

# The Ben Gerstein Website - Writings

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**MOTOKO IKEBE (1900-1989)**



Motoko Ikebe at age sixty-six.



Motoko Ikebe, age eighty-three.

From *Living and Dying in Zazen*, p. 127–133. (Arthur Braverman, Weatherhill, New York, Tokyo, 2003.)

There is no place where God is not. Sentient and non-sentient beings dwell in the life of God. In that respect human beings, birds, animals, insects, trees and grasses, and all things down to the tiniest pebbles are all equal. However, as the saying “Man is a thinking reed” indicates, human beings can think thoughts such as, “What am I? What is the meaning of life? Why was I born?” In this way, only humans can ask who they are—realizing that their heart-minds are reality. With this as a starter, they can know their relationship to God and to all other beings, and live their lives on this earth according to the will of God. It is because of this and only this, that human beings can see the joy of awakening to the true existence.

People who haven’t awakened to the true nature haven’t fulfilled their mission as humans. For other creatures, even insects, there is no need for awakening. They are nature as they are. Humans have fallen from their natural state because of delusion. So they awaken to their original nature that everything is one—to that original feeling. The mission of humans is to cease producing the waves that have occurred up until now as a result of egotism.

When that is done, a human being is born for the first time; that is the definition of a human being. Without that experience, no matter how renowned or eminent one is, no matter how great one's achievement in history is, one is after all a scoundrel, no different than the criminal on the gallows. Without that experience, no matter how respectable one may appear to be, everyone (excuse me for saying this), even the emperor, is a villain on the gallows.... So we have to do zazen. It's the most important thing in the life of the human being. Other animals are doing zazen naturally, so they don't have to make a special effort. Even insects, bugs, and worms are all doing zazen.

Dogs and cats discriminate. They have true discrimination. Humans have deluded discrimination. Dogs, cats, and insects are hot when it is hot, cold when it is cold, but they don't discriminate in delusion as humans do. Humans, too, if they practice zazen, will naturally attain this state.

There is no expression with deeper meaning than that of the word "just" in "just sitting" [*shikantaza*]. No matter what, throwing away the activity born of ignorant doings, you sit there, which means you are not being fooled. You stop delusions and sit.

"But most people can't do that," you say. That's because they hold onto delusion.

"Delusions rise again. There's nothing I can do." You shake your head and shake off deluded thought, thinking, "Now it's fine." Then, "They've risen again." For an hour you keep shaking your head, but there's nothing you can do. Grasping delusions and trying to push them away, you think they will disappear. Just stop that, stop deluded thinking. Because you give these delusions your attention, they keep coming back.

Just cease deluded thinking and sit. The highest work a human being can do is to cease deluded thoughts. Zazen means just sitting. Don't be deluded. Don't think "good" don't think "bad." It is said, "Clarify life, clarify death, that is the most important meaning of Buddhism." Truly, just sit.... That's all there is.

We've fallen into this existence because of our disregard for cause and effect, so we have to return to place where we stop the causal mind. We have to transcend cause and effect. That is zazen. Zazen is ceasing to create karma. That's the reason we sit, isn't it? To stop creating karma and only that. Human beings can do nothing other than that. It's a lowly existence. We still think things like, "I'm a little more intelligent, or I'm a little luckier"... but those thoughts amount to nothing. "I'm a little healthier" and so forth—none of that will do us any good, it's of no use whatsoever. Just sit. To actually travel the road of truth you only have to stop creating delusion. That's the only thing humans can do. Since it was humans who created delusions, all they have to do is stop. That's the only reason for sitting. Never mind what will happen next. This wholeness will act on us from within. Humans should do what they can, that is, cease creating delusion. Then awakening is already there, for anyone and everyone, without a doubt. It's written in the *Shushoji* ["Practice Enlightenment" chapter of Dogen's *Shobogenzo*] and in many other places. So there is no need to worry, just cease creating delusion. "Ah, there it is again!" That thought too is delusion. If you give it attention, there is no limit to delusion. So quit creating delusions and just sit. Then when you face this way, which is your life, based on your practice, the posture in which you stop creating delusion is the sole true mind. Life's true wisdom is derived from this, from this work. It will arise from the true mind, undoubtedly.

"I've stopped creating delusion, why is it so trivial?" That thought too is delusion, isn't it? Consider it as when the brain stops. You feel gratitude, a feeling you've yearned for. You'll

bow to everything, appreciate everything, and there you will continue your practice. But don't stain it by overdoing. [This expression, *te aka o tsukeru* is equivalent (but not as clear) to Shunryu Suzuki's expression, "When you make some special effort to achieve something, some excessive quality, some extra element is involved in it. You should get rid of excessive things... [such as pride]." From *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.] Act with a truly quite mind of no thought.

Since breath is the greatest aid to zazen, you must take special care with it. When you are attentive to your breath, you will naturally be attentive to your mind. Isn't that true? When you react to each encounter, your heart may start to pound, or it may tighten up. Or, if you are happy, for example, it may go pit-a-pat. It is constantly reacting this way as if it were being bullied. The heart works in conjunction with the lungs circulating the blood throughout the body. When the system is calm, blood circulates through the body smoothly. There are no lapses and you have good health....

