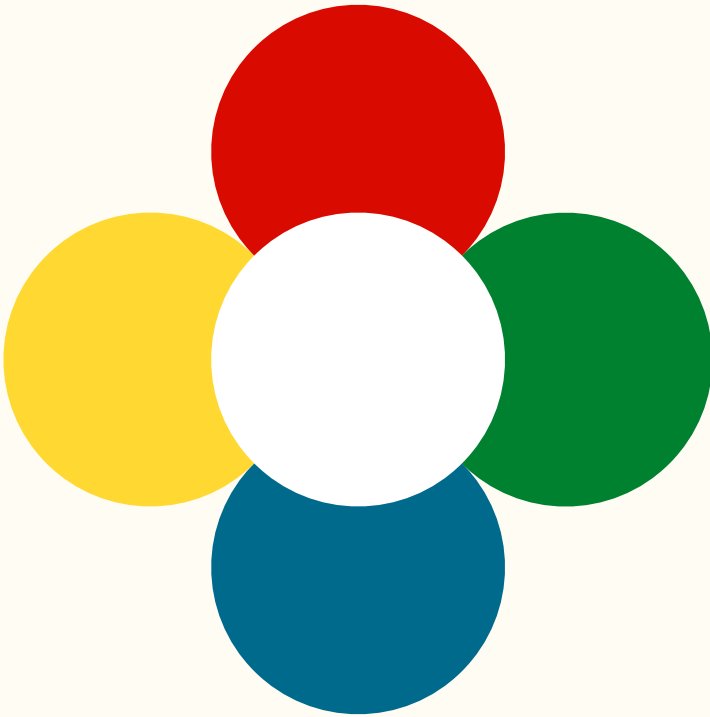


Five Colors Zen



**Paths to and from
Edel Maex**

Dedicated to my dear Zen teacher Ton Lathouwers

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Everything in this text may be shared, provided that reference is made to the author.

The five Buddha families, each with their own color, are an ancient Buddhist metaphor that has always been in the background of Zen.

They also form the basic pattern of the Borobudur in Indonesia. Mahakaruna Chan came to Europe from China via Indonesia. This creates a special bond.

We use this metaphor here to reflect on the relationship between our meditation practice and our daily lives.

A path to silence

Quest

As a child, I was a very religious boy. At the age of eight, like all children my age, I learned that Santa Claus did not really exist, but God did. And then I reached an age when I could no longer believe that either. I renounced all faith. And yet there was something missing.

A loss that I couldn't quite put my finger on. What I was missing was certainly not the God I had once believed in, nor the laws and truths. I found some of what I was missing in poetry and music, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I searched and didn't find.

Until one day, in my search, I stumbled upon a Zen group in Leuven, led by Ton Lathouwers. There I found what I had been missing all along. I still didn't have words for it, but I did have a practice: meditation.

Meditation

Meditation is very simple. It is just sitting down and bringing your attention on what is there.

What you hear you hear, what you see you see, what you feel you feel, what you think, you think. What is there, is there.

Don't hold on to anything and don't hold anything back.

You cannot do it right or wrong. You cannot learn it or progress in it. What is there can be different at any moment.

Knowledge and experience are irrelevant here. In that sense, there can be no teachers or masters. No one is an authority on what is here and now.

Words

At first, I didn't want to know anything about Zen and Buddhism. I really didn't need a new religion. I had my meditation practice. That was enough.

Zen presents itself as a wordless transmission from heart to heart. That's very beautiful, but people also communicate with language. Eventually, I started reading more about it. That's how I discovered a world of words.

It is Bodhidharma's 'vast open space', Huineng's 'original mind', Dogen's 'just sitting', Suzuki's 'beginner's mind'. It is the 'being mode' and the 'kind open awareness' of mindfulness. Different words and expressions for the same simple movement: stopping and looking.

