

Glossary of Zen Terms

Buddha Hall – Room used for services, lectures, and ceremonies.

Bodhisattva – An awakened or enlightened being who renounces the experience of nirvana in order to remain with unenlightened beings and work for the liberation of all. The bodhisattva ideal is closely associated with Mahayana Buddhism.

Ch'an – The Chinese word for zen. The word ch'an predates the Japanese word zen, of course, since zen originated in China and came to Japan later.

Chiden – This is the person who takes care of altars. The chiden cleans the incensers, makes sure that incense is available for service, and that altar candles are in working order.

Densho: The large bell used to announce services and lectures.

Dharma – The dharma (almost as difficult to define as zen) is thought of variously as the Way, the Path, Cosmic Law and Universal Truth. The dharma is often thought of as the teachings of the Buddha, and this is a legitimate view, but it's important to note that the Buddha didn't create the dharma; it was always there. The ethical rules of Buddhism are included but the dharma encompasses far more than that. It is the fundamental spirit underlying zen and Buddhism. The dharma is as much something to do as it is something to discuss or read about.

Doan – This the Soto Zen term for one who rings bells in the zendo. At AZC, our doan acts as timekeeper and sounds the small gong that marks the beginning and end of each period of zazen. The doan also rings the small and large gongs during service and ceremonies and uses wooden clappers to begin and end kinhin (walking meditation).

Doan-ryo – The group of people who serve in temple roles, including the doan, the fukudo, the chiden, the jisha, and the kokyo.

Dojo – Literally: the room or hall (do-) of the way (-jo). Dojo is often used interchangeably with zendo, however, the 'way' referred to by 'dojo' does not necessarily have to be zen. Technically speaking, dojo could also refer to a room where judo is taught, for example. For our purposes, however, it refers to a room or building in which zen is practiced.

Dokusan – A private interview between a student and a zen teacher or master. The format and length of the interview, and whether it revolves around koan work or

involves another kind of exchange, varies depending on the teacher. As a general rule, dokusan pertains more to a student's personal practice and experience than it does academic, theoretical matters. Theoretical questions are usually discouraged but often permitted (again very much of this depends on the teacher). Dokusan is a critical element of zen training and an important part of sesshin, though it is by no means limited to sesshin: some modern teachers have expanded the practice of dokusan to include communication by telephone and e-mail.

Doshi – In Soto Zen, the Doshi is an ordained person who leads the service by offering incense and leading prostrations and bows.

Eightfold Path – The Eightfold path was given by the Buddha as part of the Four Noble Truths and as such, as the main way out of suffering.

1. Right View (or Understanding)
2. Right Thought (or Resolve)
3. Right Speech
4. Right Conduct
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

Fukudo – In Soto Zen, this is the person who strikes the han (see definition of han). During sesshins (retreats) the Fukudo, also rings the large bell in the foyer to summon participants to the zendo.

Four Noble Truths – The Buddha's motivation for leaving his home and taking up a spiritual life was to understand dukkha (suffering) and find a solution to suffering. The Four Noble Truths are the answer that came to the Buddha as part of his enlightenment.

1. Suffering is all around us; it is a part of life
2. The cause of suffering is craving and attachment
3. There is a way out; craving can be ended and thus suffering can be ended
4. The way to end craving is the Eightfold Path

Gassho: A mudra or bow with palms together, it signifies gratitude. **Gatha** – A short sutra. As an example, here is a meal gatha often spoken before eating:

We venerate the three treasures, And are thankful for this food;
The work of many hands, And the sharing of other forms of life.

Han – In Zen monasteries, a wooden board that is struck with a mallet announcing

sunrise, sunset and the end of the day. At AZC, it is used to summon participants to the zendo for daily zazen. The pattern of strikes always includes three roll downs.

Hinayana – Literally: "Small Vehicle". One of the three main branches of Buddhism, the other two being Mahayana (great vehicle) and Vajrayana (indestructable vehicle). Considered by most to be the oldest form of Buddhism. Because 'small vehicle' has at times been used as a derogatory term by other traditions, many followers prefer to use the term Theravada (Teaching of the Elders) to describe their beliefs.

