

# Zen meditation and mindfulness for modern times

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## Introduction

Zen is perhaps the most talked about and the most misunderstood philosophy. While it eludes definitions, words of D.T. Suzuki convey its meaning well:

“Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom. By making us drink right from the fountain of life it liberates us from all the yokes under which we finite beings are usually suffering in this world.”  
(Suzuki and Humphreys 1969)

The documented practice of meditation and mindfulness goes back at least two and half thousand years. Zen teachings and practice originated in India at the times of Shakyamuni Buddha (The Awakened One of the Shakya clan), around 500 BC. In time it has spread to China then Japan, and in 20th century came to the West, to Europe and America. In the course of these wanderings it has adapted to local and cultural circumstances. However the direct transmission from masters to worthy successors assured that Zen is alive and that the core of teaching remains pure.

For us Zen is a way of life, and though some would argue it is non-religious, its roots are firmly planted in Buddhism. Zen practice is not monolithic – some types lead to enlightenment, the ultimate aim, some aim to enhance physical well-being and life satisfaction. The five main divisions of Zen were classified by Fifth Ancestor of the Chinese Huayan School, Kuei-feng Tsung-mi as follows: *bompu* (ordinary), *gedo* (an outside way), *shojo* (small vehicle), *daijo* (large vehicle) and *saijojo* (the highest vehicle) (Kapleau 1980). This classification reflects the increasing insight into our True Nature – all within very similar forms of practice.

*Bompu* or *ordinary Zen* is non-religious and its aim is an improvement of the physical and mental health. Philosophically content-free it is good for everybody: if practiced regularly it will improve the health, increase well-being and help to achieve concentration and clarity of mind. The key benefit is learning how to keep your mind where you put it – a skill necessary to achieve anything in life. It is noteworthy that *bompu Zen* underlies all higher forms of practice as to have a healthy body and a disciplined mind provides a vehicle for deepening insight.

In contrast the fourth type of Zen, *daijo* or Great Vehicle (Mahayana) has an ultimate goal of achieving *kensho* - seeing into one's True Nature - and becoming the Way in daily life. This is the true Buddhist Zen as Buddhism is a religion of Enlightenment; intended for people with burning desire to see the things as they really are and so experience absolute Reality first hand. The practice of *zazen* – a sitting meditation – embodies the innate Buddha-nature that we all are endowed with. There are differences in approach to enlightenment between two main Zen schools, Rinzai and Soto: Rinzai strives to awakening while Soto claims that since *zazen* actualises our pure True Nature one day it will become obvious to a sincere practitioner.

Every Zen master faces a challenge how to implement Zen Buddhist teaching in daily life for the variety of practitioners. One of us (JDS) has received Dharma Transmission in both Rinzai and Soto traditions, and his teaching emphasises meditation, mindfulness and everyday practice. He focuses on the practical application of Eastern philosophy to the stresses and strains of modern Western life.

In 2010 JDS developed two eight weeks long courses, *Zen meditation and mindfulness for health and well-being* and *Zen meditation and mindfulness for insight*. The former embodies *bompu* type of Zen whereas the latter addresses *daijo* type of Zen. He has trained since several meditation and mindfulness teachers to deliver these courses to healthy subjects. BJK delivers them twice a year at Oxford University (health and well-being) and annually at Oxford Zen Society (insight).

### **Meditation tradition**

In this paragraph we take a brief tour of concepts that are pertinent to our practice.

- *Meditation* is a practice which broadly speaking has either narrow focus on concentration (using a mantra or image) or on insight which is wider, more investigative which leads to clearly seeing things how they really are. The former is called shamatha (calm abiding), the latter prajna (wisdom or clear seeing).

*Four types of meditation* are sitting, walking, standing and lying down.

- *Mindfulness* is simply paying attention, with an internal focus, e.g. mindfulness of the body or with an external focus on an activity such as flower arrangement or Japanese tea ceremony.

*Four foundations of mindfulness* are mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of sensations, mindfulness of the mind and mindfulness of mind objects.

