

Contemplative Reading

Contemplative reading is the term I am using to refer to the quiet reading of spiritual writings as a part of our Buddhist practice. In this reading we open our hearts to the wisdom and teaching of our Master Shakyamuni Buddha and all the Ancestors down the centuries. It is not done for amusement, entertainment, distraction, or information. We read with the mind and heart of meditation, thus preparing and maintaining a pure receptacle for receiving the teaching, free of personal opinions, ideas, and emotions. The state of our heart/mind then matches that of the person who gave the teaching. Great Master Dogen presents in the *Gyakudo-yojinshu* (*Aspects of Zazen*) the way to listen to a Zen master, and his words provide useful instruction for contemplative reading of Dharma:

Before asking for the Truth from a master, you must make your body and mind pure and quieten your perceptions so that both eyes and ears perceive and hear in peace; simply listen to the teaching and do not allow it to be soiled by your own thoughts: your body and mind must be at one with each other as water is poured from one bowl to another.

Quality, in the sense of meditative mind, not quantity of words read, is the aim in contemplative reading. In the monastery as novice monks, we were usually given about half an hour for this “spiritual reading” each day. Other Zen and Tibetan meditation masters also recommend this amount of time, because they recognize the value of reading a few words with the heart and then get about doing our daily life practice of converting karma of body, speech, and mind. Without practice, both formal in seated meditation and informal in activity, the teachings do not ripen. In contemplative reading, as with scripture recitation, we are planting seeds that our experience will bring to germination and fruition when all conditions ripen. In Serene Reflection/Soto Zen, we emphasize allowing our understanding to grow naturally – and we put great effort into the practice that brings about an “understanding.” In fact, though, each of us has always understood, and we have to practice to reestablish the primacy of the Buddha nature in our life – body, mind, and heart.

Most spiritual traditions recommend that contemplative reading be done aloud, quietly of course so that you don't disturb others. A geometrical progression in value occurs when we engage our lips and ears in addition to our eyes and mind. In this day of quick reads and internet, it's all the more important to learn to slow down when we approach spiritual writings. Benedictine monastics call this practice *lectio divina*; it's considered non-liturgical prayer. They read the same kind of writings as we do in our tradition: scriptures and commentaries. Reading writings aloud also helps to memorize these works, if not entirely, at least to have the sense of them imprinted deeply in our minds and hearts. Lastly, many Buddhist writings lend themselves to reading aloud because they were originally orally transmitted scriptures, often in verse, or Dharma talks given by a Master – they were intended to be heard.

We have many other practices that can help enhance our mind's recognition of the value of spiritual writings. Many are outlined in Rev. Master Jiyu's commentary in *Roar of the Tigress, Volume 2, on Dogen's Kankin, "How to Read the Scriptures."* The most important attitude is that of care and respect, love, for these are the second refuge of the Three Treasures. A few practices that are particularly helpful are: Don't leave scriptures where they are likely to be sat or stepped upon. Place them where other books or magazines won't cover them up, preferably on a high shelf designated for that purpose. The shelf essentially becomes an altar, and offering incense before reading helps foster a receptive mind for reading the teachings. Try to keep writings clean and in good repair; wash your hands before handling them; and don't read while eating. Establish a respectful position of body for reading these writings, and if possible, hold them in "book gassho" – hold the book in front of one, with the thumb and little finger of both hands on the inside of the book opened to where you're reading (the little fingers touch), and the three middle fingers of both hands supporting the book on the outside covers. Make sure religious writings do not fall into the hands of those who might not respect them. If you do not wish to keep a book, give it to a friend, a temple, or a library.

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Rev. Master Jiyu's commentary on *Kinkin* is recommended for a fuller presentation of this topic. Quote from Dogen in paragraph 1 was translated by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett in *Zen is Eternal Life*.