

## Work as Practice

As you rush to get a room ready for a guest or haul a tray-load of dishes to the dish shack or are halfway through cutting 5 gallons of small tofu cubes, you may wonder how what you are doing relates to Zen Buddhist practice. It may come as a surprise to learn that work itself is an essential component of Zen training.

For centuries Indian Buddhist monks had been prohibited from working. Instead they were supported by the generosity of their neighborhood lay community. This changed when Buddhism entered China. To the practical-minded Chinese it did not make sense that one group would not work and be supported by everyone else. This was especially true in the Zen tradition. Each member was expected to contribute their labor for the support of the community, monastic or otherwise. Old Abbot Baizhang, after his students hid his tools to spare his aging body the rigors of farm work, shouted, “a day without work is a day without food.” He refused to eat. His students quickly returned his tools.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Dōgen Zenji (the founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan) traveled to China to study Buddhism. While there he met an old Tenzo (Head Cook) who had walked 12 miles to buy some Japanese mushrooms brought over on Dōgen’s ship. Dōgen was puzzled by the distinguished monk and asked him, “Venerable Tenzo, in your advanced years why don’t you wholeheartedly engage the Way by doing *zazen* or studying the sutras instead of troubling yourself by being Tenzo and *just working*? What is that good for?” The Tenzo laughed loudly and said, “Oh good friend from a foreign country, it is clear you have no idea what it means to whole-heartedly engage in the Way.”\*

When Master Dōgen returned to Japan, he brought with him several distinct practices, which were mainstays of Chinese Zen training. These same practices are the core of our training here at Tassajara. They include the practice of *zazen* (sitting meditation), face-to-face meetings with a teacher, following the monastic schedule and the *Guidelines*, and manual labor.

It is pretty typical to see work as only a means to an end, something that has to be done now in order to do the things we really want to do later. But Zen training takes work far beyond this small point of view. The founder of Tassajara, Suzuki Roshi, valued work so highly as to say, “First clean, then *zazen*.” When *work is practice* it is seen as part of our *zazen* (meditation) practice itself. It is an end in itself. Work and *zazen* go hand in hand. Both are necessary and without one, the other suffers. When *work is practice*, it is a Buddha doing what a Buddha does, *how* a Buddha does it.

So when our work is practice, it is less about *what* we are doing and more about *how* we are doing it. This particular *how* in Zen training refers to bringing our *zazen*, or Zen, Mind to our workplace. “Zen Mind” is a willingness to engage ourselves wholeheartedly in whatever we are doing in the present moment, whether it is making up a bed, cleaning a toilet, chopping a carrot, or serving a guest in the dining room. It is a radical willingness to go *beyond* our usual limited, small mind; the one that is ruled by its likes and dislikes, its prejudices, narrow points of view and fixed ways of seeing and doing things. The

small mind is fueled by habit energy, which says “I don’t like that kind of work,” or “I know all about that.” When we bring our zazen practice into our work, we take a leap out of that conditioned small mind and into the freedom and generosity of the mind that is accepting, fresh, and full of possibility. This mind is the unfettered mind of a beginner; it is “Beginner’s Mind.”

Most of our work areas are silent, especially in the mornings. Silence supports our practice of full engagement and mindfulness. At first, this silence may feel uncomfortable. And just like in zazen, when you notice the mind wandering off into fantasy, criticism, the urge to chat, or any other distraction, you gently but firmly bring it back to the breath, the body, and the task at hand.

Since our work here can often be physically strenuous, it is very important to be attentive to your body. Be sure to speak with your crew head or the Director about past or present injuries. If you are unsure about the safest way to perform a repetitive or demanding task, please ask your crew head.

We invite you to explore the challenges and joys of work practice with us, and hope that you will experience a new understanding of yourself and work. And, we bow deeply in gratitude to you for all your innumerable labors that support the life of this temple and this ancient Way.

--Tassajara Work Leader

\* A full account of this story is found in Dogen’s Tenzokyokun, or *Instructions to the Head Cook*.