*The Zen approach* is that meditation is a simple and natural thing, nothing special to believe in. A distinctive feature of Zen Rinzai tradition to which we belong is teaching meditation for wellbeing in and outside monastic setting.

## **I Meditation and health**

A cursory search on Amazon (March 2012) revealed 35 top guided mindfulness meditation books. The number of research papers published annually with ‘meditation’ or ‘mindfulness’ in the title or content goes into hundreds. Why is that so?

In the second half of the twentieth century there was a breakthrough in the medical science in America. Dr Herbert Benson, a father of modern mind-body medicine, has pioneered the use of meditation in medical science. He studied physiological effects of stress and demonstrated that the *relaxation response* can relieve stress as opposed to the *fight-or-flight reaction*. Factors such as metabolic rate, heart rate and blood pressure are increased by stress and decreased by meditation. The importance of his research was to show the direct connection between relaxation response and meditation (Redwood 2008).

This theme was picked up subsequently by John Kabat-Zinn (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth et al. 1985) who introduced meditation (carefully stripped of any religious meaning) as a major factor in treating psychiatric disorders and patients with chronic pain. The efficiency of eight week courses – with group meetings every week and participants practicing around an hour

daily in their own homes – has been tested and proved many times over (Kabat-Zinn 2001). This strand has been further developed in Britain by Prof Mark Williams, Oxford Mindfulness Centre (Williams 2010). In contrast our courses are aimed at healthy participants.

These courses are based on a premise that the human brain has a property of *neuroplasticity*. Both the brain and the nervous system can change structurally and functionally under the influence of the signals from the environment. Learning and memory are examples of plasticity. Implicitly it follows meditators are able to change some neural paths in the brain through meditation, and this can result in a changed outlook on life events. This profound result of sustained practice, known for many centuries to meditation practitioners, has been confirmed by scientific studies in the last two decades (Chiesa and Serretti 2010).

There are many practices which are classified under an umbrella of ‘mindfulness meditation’; while they have roots in contemplative or religious practices – especially Hinduism and Buddhism – their foundation is non-religious (Lutz, Dunne et al. 2007). This causes a problem for neuroscience investigation as there are many subtle and less so parameters essential for conducting a well-defined experiment. For example, what paths change in the brain if a meditator practices with open eyes, and when eyes are closed? Hence a strict comparison of the effects of different techniques on meditators has to be defined in broader terms, for example looking at psychological factors such as increased life satisfaction.

One of the definitions of meditation is *not-doing* as opposed to action (Lutz, Dunne et al. 2007). The former is an anathema to a busy Western person. We are supposed to manage our time in the most efficient way; some time management trainings advise people to schedule every five minutes. Keeping track of time is the ultimate achievement; not having time is interpreted as that we have ‘made it’. Curiously though, the outcome of not-doing helps us with doing if translated into daily activities. This is something we want to learn and implement in daily practice. And we pose a practical question: what can we get out of not-doing? How is it going to influence us, help us to cope with life’s stresses, can it preserve and improve our mental and physical health?

## *Zen for health and well-being*

This course addresses illnesses of modern times, as well as illustrates the benefits of meditation and mindfulness. Three examples are given below:

### **Stress, especially emotional**

Stress is an unavoidable feature of modern life, and low-ish level of it can be beneficial. It is *the non-specific response of the organism to any pressure or demand* (Hans Selye). However prolonged exposure to stress leads to impaired performance and reduces immunity to diseases. Handling stressors, whether external (e.g. work) or internal (thoughts, feelings...) involves development of outer and inner resources for dealing with them. Meditation and mindfulness helps to develop your inner resources in two main ways:

- i. providing an oasis of calm and relaxation in which we can recuperate
- ii. perceiving clearly what we are going through. When we encounter stress, we don't act out and we don't suppress it – we are simply aware.

