



Opening the Hand of Thought: Foundations of Zen Buddhist Practice

Kosho Uchiyama , Jisho Warner (Editor) , Shohaku Okumura (Editor) , Thomas Wright (Editor)

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This book offers with infused and wise humor, an eminently practical presentation of meditation, and with clarity shows how Zen Buddhism can be an ever-unfolding path of inquiry.

Opening the Hand of Thought: Foundations of Zen Buddhist Practice Details

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Annette says

There are many good parts of the book that gave me much to think about. I don't believe that there is only one correct way to practice zazen, however, and the insistent reminder that other practices are mistaken was distracting at times. The book should be considered as advanced reading for practitioners who already have an established practice, not for beginners.

EunSung says

I read this book in a busy time of exams and final papers. Uchiyama brings passion and sincerity in the practice of Zazen. A unique teacher who is really accessible and yet point to a sincere practice that takes vow of commitment from those who sit zazen. A great advocate of Shikantaza, a just sitting approach to Zazen.

To my surprise, he quoted a lot of Christian Scriptures. He studied Western Philosophy and Christian Theology before becoming a Buddhist Zen monk.

Robert says

This is a delightfully frank, clear study of Zen practice. I understand it is widely considered one of the best books on Zen, specifically zazen, which is why I turned to it in the middle of a brief course I am taking at the Chapel Hill Zen Center in North Carolina.

Kasho Uchiyama was somewhat unique in that he began his studies focused on Western philosophy and Christianity before deciding to become a Zen priest and eventually serving as the abbot of a Zen temple near Kyoto. As a consequence, he had a good handle on many of the left-brain tricks Western civilization plays in highlighting the analytic, rational dimensions of human experience at the expense of the right-brain's tendency to wander in the synthetic, irrational dimensions of experience that emphasize unity over division.

His fundamental point, made repeatedly in different ways, is that Zen is the self being the self, meaning that that which we consider our individual self actually is indivisible from the interdependent totality of the universal self. I am inseparable from you, you from me, we from the wind, the present moment, and the peace of recognizing that the best way to understand this is through minimal exertion and ambition, i.e., through zazen, which is sitting quietly for forty and fifty minutes at a time in a certain posture that facilitates our observing the illusory nature of our thoughts coming and going, changing nothing.

He draws on sayings of the Buddha and ancient Zen masters deftly, tells tales and recounts parables, and deals with the confusion that words inevitably generate by suggesting we practice zazen to experience the wordless moments that come before and between thoughts.

The impact of the book definitely is enhanced by the collaborative translation efforts of Tom Wright, Jisho Warner, and Shohaku Warner. They give Uchiyama a relaxed, personal voice in English that reads almost

like a transcript of someone simply thinking out loud.

Real masters in a discipline are often this simple and direct. King Lear is more simply written than Hamlet, for example. This is known as "old age style" and can be found throughout the arts.

A book about zazen is in some ways a non sequitur. As Uchiyama frequently points out, the issue is not really discussing zazen but rather sitting for ten years and then sitting for another ten years. That's when you come to understand the significance of sitting. Enlightenment or mental health or stress reduction are not on his agenda. To the contrary, he maintains that the more goal-oriented you are, aggrandizing your personal self, the less likely you will be to come into touch with the universal self.

He contends that zen is more or less a godless religion but a religion nonetheless. The reason for this appears to be that he considers God to be what some others might think of as that fuzzy term, the Godhead, that is, the universal self from which we emerge and to which we return, life and death being a necessary continuum, more peaceful and compassionate and less disturbing when it is thought of as such. There is no apex in this continuum, no crisis, no heaven, no hell, simply an opportunity to pass from one's individual self into the aforementioned universal self.

I'm in accord with William James on religions: if they have a positive effect on the believer or practitioner, good. This "proves" nothing about metaphysical reality in an empirical sense, but pragmatically, it suggests they "work." Almost all of us can tell when a believer or practitioner is happy and at peace. If you read this book, you will see that Uchiyama, whose life was not always easy, clearly found happiness and peace.

Judson says

This is my first recommendation for a book on zen meditation, it's very practical and direct, but also deep and useful.

