

DIALOGUE

True Sitting

A Discussion with Hisamatsu Shin'ichi

HISAMATSU: It's only natural that questions should arise during the course of the sesshin-retreat. For the sake of our practice it's essential you confront these questions and seek to resolve them. And so whoever wants to raise a question please feel free to do so, and we'll see if we can't reach a solution by discussion. That said, I'm sure there are a lot of questions you want to ask, so let's begin with those regarding sitting itself.

I: *When I'm sitting and trying to focus on the Formless Self, thoughts keep floating up even though I'm making no effort to think. And so, concentrating on the koan and sitting in zazen start to conflict. I wonder if this isn't true for everyone. This is what I'd like to ask.*

HISAMATSU: The FAS Society's fundamental koan, "To Awaken to the Formless Self," is where sitting and koan are one. There's a tendency to think of sitting and koan as two different things—after all, we do have two different terms, with Sōtō Zen putting the stress on "just sitting" and Rinzai Zen advocating koans. At root, though, these are none other than Awakening to Formless Self, [where sitting and koan are one].

Here's a passage expressing true sitting attributed to Bodhidharma, though it's certainly not limited to him, and many Zen masters have since expressed the same sentiment:

* This is a translation of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889–1980), *Za to iu koto o chūshin ni* 坐ということを中心に, *Hisamatsu Shin'ichi Chosakushū* (Tokyo: Risōsha, 1971; revised edition, Hōzōkan, Kyoto, 1994), Vol. III, pp. 649–665; translated by Jeff Shore with Takahashi Nobumichi, Tokiwa Gishin, and Fusako Shore. Originally a discussion on January 25th, 1964, at the Senbutsu-ji temple in Kyoto, its Japanese text was published in the journal FAS, No. 57 (May 1965).

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Outside all externals put to rest,
Inside let not your spirit stir.
Make yourself into a wall,
And thus enter the Way.

Outside all externals put to rest means to be unconcerned with things outside, or externals. *Inside let not your spirit stir* means to not be preoccupied with mental phenomena, or internals. In short, don't let yourself be caught up by anything, internal or external. *Make yourself into a wall* is a metaphor for *mu-shin*, or "no-mind" [the emptied mind]. Be empty of feelings, mind, and heart, like a wall. Become this wall-like no-mind, and *thus you enter the Way*. Sitting "outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir, making your self into a wall," *thus you enter the Way*.

In *Fukanzazengi*, [Dōgen] says much the same thing: while sitting "put an end to all dualistic discrimination," free yourself of all inner and outer entanglements. Succeed in that—sitting in the mode of "outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir"—and you achieve the no-mind of true sitting. "Sitting" usually connotes physically sitting or mentally composing ourselves; either way we assume it's the body or the mind doing the sitting. Doing sitting physically or mentally, with body or mind, however, is far from [Dōgen's ideal of] sitting "body and mind fallen off." Sitting mind and body engaged, thinking, for instance, "Here I am at Senbutsu-ji, etc. etc.," cannot be called true sitting. Sitting, thinking, "I'm really trying to sit and become no-mind," exposes a restlessness in yourself. Of course without a mind intent on sitting you'll not be able to sit at all. But then, sitting, thinking, "I'm really trying to sit," that's hardly the no-mind of "inside let not your spirit stir." You have to be of a mind intent on sitting, yet merely being conscious of yourself sitting is not really it. And so how we are to simply *be* while physically engaged in the act of sitting is I'm sure a difficult problem for everyone.

At the outset you must have determination, the will to sit through, no matter what, even though your legs hurt and your body is in pain. In beginning, this great resolve is important. There's a saying, "Zen practice has three essentials:" the first, GREAT ROOT OF FAITH (*daishinkon*), the conviction to give yourself over to truly sitting, the will to sit through anything; the second is GREAT TENACITY OF PUR-

POSE (*daifunshi*); the third is GREAT DOUBT (*daigijō*). I'll talk about these later in connection with the koan. At any rate, to truly sit you must be equipped with these three—great root of faith, great tenacity of purpose, great doubt—qualities you'll be better acquainted with once you've held out to the very end.

