



Plum Mountain News

Dokusan in Rinzai

Zen

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Dokusan is a private dharma interview between a Zen student and a Zen teacher. The interview provides Zen students an opportunity to work on their practice one-on-one with a trusted teacher in confidence. The Japanese word dokusan translates as “going alone to a respected one” (独参). In this translation, it is clear

that the student must be willing to “go alone” to meet the teacher, and that the encounter be respectful.

The forms we practice for dokusan prepare us for this activity.

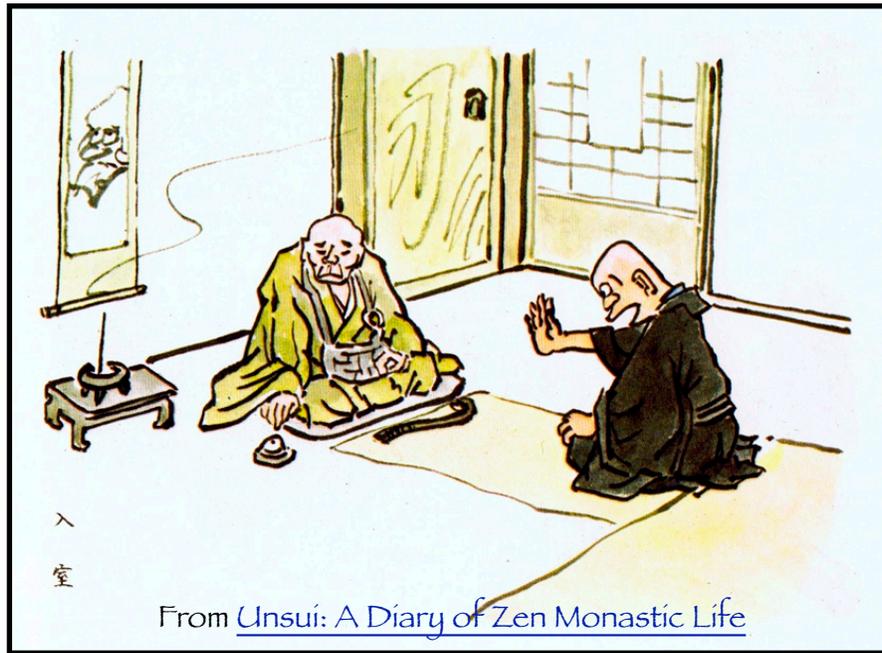
Dokusan has become a critical element of Zen training, and is especially emphasized in the Rinzai tradition, which is the tradition of our temple. The spirit of dokusan is for the student to succinctly present the state of her practice to the teacher. This achieves two ends: the teacher can track, guide, and encourage the student's understanding, and the student can receive guidance, support and encouragement to continue her practice.

The teacher applies a set of skillful means to help the student grow through zen practice. Dokusan hence is really about the student meeting herself, encountering her own nature directly. The teacher creates the space for the student to be met, exactly where she is in her understanding.

The content in dokusan relates more to the student's personal practice and experience rather than to academic or theoretical matters. In our tradition, we often are presented with a koan during dokusan. With the support of the teacher, we practice with koans to get beyond “ordinary reality.” At times, though, koans are not right for a student, in which case the teacher and student work on other matters of practice. Dokusan is a good time for the student to come to the teacher with questions about practice that arise while practicing zen. It is also a good time to share an insight or revelation that zen practice brought about. Students are discouraged from going into a personal issue (such as a

interview in some cases. If the student is working on a koan, say, and her understanding is clear, the teacher may test several koans during one interview, to take advantage of the student's heightened understanding in that moment. This is simply one form of encouragement the teacher can give the student. Other times, by means of deep practice, the student may become bewildered or scared, having uncovered a deep wound or a dark place in herself, and it is clear to the teacher that the student is standing on shaky ground. In this case, the teacher may elect to stay with the process unfolding in the dokusan room until the student equilibrates to a more stable footing, before ringing the bell and sending her back to the zendo.

Although the formality of dokusan and all the teacher's “props” (the dark, candle-lit room, the robes, the incense, the keisaku, the pictures of the ancestors) may be intimidating, ideally during dokusan there is neither teacher nor student. Rather, there is “an encounter that goes beyond what's conceivable.” (See <http://www.joansutherland.net/Pages/Talks%20and%20Essays/dokusan.htm>) The teacher is a student and the student is a teacher, and the apparent hierarchy may even become a source of play to further explore the dharma. All formality aside, the encounter between teacher and student is beyond rank or post.



From [Unsui: A Diary of Zen Monastic Life](#)

challenging relationship or job) unless the issue relates very specifically to practice.

The essence of dokusan is for the student to present her understanding as succinctly as possible. That being said, dokusan may extend to a longer

It is quite natural for the student, however, to face fears of performing well for the teacher during dokusan. Self-consciousness, anxiety, doubt, and other emotional reactions that often accompany self-revelation are all part of what students have to practice with. Dokusan

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is a good place to share these reactions mindfully -- presenting them to the teacher illuminates to both parties where the student is at. Furthermore, facing the seeming terror of dokusan may uncover obstacles the student has to being naturally confident in her practice, and in her life. What matters is that the student be honest with herself in order to "go straight on." As Shunryu Suzuki wrote in *Crooked Cucumber*, "Every thing you do is right, nothing you do is wrong, yet you must still make ceaseless effort."

When studying koans in the Rinzai curriculum, in dokusan the teacher will usually give a short reply to the student's presentation of her koan. Common replies include "No", which means "more zazen, try again", "Not Yet", which means "making progress, but not yet a bullseye", "Isn't there more?", which means "yes, that's fine, but what more can be gleaned?", or "Let's move on", which means "Okay, let's work on the next koan." Occasionally, the student might hear the teacher say, "Good insight but it doesn't match what this koan is pointing at," or, "Wow, that's a new one!" which means the "student" has just shown the "teacher" a brand new way to turn over an old koan. Each koan has the potential to spring open entirely new depths of understanding. It's as if each koan is a unique piece in a giant jigsaw puzzle, but one that has no borders. The koan curriculum is designed to reveal, over time, a multi-dimensional picture of reality. This is why it can be of great value for the student to journal her own response and the teacher's reply to a koan. After some study, the student will be able to go back and see how her understanding has developed.

Although the word koan means "public case", and interpretations of koans are publicly discussed and written about, and have been for centuries, koan study during dokusan remains a private matter between the student and the teacher. The whole purpose of koan study is for each student to cultivate her own true insight. In dokusan, the student receives assistance and encouragement to do so from a fellow trusted "follower of the way." It is poor form to share one's response to a koan with other members of the sangha. Also, in koan study, comparing where one is in the koan curriculum to where others are is imprudent; koans are about gaining an understanding through experience, and not

at all about getting ahead, performing well, or being "more enlightened." With a borderless jigsaw puzzle and an infinite number of pieces to put together, where one begins or how far one has gotten are entirely irrelevant.

At Chobo-Ji, dokusan occurs primarily during sesshin and at scheduled times after zazen for students enrolled in Chobo-Ji's Spring or Fall Intensives. During sesshin, dokusan is offered 2-3 times a day. This ample access to private time with the teacher affords the student support in her practice during the accelerated practice of sesshin. But, it's important to remember that the essence of dokusan is to be concise. Ideally the private interview lasts one or two minutes.

Also important to remember is that the teacher, not the student, determines when the interview is over by ringing the hand-bell. If a student has a matter of concern that either does not pertain to her practice or is experiencing a personal crisis that requires a more in-depth meeting, Genjo Osho is always available to schedule time outside of sesshin to discuss what's going on.



Zen Master Rinzai