Viet Hung Nguyen says

Trích d'ơn t' sách:

- Chúng ta th'ng không nh'n ra nh'ng kho'nh kh'c hi'n ti'n nh' là c'nh trí m' ph'i bên trong t' thân ??i ??ng. Thay vào ?ó, chúng ta phân tích cái b'ây gi?. Chúng ta t' ??t mình bên trong dòng ch'y h' ?o c'a th'i gian, t' quá kh' t'i t'ng lai và tr' nên b' tr'oi bu'c b'i nh'ng m'i t'ng quan c'a chúng ta v'i k' khác, b' tr'oi bu'c b'i s'c m'nh c'a nh'ng thói quen trong quá kh' và b'i nh'ng m'c ích c'a chúng ta. Chúng ta b' l'oi cu'n b'i nh'ng trông mong c'a cái T'oi nh' bé và r't cu'c, chúng ta suy s'p và th't v'ng.
- B'n ch' có th' d' dàng v'?'t qua nh'ng gian khó n'u lo'i b' ???c ý ngh' r'ng hoàn c'nh ?ang không thu'n l'i v'i b'n.
- Khi chúng ta ngh' v' m't ?i'u gì, chúng ta n'm b't nó b'ng tâm trí c'a mình. N'u chúng ta m' lòng tay tâm trí, ?i'u ?ó s' r'ng r'i.
- Giác ng' là t'nh th'c kh'i nh'ng mê l'm và quay l'i th'c t'i c'a ??i s'ng.
- Thông th'ng chúng ta ngh' r'ng mình ?ang s'ng b'i vì trí óc chúng ta ?ang n'm quy'n ki'm soát. ?ây là

sai l?m nghiêm tr?ng. Ph?m vì trí óc chúng ta ki?m soát khá gi?i h?n. Chúng ta u?ng m?t chén trà khi trí óc chúng ta mu?n u?ng cái gì ?ó. Chúng ta có th? làm ?i?u này vì trí óc chúng ta sai b?o chúng ta làm. Nh?ng nói chung, ch? có nh?ng th? nh? ?ôi tay, ?ôi chân và cái l?i b?n b? tuân theo nh?ng l?nh truy?n mà trí óc chúng ta phát ra. Chúng ta c? h? không th? ki?m soát toàn di?n ?i v?i trái tim ho?c bu?ng ph?i c?a chúng ta. Chúng ta th? trong gi?c ng?. Nó th?t s? không ph?i là m?t c? g?ng cá th?. Khi chúng ta ng?, chúng ta m? lòng tay t? t?ng, th? mà không b?n tâm v? vì?c th?. Tôi th? c? khi trí óc tôi không ý th?c v? vì?c ?ó, ph?i không nào? ?ây ch?c ch?n là tôi. T?t c? ?ây, t?t c? sinh ho?t ?i s?ng c?a tâm trí chúng ta, là t? thân ngu?n c?i.

- ?ây là ý ngh?a c?a "h?nh nguy?n"

(1) H?nh nguy?n th? nh?t trong t? ?i nguy?n c?a B? tất là "Chúng sinh vô biên, tôi th? nguy?n c?u ?? t?t c?." (Nh?ng loài h?u tình thì nhi?u không th? ?m h?t, t?i nguy?n s? c?u t?t c? h?).

(2) "Tham v?ng vô t?n, tôi th? nguy?n tiêu tr? t?t c?." (Nh?ng s? tham mu?n thêm khát không bao gi? h?t ???c, tôi th? s? d?p t?t t?t c?). ?i?u này có ngh?a là không ?? b? lỗi cu?n loanh quanh do nh?ng ý t?ng c?a chúng ta.

(3) Nh?ng ch?ng nào chúng ta là con ng?i, chúng ta còn có m?t tâm trí chuyên t?o các huy?n t?ng, và vì th? chúng ta ph?i liên t?c h?c t?p Ph?t pháp ?? làm sáng t? th?c t?i c?a t? thân chúng ta. ?i?u này là ý ngh?a c?a h?nh nguy?n th? ba "Nh?ng giáo hu?n c?a Ph?t pháp vô h?n, tôi th? nguy?n h?c t?t c?."

(4) "Ph?t pháp vô t?n, tôi th? nguy?n hoàn t?t". V?i h?nh nguy?n này, chúng ta th? an ??nh nh? là t? thân ??i ?ng.

Electric says

Reading about Zen is alot like reading about food. There are those glossy coffetable books that show off the aesthetic of fresh food or the creativity of the author/photographer and there are solid books filled with recipies that make your mouth water. It`s theory and practice. There are a lot of Books on Zen and Buddhism that are like those glossy tomes, all theory and aesthetics but no practical information on how to actually achieve the results pictured there. Opening the hand of thought is a recipe book. If you don`t sit on your cushion regularly it will not be of any interest to you. There are no nice pictures of japanese gardens or interiour design. If you take zen serious a physical practice there will be tremendous help from the lectures in this book to point you in the right direction. One of the best books on buddhist thought and action I have ever read. Zen isn`t something special, it`s not a higher state of being its just the practice of realising your true self through hard work, patience and facing the wall. This is Soto Zen in its purest form.

