

Creating the Container

Retreat is about setting aside a time to focus ourselves fully on our practice. Usually this happens at some remove from the day-to-day world in a special space that eliminates distractions and helps us to go deeply into our practice. This distance from what the Zen poet Kobayashi Issa called “the world of dew” helps us to do so and creates a container that directs our attention towards what we have committed to do. That container is further strengthened by the presence of other practitioners who have made a similar commitment, though we normally do not speak or even make eye contact unless necessary. On retreat, we are alone together and together alone.

When doing a virtual retreat from home, we do not have the same supports, and so it can be helpful to prepare yourself, your space, and those you live with so that they can all support you in your practice. Below are a number of suggestions that may help you create a container for yourself wherever you are practicing. We understand that many amongst us will have ongoing obligations that make the below difficult, so please adapt and adjust these however necessary to meet your needs.

- Designate a specific spot where you will practice during the retreat. Set up your sitting space with whatever supports you need to be comfortable, and if possible, setup some kind of altar. If you have a statue or other icon that you would like to use, please do so, but a few flowers or a nice stone are just as good for a centerpiece. It is traditional to burn incense, and you should feel free to do so if you would like. Place your incense burner directly in front of your centerpiece on your altar. You may also want to include a candle and flowers, which you can place on opposite sides of the incense. If using a statue, it is traditional to put a small water bowl in front of the incense burner as an offering.
- Communicate with the people you live with ahead of time about what you will be doing, what you may need, and how they can support you during retreat. Traditionally, Zen retreats are silent, so you are encouraged to minimize conversation as much as is feasible for your situation.
- As much as possible, disconnect yourself from the workaday world. Put up away messages on email and social media, turn off your phone, and disconnect from electronic devices, news, TV, radio, music, and books as you are able. This is not a judgement against any of those things, it simply will help you to dive deeply into your practice. Again, do what works for your situation.
- Remember that retreat is a rare and precious time in our lives and you have chosen to undertake this with purpose. Give yourself fully over to the retreat, folding whatever comes into your practice.
- Once the retreat begins, pay close attention. Listen for instruction, observe what is happening, and follow along to the best of your ability.

Coming & Going

- Many of us will not be participating in the full retreat due to other obligations. This is absolutely fine, but please do be mindful of others when joining or leaving. Make sure your microphone is muted when you arrive, observe what is happening, and join in. If in doubt, just begin zazen.

Liturgy

- There will be four liturgy services each day, dawn, morning, afternoon, and evening. The chants are attached, but we will also display them onscreen so that everyone can follow along.
- During the morning liturgy service, one of our priests will act as doshi, making offerings and performing bows on behalf of the community. This will also be shown on screen. Doshis act alone on behalf of the whole community, so you do not need to try to copy what they are doing.
- The chant leader will announce the title of each chant before we begin. When chanting, the spirit is what is most important. Give your heart to what you are doing and do not worry particularly about forms, pronunciation, or any slip-ups. While we will chant together, the small time delays in zoom mean that everyone except the chant leader will be muted.
- It is traditional to offer a seated bow after most chants.
- During some of the dedications that conclude our liturgy services, there will be an opportunity for you to say aloud the names of anyone you would like to remember at this special time. These times will be announced on screen. Please feel free to unmute and say any names you would like to.
- After the dedications, there will be a ringdown (*accelerando*) on one of the bells. This indicates that it is time to perform prostrations if you are able and would like to do so. Both seated or standing bows are also welcome. Bow with the strike of the bell, and the final bow will be indicated by a double strike.

Meals

- On retreat, meals are usually served in the practice hall and treated as an extension of zazen. Traditionally, the morning meal is porridge, lunch is the primary meal of the day including grain and vegetables, and dinner is just a simple soup or broth. You may follow these customs if you like, but please feel no obligation to do so.
- You may find it helpful to prepare your meals ahead of time so that you only need to reheat them at mealtimes.
- There is a simplified meal chant included below that you are welcome to use if you like. Treat it much like grace said over a meal before eating. You may also wish to make a small offering, putting a tiny portion of your meal in a small bowl and placing it on your altar, bowing as you do so. This is another way to express our gratitude for that which sustains us in our lives.
- When eating, do so as an extension of your sitting practice. Eat simply and silently, and clean up completely when you are done.

Work Practice

- There will be an opportunity to engage in work practice during some of the breaks in our schedule, if you would like to do so and are able. You may find it helpful to think ahead about what tasks need doing around your home. These might be regular, day-to-day things like dishes, laundry, or sweeping and mopping, but could also include small and simple projects you have been meaning to get to. Whatever you choose to do, keep things simple and continue your practice in silence as you perform the task.