While sitting, obstacles will assail you from inside and outside. In the midst of these obstacles you need the fierce determination to sit, to sit through it all, stolidly, like a rock. This enables you to begin sitting truly for the first time. Sitting in a determined state of mind is what effectively prepares you to throw your whole self into Zen practice. A person distracted by little things will not be able to go on. Their sitting interrupted by little things, they won't be able to achieve sitting as "outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir." With a mind constantly distracted, they will fail to see out their practice to the very end.

"Outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir"—is this not what is demanded of our ordinary affairs as well? To do anything thoroughly, we need great resolve—what Zen calls great root of faith and great tenacity of purpose—to achieve even the most ordinary things. How much more so with sitting! Pulling past those hindrances, throw yourself into sitting "outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir."

At first you want to drive away those hindrances, to suppress the waves of thought that pass over you. You are restless as you sit. Pursue it further, though, and you'll come to a point where you won't have to try to suppress anything; it'll just naturally come to you to "let not your spirit stir," with "all externals put to rest." Having actualized this myself, for me it's a proven fact. If you were to proceed in this way, I assure you that you too will meet with success.

When, after you've sat for awhile, you have this Awakening, it no longer matters whether you have a specific time or place to sit. Ordinarily you should sit on a zazen cushion in a certain place at a certain time, but upon Awakening you should no longer be tied to sitting on that cushion in that time or place. Awakening to self frees you completely, as you step beyond time and place. That is, Awakening doesn't obtain only when sitting physically in full-lotus; rather, you come to be that way all the time. For instance, when you shift from sitting to standing, the act of standing becomes sitting on the move. Sitting does not sim-

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ply end when one rises to one's feet; on the contrary, it's an ongoing affair. As sitting is Awakening to the Subject, the sitting Subject is what performs the act of standing; it's not as if one rises from sitting position to standing; rather, the sitting itself stands.

The *Zazengi* says that when going from sitting to standing, one should rise quietly and slowly. Here, in its use of terms, [Dōgen] sifts out the sitting from the standing, and treats it as a state prior to standing. I would aver this is not true sitting. In true sitting, it is as if there were no shift from sitting to standing; rather, the sitting itself stands. When the sitting itself stands, the sitting as such is not a state distinct from standing. Were it a distinct state, there would be a shift from sitting to standing, from standing to walking, and so on. But true sitting is not so: at core to true sitting is the fundamental Subject. True sitting as fundamental Subject, or one's own self, the very sitting one embodies does the standing. Your sitting has yet to become true sitting if it is not so.

That's how it should be when you've truly sat through. When truly sitting, it's no longer necessary to rise quietly. Jump up, even leap up, from your seat, and it's still a function of your sitting. If you must rise oh-so-quietly so as not to lose your equilibrium, that's sitting merely as one particular state. Such sitting has yet to actualize itself as one's self, it has yet to awaken to the Subject itself.

What we call Formless Self is this:

Walking is also Zen,
Sitting is also Zen.
Talking, silent,
In motion or at rest,
The Subject: composed.

True sitting is nothing but Zen. The word Za-Zen 坐禪 is made by putting together the characters for "sitting" 坐 (za) and "zen" 禪. But from the standpoint of true sitting, the sitting must itself be Zen, Zen must itself be the sitting. If not, it's not real Zazen.

Clearly, one particular posture or state of mind is not true sitting. When everything you do is a function of your sitting—walking, sitting, silence, speaking, thinking—then for the first time you've crossed the threshold of true sitting. Sitting, thinking a certain way, trying to become a certain thing, that's not true sitting. True sitting accrues in

“outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir.” True sitting isn’t sitting trying to *become*; it’s sitting, *being*, just like this. This mode of sitting is important to attain.

