

Shikantaza – Being without Soul



Shikantaza is the path of silent illumination. It is also called the ‘methodless method’ or ‘sitting in goalless quiet awareness’. The concept of Shikantaza comes from the Soto School of Zen. While it was popularized by Zen master Dogen in the 13th century, it originated much earlier in China, where it was developed as one of the five houses of Zen. In the beginning, shikantaza was based on the integration of ‘shamatta’ (calming the mind) and ‘vipassana’ (insight meditation) but, due to the influence of Dogen, the term has since come to signify the act of pure meditation based on the principle of ‘just sitting.’

The Philosophy of Shikantaza

Zen is a sudden path, meaning it posits that awakening is a spontaneous, single event in time, rather than being the gradual, linear outcome of practice. However, unlike Advaita, which is also a sudden path, Zen did not lose the common sense requirement for practice and meditation. As such, the concept of shikantaza is a beautiful attempt to integrate the sudden nature of awakening with the gradualness of practice. On some levels the Soto perception of the path is purer than that of the Rinzai (Lin Chi) School, which is known for its koan-based practices. Although the Rinzai School also combines sudden enlightenment with practice, its conceptions of practice and awakening are less integrated, and it often perceives enlightenment as a very dramatic, earth-shattering event. In Soto, practice and awakening are combined in a more refined way.

The most basic principle of Zen is that one has to sit in meditation. There were schools of Buddhism that did not advocate sitting practice, but all of those faded away. Buddhism is, in essence, a path of practice and understanding, and the foundation of that practice is sitting meditation. Indeed, Buddha himself sat in meditation right up until his death. The problem that arises within practice-based approaches is that, when we sit in meditation with the goal of reaching enlightenment, we create an overly dualistic relationship with our pure nature. By wanting to reach it, we construct an object out of it and lose our pure connection to the now. There is truth in the common phrase ‘stop seeking and you will find.’ However, that is just one side of the coin because by not looking at all, we won’t find anything either. The concept of shikantaza aims to solve the paradox of seeking awakening through non-seeking. One is seeking through *being*.

The philosophy of shikantaza is not practicing to *reach* our Buddha nature, but rather embodying it through *zazen*; we acknowledge and express it through just sitting. In fact, the direct meaning of shikantaza *is* ‘just sitting.’ Just sitting does not point to physical act of sitting, but to the ‘sitting mind’ – abidance in reality. We sit physically to create the proper environment for the mind to submit itself to shikantaza. However, even though it needs to be stabilized through sitting meditation, true shikantaza transcends the polarity of sitting and activity. Shikantaza is happening at all times; it is just another name for our natural state.

The Pitfall of ‘Dead Shikantaza’

There are two dimensions of shikantaza: one is non-seeking (just being), and the other is practice with evolution into self-realization. There is always a danger of becoming stuck in the first dimension without having truly realized oneself. Hence, there are teachers of shikantaza who have learned the basic principles of the Soto School, but who have not actualized their pure nature. They are teaching an unreal shikantaza, an imitation of its true essence. There are actually many warnings against this pitfall in Zen: just sitting without illumination - lifeless ‘dead shikantaza’. We have to see that even a cow can ‘just sit’ (animals are, in fact, very good at it), but a cow obviously does not know its true self – it is sitting in the shikantaza of ignorance. So, the question is: How do we sit beyond seeking and yet avoid falling into negative non-seeking? How do we avoid drifting into a state of lethargy and suspension, rather than abiding in the sphere of silent illumination?



Here we come to one of the main issues with the concept of shikantaza: while it attempts to transcend the duality between practice and awakening, it does not really give clear guidance on how to actually awaken. It is pointing to awakening, but it does not specify a definite direction or mechanism through which to facilitate it. No wonder most people who walk the path of shikantaza are completely lost. They may sit for years in the mode of ‘just sitting,’ but nothing really changes. Nothing changes, not because they have become one with their Buddha nature, but because they cannot cross over from illusion to reality.