Ino – In Soto Zen, the Ino is in charge of the zendo (meditation hall). As well, the Ino is one of the four or five main leaders of a sesshin, the others being the jiki-jitsu, jisha, tanto and often the tenzo. The Ino leads chanting at sesshin and also directs oryoki-style meals. At sesshin, the Ino is in charge of any matter that involves the mouth. An ino is often present and leads chanting at other zen gatherings besides sesshin.

Jiki-jitsu (also Jiko) – The timekeeper for a sesshin or for any meditation gathering. All matters having to do with time are the responsibility of the "jiki" (provided the decisions do not conflict with the activities or wishes of the roshi). The jiki usually leads kinhin as well.

Jisha – In Soto Zen, the Jisha is the attendant to the Doshi during service. During daily service, the Jisha presents an incense stick for the Doshi's offering at the altar. On Saturday mornings the Jisha attends to the person giving the dharma talk. As well, the Jisha is the roshi's attendant during sesshin. Those attending a sesshin are most aware of the jisha's role as the person who directs dokusan; the jisha announces when dokusan begins and guides students in and out.

Jukai – Taking the precepts, taking refuge in the precepts or taking up the way of the bodhisattva. A significant step marked by a ceremony of the same name(s), jukai signifies a serious commitment to zen, to the ten main precepts of Buddhism and to the salvation of all beings. Each student will recite the ten precepts during the ceremony and explain to the assembly what each precept means to him or her personally.

Karma – The Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect. The effect of an action taken today (or thought or word spoken, etc.) might not occur today. The effect, whether good or bad, may come to pass many years from now or even in a subsequent lifetime. The important point to remember is that no actions are isolated and independent; all are tied together in cause and effect.

Kensho – An enlightenment or awakening experience. It is folly to try to describe this experience in words, however, a kensho reportedly gives one a glimpse of one's own nature and the true nature of reality. It is said that koan work can lead to kensho, though koan work is not the only way.

Kinhin – Walking meditation. Although its meditative aspect is of prime importance, kinhin also serves the purpose of moving one's legs after a long period of zazen, thus making physical problems unlikely. Hands should be held in the shashou position. Some schools of zen perform kinhin extremely slowly while others do it rapidly. It has become traditional, in North America at least, to combine the two: kinhin begins very slowly at first and then switches to a brisk pace (the change is marked by an audible signal).

Koan – Originally: a public record. A zen paradox, question or episode from the past that defies logical explanation. Koans are sometimes thought of as zen riddles, but this is not entirely accurate since most riddles are intended to be solved through reason. A student undertaking koan work is meant rather to exhaust the use of reason and conceptual understanding; finally making an intuitive leap (see kensho). Koans were originally recorded and used by the rinzai school of zen, but the old distinctions have become less important so that today some teachers closer to the soto school have also used koans.

Kokyo – This is the Soto Zen term for the person who leads chanting during service.

Kyosaku – Wake-up stick or encouragement stick. Used during long periods of zazen (mainly during sesshin) to strike practitioners on the back or on the part of the shoulders close to the neck. The kyosaku is not used for punishment: this is made clear by the fact that receiving the kyosaku is voluntary; it is never given to those who do not request it. Some request it simply to shake off sleepiness, but others say the blows can actually relax tense muscles. Ceremonial walking of the kyosaku (without any striking) is done early in the morning to signify opening the dojo and late in the evening to begin the closing.

Mahayana – Literally: "Great Vehicle". One of the three main branches of Buddhism, the other two being Hinayana (small vehicle) and Vajrayana (indestructable vehicle). Although this is the branch to which zen belongs and zen traces its origin back to the Buddha himself, generally Mahayana is considered to be a newer form than Hinayana. There is less emphasis placed on nirvana and individual salvation in this tradition and more emphasis placed on saving all sentient beings.

Mindfulness – Awareness; remembering that all things are interrelated; living in the present moment. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of mindfulness in zen and Buddhism. The master Muso Kokushi said: "When you walk, watch the walking, when you sit, watch the sitting, when you recline, watch the reclining, when you see and hear, watch the seeing and hearing, when you notice and cognize, watch the noticing and cognizing, when joyful, watch the joy, when angry, watch the anger."