The koan too ultimately broaches this dimension of “outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir.” In a koan like, “The original face even before your parents gave birth to you,” that “original face” is what we call the True Self. That is what is, “even before your parents gave birth to you;” it is the self with body and mind fallen off. This self with body and mind fallen off is your original face even before your parents gave birth to you. To be born of parents is a physical and psychological event, and so we can say the self is prior to that event. Of course, “prior” does not mean temporally prior; it’s what really is, right here and now. In other words, the self of body and mind fallen off is the self “prior to the arising” of body and mind. “Prior to one’s birth” is not meant in the ordinary sense; it means what is prior to anything arising; it is what is, right here and now. Here, there is no elapse of time, no temporal before or after; what’s right here and now is what is prior to anything arising.

“Before anything arises” is the place of the True Self. That’s why “before your parents gave birth to you” isn’t the ordinary meaning of the phrase. It means, rather, that the original self, with body and mind fallen off, is prior to all physical or mental phenomena. That’s why words like, “before your parents gave birth to you,” are used, although again not in their literal sense. Where you achieve the self with body and mind fallen off, there you realize the self prior to the arising of body and mind. Conceived temporally, you might think that this “falling off” occurs after we’ve acquired body and mind. But returning to what is “prior to one’s birth” means that what is born and alive in the present., i.e., body and mind, has fallen off. This is what is meant by prior to birth, prior to anything arising.

Koans like “before your parents gave birth to you” are the same as true sitting; they attune you to the dimension of “outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir.” To be so attuned is the goal of the koan known as koan-samadhi. It doesn’t really matter what koan you are working on—whether it be “Before your parents gave birth to you,” or “Not thinking good, not thinking evil,” or “Transcend the four propositions [of logic] and the hundred negations,” or “Neither speech nor silence will do, neither thinking nor not-thinking

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will do, neither standing nor sitting will do”—when you engage it from a standpoint free of duality, throwing your whole self into that koan, you merge with the koan in so-called koan samadhi, bringing it to life. As often as not, though, what happens is the koan turns into a specific, limited form completely cut off from you. To counteract this, koans were conceived like, “Transcend the four propositions [of logic] and the hundred negations,” or “Not thinking good, not thinking evil,” or “Neither standing nor sitting will do,” which are meant to lead you from the dualistic and limited to the unlimited. Interestingly, well known koans such as Chao-chou’s “Mu” or Hakuin’s “single hand,” though classics in their own right, can have a stultifying effect on practitioners, making them cling to the koan in so-called Mu-samadhi or single hand-samadhi. Mu-samadhi is merely a particularized samadhi, with some places making practitioners repeat, “Mu! Mu! Mu!” as a prelude to entering it. Granted it is not the dualistic Mu of being and nonbeing, but neither is it the real Mu. Today, this sort of Mu-samadhi is widely practiced, with almost everyone taking Chao-chou’s “Mu” to be merely yelling, “Mu!”

The real standard by which to judge whether this is the ultimate Mu of body and mind fallen off, is to examine whether the Mu is the Formless Self or not. If it is the Formless Self, then, even though you say, “Mu,” it is the unrestricted Mu of the Formless Self. The Mu-samadhi is not a limited event to be entered upon only by voicing “Mu.” It is totally unrestricted, just as real sitting is totally unrestricted. Standing, sitting, whatever one’s doing, it must be nothing other than sitting. We call this order of sitting the Formless Self. The fundamental Subject is the Formless Self operating at the root-source (*kongen*) of all things yet without being determined by anything. Here, in the Formless Self, there is no such thing as life and death, body and mind, good and evil. Completely emancipated, freed from all such things, it is real, original freedom, “free from all obstacles and self-abiding” (*muge jizai*). Truly unhindered and free from all obstacles, there isn’t even some “thing” which can be said to be unhindered and free from all obstacles.