Start by counting your breath. You will eventually be doing it unconsciously. Count the number of breaths. When it becomes your own, you will no longer count. You will be able to breathe in a way that suits you. What's more, this state of mind in which you practice zazen will be expressed in your life. You will be able to breath in this natural way in all states.

When you say, "Another delusion! I can't do anything about it," you are giving these delusions wheels, aren't you? And when you say, "Why do they manifest? I'm so pitiful." You are holding onto this "pitiful self." There is no such thing, so just let go and there will be no problem. "If that's true" you say, "if it's okay to just sit there in a fog, wouldn't it be better to just go to sleep?" Waking up and sleeping are relative. If you're not sleeping, you are awake. We are not talking about problems of this world like waking or sleeping.

There is something unrelated to all that—something that continues to be awake through eternity, something that continues though you die. That's where you have to sit. There, your mind becomes perfectly clear and warm. You may think I mean warm in the sense of body temperature, but I don't. You may think that by perfectly clear I mean like the blue sky or a moonlit night. But examples like those are unnecessary. This transcends examples. The saint Ippen called it "quiescent no-mind." You must sit within "quiescent no-mind." The mind is not put to work. When it arises, you leave it as is. You let it be. It's because you pay attention to it that things arise one after the other ceaselessly. We call this the demon because it stands in the way of our escaping from the three worlds.

Now if you truly sit in quiescent no-mind, it's quite difficult to do it for an hour straight. You may say "I hear sounds." Since that is proof that your ears are working well, rejoice in it. If you can't hear anything when you are sitting, that would be reason for alarm. You may say, "My feet are becoming numb." If your legs don't become numb, something may really be wrong. Don't concern yourself with numbness, it can't be helped. Simply switch the position of your feet.

Just cease creating delusions, don't delude yourself. You have to sit in a manner in which delusion has no real relation to you. That's the way to sit

When you were born, when you die, and in between, every breath is life-death. So you need not worry about it; there is no death. If you do zazen, you will realize this fact.

From now on, throughout this year, sit resolutely. Sit through this year and the next. You should sit throughout your whole life.

Then when you realize "This is it", you won't continue accumulating karma. You won't pile up the three poisons. The three poisons are of this world. You will be throwing them away in zazen because you won't be holding on to them.

Holding on is the number-one fault. When you hold on you are not free. Then you won't even be able to have a cup of tea, you won't be able to hold the cup. You have to let go constantly. Hold on to something and the act of holding will soil it. Many times you hear people say, "I did it for him but he doesn't show any appreciation." The act is already soiled. You are doing it because you want favor bestowed upon you.

Since we are simply being allowed to do what we do, whatever happens is fine. If in an encounter I am acting in accord with my inner calling, there is no need to inquire into the results. We must treat each instance in this way, not giving attention to deluded thoughts, and since this "Mr. Delusion" is just a lump of attachments, he will weaken, won't he? Then he will disappear for sure.

At any rate, if you advance in single-minded zazen here in this way, giving life to it, you will understand this feeling of gratitude. That's why you won't expect anything from anyone.... If you are expecting something you already have adopted a greedy mind. When you yourself change, surely some people around you will be moved by that change. Your actions alone will be a great sermon. Sitting on a high seat, spreading the sleeves of your red robes, waving your hands, voice and body shaking, sermonizing, is not the real sermon. It is theater.

When your true self is practicing the activity of true mind, that is a great sermon. There is no other way. You may wonder, "What do I need to do to practice the activity of true mind?" You must realize more and more the "oneness." In zazen you will understand this oneness for a second or for a minute. It will accumulate.

Life is the universal creation. There is no more perfect work of art. That's how wonderful it is.... But past karma has made it necessary for me to suffer in this life. Karma is the form taken by effects of accumulation from causes.

Repentance is not saying, "I was wrong." When someone says, "I was wrong," it means nothing. Single-minded zazen, even for a minute, is the correct response. Sit true Zen.... In this you will have repented. It is said, "If you want to repent, practice zazen and understand reality." That is repentance. If you feel you've wronged someone, you should sit earnestly. In that way you will build yourself.

Little by little, you will advance until you reach the end. Your karma will be erased and you will doubtlessly improve physically. Whatever happens, there will be nothing to worry about.

Zazen is not something reserved for when you sit. Humans already live in Zen. This already is. It's the original enlightenment of the whole universe; it is "thus" (*nyo*). And the place deep inside of us is "comes" (*rai*). We sit in this "thus come" (*nyorai*). What we call "I" is the whole universe. It is here where we must sit. All we need to do is stop creating delusion. Just stop the three poisons, which means stop and sit.

As long as we are alive we are creating delusion because we are fumbling through life. We call this living. We have to quit this way of living.

"Then," you say, "I might as well hang myself." That's not right. We have to quite within this life of fumbling. We have to practice within it. No matter what circumstances manifest, we

have to act within them. That is the meaning of living in the "truth of all dharmas." There you actually sit in no-mind. Practicing this activity of non-ego, you will without a doubt make contact with the true wisdom. You can't make contact through your mind alone. But you will clearly realize it as a way to peace. You will feel truly grateful. All of you please treat this "sitting mind" with great care in your life.