

Guided Meditation: Gateless Gate

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Hello and welcome. Many years ago, when I was young—40 years ago—I went to practice at a Zen monastery in Japan. I was already a Zen monk, and I went to one of the more serious training monasteries where they did things fairly traditionally. One of the customs there is that when a new monk comes and is going to be in the monastery, they are asking to be in the monastery. They have to stand in front of the monastery gate and wait until someone comes and checks them out. Sometimes the custom is that this aspiring monk is ignored and just left there to stand in front of the gate.

Partly, this is to show his sincerity, his dedication, his persistence—that this is really important. I've been told that sometimes they have to stand there for three days. I think they're allowed to go sleep somewhere at night, but I don't know how that works. They have to stand there for a long time. This idea of standing in front of the gate, waiting—maybe they're waiting to see how the person is. Is a person mature in their practice to be able to really stand there in a comfortable, relaxed, upright way?

Not impatient, not collapsing, not giving up, not pounding on the gates, yelling and screaming to be let in, not arguing the case that they should be let in, not blaming the monastery for being so cruel and thoughtless and inconsiderate and unwelcoming to require the monk to stand there—just to stand there, as if it's going to be forever, to stand there. The paradox—or not a paradox—is they're standing in front of a wide open gate. They just can't walk through it. It's wide open. In Zen, they also have a famous question that practitioners live with and struggle with, or reference points called the gateless gate.

What is the gateless gate that we're always standing in front of? How is it we need to be in order to step through that gateless gate? In my circumstance in Japan, it turned out I only had to stand there for about an hour. I have no idea why. I never asked. Then they came out

and asked me a question, kind of a Dharma question, to see how I would do. Maybe because I was a foreigner, maybe they didn't expect much from me or something. It was a relatively easy question. Then I was invited into the monastery to practice there.

This gateless gate, this gate that we stand in front of—one way of understanding it for our practice of *sati*, mindfulness, of awareness, is that we're always standing in the middle of a gateless gate. The gateless gate is the great gate that we stand in the middle of. It's wide open. Our awareness, capacity to know, to sense, to feel, to be present here—the present moment when we're conscious of it, fully conscious of here—that is the gate. We'll only be let in when we are in harmony with that gate. We'll only be let through when we adjust ourselves in such a way that we are attuned, that we show up—not complaining, not protesting, not demanding, not collapsing, not arguing the case that we should be let in, not getting distracted and wandering off.

We need to be here at this gateless gate with sincerity, presence here. At some point, we'll be invited in. Invited in where? Through the gate of the present moment. To here. In a certain way, where we've always been, but in another way that we have never known. So here we are, always at the gateless gate. How do we attune ourselves? How do we show up so the present moment invites us in?

So, to assume a meditation posture and to gently close your eyes. There's a way of being here, showing up here, being established here. Take a few long, slow, deep breaths as you exhale, to settle into here. This is the place to become attuned to the present moment. Here is where you stand in front of the gate. As you exhale, feel the stability of whatever chair, cushion, floor, mattress is holding you up, taking some gently fuller breaths.

On the exhale, relaxing the shoulders. On the exhale, softening the belly, letting your breathing return to normal. As you exhale, soften the muscles of your face. Relax tension. Tension of wanting. Tension of worry. The tension of aversion and not wanting. Softening around the eyes, the jaws, maybe letting the teeth fall away from each other slightly.

As you inhale, feel the thinking mind—the pressure, the tension, the agitation of the thinking muscle. Feeling it on the inhale, softening the thinking mind on the exhale. Feeling the thinking mind on the inhale. Imagine that the thinking mind expands and opens into space as you exhale. As you exhale, feeling your whole—as you inhale, feel your whole body. As you exhale, imagine that your whole body opens up wide into the space around you. A 360 degree awareness of the present moment, all that's here in all directions, and you sitting in the middle of it, open, available, available to be invited in, sitting at the gate of the present moment, content to be aware, content to be aware and available for how the present moment invites

you into knowing it.

If you're fully here at the gate of this present moment, you'll be invited in to a different future, depending on how fully you're in harmony, at ease, present to the vastness of this gate. To the degree that you're a little calmer or settled than you were before, can you now open your awareness to the vastness of the present moment? It's almost like opening up to the vastness of space, or the vastness of whatever feels like stillness here, or the vastness of silence between and around the sounds. Here the gateless gate, here we stand. What would it mean to be here in harmony with all things, to be in alignment with the river of time as it runs through the gateless gate?

As we come to the end of this sitting, everything that arises, everything that comes our way in this vast, gateless gate of the present moment, is something to be in harmony with, to be aligned with, in a particular way, and that is to meet it with friendliness and goodwill, meet it with generosity and a willingness to create a wholesome future, a good future, by the care and the friendliness we offer. May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be free. And may each of us be available to be friendly and supportive of all beings everywhere, perhaps one at a time. Thank you.