Mindfulness centred on the body helps to identify and alleviate stress and works on many deep levels. Hence we can learn to change our *reaction* to some stressors such as deadlines, relationship problems or public performance to a *response*:

1. **The classical stress reaction** - three stages: i. fight or flight (mobilization of the body for immediate reaction), ii. a slower resistance action iii. exhaustion
2. **Response to stress** – the *ultimate effect on our health of the total psychological stress we experience depends in large measure on how we come to perceive change itself in all its various forms, and how skilful we are in adapting to continual change while maintaining our own inner balance and sense of coherence* (Jon Kabat-Zin).

In an interview Herbert Benson stated that his team has found psychological benefits of meditation as well (Redwood 2008). The relaxation response was found to allay anxiety, mild and moderate depression, and to moderate excessive anger and hostility. He also compares health and well-being to a three-legged stool: one leg is medication; the second leg is surgery and other medical procedures. For the balance there has to be a third leg and “*that leg is self-care*”. Self-care includes relaxation response and other factors, such as proper nutrition, the belief system of the patient, social environment etc. Therefore one has to bear in mind that

meditation is not cure for all: especially in mental disorders it is often used simultaneously with traditional medical treatments.

### **Anxiety and depression**

Rather than escaping emotional pain we deal with it through AA (awareness and acceptance). Emotional responses are often rooted in the animal level of our being; hence one of the most effective ways of dealing with them is through mindfulness of the body. The key attitude is that of being present with emotional pain, neither suppressing nor acting on it. This approach is also valid for dealing with very strong states such as fear or depression; practising by simply coming face to face with the moment-to-moment reality of our symptoms. The results of scientific research (Kuyken, Byford et al. 2008) show that mindfulness and meditation (often combined with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as done at Oxford Mindfulness Centre) is as effective as maintenance anti-depressants in preventing a relapse into depression, and is more effective in enhancing peoples' quality of life (Teasdale, Segal et al. 2000).

### **Elevated function**

*After meditating I feel calm, centred and ready to compete – but, more importantly, the technique allows me to ‘just play’ and enjoy the game without worrying about the result.*  
Jonathan Rowson, the three times British chess champion

In addition to preventing ill-health on mental and physical levels and to stress-proofing meditation can boost or elevate your function. This is widely accepted in the East; in Japan many companies will send their employees for short meditation training in a Zen temple. Meditation improves attention, concentration and clarity of the mind; enhances creativity and problem – solving skills; induces general psychological well-being; encourages positive personality growth with the length of the meditation practice; increases self- esteem; increases empathy; delays the aging process; heightens perception; may even boost IQ. Public speaking becomes easier; personal performance improves, physiological age is ‘younger’ than chronological age (Wallace, Dillbeck et al. 1982). Another level of elevated functions – metaphysical – is not ‘proved’ conclusively by scientific methods.

To sum up, the key wellbeing benefits of meditation and mindfulness are:

- **training the mind to focus and concentrate** – daily practice, with obvious benefits
- **enhancing** mental, physiological and psychological planes
- **improving general psychological well-being** – typically increasing with the length of practice – meditators are more confident, relaxed, satisfied, conscientious and less anxious than their less experienced colleagues
- **a tool to enhance youthfulness and longevity** – regularly practising meditation for five years brings benefit in being physiologically 12 years younger than non-meditators .

### **Practices taught in this course**

All Rinzai Zen masters of today have Hakuin Zenji as their ancestor. Hakuin (1686-1769) revived Zen teachings in Japan, and was a prolific writer. Nowadays he is remembered in the lay world for his book on health *Yasenkanna*\*\* (Yampolsky 1971).

Here we concentrate only on the health aspect which is the primary and underlying aspect of Zen practice. There are people who meditate zealously but yet their health suffers – from what became colloquially known as ‘Zen sickness’. This can be overcome by a practice of introspection, roughly by allowing the inward spirit and vital force to penetrate into the space below the navel.