The Heart Sutra says, “No hindrance, free from all fears” (*mukeige-muukufu*). Though fear is really a very small thing, the phrase “free from all fears” should go so far as to say “free even from freedom from fear.” This goes to the heart of the matter, for simply living without fear will not do. “Free from all fears” means being free from

the determinations of pleasure-pain, fear-fearlessness, and so on; it means to stop being subject to all such determinations. Even if it harbors some good, if it's determined, it also entails fear, which, without fail, will make itself felt. So we can speak of being "free from all fears" and "unhindered" only when we are functioning formlessly. When we are functioning formlessly, whatever we do is unhindered.

This goes for the koan as well: if we regard it as some kind of special experience or specific problem-question, it's not a real koan anymore. For a koan to be genuine, it must be universal. Take Chao-chou's "Mu": if you just shout "Mu!" with a loud voice, putting all your might into it—though palpably the right answer—the Mu you become is not it. We'd be bad off if we all practiced like this, but nowadays real koan Zen has lost itself in such practice. Real Mu must be without form. Only when you become the Formless Self, can you break through the koan. You can break through a koan by understanding it as one particular problem-question; you could even have a very unusual experience of it, saying you weren't able to become Mu at first, but now your self, your body, and the whole world have become Mu. All the same, these are nothing more than particular experiences. Whatever koan you have—Mu, the single hand, the cypress tree in the garden, etc.—you are told to conform to koan practice, giving up your freedom in the process. For me, breaking through a koan is Awakening to the Formless Self, realizing it; this is what it means to break through. Unless you've gotten there, you haven't broken through. Once you have, though, you can function formlessly, yet express yourself within the forms as freely as you please.

As you are preparing to sit, I thought it'd be better to keep these points in mind, rather than have you fumble about in the dark with some preposterous ideas of your own invention. But if with this knowledge you sit only self-consciously, then all for naught. Everyone, how are you sitting?

I: I'd like to ask about dualistic mental composure. It's not the kind you mean when you say sitting itself stands up. Mine gets disturbed when I rise.

HISAMATSU: There you must follow the right way in your struggle. If

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you gain composure when you sit, but start to lose it when you rise, and lose it completely when you start to run, well, that won't do. Real composure is to be composed even when you're turned head over heels. That's the way it is: even dying you must be calm and composed. Not composure because you're resigned to die, it must be composure even in death. When that's not the case, that's not real composure. People talk about going "beyond life and death," and negate death, saying "there's no life and death." If you stood on the brink of death, and remained calm in the face of death, that's not what's meant by going beyond life and death, though it's often understood this way. If you were terminally ill and, facing death, were to remain calm in your last moments, such composure is probably no more than psychological. To go beyond life and death, *death itself must be composed*. It's not to be calm though you fear death: death itself must be "free from all fears." To say, "I'm not afraid," over and over again—that's not real "freedom from all fears." Truly be the Formless Self, and you will be totally free of fear.

Dōgen says this very life and death is the true self. Dying is also the self, living is also the self, where "the coming and going of life and death is itself the true human body." Unless you penetrate to that depth, you can't say you've really passed a koan or given yourself up to sitting. That's why I advocate the Formless Self, rather than such things as passing a koan or what is ordinarily called "sitting." I would insist that the Formless Self is the koan. Does someone have a question about this?

A: Mr. I may have asked whether concentrating on a koan becomes some form of thought or not, but when concentrating on the Formless-Self koan, does the concentrating itself have some kind of form?

HISAMATSU: When you really struggle with a koan, it's the condition "prior to anything arising," of "body and mind fallen off," of "returning to the source." Zen will have you ask yourself what it is that thinks or feels, for there is a source prior to thinking that does the thinking. That's why I also speak of "following your thought," returning to the source from which it issued, prior to anything arising, before

mind and body. This “prior to anything arising” is the same as “before your parents gave birth to you,” and “outside all externals put to rest, inside let not your spirit stir.”

F: I think I understand that working with a koan such as the single hand, or Mu, is not just becoming that particular koan. But do you first become that particular koan and then break through the form of that koan, or is there some other way? I don't understand the right way of concentrating on the koan, so that's why I'm asking this question.

