is the difference between letting my mind wander and sitting in zazen? I know you told me your master talks about the posture being in and of itself perfection. Maybe it will just take practice and several hours of sitting in zazen for the truth to be realized?

JR:

I agree that this all gets clearer with practice, over time. I haven't done Vipassana, but from what others have told me, it seems there are some similarities.

“Letting the mind wander” isn’t how I’d characterize zazen, actually. Maybe that phrase suggests encouraging thought or being preoccupied.

If you’re preoccupied, notice that. If your mind seems busy, notice that. Zazen isn’t one thing, it’s all of the above. So long as you maintain the posture, you’re “doing it.”

At the same time, in zazen, we try to “let thoughts go.” Sensei Craig Horton at the Cleveland Buddhist Temple says, using a common metaphor, it’s like clouds in a blue sky. The clouds are your thoughts. Let them go. Sit in the blue sky.

Imagine making a fist, and then opening your hand. A fist suggests grasping, and with an open palm we let things come and go. When you’re outside you might say, “Look, there’s a cloud... there it goes.” Just like thoughts, clouds arise and then disappear.