



108 Meditation INSTRUCTIONS

AND
6 Dharma
Talks

A FOUNDATIONAL GUIDE TO
ZEN BUDDHIST MEDITATION

by
Sokuzan



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AND
6 Dharma
Talks

by *Sokuzan*

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Dedicated to My Root Teacher

The Vidyadhara

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche,

Dorje Dradul of Mukpo

and

My Zen Master

Kobun Chino Roshi

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Foreword

Consonant with the traditions Rev. Sokuzan draws upon, his meditation “instructions” are presented in a language that is at once beguiling and baffling, appearing to describe the true nature of the mind—and then mischievously pulling the rug of certainty out from under us. His instructions are astonishingly direct and simple—yet radically challenging at the same time. He urges us to simply sit and observe, without grasping or rejecting, over and over and over again. Simple, right? We wish. But if we do it regularly, then the endless phantasmagoria we call mind slowly starts to slow down, easing us into a direct recognition of what is, just as things are, just as we are—nothing more, nothing less. Try it and see.

William S. Waldron

November 2021

Religion Department, Middlebury College

Middlebury, Vermont

Introduction

For decades, I have personally looked at what we call the mind and have worked with many others who want to understand what's happening in their minds and are confused by what appears. I am highly motivated to help you—with your permission.

The way it looks over here, the most important thing you can do is shikantaza, which translates out of the Japanese as *just precisely this*. This meditation form of facing the wall with all of our senses open—including the eyes—is a centuries-old practice. We sit down, hold still, and observe what moves.

Why do this kind of meditation rather than shiné and lhaktong or samatha and vipassana? Why not do creation/completion practices or deity yoga visualizations? Or mantras? Why not do walking meditation in the forest? Or follow the breath? These kinds of meditation practices try to stabilize the mind. If you endeavor to calm the mind, you are calming what you *think* is the mind, not the actual mind. It will just look like it is calm because you've done something artificial to it.

Shikantaza is not about training your mind to be more mindful—though that may occur. If you are looking for peace, this kind of meditation is *not* going to help you. Shikantaza is much more rough, rugged, and realistic than that and will take

you right into the labyrinth of your karma. For that ambitious undertaking, it seems necessary to have a solid discipline that summons you to sit down, hold still, and watch what happens in the mind stream without agreeing or objecting. Shikantaza is a *practice* because you may have to watch yourself shut down, disagree, or ignore what arises in your mind over and over. *But* you don't have to fix anything. You don't have to correct anything. You don't have to get better. It's pretty good news—you don't have to be somebody else. You get to be *exactly* who you are.

As a Buddhist monk, what I present here in *108 Meditation Instructions* is not meant to persuade you to become a Buddhist. You may even find that portions of my approach leave you wondering, but I invite you to temporarily set aside your beliefs, disbeliefs, opinions, assumptions, suspicions, or conclusions and consider what I *do* advocate. If you are ready, hear what I have to say: *Train your mind!* Sit down. Hold still. Observe. Watch what continues to move. It's about awareness. You can do it. Good luck!

A stylized, cursive signature in black ink that reads "Sokuzan". The letters are fluid and interconnected, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

November 2021

Meditation Instructions

given by Sokuzan at

SokukoJi Buddhist Temple Monastery

in Battle Creek, Michigan

Meditation Instruction #1

“There Is Nothing to Do”

Please face the wall.

Sit very, very still. What continues to move should be observed. Your only activity in terms of mental direction, formation, formulation, intention is to be aware. Shikantaza. Just sitting. You're just sitting, and you're just being aware. If you add anything at all, be aware of that. If you are completely aware, you will not be aware that you're adding. To be aware that you're adding is actually adding. Just observe.

There's *nothing* to do. As long as you think there's something to do, you need to come and look at this wall. When you realize, it won't matter whether you're looking at this wall or looking at the parking lot. Just observe. Do it all day.

Just observe. (Bell)

Meditation Instruction #2

“There’s Only This”

Please face the wall.

Hold the body very, very still without being rigid and just observe. All of your senses are open, in particular the eyes. And when you’re facing out away from the wall, your gaze is downcast toward the floor four to six feet out in front of you. Whatever is there, just observe. It does not matter whether you are looking at a little dot or you’re taking in the entire room. You’ll probably do a lot of both. Just observe.

What we are doing here is *not* emphasizing or exercising the thinking process, but we *are* emphasizing and exercising the awareness in which the thinking process or thoughts arise. So just observe. Very simply. Whatever arises in your awareness—whether it is in the five sense consciousnesses of feeling or touch, smelling, tasting, hearing, seeing—just observe. And whatever arises in the sixth consciousness, or the thinking process—again, just observe. Don’t push it down. Don’t fluff thoughts up or make a big deal out of them or analyze them. And don’t look away.

Stay here in your body, in your senses, and appreciate, which is the same thing as observe. Just observe. No comment. No post-it notes. Just observe.

There's only this. (Bell)

Meditation Instruction #3

“No Post-It Notes”

Please face the wall.

Hold the body very, very still, without being rigid. Very straight, without being rigid. Your backbone should be as straight as possible for your particular form. Hold very, very still, so you are able to see that which continues to move. Hold everything still that you can without struggling. Just observe that which arises in all fields of the senses.

Sense of touch, how this feels. Sense of taste—might not be much there—saliva. Sense of smell—you may smell the incense, maybe the humidity. Sense of seeing—you are seeing a wall in front of you. Look at it. Register also the space between you and the wall. Hear the voice you are hearing. Hear if it goes up in tone or down. The tone and the timbre of the voice are just as important as the message that is being conveyed. This is usually missed.