The Paradox of Original and Acquired Enlightenment

Both Buddhism and Advaita have struggled to solve the apparent paradox that we already are our pure, original nature (non-seeking) and yet we must still realize it (practice and awakening). In Zen, they tried to reconcile this through differentiating between acquired and original enlightenment (Tathagatagarbha). Tathagatagarbha is not really enlightenment, but rather the original nature of existence, the womb of all Buddhas. Acquired enlightenment means *realized* tathagatagarbha: it is a function of practice and grace, and requires recognition to bring it into our consciousness. In Advaita, among teachers of a lower degree, the paradox of acquired and original enlightenment is often misinterpreted, and the need for realization by virtue of grace and practice is denied. Such teachers may acknowledge the concept of acquired enlightenment, but grossly oversimplify it as the single event of becoming conscious of our original enlightenment. By applying a linear logic, they miss the vital bridge between ignorance and enlightenment – realization. Realization is not the same as recognition – recognition follows realization. This is why, when Master Joshu was asked if a dog has a Buddha nature, he answered “No!” We both have and don’t have a Buddha nature, because to truly have it requires conscious recognition of it, and this is impossible before it is awakened and realized.

To realize our pure nature is to enter the dimension of the self. If we compare our Buddha nature to a country – say India – one may know that India exists, one may be fully convinced on a conceptual level that it is there but, in order to truly recognize it, one actually has to be in that country and see it for oneself. Otherwise, India remains a concept or agreement between minds rather than a real experience. Superficial teachings of Advaita suggest that we can know India without ever going there. This might save us a lot of hassle but, unfortunately, does not work. There is no recognition prior to realization. Sometimes they seem to occur simultaneously because recognition follows immediately



after realization. At other times, recognition enables realization to become complete by infusing it with consciousness and intelligence, or by allowing our me to embody the state more deeply. But there cannot be recognition without first having access to our pure nature – which is realization.

There is a Zen story in which a monk, Baso, who has been sitting for a long time in deep meditation, is confronted by his master, Nanyue. As the story goes, Nanyue went to him and asked:

“Great monastic, what do you intend by doing zazen?”

Baso said, “I am intending to be a Buddha.”

Nanyue picked up a brick and started polishing it.

Baso said, “What are you doing?”

Nanyue said, “I am trying to make a mirror,”

Baso said, “How can you make a mirror by polishing a brick?”

Nanyue said, “How can you become a Buddha by doing zazen?”

Baso said, “What do you mean by that?”

Nanyue said, “Think about driving a cart. When it stops moving, do you whip the cart or the horse?”

Baso said nothing.

Here, the horse represents the very force that transforms meditation into the vehicle of transformation and awakening – intelligence. Zazen is the cart and intelligence is the horse. In fact, to present this metaphor in more comprehensive context, we could say that the driver is intelligence, horse is consciousness, and the whip is the power of will and intention. Shikantaza that is not illuminated by intelligence is not real shikantaza. The function of intelligence is to direct the light of consciousness toward our essential nature, in order activate our spiritual potential and awaken our true self. Even though Buddhism is as intellectual as Advaita, because it is also a path of practice, it remains more in touch with reality; hence, as the story demonstrates, the need for realization is widely accepted.



Solving the Paradox of Shikantaza through Transcending Non-Duality

Over the centuries, many thinkers have contemplated how to reconcile original and acquired enlightenment but because they failed to question their basic assumptions, they were effectively wasting their time. It is only after leaving the conceptual cage of non-duality behind that many of the logical paradoxes within this reconciliation drop away. Graduating from simplistic non-duality is like a lifting a non-existent stone from our chest: we can finally breathe, even though the stone wasn't really there in the first place. Is the coexistence of original enlightenment and acquired enlightenment really a paradox at all? It is only so if we stubbornly adhere to the non-dual concept of existence. If we deny there is 'someone' who is reaching enlightenment, there is no way we can grasp the nature of our evolution and journey *into* enlightenment. In Buddhism, it is assumed that, by reaching enlightenment, we become the Buddha nature or the 'one mind.' But *who* is realizing that one mind? When we realize one mind, do we mysteriously disappear into thin air? Or do we, in fact, continue to exist and remain in a relationship of consciousness, intelligence and feeling with that one mind? To even begin to understand these matters, we must first of all grasp the fundamental difference between the universal and individual dimensions of self-realization. Only then does the philosophy of shikantaza start to make real sense.

Dogen illuminated many aspects of the Buddhist path and of shikantaza. He was a man of great intellect, but too good a Buddhist to question the basic assumptions of Buddha's teaching; he was not internally free enough to realize the truth. He criticized the concept of a 'true man of no rank', which master Lin Chi had used to describe a self-realized being. But this phrase expresses how Lin Chi, in his own way, intuited the existence of our higher individuality as the embodied essence of enlightenment. Lin Chi still had to navigate his understanding within by the framework of his Buddhist philosophy, but at least he looked for a way to describe his realization in a unique way. Dogen was critical because he sensed that the 'heretic' concept of self had infiltrated Lin Chi's understanding. So, while Lin Chi was probably a worse Buddhist than Dogen, he was for that very reason a better Buddha.