Immediately

Words can clarify, and words can lead to misunderstandings. That is frustrating, but there is no way around it. The same applies to forms, which can help, or come to the fore in such a way that they draw all attention to themselves.

What appeals to me so much about Zen is its immediacy. To quote Huangbo: "You can choose a long path of ten stages, but you will end up in the same place as if you did it right now. So don't waste your time."

This is not an exhortation to work hard to achieve something. That would be a waste of time. There is nothing to achieve. But you can choose to stop and look right now.

The meditation instruction is crystal clear, without paradoxes. It is not a special state. It is not a mystical experience. You just do it.

Must

Why should I meditate? Well, the good news is: you don't have to.

I have never felt obligated. What would be the point of being forced to do something you don't want to do? And it would make no sense at all to be forced to do something you want to do. That would be like forcing a child to play. It would take all the fun out of it.

So meditation only makes sense if it touches you, if it resonates with something inside you. Even if it's just enough to give it a try out of curiosity.

My experience, especially from teaching mindfulness to so many groups, is that more people than I ever expected are touched by it. But it has to be the right moment, and in a form that suits you. For many, including myself, the right moment turned out to be when you hit a wall. At that moment, you wish you had learned about it sooner. And mindfulness turned out to be a good form for many people.

The middle way

No illusion

How long does a person live? One possible answer to this question is: a person lives only for one moment, and that moment is now. Everything else is just a narrative.

In meditation, we see everything that presents itself as what is happening now. If you read some Buddhist texts, especially ancient Zen texts, you might get the impression that everything else is an illusion.

But the narrative is also important. If I were to wander through the city, convinced that everything is an illusion, I would never find my way back home. I would be picked up and admitted to a psychiatric ward.

We sometimes call the narrative conventional reality. Conventional in the sense that we have agreed on it together.

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The foot in front and the foot behind

In Buddhism, you will find many different words to describe this tension. Sometimes lofty terms are used, such as 'absolute reality' or 'ultimate truth'. This often leads to misunderstandings.

Ultimately, there is only one reality, and that is this here now. And there is only one truth, namely that we can relate to that one reality in two ways. In mindfulness, we call these two ways doing mode and being mode. We can also call it 'open presence', as in meditation, and 'conventional reality', which I need when I want to find my way home.

An old Zen metaphor is: "It's like the front and back feet when walking." We need both, and they naturally alternate.

In Buddhism, we call this the middle way. Clinging to either extreme is unsustainable. So it's not either/or. Neither is higher or deeper than the other.

Silence

Language is also a convention. Words have the meaning we have agreed upon. It also makes it possible to represent things that are not here at this moment, are no longer here, or are not yet here. This allows us to make plans for the future and learn lessons from the past.

In this way, language creates a virtual reality that allows us to organize our world. It is an incredibly powerful tool. Humanity would be inconceivable without it. It only becomes a problem when we think that this reality is the reality.

That is why we sit in silence. Not to stop thinking, because we will never lose that. But we leave thoughts and words for what they are, no different from sounds and other sensory impressions.

That is 'beginner's mind'. We leave our organized virtual reality for what it is and return to an open world of endless possibilities.

