

28.01.25 “Wabi Sabi” by Sono

So welcome everybody. It's Tuesday morning 28th of January 2025. Welcome to this guided meditation. This morning, we will be covering some very familiar territory, the practice of Shikantaza, translated into English as Just Sitting, our core practice in Soto Zen and Ordinary Mind Zen. I might also touch on some related teachings known as Wabi-sabi and Wu-wei. Wabi-sabi is a kind of Japanese aesthetic philosophy of beauty which is very much related to impermanence. And Wu-wei is a Taoist teaching which is very much related to our practice of just sitting, leaving everything alone.

So let's take a few moments to settle into our posture. Sitting comfortably on a chair or cushion. You can have your hands just resting on your lap or you can put them into the Zen mudra position if you like. Your eyes may be closed or slightly open, facing down to the ground about 45 degrees in front of you. Keeping your back relatively straight so that you can sit in relative stillness.

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Becoming aware of the breath, sounds in the environment. Feeling the breath, allowing the breath to breathe you. The breath is a beautiful gateway into Shikantaza practice. As most of you know, just sitting is the most simplest kind of meditation practice. In fact, some people don't like even to refer to it as meditation. Just simply sitting has no goal, no object. However, feeling the breath is a lovely anchor and it's okay to return to feeling the breath at any juncture, any moment in our just sitting practice. So, for me, I return often just to feeling the breath to center myself and then just allowing myself to be aware of whatever's occurring in this moment, whatever is most salient to me, whatever stands out most to me. So my attention is always circulating around the circle of 360 degrees circumference of our attention. But quite often just simply returns to feeling the breath.

Even though Shikantaza translates literally as just sitting, the founder of Soto Zen practice, Dogen, the 13th century Japanese Zen master, encouraged us to understand Zazen as going beyond sitting or lying down. So sometimes it might

be helpful to think of this practice as “just awareness”, just sitting and just being aware, simply being.

The reason why this is a difficult practice is that it goes against the grain of our culture to be endlessly busy, focusing on various tasks, or being entertained by our TV sets or iPhones. And ultimately, just sitting takes us back to the reality of ourselves in this moment. We're taking the backward step, embracing our body, mind and world in which we are living right now, and settling there, putting up our welcome home sign. We settle in this body, mind, world, which is our home, and we cultivate, finding ourselves at home in this present moment, this wonderful present moment ... feeling the breath, feeling the various sensations of the body. As we sit in stillness, relatively, our body will naturally start to unwind and relax ... feeling safe, trusting in this process of just being aware, letting go of striving, seeking, wanting to be somewhere else or be someone else, simply returning to the acceptance of this moment.

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Allow everything that you're experiencing to be simply what it is, coming and going, changing from moment to moment, thoughts coming and going, sensations coming and going, sounds coming and going. No need to grasp onto anything, just let everything go. No need to try and stop or change your thoughts, or no need to label thoughts in this practice, just let everything flow.

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Feel the contact of your body with the chair you're sitting in or the cushion you're sitting on, contact of your feet on this ground, on this earth, or the contact of your knees on the mat, forming a stable base, whole practice forming a stable home base to allow us to be with any difficulties that may arise for us in this moment, be it some sense of discomfort, physical discomfort, or maybe an emotion which is tinged with a sadness or some emotional conflict. Just allowing that to be, without trying to fix it or change it or make it go away, accepting, welcoming it to our welcome home mat.

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Embracing the stillness and the silence within you and around you, allowing the stillness and the silence to evoke a calming presence and the perception of how everything is transient and impermanent and changing moment by moment.

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Just sitting teaches us to accept ourselves exactly as we are. It also teaches us to accept others exactly as they are, to let go of striving for perfection, to let go of striving to improve ourselves, simply to let go of any curative fantasy of becoming someone other than who we are or seeking some other special state other than this particular state we are currently experiencing.

Just sitting is synonymous with radical self-acceptance. The act of just sitting as we practice it day by day and as we can return to it during the day - if you have a moment during the day when you can just stop, feel the breath, come back to this moment, just awareness wherever you are, the constant repetition of this practice creates the sense of acceptance of ourselves without having to think about it. It becomes part of our procedural body-mind-set. It starts to permeate our everyday lives, our relationship with ourselves and others. Like good wine, it matures, the sense of self-acceptance matures over the years. It becomes sweeter as we age, which is a nice way of segueing into the Japanese aesthetic philosophy of wabi-sabi.

Wabi is about finding beauty in imperfection, simplicity, things that are aged and broken and cracked. Sabi is the appreciation of the beauty of impermanence and transience and the kind of melancholy feeling which comes with that which is kind of a sweet feeling. Sabi is concerned with the passage of time, with the way in which all things grow and decay and how aging alters the visual nature of those things.

This is a quote, some quotes from a book by Beth Kenton, the author of *Wabi-sabi, Japanese wisdom for a perfectly imperfect life*.