The Lower Forms of Just Being

In Zen, there is a tendency not to conceptualize the inner reality in order to preserve its purity. But, without being able to reflect our internal evolution in a precise conceptualized model, we are, at best, bound to remain stuck in an incomplete realization. The role of conceptual understanding is not only in order to grasp the nature of our inner reality, but also to safeguard us from falling into numerous pitfalls on the path.

As a result of these gaps in Zen understanding, the practice of shikantaza has, in many ways, become degraded. Shikantaza is meditation without support, meaning there is no object of concentration or meditation involved. At times, conscious breathing to the belly is applied, but meditation does not hinge on it. However, as we have said, for true meditation without support, one has to have access to the inner state; one has to be awakened already. If that access is closed, as is very often the case, one has to resort to a superficial type of mindfulness in order not to get lost in the mind. We could call this the ‘pre-awakened’ stage of shikantaza – shikantaza for beginners, so to speak. At this stage, one’s practice is based around mindfulness with no object, where the adept keeps returning to the form of sitting from moment to moment with the intention of ‘just being’. When one keeps coming back to the pure act of just sitting, some of one’s energy may drop into being, enabling one to gain a certain anchor in reality. Mindfulness without object is not really shikantaza; it is a lower form of just being which one has to transcend in order to enter pure subjectivity.

What does ‘just be’ mean? One can ‘be’ on many levels, even in a very unconscious way. There are lower and higher dimensions of existing, and not all of them contain the pure energy of being, which is vertical and which indicates a degree of connection to the source. For instance, the observer can cultivate a kind of ‘shikantaza,’ but this condition possesses neither qualities of being nor of consciousness. Here one experiences a shallow imitation of being – the sense of presence or attention – which is obviously not true shikantaza.

In order to enter true shikantaza we have to go beyond the observer and beyond the practice of mindfulness, so as to pass through the gateway to pure subjectivity. Pure subjectivity is the real heart of just being. It is, in itself, a complex term, and can be experienced on several planes of existence. To put it simply, it is a state of consciousness and being without object. However, on a deeper level, it can be defined as a non-objective state of pure knowing, beyond both thinking and the observer, which is



realized in unity with the universal I am and illuminated with the light of me. While this term does not arise in either the vocabulary or conceptual framework of Zen, there is no true shikantaza without pure subjectivity

Because the Buddhist path aims at the realization of impersonal enlightenment, its concept of shikantaza is oriented toward abiding in the state of universal reality. However, true just being represents a deeper realization, which is reached through the awakening of the individual dimension of our subjectivity. When we are merely abiding in the universal reality, it remains external to our own existence – universal reality is being objectified and, as such, it is not the self. One cannot truly realize the universal self without realizing the soul, because only the soul can experience the beyond as pure subjectivity. In just being, the personal and universal dimensions of enlightenment must be unified. Only then can we reach emancipation from objectivity and embody the state of just being – true and universal shikantaza.

In addition to a direct understanding of our essence of pure subjectivity, the concept of true shikantaza must also be complete and holistic; it must include all the planes of just being. The traditional concept of shikantaza is far too constricted and one-dimensional. Many imagine that our Buddha nature is a singular state of realization, but this is far too simplistic. Unless we have a correct vision of the complete inner state beyond the mind, we can neither imagine nor manifest the state of holistic shikantaza.

Holistic Shikantaza

Depending on the stage of our evolution we can access the following levels of shikantaza:

1. Abidance in Awareness

Awareness is a reflection of consciousness in the human me. It is not consciousness, but it is beyond the mind, and it has some of the characteristics of consciousness, such as spaciousness and luminosity. What awareness lacks is the quality of the soul and true energy of surrender; it is entirely confined to the dimension of presence. In the human body, awareness is experienced as spacious presence in the front of the head. The complete awakening of awareness includes the realization of its pure subjectivity, which is conscious me. When it is mature, conscious me also has the quality of being, meaning it is linked to the dimension of verticality. As such, it is the first level of true 'just being'.



2. Abidance in Pure Consciousness

Pure consciousness is the unification of pure me and I am. Energetically, it is located deeper in the headspace: with eyes open, it is felt at the back of and behind the head, while with eyes closed, it is experienced as a space of subjectivity between the front and the back of the head, which rests towards the bottom of the head and neck.