Mahakaruna

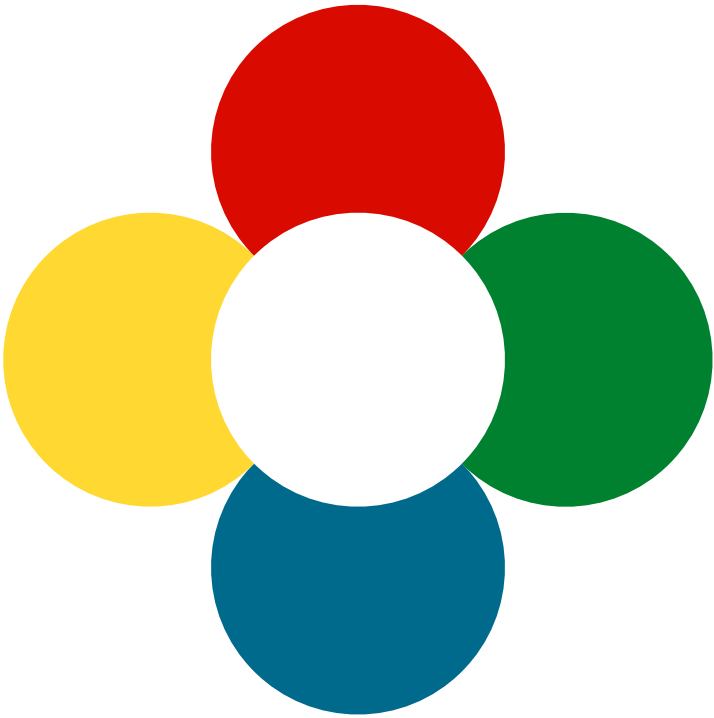
This gives us a great responsibility. If the virtual reality of language is not the reality, then new possibilities open up. Zen and Buddhism are not only about meditation but also about how we move within conventional reality.

The focus of meditation is a kind, open awareness. It is open because it excludes nothing. And it is kind because it excludes nothing. Compassion begins there. But meditation would be futile if that compassion were not expressed in our daily lives.

In our Zen tradition, we sing: "Great compassion is the essence of meditation. Without this great heart of love and compassion, meditation, however sublime it may be in other respects, is of no value whatsoever."

That is why the Zen tradition we have inherited from Ton Lathouwers is called 'Mahakaruna Chan'. Chan is the Chinese pronunciation of Zen. Mahakaruna means great compassion.

Paths to the world



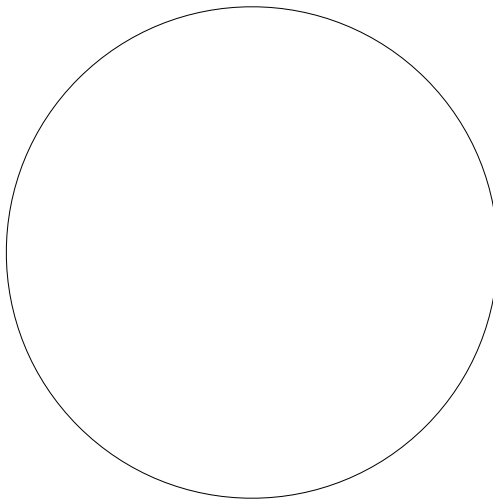
Five Buddha families

The mandala of the five Buddha families is a useful metaphor to give that compassion more substance. The five families represent choices for dealing with the world.

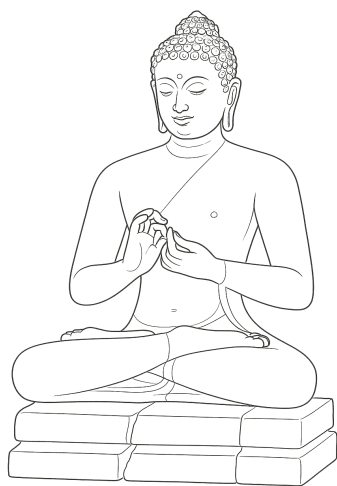
The family in the middle is that of white light. Like in a prism, it breaks down into four colors. Each color is an aspect of the white light and also refers back to it.

In early Buddhism, the Buddha is a historical figure. In later Buddhism, the Mahayana, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are mythological figures. I call them the superheroes of Buddhism. They possess qualities that we all have within us, but in super form. This sets an example and, at the same time, acknowledges that we are not superheroes ourselves.

Vairocana



The Buddha in the white circle in the center is Vairocana. His name means all-pervading light. The light of Vairocana permeates the entire cosmos.



The willingness to look

Doing and being can never be completely separated. Meditation is stopping doing and looking. But sitting down on your meditation cushion is doing something. And looking is a conscious choice.

