

Baek Jang's Principles of Sitting Zen

Translated by Jess Row

Translator's Note: Principles of Sitting Zen is a section of the Baizhang Qinggui, or The Clear Rule of Baizhang, a twelfth-century (Yuan dynasty) version of the original temple rules written by Zen Master Baizhang Huaihai (Baek Jang) in the ninth century, near the end of the Tang dynasty. The original text no longer exists.

Baizhang was a disciple of Mazu Daoyi (Ma Jo) and the teacher of Huangbo, who gave transmission to Linji. According to Zen Master Seung's Sahn's lineage line, our Kwan Um tradition passes through Baizhang, Huangbo and the Chinese Linji school, entering Korea with Zen Master T'aego in the twelfth century. The Baizhang Qinggui, however, is the source of temple rules not only for one lineage line but for all Zen practitioners, in China, Japan, and Korea. It helped create the "Zen school" as a distinct tradition and institution within East Asian Buddhism. Most famously, Baizhang emphasized that monastics in the Zen tradition should engage in physical labor, including the cultivation of food, which was an enormous cultural shift away from the earlier Buddhist emphasis on surviving entirely through donations from the lay population. Baizhang was also the first to insist that Zen temples should include separate dharma halls for meditation, and that monks should adhere to a fixed schedule of practice, labor, chanting, and formal meals, with as little sleep as possible—the same kind of schedule we use today in our retreats.

The Baizhang Qinggui is markedly different from other well-known Chinese Buddhist texts of this era (such as The Blue Cliff Record or the Mumonkwan) because it is concerned not with biography or teaching stories but with concrete instructions for day-to-day life. "Principles of Sitting Zen" is, to my knowledge, one of the earliest texts offering explicit directions for sitting meditation practice in the Zen tradition. Although there are many translations of Baizhang's biography, speeches, and dialogues, as far as I know, this particular text has never before appeared in English.

P r i n c i p l e s

10]

Now, to study the Prajna-paramita means to take up the great heart of compassion and expand our vows and intentions.

This is the precious practice of samadhi we vow to undertake for all beings.

Don't conceive of the body only as a way to seek to solve or alleviate problems, or as a means of escape.

Abandon all reasons of wanting to rest; let go of your ten thousand thoughts.

Use the body and mind together as a means of paying attention, in an undivided way, without quantifying, even while drinking and eating; pay close attention even while sleeping.

When you are sitting, seek a point of tranquil, thoughtful attention over all present phenomena.

Sit cross-legged or half cross-legged. Put the left palm over the right. Put the two thumbs together.

Sit with your body upright. Square your ears with the tops of your shoulders. Align your nose with your navel.

Your tongue should be propped on your teeth. Your eyes should be slightly open. Avoid falling asleep.

If you attain Zen practice your strength will increase to the utmost.

The great practicing monks of old always kept their eyes open. Zen Master Faxu laughed at people who closed their eyes while sitting Zen. He called this a black mountain spirit cave. Heed this deep and profound statement.

Don't concern yourself with good and evil. Set out to achieve attainment just now.

Lasting attainment has no taste, does not fall away, does not scatter.

Ten thousand years with one intention: not short, not long. This is the only technique needed for sitting Zen.

Sitting Zen is the dharma-entrance to peace and joy.

There are many who fall ill and fail to realize their intention.

To realize your intention and self-nature is the fourth great serenity. It is to have a brilliant spirit, clear and hopeful.

The flavor of the dharma is natural stillness and constant illumination of the spirit. It is to awaken from a deep sleep and realize that life and death are exactly the same.

But you must control your mind without the intention of gaining anything. Otherwise, I fear that along the Way great devils will distract even the strongest practitioner.

If you keep these thoughts foremost in your mind, nothing will detain you.

N o t e s

Abandon all reasons of wanting to rest; let go of your ten thousand thoughts.

This can also be read as "abandon all reasons of wanting to put the ten thousand thoughts to rest."

Pay close attention even while sleeping.

Literally this translates as "investigate even while sleeping."

Black mountain spirit cave.

In his translation of Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, Thomas Cleary calls this a "ghost cave in the mountain of darkness."

Fourth great serenity.

This line can also be read as "four great serenities." In either case, it's not clear what Baizhang is referring to. ☸