Is it possible to realize shikantaza on the level of pure consciousness within the Zen path, even if they do not have the concept of me? It is possible. Even though there is no concept of me in Zen, everyone *has* a me – it is inextricable from whom we are. So, we can reach a relatively correct state without being conscious of the process we have been through or of the deeper meaning of our realization. For instance, we could realize pure consciousness through grace or transmission without embodying our pure me or intentionally surrendering to the universal I am. The difference is that what we have realized is just a ‘state,’ not our soul. It might be energetically correct, but it lacks an additional dimension – pure subjectivity.

After the awakening of pure consciousness, one can abide in shikantaza of pure consciousness alone or in both pure consciousness and awareness combined.

3. Abidance in Being

The next level of shikantaza is abidance in being. Being is experienced in the area of the lower belly as a feeling of restfulness and absorption. Through a combination of sitting zazen and belly breathing, energy often spontaneously drops into being, even if one is not directly cultivating vertical surrender. Shikantaza becomes a combination of abidance in pure consciousness (with or without the conscious me) and shallow or deep being.

4. Samadhi of Being

Samadhi is beyond abidance, for it signifies the absorption of the individual in the universal. The deeper states of shikantaza are opened through the shift into the absolute state, through which we are granted access to the universal energy of the unmanifested. This is what we call ‘enlightenment to being.’ Through this shift we enter the unmanifested through the portal of tan t’ien, the center of the vital force in the lower belly. In Zen they say: “The bottom of the bucket falls off.” Shikantaza then



becomes a combination of pure consciousness (with or without conscious me) and the absolute state. In most cases, this is the deepest level of shikantaza accessible to those who exclusively walk the path of Zen.

5. Samadhi of the Heart

The next level of shikantaza is difficult to reach on the Zen path, because it requires enlightenment to the heart. The Zen energy and concept of reality is not really compatible with evolution into the heart, as this requires a more feminine energy, so it can embrace the deeper sensitivity of the soul. To experience shikantaza of the heart requires three elements: the heart has to open, it has to be embodied by pure me and then it has to be merged with the absolute state. In the past, we used the term 'divine shikantaza' to describe this state. Here, one abides in the combination of consciousness (with or without conscious me), the absolute state and the state of the heart. Traditionally, the heart is not included in shikantaza but, as we revise this model, we introduce its sensitivity and divinity.

6. Samadhi of Consciousness

We have touched upon samadhi in being (the absolute state) and samadhi of the heart (the divine state). After the foundation of samadhi in being and heart is established, consciousness can begin to surrender in order reach absorption in the unmanifested. To reach the vertical samadhi of consciousness is rare on the Zen path, due to the absence of the heart. Without the bridge of the heart, consciousness cannot enter the absolute. Samadhi of consciousness (and ultimately of conscious me) is the final component in arriving at perfect, holistic shikantaza.

In summary, holistic shikantaza is the state of just being that occurs from all three centers of the soul in the context of her samadhi in the absolute. The more the soul is awakened and surrendered, the more complete that shikantaza becomes. Because the Buddhist path does not embrace the awakening of the soul, its potential to reach the final depth of meditation is limited. While it is possible to awaken all the three centers of the soul without realizing their subjective essence – pure me –, this diminishes our relationship with both our individual existence and the universal I am. No matter how deeply one is absorbed in shikantaza, unless it becomes the sacred vessel of the light of me, it is bound to remain a shikantaza without true illumination.



Shikantaza – Being Without Soul

The concept of shikantaza and the philosophy of the Soto School were great contributions to human spirituality. Of all the past teachings, the concept of shikantaza represents the purest perception of true meditation. It embraces, in a wonderfully transparent way, both the need for practice as a means to acquire our true nature, and the conviction of our original enlightenment; it captures the fine balance between the dual and non-dual aspects of enlightenment.

However, considering that the concept of shikantaza was created over one thousand years ago, it has not evolved much, if at all, since then. Dogen reinterpreted it, but he still could not go beyond the basis of Buddhist philosophy. Spiritual truth must evolve, because it is alive; it is not the dull repetition of past conclusions. Those who teach or practice the art of shikantaza must strive and be inspired to awaken and enliven it. It should come to represent the true state of just being that is one with the endless evolution of existence into its fathomless depths. True shikantaza is not just sitting: it is a portal to revelations into the mystery of being. For that portal to be a true opening to the ocean of the beyond, our soul has to enter the temple of meditation, for she is the hollow flute through which the divine can whisper – I am love.

Blessings

Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology you can visit our website: www.anaditeaching.com/glossary