The willingness to look is enough. That is the choice of the white circle. No one can make that choice for you, and no one can force it on you. It is inalienably your choice.

We have many ways of not looking. We can intoxicate ourselves with alcohol or other drugs. But also in a figurative sense: by never stopping, by constantly carrying on. This narrows our view and we shut ourselves away in a narrow cocoon.

Meditation is choosing a kind, open awareness in which we exclude nothing. Even when difficult things come our way, we remain seated. That is not an obvious choice.

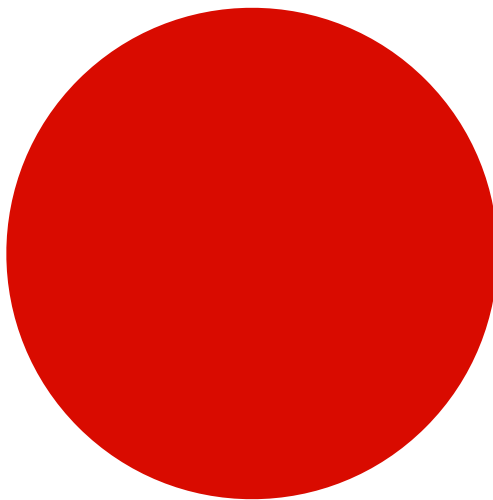
Groundlessness

If you look with an open mind, you will notice a multitude of impressions, thoughts, and feelings coming and going... Everything that arises is impermanent, temporary... there is no fixed point to be found anywhere. There is no solid ground to stand on. The Buddha was not the only one to discover this. The philosopher Descartes described it as a whirlpool that threatened to swallow him up.

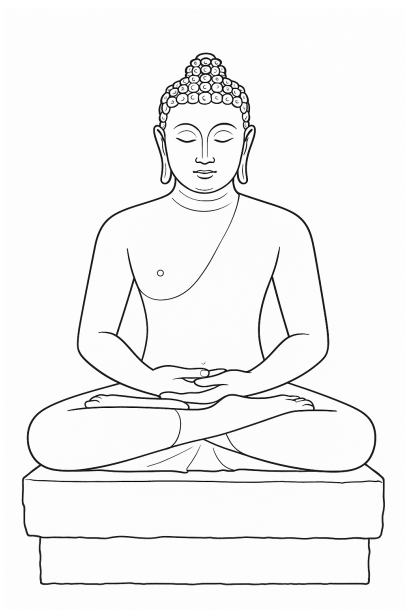
The Buddha is the only one I know who does not desperately try to assume a firm ground. For the Buddha, uncertainty and groundlessness are the self-evident starting point of existence.

Certainty is something we create in conventional reality, but it is always temporary and impermanent. Shunryu Suzuki expresses it very vividly: "life is like setting sail on a ship that you know will perish at sea". The question is not how we can escape this fate. The question is what we do in the meantime. How can we live a good and meaningful life now that the ship is sailing?

Amitabha



The Buddha of the red circle in the west is Amitabha, the immeasurable light. His mudra is his hands in his lap, as in meditation. He is the Buddha of boundless compassion.



The willingness to give love

When you listen to love songs on the radio, almost all of them are about wanting to have someone: "I want you..." Actually, we should have two different words for love. The red circle is about giving love, about compassion, about caring for every being that crosses our path. The choice here is between grasping for love and giving love.

Not that there's anything wrong with passion and desire, but do I see the other person purely as an object of my desire, or do I recognize the other as an autonomous being with its own right to exist? That is the most important choice we have to make time and again, face to face with every sentient being that crosses our path. And, importantly, that includes yourself.

In Zen, we recite the bodhisattva vow: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them." It doesn't have to be your vow, it is the bodhisattva's vow. But perhaps it strikes a chord with you somewhere.