Snorki says

No doubt that this is an excellent book, but I think that a lot of it goes over my head, and it is also written from a religious position, which I don`t really subscribe to - I had decided to re-read this as a book about meditation. It is that, but it is in the context of a religious perspective on that meditation. He is also talking about concepts that are difficult to put into words, and sometimes go completely over my head!

A. Jesse says

Highly recommended, but don't feel bad if you skim the second half.

The book's early chapters offer the most specific and practical guide to zazen that I have read in print -- the

method, its goals, and what the meditator can reasonably expect to achieve. It clarifies the relationship between zazen and thought beautifully.

After that, Uchiyama Roshi heads off into the weeds, offering chapter after chapter of opinions on modern life and religion, the state of Zen in Japan, on and on ad nauseum. Uncle Uchiyama sits back on the couch and grumbles at the television -- "Kids these days. No one practices real Zen anymore."

Be patient with the old man's gripes, and don't take them too seriously. Read his instructions on zazen and your sitting will be transformed.

Ridgewalker says

This book is an excellent introduction to ZaZen and Buddhism.

Magdelanye says

This is an elegant guide to Zazen that does not pander to current fads but cuts to the vital heart of the practice of "wholeheartedly sitting in the middle of your life" xiii

Please refer to my daily updates for some wonderful quotes.

I was also glad to have articulated my vague unease with the goal oriented approach to meditation that western medicine has pounced upon and many doctors now promote. Mindfulness and meditation may very well be viable solutions to life's woes, but KU clearly differentiates the way of Zazen as a life practice "only for the sake of buddhadharma, without justifying it by human emotions and worldly ideas" p149

KU never left Japan but in his life as a monk expressed a wonderful grasp of the ancient texts as well as the modern predicament. Humble and stern, he is a true master and this book is a treasure.

John Porcellino says

Uchiyama Roshi was a Soto Zen iconoclast, and these teachings for modern practitioners are direct and no-bullshit. This book contains down-to-earth discussions about and instructions for zazen, Zen meditation. Thoroughly contemporary and rock solid.

James Elliott says

An exquisite summation of the subtle and pure Zen meditation known as shikantaza, "Just Sitting", perhaps the purest, simplest sounding, and most challenging to practice meditation there is, and how it relates to the functioning of Zen Buddhism as a religious life.

Shea says

The clearest thing I've read on zen practice and the dharma--maybe ever. Uchiyama is funny, human, and totally simple in his explanations of terms and practices that can often seem exotic or esoteric when taken up by other writers. He actually provides a hilarious diagram of "The Mind of Zazen" that clarifies things for me immensely--this is after four years of practicing zazen! It's so simple and so clear that I'm inclined to give my parents a copy and say, "This is what I'm doing, or at least what I'm aiming at doing." Thanks, Shintzy, for loaning it to me.

Sky says

A no-nonsense introduction to zazen practice and everything it embodies and produces. Personally i still have my doubts about the method, especially the sesshins, since there is a considerable risk of dissociation and other pathologies, for which there is little support in zen circles, to my knowing.

My biggest critique and the reason i did not give 5 stars is the lack of teaching on how to integrate zazen into daily life, especially for people who have to work hard and support children, etc. I'm sure it will bear fruits here and there, and maybe the serious practitioner will discover his/her own methods of "remembering" to open their hand of thought (~ to return to an undivided, open state of letting go) no matter what situation, but to me it still seems an extremely hard and inefficient way to transform one's mind, unless a lot of time and effort are put into it. I could be wrong of course, but i think very few people actually manage to continue their zazen.

The big plus side is that all is kept very simple - zen buddhism is the most simple, no-nonsense religion out there.

It also takes some time to digest idioms such as "the self doing the self" or "universal self", but that is truly part of the game/work. Still, profound words and highly recommended.

Andrew says

The Shurangama Sutra tells us that the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon; or in plainer language, the Diamond Sutra says that "the dharma cannot be spoken". And yet, it was recently pointed out to me the irony in the sheer volume of words that have been written about something that cannot be described. And I've read a lot of them (as evidenced by my Buddhism bookshelf), too many probably. But Uchiyama's book was a recommendation from my teacher, and is indeed different than most. He doesn't shy away from the fundamental irony in trying to describe the indescribable. In fact his core teaching is amazingly simple - practice zazen with pure intent and just keep doing it over and over again. That's it.

Kind of like losing weight, no? It all comes down to eating less and exercising more. But the number of books written on weight loss probably exceeds even that written on Buddhism; and likely for the very same reason. Nobody wants to hear that Buddhism, or at least Zen, is just about meditating. It's so much more alluring to spend all our time talking and thinking about meditating than it is to shut up and actually do it.

But that's the essence of the finger pointing at the moon, and its taken me a long time, a very long time, to begin to understand it.