“Wabi implies a stillness with an air of rising above the mundane. It is an acceptance of reality and the insight that comes with that. It allows us to realize that whatever our situation, there is beauty hiding somewhere” or beauty that is right before our very eyes, totally unhidden, all around us.

She says also, “ultimately wabi is a mindset that appreciates humility, simplicity and frugality as roots to tranquillity and contentment. The spirit of wabi is deeply connected to the idea of accepting that our true needs are simple and of being humble and grateful for the beauty that already exists right where we are.

The word sabi, over time, “has come to communicate a deep and tranquil beauty that emerges with the passage of time. Visually we recognize this as the patina of age, weathering, tarnishing and signs of antiquity. Sabi is a condition created by time, not the human hand, although it often emerges on quality objects that were originally crafted with care. It is interested in the refined elegance of age. It is beauty revealed in the processes of use and decay, such as the dull shine in the worn grain of a well-loved farmhouse kitchen table.”

So, let's take some moments to appreciate that aesthetic philosophy of wabi sabi and integrate it into our just sitting practice. It invites us to acknowledge and embrace the imperfections within ourselves and the world around us, and to see the beauty and perfection of that. To love your wrinkles, to embrace your sagging tummy. It's really a radical undermining of images of perfection that are often thrust upon us by the culture in which we live in, which is very youth-oriented. It's appreciating the weather-worn ageing process, finding beauty in simplicity, both in nature and in human-made objects.

Allow yourself to soften and let go of any need for perfection. Embrace the natural ebb and flow of life and find beauty in the simplicity and impermanence of each moment. Flowers fall, weeds flourish. Falling flowers and flourishing weeds are also beautiful.

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You could say that the philosophy of wabi sabi is appreciating flaws, the cracks within the vase. As Dylan says in one of his songs, everything is broken. As Leonard Cohen says in one of his songs, there is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. Appreciate the grace of brokenness.

Brokenness is another metaphor for impermanence or emptiness. Everything falls apart and then reunites again in the endless cycle of growth and decay and birth, birth and death, death and birth. Buddha nature itself.

So appreciate your flaws in yourself and in others, in objects, relationships or even careers. From this perspective, everything becomes perfect just as it is. We're not seeking an ideal of beauty. We're training ourselves in a way. Wabi sabi is a way of appreciating, a way of seeing the beauty of impermanence and interdependence. A certain mood goes with that, a sense of serenity in the midst of change, appreciating the beauty of change, the beauty of aging. Even in the reality of sickness and death. Everything living must die, grow, flourish and then fade away in beauty.

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As I sat by my mother's bedside when she was dying, I appreciated the beauty of her skin, her hands, her fingernails. Unfortunately, she was in great pain at the time and relatively unconscious through morphine. But even in the moment of the body dying, there is still beauty.

Therefore, we can accept our imperfect selves, our imperfect lives, our imperfect jobs, our imperfect relationships. Beth Kempton writes, “put simply, Wabi Sabi gives you permission to be yourself. It encourages you to do your best but not make yourself ill in pursuit of an unattainable goal of perfection. It gently motions you to relax, slow down and enjoy your life. And it shows that beauty can be found in the most unlikely places, making every day a doorway to delight.

So “Wabi Sabi is less about what we see and more about *how* we see.”

I think part of our Zen Buddhist training in sitting and practicing is about changing how we see, changing how we see impermanence and interdependence. When the Buddha Shakyamuni first started on his quest, he rejected impermanence. He rejected old age, sickness and death. And during the long years of questing, he realized that was the wrong direction to go. The path is the acceptance of impermanence, the acceptance of sickness, old age and death. And we come to see that beauty in that process as well. It's not something

we have to be afraid of, or reject. It's something we can embrace and integrate into our appreciation of life.

You could say beauty is only made possible because of impermanence. Everything changes and we appreciate the miracle of just this moment. Miracles are not walking on water. Miracle is simply just walking on this earth. Just breathing is the miracle. Appreciating beauty in simplicity.

Therefore, our just sitting practice cultivates a way of seeing. Not a way of seeing clearly, which is more left brain in orientation. But an aesthetics of seeing. The perception of beauty and perfection and simplicity in nature, in old age, sickness and death. This cultivation of the perception of beauty in impermanence and interdependence we could call wabi sabi.

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As we bring this meditation to a close, take a few moments to appreciate the stillness. Integrating the teachings of Shikantaza, just sitting, with the aesthetics of wabi sabi as a way of seeing.

Draw upon wabi sabi to help you appreciate this life. This life that you are living right now. This moment which will never be again. This life which will never be again. Your unique human life. Which is very fleeting. Allow wabi sabi to support you to find beauty in memory. To find beauty in darkness. In brokenness. In cracks. Allow wabi sabi to free you from the fear of change.

Carry the essence of this meditation with you as you move through your day. Embracing the present moment and the beauty of imperfection. May you appreciate the grace of brokenness and the beauty of flaws.

Thank you for being here this morning and joining in this guided meditation.