The name of the Buddha

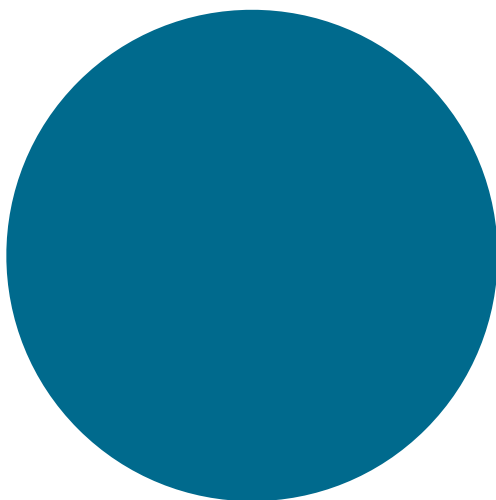
In some traditions, including Chinese Zen, the name of Amitabha Buddha is recited as a mantra. For me, it is a beautiful way to keep compassion in mind and reconnect with it at any moment.

Compassion is the basis of all human coexistence. It is our nature. Where compassion disappears, coexistence also ceases. Just look at the horror of wars and genocides.

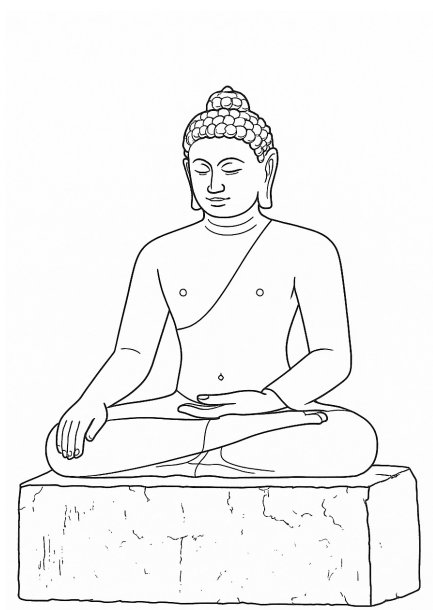
You could call compassion a universal antidote to suffering. If we stay in touch with our natural compassion, much suffering can be prevented. And even if the cause of suffering cannot be removed, compassion for each other and for ourselves is still the only meaningful response.

Namo Amitufo

Akshobhya



The Buddha of the blue circle in the east is Akshobhya, the unshakeable one. He touches the ground with his hand. He is the Buddha of mirror-like wisdom.



Reactivity

Akshobhya means unshakeable. He touches the ground and remains seated. He does not allow himself to get carried away. He retains his freedom of choice.

In early Buddhism, this is referred to as the victory over Mara. Mara is the personification of everything our mind wants to grasp and push away. In various stories and legends, Mara challenges the Buddha. Mara tempts him with riches and power, tries to make him doubt himself, sends monsters and demons after him, and his beautiful daughters who try to seduce him.

But the Buddha touches the ground and remains seated. He reclaims his freedom. Eventually, Mara withdraws in disappointment. The victory is not that he destroys Mara. Mara often returns. The victory is that the Buddha does not allow himself to be entrapped and reclaims his freedom, time and time again.

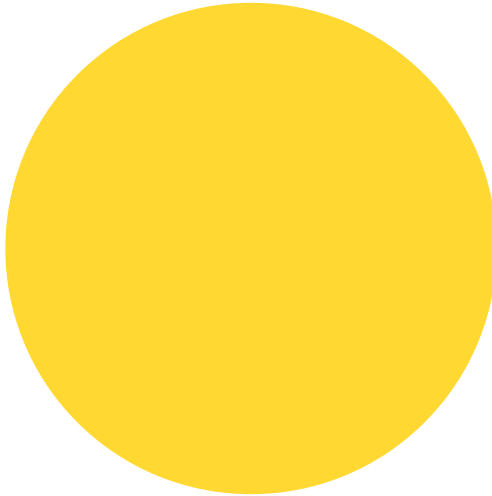
The willingness to understand

Akshobhya's wisdom is described as mirror-like wisdom. In modern language, Akshobhya could be translated as the one who rejects polarization. That has become very difficult in this world. You are either for or against. Nuance is not appreciated. If you are not for something, you are automatically labeled as against it.

