

14.01.25 “Leave Everything Alone” by Sono

Welcome to Tuesday morning guided meditation, the first one for this 2025.
Tuesday, 14th of January.

May all beings be well. May all beings be safe.

Let us settle into our posture: the soles of our feet on the ground or knees touching the mat, feeling the breath, eyes closed or slightly open, facing downwards.

So good to be sitting here with you all. Zen is a communal practice and so lovely to sit together. Each in our own different geographical locations, each experiencing different soundscapes - gentle rain falling where I am, visual of the magnolia tree in the backyard, sound of cars going past. But even though we're in different geographical locations, different visuals, different sounds, we share very similar bodies. One thing we have in common, all humanity has in common, is breathing. So we can all guess what it feels like to breathe. We all share that together.

Welcome the breath. Become one with the breath, our constant companion and friend, right to the very end. In, being aware of breathing in. Out, being aware of breathing out ...

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Zazen is the Dharma gate of ease and joy, our practice of just sitting, our practice of *leave everything alone*.

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So, our breath is like our constant companion, our anchor, always there to return to. But we can also expand our attention to 360 degrees circumference. Just being totally aware from the soles of our feet to the tip of our head, beyond into the environment, into this world we're all sitting in. Just allowing ourselves just to be aware of body, heart and mind.

Not trying to change anything, fix anything.

Just allowing our Zazen to do its work for us. Sitting relatively still allows us to go deeper and deeper into just simply experiencing this moment.

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Allow the breath, the unity of us all, sitting together, breathing together, to connect us to the sense of life itself. Life itself manifesting all these different forms. Human forms, bird forms, frogs, trees, all breathing together on this wonderful planet that we all share.

This beautiful blue shining globe, the vast cosmos.

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Zazen itself is a form of yoga. The longer we sit, pay attention, we feel areas in the body which might be contracted or tight. And just simply allowing them to be, just simply remaining still, relaxing, leaving everything alone. Some of those areas of tightness and contraction may simply loosen themselves up just naturally, just through this practice of breathing, sitting still and leaving everything alone. Just appreciating this wonderful body, feeling the sense of compassion arising and embracing our own body and mind and heart. Holding ourselves in a loving embrace.

So our practice always starts with feeling that sense of acceptance and love for this body, mind, and heart that we are. Sitting together, sharing our interdependence, creating a space where we can experience this stillness and this opening of our hearts together in a safe space, a safe zendo. Zendo doesn't have to be a room we're sitting in. Zendo can be created by sitting together here on Zoom or wherever we're sitting and practicing is really a zendo. Could be outside in a forest, on top of a mountain, sitting at a bus shelter waiting for a bus. But Zazen does require some prerequisites, some preconditions.

You know, we do need to feel relatively safe to practice Zazen. We need to be able to relax. It's our responsibility as Sangha to create these spaces wherever we are as much as we can. Even though our companions or friends or partners

or family members don't practice Zazen, you know, we can bring the safe space of Zazen into their lives as well. One of the best ways to do that is just simply return to the breath at any moment in your day. Reconnect with Zazen practice.

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This practice, we call it no-gain, just sitting, leaving everything alone. Simply means we're not trying to get from here to there. We're totally content to be this moment.

This practice of no-gain is wonderfully expressed in the classic Zen story of the young monk Matsu, who became a very famous teacher with many disciples. As a young monk, he was sitting in the zendo ardently practicing his Zazen. So much effort, beads of sweat were trickling down his forehead. And the master saw this promising young monk, came to him and said, “what is the purpose of your Zazen?” And Matsu, the young monk, said, “I'm seeking to become a Buddha master.” “Hmm ...” So the master smiled and nodded. Went outside the zendo and came back and sat next to the young monk and began polishing a roofing tile. The young monk Matsu looked across confused. “Master, why are you polishing a roofing tile?” And the master said, “I'm going to make myself a mirror. I'm going to turn the roofing tile into a mirror.” Matsu, looking even more confused, said, “Master, you'll never be able to turn a roofing tile into a mirror, no matter how long you polish it.” The master smiled and said, “Yes. And you will never be able to make yourself into a Buddha by practicing Zazen.” And at that moment, the young Matsu had a realization. Zazen is not a means to an end. We're not seeking to become something other than what we already are. We already are Buddha. We already are Dharma. Reality itself is Buddha-Dharma. How could it not be otherwise?