Mokugyo – The red lacquered drum used as a "heartbeat" for chants. **Mondo** – A short zen dialogue between master and student, usually from the past. The student asks a question that is troubling him or her, and the master responds not with theory or

logic, but instead in a way that encourages the student to reach a deeper level of perception. Many great mondos became koans.

Mudra – A position of the body which is symbolic of a certain attitude or activity, such as teaching or protecting. Although mudra technically refers to the whole body and the body does not have to be that of the Buddha, in common usage this term most often refers to the hand positions chosen for statues of the Buddha. Each hand position is symbolic of a certain characteristic such as supreme wisdom or serenity.

Nirvana – Literally: cessation or extinction. Although nirvana is the ultimate goal of many Buddhists it should never be confused with the Western notion of heaven. Instead, nirvana simply means an end to samsara. In the Mahayana tradition, the bodhisattva eschews nirvana until all sentient beings are saved.

Okesa – A large patched robe made like Buddha's robe, worn by priests.

Oryoki – This has come to mean a certain kind of formal, ritualized eating, but the word oryoki actually refers to the specific collection of napkins, utensils and especially bowls used for this style of eating. This set, which is held together by tying one of the larger napkins around it, was traditionally given to a nun or monk upon ordination. Eating is commonly done while seated on one's cushion in a position similar to meditation posture, though on occasion one can be seated at a table. The sequence in which the pieces are used and the actions performed are carefully done by ritual. Silence is maintained except for the chanting of certain meal sutras. When done, the utensils and bowls are immediately washed with tea (while still at one's seat) and wrapped up again in the same specific way. At AZC, oryoki is our preferred way of eating during sesshin (retreat). The practice involves ceremonial opening of the three bowls, chanting, receiving servings of food from servers, eating, washing the bowls, offering wash water, and then rewrapping the bowls.

Rakusu – A small patched neck robe made like Buddha's robe, worn by people who have received precepts in an ordination.

Raihai – Also known as deep bows or prostrations. Normally done in a set of three and normally done towards the altar, these are bows that lead immediately into a kneeling position and then quickly into a position with one's forehead gently touching the floor. The hands, palms upwards, are raised in a gesture symbolic of lifting the Buddha's feet over one's head. It's appropriate to cultivate an attitude of emptying, letting go, receptivity and gratitude. As mentioned with regard to other matters, one should seek out instruction from a knowledgeable practitioner or teacher for the correct form and mental approach.

Rinzai – One of the two main schools of zen still active in Japan, the other being soto. Rinzai, which originated in China, was the first school of zen to be brought to Japan. Its initial introduction near the end of the 12th century did not take hold, but a

subsequent transfer from China did succeed. The rinzai tradition places more emphasis on dokusan and koan work than the soto tradition. However, a positive trend seen in North America today is that the distinctions between the two schools are not considered very significant and teachers often quote zen masters from both schools, or from non-Japanese sources, equally as often.

Rohatsu – The day set aside to commemorate the enlightenment of the Buddha, which traditionally is celebrated on the eighth of December. Many zen centers and sanghas will organize a rohatsu sesshin early in December to mark this zen "holiday."

Roshi – Venerable master of zen. A roshi can be a man or a woman, a monk or a layperson. Although the approach has varied down through the centuries, certainly many years of training and some degree of "enlightenment" are required before becoming a roshi is even considered. Some of these years of preparation are often spent teaching the dharma as a sensei. In most zen traditions, an established master will elevate a teacher to the level of roshi through a process known as "dharma transmission." This also establishes an important link; the new roshi is considered a dharma heir or dharma successor of the established roshi.

Samsara – In Buddhist thought this is the continuing cycle of birth, death and rebirth. All beings are trapped in this unpleasant cycle until they reach enlightenment. Samsara is looked upon in a negative light because of all the suffering that life entails (as elucidated in the First Noble Truth). The cause of this cycle is craving as elucidated in the Second Noble Truth. Belief in samsara does not necessarily require a belief in reincarnation in its strictest, traditional sense and it should be mentioned here that many people practice zen but do not believe in reincarnation.

