

What do we mean by meditation?

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There are many translations of Dōgen's instructions for zazen that miss the mark because they fail to translate accurately the core of Dōgen's words – they talk around the subject yet fail to penetrate it. They fail to penetrate it because they take zazen to be something divorced from Buddhist training.

Some consider zazen to be a form of self-improvement and describe it as being present in the moment, just paying attention to sitting or following the thoughts etc. and thus fail to translate Dōgen's words accurately.

The pith essential instruction is found in the words that occur right after the instructions on the physical posture. This is where many translators trip up by using such words as “think the unthinkable”, “think not thinking”, “think beyond thinking”, “profound thinking”, “not thinking”, “pay attention to thinking” etc. This is like leading a horse to water but not allowing him to drink. Dōgen intended his words to be understood, he wanted zazen to be practiced.

Their translations “fork no lightning” because they fear the implications of Dōgen's words – that there is something greater than ourselves – the Unborn, Uncreated – and that faith is necessary.

In translating the essential words as “do not think and do not try not to think” the core of the practice of zazen is laid open and that which is greater than ourselves is pointed out, for when we let go of deliberate and natural thought the Unborn emerges. We must not become so caught up in “trying hard to not try hard” that we miss the basic entrustment needed.

Simply sit down and adjust your body to the basic instructions – entrust your self, others, the exterior and interior worlds, relatives and all to the sitting – let all calculation and cogitation go. Do not try to gain anything including peace of mind or stillness.

Then, in your daily life, practice the precepts with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your heart.