HISAMATSU: Problems such as you pose make it preferable to use the FAS Society's Fundamental Koan. Briefly, it is to realize the freedom in which you are not anything whatsoever; to be at one with the free and formless self we've been talking about—that's the essential koan. For example, in the formulation, “neither speaking nor silence will do,” what will not do tends to be limited to these words. But what matters is the self that is not anything whatsoever. The way to that self is opened up when you are trapped in a corner; that is, in a distressing situation where you are getting driven up against the wall, where you are neither this nor that, where, in short you are nothing whatsoever, *that [Hisamatsu taps the table]* is where you penetrate to the point “prior to anything arising;” it is prior not just to something like good and evil, but “prior to the arising of anything whatsoever.”

From my point of view, good and evil, or not thinking good, not thinking evil, is still something particular. But if it's truly on the order of, “Without thinking good, without thinking evil, right now show me your original face,” everything must be included in this formulation. It's not just a matter of good-evil, it must be everything. “Not thinking” is not only a matter of the mind thinking; it must be of all our activities in their totality. It's not just concerning the mind, but all activities of the body: use not your hands, your feet, not even your sense of touch. To incorporate not using anything in a formulation, it would be: “When you are not that way, [what do you do?]” That's what we in FAS call the Fundamental Koan.

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F: *I try to hold the koan, "Neither standing nor sitting will do: now what will you do?" in mind during Zazen, but it's like I'm chasing after something.*

HISAMATSU: If you're chasing after something objectively, that won't do. You must drive yourself to the ultimate dilemma in a fundamentally subjective manner. In short, you must be hopelessly cornered, driven to the last extremity, where you experience "Dying the One Great Death, then being revived." The fundamentally subjective experience of absolute negation may also be called the Great Doubt Block (*daigidan*), that is, the ultimate doubt.

A: *About the koan of Chao-chou's "Mu," I must say that being made to repeat, "Mu! Mu!", and concentrate on this voiced form of Mu is not the true Mu koan. It's not a voiced Mu, or any form, concept, or idea of it. It's Mu itself. And because one can't deal with this in any form whatsoever, we cannot but completely discard such a way of dealing with it. We can only be forced back to Mu as Mu, that is, to "prior to anything arising." Thus, even when struggling with this Mu koan, if we just work that way, we will also return to the source of all koans, won't we?*

HISAMATSU: It would seem to me that, rather than use some specific form of mediation—in this case Mu—it would be better not to use any form. Wouldn't this be better suited to your purpose: to drive yourself up against the wall without having anything to hold onto. As a method of penetrating the true "mind and body fallen off," to the True Self, this, I suppose, would be the most ingenious way.

As a matter of fact, the way that I'm talking about did appear early in the history of Zen, assuming particular forms such as "Transcending the four propositions and the hundred negations, say what the meaning of the first Patriarch's coming from the West is." With "Transcend the four propositions and the hundred negations," it can't be negated, it can't be affirmed. If you say something it won't do, if you don't say something it won't do, either. "What is the meaning of the first patriarch's coming from the West?" This refers to Bodhidharma's crossing from India to China, and has been used many times in mondo [question-answer] exchanges, which are called koan. Put simply, it is the same thing as Zen or again the "Self."

As to “the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West,” once I wrote in the FAS Society’s newsletter *Fūshin* on the exchange K’an-jan 湛然 had with his teacher Lao-an 老安, one of disciples of the fifth patriarch. K’an-jan asked “the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West,” and was told, “Why don’t you ask the meaning of your self?” Ask the meaning of your self, not the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming! Ask directly the meaning of your self! At any rate, the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West is, in the words we use, nothing but “the True Self.” When you can neither negate nor affirm, neither be silent nor speak about this True Self, how will you answer the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming? Yes, how do you answer when neither silence nor speech will do? When you realize the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West concerns the fact you cannot remain silent, you cannot speak, you cannot assert, you cannot negate, then there you’ve gotten the meaning of it. At first you addle your brains thinking what possible meaning his coming could have, but realize it won’t do. Instead, you have to reach the point where you can neither keep silent nor talk: right there is where you free yourself; right there is where you break through. And THAT (*Hisa-matsu striking fist on table*) is the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West.