Samu – Work Practice. This is work, usually physical, done in a mindful and aware manner. Tasks should be carried out in silence, though speaking in hushed tones is permitted when clarification or further instructions are needed. Periods of samu are often part of a sesshin, though it can be performed at any time during one's daily life. Simply stated, samu is a form of meditation done while working.

Sangha – Zen family, community or group practicing together. In its largest sense, all living beings make up our sangha, though when commonly used sangha means our fellows in the local zen center or the group in our area with whom we practice.

Satori – A very deep state of meditation in which notions of duality, self and indeed all concepts drop away. Profound satori is very close to an enlightenment experience (see kensho).

Sensei – A recognized teacher of zen. The title sensei, like the title roshi, traditionally is positioned after the teacher's name rather than before (i.e. Jane Smith Sensei). This convention is not adhered to rigidly, however.

Sesshin – Most easily translated as a meditation retreat, though the wrong impression may be given by using this 'shorthand' definition. Many feel the word retreat has the wrong connotations, since the effect of a sesshin is often to let more of the world into our lives instead of escaping from it. Suffice it to say that a sesshin is a silent retreat that involves many periods of zazen and also private interviews with a teacher (see dokusan). Meals are often eaten oryoki style, and periods of samu are generally included. The duration of a sesshin, at least in North America, is usually 3, 5 or 7 days, though the length can be shorter or longer and an odd number of days is not required.

Shashou (also Shashu) – The position in which to hold the hands for kinhin and whenever moving about in the zendo. To form this position, first one hand should gently be made into a loose fist with the thumb held inside. The other hand is then wrapped around the fist with the thumb resting in the slight indentation at the top of the first hand. Together the hands are held at the upper part of the stomach area, near the base of the ribs. During sesshin it's good practice to hold the hands in shashou not only in the zendo or just during kinhin, but during almost any time that's spent standing or walking.

Shika – The guest manager at the temple.

Shikantaza – "Just sitting." An intense form of zazen where no mental aids such as counting the breath are used. A state of great mental alertness is cultivated, but no concepts or objects of thought are in the mind (ideally). Some consider shikantaza, which is strongly recommended in the soto tradition, to be the highest form of zazen.

Shoten – The person who sounds the densho to announce events in the Buddha Hall.

Soto – One of the two main schools of zen in Japan, the other being rinzai. The tendency towards caution (one could even say mistrust) regarding words and concepts which is a common thread in zen finds its greatest expression in the soto school. Thus it follows that there is less emphasis placed on dokusan and koan study in the soto tradition and more emphasis placed on shikantaza. Zen practiced this way is sometimes called mokusho, which means the zen of silent enlightenment. Perhaps following the Buddhist doctrine of non-duality, it should be noted that many zen teachers and students in Western cultures today do not consider the line between soto and rinzai to be of great importance.

Shuso – The head student for a practice period.

Soji – A brief period of mindful work; temple cleaning.

Sutra – A Buddhist canon written in prose form. The chanting of sutras can at times be a form of singing, but more commonly it is done in a rhythmic way in a normal tone of voice. Some sutras are intentionally recited in a monotone. Sutras are chanted as part of most zen gatherings, whether the occasion is for a special ceremony or regular

weekly zazen meeting. One of the best known is the Heart Sutra. A short sutra is often called a gatha.

Tan – The raised platform for sitting in the zendo.

Tanto – One of the main leaders of a sesshin, the tanto is in charge of the smooth running of the zendo. The tanto is usually an experienced senior student who is familiar with the roles of the other leaders and thus is able to offer guidance if any confusion arises.

