

**NEWSLETTER**  
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SOME SERENE REFLECTION MEDITATION GUIDANCE

I have recently been re-reading some of my Master's published teachings, particularly on the subject of meditation. Since I have been writing about meditation in this series of newsletters, I thought that it might be helpful to quote a few passages from her various introductory instructions. I hope that they will give some added perspective to the instructions that I have given all of you. At the beginning of my introductions, I tried to alert you about what you were getting into. On that subject, my Master said:

Remember what we said: anytime you sit down to meditate you are beckoning to the Unborn and the Undying. You are saying, "I want to find You."<sup>1</sup>

It doesn't matter why you think you are meditating, or what you expect to find. What you *will* find, if you keep it up with a willing mind, is the Unborn, and, in the process, unless you deliberately turn your back on what you have found, you will have to do something about yourself, whether you had wanted to or not.

Continuing on what meditation is (and is not), she has said:

Zazen teaches the realisation of our True Mind and, once one has this realisation, the mind never again changes back to its old state. Remember, however, that this is not an attempt at stilling the mind for this is an impossibility. It is true that we quieten down the winds of thought, by allowing no thought to disturb us, but it is not possible to stop thinking, nor is this advisable. We simply notice that thoughts arise and that they disappear.<sup>2</sup>

We often say that in our meditation we allow whatever is there to arise and allow it to pass, not holding onto it or pushing it away. In my understanding this is the essence of Serene Reflection meditation. "Whatever is there" are our thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, ideas, worries, anger, fear, discomfort, confusion, boredom, impatience, sensory perceptions, etc. We tend to believe that these are important and that we must become involved in them. Our meditation is simply to be aware of them, accept and embrace especially those that need conversion, but be willing to not get involved in them. When we get involved in them, we allow them to gain power over our minds.

The eyes must be open since, to close them, encourages sleep, dreaminess and, sometimes, hypnosis. Since the last named is completely incompatible with Zen meditation it is to be absolutely discouraged. The eyes should be in a sort of half-closed state, not focusing on anything in particular, but resting on a point on the ground that is natural for the range of vision of the trainee concerned. I have heard it said that this must be at least three feet but, since some of us are long-sighted and others short, it is not possible to lay down a firm rule on exact distance. Just allow the eyes to rest naturally on a spot on the ground that is a short distance from the body, thus causing the eyes to be automatically lowered but not closed; this will prevent both eye-strain and fatigue.<sup>3</sup>

A number of people have asked me about closing the eyes while meditating. I hope that the above is helpful.

A number of people have also asked me about following or counting the breath during meditation. Her first book, *Zen Is Eternal Life*, written early in her teaching career, has the following introductory advice about this:

When you are completely comfortable take two or three deep breaths; both inhalation and exhalation should be slow and, of course, taken through the nose: this will tend to quieten your mind and allow your breathing to settle down quite naturally. For the purpose of learning concentration at this early stage the best training is to work on counting incoming and outgoing breaths: this will help keep out thoughts of a reasoning nature and pinpoint the mind in one direction only; you will also begin to calm down the thought waves. Under no circumstances go further than ten in your counting; when you reach this number start from the beginning and go up to ten again.<sup>4</sup>

For her thoughts some years later, I offer the following, which is a transcription of one of her talks:

...unfortunately an awful lot of people have been taught that you need to count your breaths. Now, counting of the breaths is extremely useful if you can't keep your mind from wandering: it keeps the mind doing something. If you have a mind that is constantly running off and chasing its own thoughts, then it can be very useful indeed, especially if you've got a mind that is very, very active that way. Then what you need to do is count the breaths up to ten, and when you reach ten, start from one again. If at any time during those ten, a thought comes in (that is, a discriminative thought, one where you are discussing things inside yourself—not a natural thought, they're harmless), start at one again...