What is so important about this space below the navel? This is *hara* – the vital centre of man. There is a book of this title by Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim. He asserts that ‘...anchorage in the vital centre which is Hara guarantees man enjoyment of a power which enables him to master life in a new and different way. It is a mysteriously sustaining, ever renewing, ordering and forming power, as well as liberating and integrating one.’ (Dürckheim, Kospoth et al. 1977)

With some simplification there are three essential physical components to the Zen training: posture, breathing and balance between tension and relaxation. On the mental level there is attention and concentration. All these are linked to *hara*; a well-developed *hara* is essential for ‘being centered’, for being focused, for keeping our attention fully on any activity or accessing meditative states.

We teach four fundamental meditation and mindfulness techniques for health and well-being: bodyscan (a simplification of a traditional Zen practice called nanso no ho or soft ointment meditation), counting breath, following breath and fusho (the practice of presence or unborn mind). They serve as an anchor for attention to which we revert when distracted, and their relation to foundations of mindfulness is summarised below:

### Attaching attention

- Bodyscan —————> Strong physical anchor
- Counting breath ———> Abstract and physical anchor
- Following breath ———> Physical anchor
- Fusho —————> No anchor

## II Spiritual development

Mindfulness and meditation are traditional, age-old Eastern ways of developing and deepening insight. Mindfulness means being aware of what's going on in the present moment; being one with any activity we choose; not day-dreaming. Zen places particular emphasis on developing awareness of the body which is the vehicle for enlightenment. That's where mindfulness plays vital role as we have the body-mind: what's going on in the body affects the mind and vice versa.

### *Zen meditation and mindfulness for insight*

This eight week course introduces Zen meditation and mindfulness practices aimed at developing insight into how the reality is and who we really are. The ultimate focus is on *kensho* – literally seeing or experiencing your true nature – ‘...a blissful realization where a person's inner nature, the originally pure mind, is directly know as illuminating emptiness, a thusness which is dynamic and immanent in the world’ (Peter Harvey).



## Mental level

In addition to documented effects of meditation and mindfulness on health there is their influence on the mental level. From the ability to concentrate stems an increased mental clarity, heightened ability to learn, mental strength and being grounded, increased empathy (with some detachment). There are several current studies on the influence of meditation on mental tasks, e.g. improvement of the ability to prioritise and manage tasks, the ability to voluntarily focus on specific information and the ability to stay alert to the environment (three sub-components of attention) (Jha, Krompinger et al. 2007). All these effects are linked to neuroplasticity of the human brain. Both the brain and the nervous system can change structurally and functionally under the influence of the signals from the environment, thus our experiences and our thoughts.

Mental effects of meditation can be summarised as follows:

- **the skill of concentration:** ability to concentrate can be learned and improved; impact on all areas of life when we are able to stay focused
- **increased mental clarity, heightened ability to learn**
- **concentration leading to relaxation** – concentration narrows our focus of attention thus ‘squeezing out’ distractions
- **overcoming principal barrier to mindfulness** – lack of willingness to see things as they really are. If we stop fooling ourselves and have courage to see things as they are, we can overcome this barrier. We allow things to arise and pass, to resolve, letting them go, thus healing and gaining mental strength and groundedness.

## Spiritual level

A central feature of this course is outlining the road to *kensho*, enlightenment, through practice. We recall that the key aim of mindfulness training is to keep the mind where we put it. How this work changes, expands and influences mind – and ultimately our Being - is traditionally expressed in Zen through *Ten oxherding pictures*. Similar stages in spiritual practice are found in other cultures as well. For example, in Christianity there is St John of the Cross’ “The Dark Night of the Soul”. On one level the Tibetan Buddhist classics *The Tibetan*

*Book of the Dead* describes how to prepare for death and desirable rebirth; a modern interpretation is of passage through several psychological states.

The Tibetan tradition emphasizes the path as being *between* confusion and enlightenment, and urges the practitioner to choose the latter. Of course the final goal is enlightenment but at every stage, in every realm, there is a clear choice between soft and alluring light (wrong!) and brilliant intimidating luminosity (correct!). The path can be cyclical – there are six realms where one can be reborn: the realm of hell, the hungry ghost realm, the human realm, the realm of the jealous gods, the realm of the gods. These realms are thematically tied to living in *samsara* (life in ignorance and suffering) and serve as a springboard to entering *dharmakaya* (the absolute Buddha-nature). In all realms the liberation happens via seeing through and not falling for projections of one's mind but instead finding the courage to face and enter luminosity (the naked mind).