It’s not a matter of reflecting on the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West; it’s penetrating to where neither silence nor speech will do. Reach that point and you realize the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West. Penetrate to where neither silence nor speech will do, and you reach your self. Then and there (*striking fist on table*), you grasp the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West, saying, There is no other meaning than this!

If expressed as a koan it would be: “When nothing whatsoever will do, what do you do?” In terms of life and death, it could be expressed as, “When neither living nor dying will do, what do you do?” This “What do you do?” is extremely important, as it draws out the functioning in us. If we think it’s just the self in which neither living nor dying will do, that’s only the negative side of its own way, and no functioning will emerge. “When nothing whatsoever will do, what do you do?” This “What do you do?” elicits the active functioning in you. This can be said to be the “source” or root-origin of all koans. This

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question is one you can put to yourself at any time. When you're walking, for instance: When walking won't do, what do you do? When bending over: When bending over won't do, what do you do? Like this, concerning everything: When nothing will do, what do you do? When we are something: When being that something won't do, what do you do? These examples I cite because the truly formless Self as the True Self is something that really exists for me. Normally we abide only in the world of forms; but at root source to them all, we abide as the truly formless Self.

The saying, "Be like a child," or "Be like trees and rocks," approaches the truly formless Self, for when as a child one has yet to discriminate things, thus the child stands close to the source. To cross over into that childlike world is impossible, as long as we dwell in the world of forms. We must let ourselves be absorbed back into the source and return to the One. However hard you try to go up outside yourself to return to the One, you never can; you will always remain caught outside in the world of forms. Your becoming one must be in the direction of returning to the origin, yet it does not require your *becoming* childlike: the One is already here as your truly formless self, wherever you may be. You are constantly in touch with that One, not just while struggling through a zazen-session. That's why I would insist it is here with us, anytime, anyplace.

In Zen, the manner of Attainment is said to be "immediate." That is, by realizing that our sitting in zazen here and now like this won't do, and that more than just sitting, it has to include everything, then our being one with sitting ceases to be anything particular. When your sitting won't do, when you can't be just sitting there, you can just stand up. But you'll never get to the source that way. When your sitting won't do, right there you must reach where *absolutely nothing will do*. Though it would seem to assume one particular form, it's not: it's all one whole.

I often use the analogy of the water and the waves. Let's take one wave as an example. It's a *particular* wave, granted, but right below it we find it connected directly with the sea. As a wave it may assume different shapes, but no matter what shape, it's all water, and all water is one. This particular wave does not remain as such, however, and instead of going horizontally in the direction of other waves, it goes verti-

cally—straight down—where it finds itself connected to the whole. We could say *the whole is being drawn into the particular*. Though it is particular, in this case it penetrates or mediates the whole.

When you engage Chao-chou's "Mu" or the single hand, do it in this way, such that it's no longer simply one particular thing. It may sound like the same old "Mu" you've always voiced, it may look like the single hand you've been working on, yet it's not. No matter what people say about *becoming* the single hand, if you do not go beyond that, well, the koan remains stuck at the level of particularity. In terms of samadhi, there are particular samadhis and total samadhi. Ours, the Royal Samadhi (*ōzanmai*), is total samadhi, hence its name. Completely one, this universal, total samadhi is what we've been referring to as the Formless Self. Though we say it's total, if that totality isn't the root-source of the Formless Self, then it's simply an abstract generality. It must be the root-source of all particularity, of everything we do, functioning freely and self-abidingly. When we speak of body and mind fallen-off, we mean the Royal Samadhi; the Royal Samadhi conversely becomes the positive instant of "fallen-off body and mind."

What is your response to this view of mine? . . .