In this situation, simplifying your next few minutes, you are going to become very still and watch that which continues to move in the six sense fields including the mind. When things arise in the mind, we observe, like watching anything that we

don't have a lot of say-so over. A good example is clouds. We watch clouds passing by. They are interesting, flat, stretched out. They are fluffy, dark, or brightly sunlit. And we just observe. They are very interesting and might magnetize us, but they are none of our business. When I say they are none of our business, I mean you have no say-so over clouds.

When you start to awaken and you start to realize the nature of your life and who you actually are, what this is, you'll see how little say-so you have over these thought patterns. Just observe, just like you would observe the clouds in the sky. Observe thoughts, emotions, memories, judgments, opinions, concepts flowing past. Neither reach out to them nor reject them, go to war with them nor ignore them. Just observe. It is always and completely and thoroughly about awareness, awareness, awareness.

Just observe. This is called shikantaza, the Japanese word for *just precisely this*. Just precisely this situation. In this way, we take a few moments out of our lives. Hold very still and look very closely at the way the mind works: coming and going, coming and going, coming and going. Don't interfere. No post-it notes on your thought patterns. No manipulation or meddling with your mind. Hold very still for the next few minutes and just observe. (Bell)

Meditation Instruction #4

“Before We Know”

Please face the wall.

The way we practice sitting meditation here at SokukoJi, the way that is recommended, is to face the wall.

Hold the body very, very still without being rigid. All of the senses are open, in particular the eyes. Look directly ahead. If there's a window there, look out the window. There's not much out there anyway. If you're in front of the wall, look at the cottage cheese texture of the wall. Little bumps all over the place. Look at one of them. Look at two of them. Look at three. Look at the entire texture. Let your gaze go, you could say, in and out of focus. Don't maintain anything other than your intention to observe. And you're observing through this sense of seeing, the sense of sound, the sense of smell, the sense of taste, sense of touch. And observing in the sense of thinking.

In other words, treat your thoughts as if they were clouds passing by. Not particularly any of your business. Treat them that way. Later, when you get up, you can be as personal as you want to be with your thoughts. But right now, at this moment, in order to practice strengthening the awareness rather than the

thought process, the analytical process, the logical process, which makes so much sense to our ego, let's just look and see what is there before we add anything to it. Let's look and see what is arising before we personalize it. Let's just look and see what is there before anyone has a problem with anything.

I'm not asking you to push your problems away. I'm not asking you to justify, explain, or complain about your problems in this particular case—nor am I asking you to ignore them. I'm saying hold the body very, very still, which is intimately connected to the mind. Fundamentally, it's not different or separate from the mind. It just looks that way. Hold the body very, very still and observe before anyone has a problem with anything.

Just observe what it is that is fundamentally there or not there. It's always about contrast. Before we know what is good or bad, before we know what is healthy or unhealthy, before we know what is promising or discouraging, we have contrast. First, we see the light and the dark without knowing, without knowing which one is preferable. *Without knowing*. Go there.

Hold the body very, very still and observe whatever arises. If you are endeavoring to hold the body still and trying to just be here and see what happens—sometimes called beginner's mind, always at the beginning of everything—if you are doing

that, then whatever arises, whatever comes into the train station of your mind, *whatever comes* into your particular view, into your senses, is precisely, exactly what you need to see at this very moment. Don't accept, don't reject, don't look away. Just look at things as they are.

Just observe. (Bell)

About the Author

Kyoun Sokuzan, Abbot of SokukoJi Buddhist Temple and Monastery in Battle Creek, Michigan, is a fully transmitted monk in the Sōtō Zen Buddhist tradition. He met Chōgyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a preeminent teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, in late 1973 and became a student. In 1974, Sokuzan attended the first session of Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. In 1975, he established the Dharma Study Group of Battle Creek, Michigan, offering weekly meditation and study as well as monthly nyinthuns, or all-day retreats. In 1978, Sokuzan became an authorized meditation instructor through Vajradhatu in Boulder and later completed the Vajradhatu Seminary in 1980 at Lake Louise in Alberta, Canada.

In 1990, Sokuzan met Kobun Chino Roshi, a Zen meditation master from Japan, and became a student of his, later receiving lay ordination from Kobun's brother, the late Hojosama Keibun Otagawa. Sokuzan received full ordination as a priest in the Soto Zen lineage in 2007 and Dharma transmission in March of 2013 from Kuzan Shoho Michael Newhall, Abbot of Jikoji in Los Gatos, California.

About SokukoJi

SokukoJi is a Japanese name which translates to “Temple of Immediate Light.” SokukoJi traces its origins to a dharma study group in 1975 and officially became SokukoJi in 2007. Our campus is in downtown Battle Creek, Michigan, which includes the temple and community facilities as well as additional residential facilities. We endeavor to create and maintain a space for people to practice meditation and study the Buddhist teachings. We offer daily sitting meditation, services, and dharma study groups, and we host monthly and yearly retreats. Using online video conferencing, our sangha also includes practitioners from around the world.

On November 18, 2020, Sokuzan formally established SokukoJi Buddhist Temple Monastery as a separate order known as the Order Of Immediate Light (OOIL). This order acknowledges Sokuzan’s unique background and style of teaching that emphasizes using various modalities to understand the nature of the mind. OOIL brings together elements of the Tibetan Kagyu tradition and the Sōtō Zen lineage of Japan, along with other methods of understanding consciousness. Sokuzan has established three tenets to help guide and protect this order, which can be found on the website at www.sokukoji.org.