Psychologically in the realm of hell, the most intense of all, a practitioner is fighting with hatred and aggression (hot hell) or pride (cold hell). In the hungry ghosts realm one suffers insatiable hunger of possessing all what is to be possessed so there is no joy of new acquisitions. In the animal realm everything is sane, solid and humourless – so anything unpredictable threatens the base of living. The human realm is a sort of mixture between animal and hungry ghost realms: seeking predictability while striving constantly for something (research and development, enriching life). In addition there is passion and intrigue, and impermanence.

We argue that the Zen way leads *from* confusion to enlightenment. Traditionally the path has ten stages as described below. It is universally recognized that this is not a one-off process but it is cyclical; it reaches deeper and deeper cleansing and healing levels resulting in deepening understanding of and connection to our true nature. It does not however describe the emotional landscape through which this path is weaving. To a great extent it seems to be unimportant; a typical response of a Zen master would be: 'cut off'!, 'more zazen'!, 'let go!'.

There are reasons for that, and one is that a Zen practitioner has to let go of any experience, even of kensho as not to stop the possibility of infinite spiritual development.

## Stages of insight

*The ten oxherding pictures: Zen road map of the journey of spiritual insight*

The ten pictures illustrate stages of insight, and are often accompanied by poems\*. Over the centuries prominent Zen masters added their commentaries, sometimes in a very oblique way. Here we present a modern version: verses by Ryōsen (BJG) and commentaries by JDS from teacher's manual as taught to meditation and mindfulness teachers.

### 1. The search for the bull



*Transmutation*

Breath by breath

I open my chest

Breath by breath

I let the dragon soar

Breath by breath

I let the light in

Breath by breath

Chest opens

Breath by breath

Dragon soars

Breath by breath

Light shines

Breath by breath

Dew drop on the blade of grass

*From Teacher's Manual:* We're doing our practice and there is an engagement with it, a commitment to find what we are looking for. In this stage we are studying the self, our mind and body and we realize that ultimately we are not our mind and body.

## 2. Discovering the footprints



*Three worlds*

I have given you:

A shadow of the past

A glimpse of the future

A body of the present -

A sightless man, you held this body tight

*From Teacher's Manual:* The footprints are the effects – previous actions are the cause. We realize clearly that things, being made up of causes are inherently changeable and have a degree of instability about them that can never fully and permanently satisfy us.

## 3. Perceiving the bull

*University Park*

A ginkgo tree silently stands  
bridging heaven and earth.

Its naked crown supports the sky,  
its leaves carpet the ground.

A late hedgehog rustles the leaves  
into a winter house,  
and rainy clouds fleetingly rest  
on dormant nets of branches.



Tenderly, a kiss of a smooth bark  
 falls on an open palm –  
 the heart beats thanks for such  
 generosity of this tree.

*From Teacher's Manual:* We get a clear view on things now, our meditation takes on a life of its own. Reality begins to be seen as networks of very fine vibrations. We can feel like we've made it – we've seen the grandeur and beauty of reality.

#### 4. Catching the bull

*Tyrtej*

Like a resinous splinter, you keep shedding  
 Alighted rags whirling all around you  
 Burning, you're ignorant of becoming free  
 Or if all what is yours will be lost?  
 What will be left: just chaos and ashes  
 Storm-driven into an abyss? – or  
 Among the cinders star-begotten diamond will remain  
 The eternal victory dawn...



*Cyprin Kamil Norwid (free translation by Ryōsen)*

*From Teacher's Manual:* At this stage we come face to face with all the suffering inherent in our previous deluded or asleep lives. There are specific obstacles that arise in this stage, that vary for each person. It's very beneficial to have a teacher or a reference point who has gone through it before you.