Body Practice

- Long periods of sitting can be surprisingly demanding on the body, so we must support our bodies so they can support us. Be sure to drink plenty of water to stay well hydrated. You may also find it helpful to make time during the breaks for some light exercise or stretching. Things like yoga, tai chi, or foam rolling can be particularly helpful for stiff or sore muscles.
- Please remember that zazen seated on the floor, sitting in a chair, or lying down are all equally good and valid forms of practice. There are no bonus points for tying your legs in knots and sitting still until they go completely numb.
- If you do sit on the ground, be careful when you stand up and give plenty of time for normal circulation to return to your legs.

Empty Moon Zen Retreat Liturgy

Meal Verse (condensed)

Buddha was born in Kapilavastu, enlightened in Magadha,

Taught in Varanasi, Entered nirvana in Kushinagara.

Now we have set out Buddha's bowls.

May we, with all living beings,

realize the emptiness of the three wheels:

Giver, receiver, and gift.

We reflect on the effort that brought us this food and consider how it comes to us.

We reflect on our virtue and practice, and whether we are worthy of this offering.

We regard greed as the obstacle to freedom of mind.

We regard this meal as medicine to sustain our life.

For the sake of enlightenment we now receive this food.

May we, along with all beings, realize the Buddha Way.

EARLY MORNING

Verse of the Kesa

Vast is the robe of liberation,

A formless field of benefaction.

Wrapping ourselves in Buddha's teaching,

Saving all sentient beings.

The Four Bodhisattva Vows

[Beings are numberless;] I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.

Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.

The Buddha Way is unsurpassable; I vow to embody it.

MORNING LITURGY

Gatha of Atonement

All evil karma ever created by me since of old,
on account of my beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance,
born of my body, mouth, and thought,
now I atone for it all.

The Three Refuges

Buddham saranam gacchami;

Dhammam saranam gacchami;

Sangham saranam gacchami.

I take refuge in Buddha;

I take refuge in Dharma;

I take refuge in Sangha.

The Five Remembrances

I am of the nature to grow old; there is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill health; there is no way to escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die; there is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature of change; there is no way to escape being separated from them.

My deeds are my closest companions.

I am the beneficiary of my deeds; my deeds are the ground on which I stand.

Sho Sai Myo Kichijo Dharani (*The Dharani of Good Fortune that Averts Calamities in the Mind*)

No mo san man da moto nan

oha ra chi koto sha sono nan

to ji to en gya gya gya ki gya ki un nun

shifu ra shifu ra hara shifu ra hara shifu ra

chishu sa chishu sa chishu ri chishu ri

soha ja soha ja sen chi gya

shiri ei somo ko

Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo (*Invocation of Kanzeon/Guanyin/Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, whose name means "the one who perceives the cries of the world"*)

Kanzeon!

Namu Butsu

yo Butsu u in

yo Butsu u en

buppo so en

jo raku ga jo

cho nen Kanzeon

bo non Kanzeon

nen nen ju shin ki

nen nen fu ri shin.

Absorbing world sounds awakens a buddha right here!

This buddha, the source of compassion.

This buddha receives only compassion.

Buddha, Dharma, Sangha — just compassion.

Thus, the pure heart always rejoices.

In the light, recall this.

In the dark, recall this.

Moment after moment the true heart arises.

Time after time there is nothing but this.

Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when deeply practicing prajna paramita clearly saw that all five aggregates are empty and thus relieved all suffering.

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form. Sensations, perceptions, formations, and consciousness are also like this.

Shariputra, all dharmas are marked by emptiness; they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor decrease. Therefore, given emptiness, there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no formation, no consciousness; no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realm of sight, no realm of mind consciousness.

There is neither ignorance nor extinction of ignorance; neither old age and death, nor extinction of old age and death; no suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path; no knowledge and no attainment. With nothing to attain, a bodhisattva relies on prajna paramita, and thus the mind is without hindrance. Without hindrance, there is no fear. Far beyond all inverted views, one realizes nirvana. All buddhas of past, present, and future rely on prajna paramita and thereby attain unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment. Therefore, know the prajna paramita as the great miraculous mantra, the great bright mantra, the supreme mantra, the incomparable mantra, which removes all suffering and is true, not false. Therefore we proclaim the prajna paramita mantra, the mantra that says:

Gaté Gaté Paragaté Parasamgaté Bodhi Svaha

Gaté Gaté Paragaté Parasamgaté Bodhi Svaha

Gaté Gaté Paragaté Parasamgaté Bodhi Svaha.

Dedication (whole sangha)

All buddhas throughout space and time,
All honored ones, bodhisattva-mahasattvas,
Wisdom beyond wisdom, Maha Prajna Paramita.

AFTERNOON LITURGY

Option 1

Song of the Grass-Roof Hermitage

I've built a grass hut where there's nothing of value. After eating, I relax and enjoy a nap. When it was completed, fresh weeds appeared. Now it's been lived in – covered by weeds.