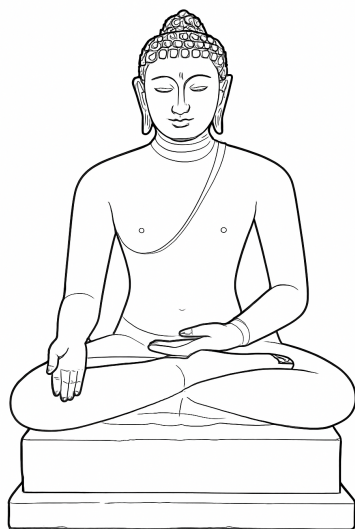
Akshobhya touches the ground, remains sitting, and looks. He does not allow himself to be carried away by an opinion. He does not allow himself to be carried away by us-them thinking. He tries to understand what is going on. Understanding is not synonymous with approval. Some things must be condemned in no uncertain terms, but not without trying to understand how they came about. And condemnation alone solves little or nothing. It requires honest and open attention to see what I can do in this place, however limited.

Our Zen practice is not detached from the world. Our meditation practice invites us to engage with the world with wisdom and compassion. Without that, it is of no value.

Ratnasambhava



The Buddha of the yellow circle in the south is Ratnasambhava, born from a jewel. He is the Buddha of immeasurable wealth. His mudra is an open hand that gives.



The willingness to share

The yellow circle is about how we deal with what is valuable. This can be material, such as money and other resources, but also immaterial, such as our skills and what we create. The choice is between 'keeping everything for myself' or 'sharing what I have'.

Living together is impossible without sharing. We live together, we eat together. We share our joys and our sorrows.

Again, no one is saying that you should just give everything away. It's about being aware of your choices. But it is an old wisdom that you don't get happiness from what you get, but from what you give.

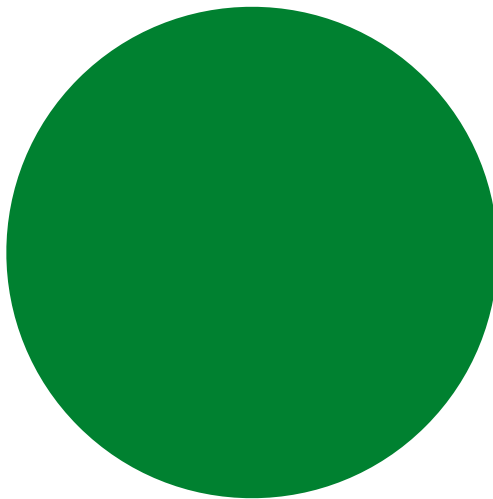
Half a dipper

Near Dogen's monastery, it is said, there is a small bridge called Half Dipper Bridge. Whenever Dogen took water from the river, he drank half a dipper and gave the rest back to the river.

Let's place this story in the context of today's climate issues. If we think in a goal-oriented way, what Dogen does is absurd. The effect on nature or the climate is zero. But it's about the intention. In goal-oriented action, we risk losing sight of our intention. Then the end justifies the means.

The unspoken intention is to share, in harmony with the river, nature, and the earth. What would be the effect on the climate if we all cultivated that intention? If we took no more than what was needed and shared the rest? The effect would be enormous. Perhaps that is the only thing that can save us from a major catastrophe.

Amoghasiddhi



The Buddha of the green circle in the north is Amoghasiddhi, the unstoppable strength. His mudra is a gesture of "have no fear." He is the Buddha of boundless commitment.



The willingness to commit

The green circle is about our commitment. Are we committed solely to our own interests or to the well-being of ourselves and others? What are we going for? What gives our lives meaning?