## 5. Taming the bull



### *The night watch*

The full moon hangs in the raindrops  
Even the black clouds  
Cannot obscure his luminosity

*From Teacher's Manual:* We finally reach a stage of equanimity. We are sufficiently de-identified from our stuff that it can arise and pass away quite freely. With it can come a quality of relief.

## 6. Riding the bull home



### *Just so dance*

Twirling with the leaves  
Flirting with the breeze  
Weaving a web of joy  
Of an Indian summer

*From Teacher's Manual:* Things can become quite pleasant, we can feel like we can ride the vibrations of rise and fall without any particular effort. Our mind is now trained. We are good meditators.

## 7. The bull transcended



Form is emptiness, emptiness is form – the moon in his belly, his chest the clouded sky

*From Teacher's Manual:* We don't have anything, we're not identified with anything in particular. The famous Zen text, the Mumonkan says: "All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream".

## 8. Both Bull and Self transcended



[left blank on purpose]

*From Teacher's Manual:* Then we come to the stage of the famous Zen empty circle. In this stage, reality disappears for a moment and so do you. Zen calls it 'the great death'. We let go of everything and here is no time, space or anything else. There is really nothing we can say about this place, it is a condition of complete discontinuity.

## 9. Reaching the source



*An early spring*

The newborn catkins –  
Their silvery down wet still –  
Tickle the sulky sky

*From Teacher's Manual:* In this place we're often touched by joy and relief. We know we're home and paradoxically we can know that we always were home. Everything is as it is, and has a quality of perfection about it.

## 10. Returning to the world



*On the way from the market*

Armful of fresh roses  
Carried through the streets  
Gladdens the hearts of passers-by

*From Teacher's Manual:* With all of this spiritual work it's not enough to have realization, we have to live our understanding, and in doing this, we naturally help others. How we live and what we do become vastly important at this stage.



## Summary

In this paper we have described the implementation of Zen meditation and mindfulness practices as two eight week long courses. There is a degree of overlap between them but they have different aims. The basic, non-religious course aims for improvement of health and well-being. The advanced course aids spiritual development as leading to enlightenment. We can summarise the main points of both courses as follows:

- **Key concept – meditation as a journey:** Zen practice is a life-long process, and regular practice is essential in order to develop deep insight which then changes your life. It is an adventure with many surprises and insights along the way. But Zen places emphasis in finding the Truth in your ordinary life.
- **Happiness as a way of caring for others:** the more we forget about ourselves, the happier we become, and eventually serve with our life.
- **Changing your life:** outwardly, life may be the same but there are changes inside – a true Zen practitioner is happy regardless of external circumstances.
- **Longevity:** a side-effect of meditation. Zen masters are renowned for their longevity – for example, Joshu Zenji lived to 120 years.
- **Beyond daily practice:** achieving mastery in your profession through inner work and outer experience.

## How we did it

Each of these courses lasts eight weeks, and comprises 1.5 – 2 hrs long meeting with a themed talk and guided meditation, backed up by a CD. Participants are expected to practice on their own about half an hour daily in between the meetings. Typical homework for a week: to continue sitting meditation and update a meditation diary. Take some time for mindful stretching. Continue practicing and noting daily life mindfulness activities. In addition, do a three-minute mini-version of current practice daily and note the effects this has in the meditation diary.

## Notes

\*For example, see traditional poems by Kakuan, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Zen master. A good translation is by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps, as presented in a book **Zen Flesh, Zen Bones**

Illustrations for *Ten oxherding pictures*: Ryōan-ji temple, Kyoto, Japan

\*\*Yasenkana ("Chat on a boat in the evening", English translation RDM Shaw and W Schiffer, Monumenta Niponica XIII, no. ½ (1956), pp 101-127.)

More about meditation and mindfulness teacher training: <http://www.zenways.org/>

*Zen meditation and mindfulness for health and well-being* course is a part of a 'Building a successful career in the sciences' programme at Oxford University: <http://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/skills/courses/meditation-and-mindfulness>

More about *Zen meditation and mindfulness for insight* course: <http://www.oxfordzensociety.org/>

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