You see, one of the reasons why we find it difficult to understand this concept of no gain, it's because of the kind of, I guess what Barry would call, the curative fantasies or these idealized concepts we have of what so-called “enlightenment” is. We always imagine it to be some special state far beyond our ordinary life.

Yet, our Zazen practice teaches us time and again, when you're hungry, eat. When you're tired, sleep. Life is intrinsically valuable. Appreciate our life.

Appreciate life. If you're lucky, you might get 85 years or 95 years. It's not very long.

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This practice is true. The etymology of the word “truth” is quite interesting in our European languages. Apparently it has an association with the word trust. To be true to yourself, trust yourself. This person is true. This person is trustworthy. This practice is trustworthy. You can have faith in this practice. It will deliver you to your true self, which is none other than this moment right now.

The longer we sit, the longer, the deeper we surrender to this practice. You can feel our relationship to our body, mind, and world subtly transforming. We're not seeking anything. We're not grasping. We're just letting everything just flow in this moment. Hmmm ...

It's okay to *enjoy* this practice. Sometimes it may feel a bit uncomfortable with the body, but generally speaking, sitting on a chair, it's usually fairly comfortable. We're not seeking pain for the sake of pain. We're not trying to do “boot camp” Zen. We don't have to sit through painful periods of Zazen anymore. Just learn how to relax and surrender to this moment.

Check in with your face every now and again and your facial muscles. Give yourself a little smile. Bring relaxation to the forehead, eyebrows, cheeks, and the jaw.

Bring awareness to the center of the chest and the heart. Sense of appreciation to this beautiful organ. Relaxing the belly. Connecting to our body and mind and to each other.

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Breathing in. We are aware of breathing in.

Breathing out. We are aware of breathing out.

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We are inseparable from the natural world. We are a wonderful creation of evolution.

Our sense of self is a wonderful creation of evolution. And all the emotions which go with having a sense of self, need to bring our sense of acceptance to all of those. Our emotional needs as well as our physical needs for food and water and shelter. Our needs for recognition and empathy from others.

We bring our no-gain practice to our psychologically-minded Zen practice. To a very deep acceptance of ourselves. We all experience shame at some part in our lifetime. A sense of inadequacy, inferiority, failure, not good enough. All the various ways in which we reject or hate ourselves. Our no-gain practice, leave everything alone, is recognizing, just like everything in nature, we are perfect just as we are in this moment.

Perfection in this sense meaning it's complete. It couldn't be anything different to what it is. The way, the Tao, is perfectly in harmony with itself. We just have to trust the way, the Tao. That is what we are. We don't have to cultivate it. We just have to see that we don't have to be caught in our relentless rejection of ourselves. If we make a mistake, we make a mistake. If we fuck it up, we fuck it up.

But we know our hearts are in the right place. Our hearts align with this practice, with this Dharma, with our intention to do no harm, to do good, to do good to others. By allowing others to be themselves, the more we can allow ourselves to be ourselves, we can allow others to be themselves.

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I'm just going to read you out a poem by a Chinese Zen hermit, I think from the 13th century. In English, his name is Stonehouse. It's a translation by Red Pine.

I sleep in the clouds where the sun doesn't shine. Beside a high cliff and a mountain stream, I dream on my cot until the moon fills the window. The porridge is done when the stove smoke clears.

A million reasons vanish without being driven off. Our single, perfect nature shines by itself. As clear as a cloudless sky, it never changes.

The sea, meanwhile, is now a mulberry grove.

So everything changes, but everything's also perfect just as it is. That's our single, perfect nature, shining by itself. We don't have to cultivate or add anything to it. We are already non-separate from that shining nature.

Sometimes we're intuit it when we are in one of those special moments or moods, could be at a dawn or dusk or looking at the sun shimmering on the waves. Beauty can certainly evoke it. But that shining, clear, true nature is always present.

But it's very difficult to appreciate that there are certain conditions which are necessary. That's where it comes back to Sangha practice, our practice as human beings to do no harm, to create safety, to share empathy and compassion, to create the opportunity for all human beings to appreciate this beauty, the beauty of this world that we live in. It's very difficult to appreciate that if our lives are in danger. That's where our precept practice comes in.

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We are Buddha. We are Dharma. We are Sangha.

Thank you all for being here this morning, sharing this time together, touching base with each other, with ourselves as well, creating hope for the conditions for a good day.