Meaning is not found in achieving a goal. Achieving something is always time-bound and temporary. How often have we been happy when we achieved something? And how often have we been unhappy and disappointed when something didn't work out?

Meaning is not about the goal but about the direction. The intention with which we live is not time-bound. It is there in every moment. At least, it can be there in every moment. In that intention there is a timeless happiness that is not dependent on anything.

Courage

The hand gesture of the Buddha of the green family is the abhaya mudra. Have no fear. That is not self-evident.

Being true to our intentions can put us in difficult, even dangerous situations. The choices can be difficult. It is easy to say what someone else should do in a given situation. We have to make our own choices, in every moment.

But perhaps Amoghasiddhi and his gesture can help us to maintain our integrity in some difficult moments.

An endless path

Choice

What choices do you have, and what are the consequences of those choices? Meditation, taking a step back and looking at things, broadens your perspective and reveals possibilities.

You could call our mandala a moral compass, with the understanding that a compass does not tell you where to go but helps you orient yourself. We easily use the expression 'moral compass' to say that someone doesn't have one. But this compass is primarily intended for yourself, not to judge others.

It is not an ethic of "you shall" and "you shall not," but of being aware of choices and the consequences of those choices.

That is not easy. Our meditation practice helps us to remain present and not get carried away by our reactions. In this way, we retain our freedom of choice. Perhaps "must" and "must not" are much easier. If you prefer that, there are plenty of systems that work that way. So you can choose that too, but that too is still your choice.

Bowing to

In Buddhism, including Zen, there is a lot of bowing. But it is not an act of submission but of acknowledging.

Ultimately, all those images, of the five Buddha families and the countless other Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Buddhism, are personifications of aspects of ourselves.

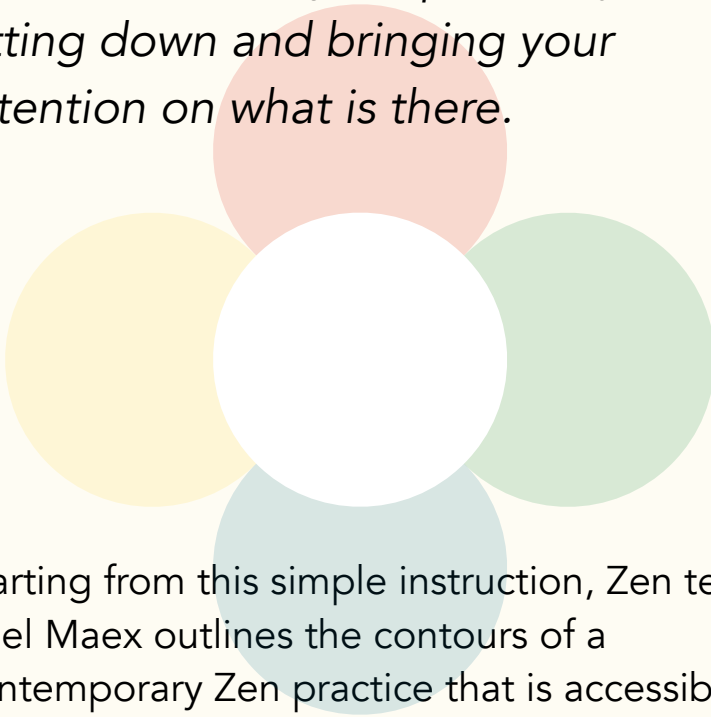
In bowing, in singing, in saying the name, in sitting in meditation, we connect with them.

That is why we bow to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas in all times and all spaces.

And in the acknowledging that each of us is a Buddha, a bodhisattva..



Meditation is very simple. It is just sitting down and bringing your attention on what is there.



Starting from this simple instruction, Zen teacher Edel Maex outlines the contours of a contemporary Zen practice that is accessible, open, and engaged with the world.