Teisho – Literally: presentation of the shout. Commonly: a talk by a zen teacher (a sensei or roshi). The talk is not a sermon or an academic lecture; it is more a presentation of insight than an exposition of factual knowledge. Though not limited to sesshin, a daily teisho traditionally is part of the schedule during sesshin. Often a koan is discussed, and on occasion some teachers will permit a question and answer period following the teisho. Sometimes people not familiar with zen are invited. Attendees are allowed to sit in a relaxed posture and may quietly shift position to remain comfortable. Instead of peering intently at the teacher and concentrating on every word, some students will look at nothing in particular and just allow the words to wash over them; thereby placing less emphasis on concepts, yet trusting the value of the talk to sink in.

Tenzo – The head cook for a monastery or sesshin. Traditionally the role of tenzo was a position of high honor in zen monasteries. Similarly today, a tenzo is often considered to be one of the main leaders for sesshin.

Vesak – The celebration of the Buddha's birth, which traditionally is set in May on the day of the full moon. This is a very important holiday to Theravadans (see Hinayana), and in that tradition vesak is considered more than just a commemoration; it's a celebration of the dharma and a day to remember the entire life of the Buddha, including his birth, enlightenment and death.

Zabuton – A rectangular, flat cushion used for zazen, usually found underneath the zafu.

Zazen – Seated still meditation, usually on a cushion on the floor. Unlike meditation done in some other spiritual traditions, zazen usually does not involve concentrating one's mind on a subject, nor is the aim to blank out one's mind completely. Rather, being aware of one's breath is recommended and most practitioners of zazen do this by counting breaths in one way or another. When the mind wanders, which often happens, one gently turns attention back to the breath. Zazen is usually broken into periods of 25 or 30 minutes. Determining the correct posture for zazen can be a challenge, but sitting in a chair is also permitted. As mentioned with regard to other matters, one should seek out instruction from a knowledgeable practitioner or teacher for the correct posture, mental approach, and way to count the breath. Most zen teachers maintain that zazen is essential to practicing zen.

Zafu – A round cushion used for zazen.

Zazen – “Total awareness in an upright posture,” aka meditation, zen-style. (N.B.: some may argue that “meditation” and “zazen” are not at all synonyms but this is probably fine for our purposes.)

Zazenkai – A single day devoted to meditation, usually done together with a group. This can be considered a one day sesshin, although a teacher need not be present.

Zen – Zen, or ch'an as it was called originally, is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism that first appeared in China in sixth and seventh centuries. Buddhism had earlier come to China from India, the birthplace of the Buddha and Buddhism. When Mahayana Buddhism was introduced it was influenced by the indigeneous Chinese religion Taoism. Most scholars believe, for example, that it was from exposure to Taoism that zen developed its great caution and reluctance towards using words and concepts as the path to enlightenment. From China zen moved on mainly to Japan, Korea and Vietnam, although it found some acceptance in other regions, as well.

The word ch'an is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word Dhyana, meaning concentration (i.e. meditation). While some schools of Buddhism emphasize elaborate cosmologies, devotional practices, chanted formulas and arcane images and gestures, zen offers meditation (zazen) as the best way to discover things directly for oneself.

Another distinctive characteristic of zen is that the person of the Buddha is regarded with somewhat less reverence than in most other Buddhist traditions. Certainly zen practitioners can exhibit a degree of respect and admiration for the Buddha, especially for his solitary quest for enlightenment without the guidance of anyone before him and for his burning desire to cure the world's suffering. However, zen Buddhists do believe the Buddha was just a man after all and that being fixated on this man is not a sensible path to enlightenment. Thus a bit of disregard for the Buddha now and then is considered healthy. One zen master, when he heard a student speak reverently of the Buddha, washed out the student's mouth with soap! (It should be noted, however, that zen is certainly not the only tradition that considers the Buddha to be just an admirable person and not a godlike figure.)

Zendo – Zen room or hall. This is the main room, whether it be in a monastery, retreat center or residential home, where zazen and other zen practices are observed. An altar is not essential but usually one is present. If possible, the room should be private and quiet, free from distractions such as television, music and noise from nearby automobile traffic or pedestrians. (However, it's important to note that quiet, isolated locations are not the only place to practice! Zen should be taken out into the real world as well, and sometimes a little traffic noise is a good reminder of that.) As with the English word "hall," zendo is sometimes used to refer to an entire building or teaching center.