The person in the hut lives here calmly, not stuck to inside, outside, or in between. Places worldly people live, he doesn't live. Realms worldly people love, she doesn't love. Though the hut is small, it includes the entire world. In just this place, an old man illumines forms and their nature. A Mahayana bodhisattva trusts without doubt. The middling or lowly can't help wondering: Will this hut perish or not?

Perishable or not, the original master is present. Not dwelling south or north, east or west, firmly based on steadiness, it can't be surpassed.

A shining window below the green pines – jade palaces or vermilion towers can't compare with it. Just sitting with head covered, all things are at rest. Thus, this mountain monk doesn't understand at all.

Living here she no longer works to get free. Who would proudly arrange seats, trying to entice guests? Turn around the light to shine within, then just return. The vast inconceivable source can't be faced or turned away from.

Meet the ancestral teachers, be familiar with their instruction, bind grasses to build a hut, and don't give up. Let go of hundreds of years and relax completely. Open your hands and walk, innocent. Thousands of words, myriad interpretations are only to free you from obstructions.

If you want to know the undying person in the hut,
Don't separate from this skin-bag here and now.

Option 2

Days Like Lightning

The days and months go by like lightning: we should value the time. We pass from life to death in the time it takes to breathe in and breathe out; it's hard to guarantee even a morning and an evening. Whether walking or standing, sitting or lying down, do not waste even a minute. Become ever braver and bolder. Be like our original teacher, Shakyamuni, who kept on progressing, energetically.

When the mind-ground is equanimous and awake, you will have profound certainty in the intent of the buddhas and ancestral teachers. You must accomplish

this correctly. Mind is the natural buddha: why bother seeking elsewhere? Put down your myriad concerns and wake up. At the end of the road, it's like an iron wall. False thoughts are all extinguished, and extinguishing is wiped away; body and mind resting on the void. In the stillness, a light reaches everywhere with brilliance.

The original face: who is it? As soon as it is mentioned, the arrow sinks in stone. When the mass of doubt is shattered amid all the particulars, one thing covers the blue sky. Do not seek guidance from those without wisdom. Do not become overjoyed. Visit Zen teachers: show them how your mind works and ask for their teaching. After that, you can be called one who continues the tradition of the ancestral teachers.

Our family style is not remote. When tired, we stretch out our legs and sleep. When hungry, we let our mouths eat.

In the human realm, what school is this?
Blows and shouts fall like raindrops.

Option 3

Song of Zazen

All beings by nature are Buddha, as ice by nature is water;
Apart from water there is no ice; apart from beings, no Buddha.

How sad that people ignore the near, and search for truth afar,
Like someone in the midst of water crying out in thirst,
Like a child of a wealthy home wandering among the poor.

Lost on dark paths of ignorance,
We wander through the six worlds, from dark path to dark path.
When shall we be freed from birth and death?

Oh, the zazen of the Mahayana! To this the highest praise!
Devotion, repentance, training, the many paramitas,
All have their source in zazen.
Those who try zazen even once wipe away beginningless crimes;
Where are all the dark paths then? The Pure Land itself is near.

Those who hear this truth even once, and listen with a grateful heart,
Treasuring it, revering it, gain blessings without end.

Much more, those who turn about, and bear witness to self-nature —
Self-nature that is no nature — go far beyond mere doctrine.

Here effect and cause are the same;
The Way is neither two nor three;
With form that is no form, going and coming, we are never astray;
With thought that is no thought,
Singing and dancing are the voice of the Law.

How boundless and free is the sky of samadhi!
How bright the full moon of wisdom!
Truly, is anything missing now?
Nirvana is right here, before our eyes.

This very place is the Lotus Land;
This very body, the Buddha.

Option 4

Bodhisattva's Vow

[I am only a simple disciple, but I offer these respectful words:]

When I look deeply into the real form of the universe,
Everything reveals the mysterious truth of the Tathagata.
This truth never fails: in every moment and every place,
things can't help but shine with this light.

Realizing this, our ancestors gave reverent care to animals, birds, and all beings.

Realizing this, we ourselves know that our daily food, clothing and shelter
are the warm body and beating heart of the Buddha.
How can we be ungrateful to anyone or anything?
Even though someone may be a fool, we can be compassionate.
If someone turns against us, speaking ill of us and treating us bitterly, it's best to
bow down;
This is the Buddha appearing to us,
Finding ways to free us from our own attachments —
the very ones that have made us suffer, again and again and again.

Now on each flash of thought a lotus flower blooms,
And on each flower: a buddha.

The light of the Tathagata
Appears before us, soaking into our feet.
May we share this mind with all beings,
So that we and the world together may grow in wisdom.

Dedication (whole sangha)

All buddhas throughout space and time,
All honored ones, bodhisattva-mahasattvas,
Wisdom beyond wisdom, Maha Prajna Paramita.

CLOSING CHANTS

The Four Bodhisattva Vows

[Beings are numberless;] I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.
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