But once the mind does not constantly wander, counting of breaths will damage your meditation.\* It is a means of concentration, learning to concentrate; it is not a means of meditation, and there should be a very clear distinction on that... There is a tremendous difference between concentration and meditation. To focus on one thing and, every time your brain wanders off, to bring yourself back to it, is concentration. There is a difference between that and just sitting still in meditation: the one is getting one-pointedness of mind so that your brain isn't scattered, the other is just sitting still. And counting breaths can be a bridge from one to the other.

\*These comments pertain to the Soto Zen form of meditation, known as shikan-taza, "just sitting", or "serene reflection", and are not a criticism of other traditions in which the counting of breaths sometimes plays a central role.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, if you believe that you need help in learning concentration, certain techniques are available. If a teacher is also available, it is good to discuss one's meditation with that person before undertaking breath counting, etc. In our tradition, a teacher determines individually, through familiarity with, and feedback from, a trainee, when help is needed—in meditation or any other aspect of training—and only then is a particular problem addressed by providing the most appropriate assistance.

After her third kensho, my Master did emphasize a particular "circular" breathing pattern that she had found especially helpful. She fully described it in the original edition of her book *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*<sup>6</sup>. Although that description is too long to reprint here, an excerpt states:

One should not count breaths when meditating; one should follow the course that the breath takes. Most people breathe without thinking about it but the meditator must consciously, at the beginning of each meditation, as well as at any time he loses his awareness during that meditation, follow one or two breaths thus:—Imagine, when taking these breaths, that at inhalation the breath starts at the base of the spine, continues up the spine and does not cease to move until it reaches the crown of the head which is the moment at which exhalation begins. The breath then continues down the front of the body during exhalation to the pubic area where inhalation takes over at the base of the spine. Thus the breath seems to travel in a circle, inhalation up the back of the body and exhalation down the front; it is absolutely vital that it travels up the spine and down the sternum.<sup>7</sup>

And even with this breathing pattern, she instructs that it should not be followed continuously:

Above all, do not try to follow the breath in this way during the entire meditation. That pattern should only be set up again if the mind wanders much or if the mind falls out of meditation; then two or three more breaths should be taken in the same way and the pattern again set up.<sup>8</sup>

Don't get confused here. Each of these things was written or said at a particular time and place. The best way to sort out problems (with breathing or any other aspect of meditation or practice) is to talk about them with a teacher, but don't worry about "problems" that you don't have.

Finally, I thought that the following selection describing walking meditation might give helpful perspective on that practice.

...beginning with the left foot. Walk calmly and slowly, with great dignity; do not walk absent-mindedly; a step of not more than six inches at a time should be taken. Walk first on the heel and then along the side of the foot ending upon the toes so that the foot digs itself into the ground as it were.<sup>9</sup>

If this has been helpful, good. If it has raised questions or confusion, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me. Above all, persevere in your training, and in that, I wish you the best.

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<sup>1</sup> *Roar of the Tigress, The Oral Teachings of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett: Western Woman and Zen Master, Vol. I, An Introduction to Zen: Religious Practice for Everyday Life*, Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy, ed. Shasta Abbey Press, 2000, p. 53

<sup>2</sup> *Zen Is Eternal Life*, Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press, 1999, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., p.24

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27-28

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28-29

<sup>5</sup> *Roar of the Tigress*, Op. Cit. p. 66-67

<sup>6</sup> *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom or How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death*, Rev. P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Roshi, Shasta Abbey Press, 1977, Appendix A, pp. 186-195. This appendix was not included in the second (1993) edition, but a version is included in a booklet entitled *Serene Reflection Meditation*, Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C. and Members of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, Sixth Ed. revised, Shasta Abbey Press, 1996, pp.4-8

<sup>7</sup> *Serene Reflection Meditation*, Op. Cit., p.6

<sup>8</sup> *Serene Reflection Meditation*, Op. Cit., p.7

<sup>9</sup> *Zen Is Eternal Life*, Op. Cit., pp.34-35