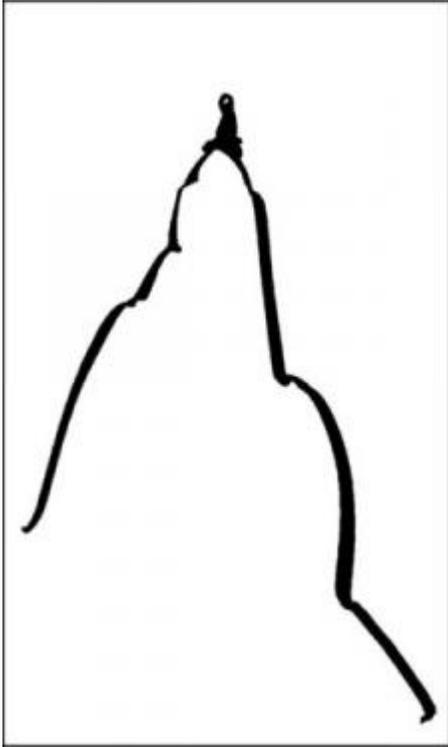


# The Point of the Posture And What It Points To

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei  
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What is the point of the posture of zazen?  
To learn to open past what you think of as “you”;  
To learn to step past all of the states you believe yourself to be  
Into who and what you truly are,  
Awareness in Itself.

What does the posture point to?  
The posture points to Awareness in Itself.  
Why don’t you already know this?  
You do. But you choose to ignore it.

The Hatto is filled with students this morning and we all sit in the posture of zazen. It is very quiet in the room, with students sitting facing the wall, balanced and aligned, without moving.

That is how it looks, but that’s not all that’s going on. It seems very quiet, but I know that there are actually many storylines being spun even as I speak. Some of you are having conversations with yourselves about what I am saying and so you cannot even hear what I am saying.

There is an appearance of balance and alignment, but some of you are already uncomfortable even though you’ve only been sitting for a few minutes.

And so although it may seem quite still in the room, there are already some subtle and not so subtle

movements going on here and there – someone rocking very slightly; toes flex, a foot shuffles just a little, a small shift of the head – subtle callisthenics to relieve perceived tension in the neck. Some of us understand the importance of simply sitting still. Others who have not been practicing for quite as long are not as clear about this. In ten or fifteen minutes the little “corrections” going on around the room will become more and more obvious as students begin to argue with themselves about how their posture “should” be.

Now we might think that these little movements – the shuffling of a foot a slight rocking motion or the continuous movements generated by arguing with oneself over one’s posture are okay because we are sitting and we’re just “trying to get it right” or some such thing, but they’re not okay. As our Teacher, Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi often says “If you move while sitting zazen, you simply haven’t sat. You’ve just been sitting around instead of practising a round of zazen.”

One of the most important things that we are practising when we sit is the posture itself. The posture of zazen lets the body sit as the body itself instead of holding it captive to our usual states, thoughts, feelings and storylines. Ordinarily, when we experience a state of sadness or anger or confusion, whether alone or with other people, we act it out with the body by doing such things as physically tightening, allowing the spine to collapse, sighing, fidgeting, grimacing, rocking, shifting, twitching, pursing the lips, clenching the teeth or going slack-jawed, narrowing the eyes, twiddling our thumbs and on and on and on. A thought, a feeling, even the memory of something that happened 30 minutes or 30 years ago can express itself bodily and when we do this what we are doing is reinforcing the state.

When we sit in zazen, what the posture points to is not what you ordinarily think of as “you”, which is a collection of habits and tendencies. In fact, your whole life points to the fact that it is not about you and never has been. The posture of zazen is very simple and very clear. The point of the posture is to sit in the reality of this moment. The posture points to the open space of reality all around and within and as the bodymind.

Let’s start at the very beginning, the beginning of the sitting round. You have a minute or so to arrange your posture and you must do this mindfully because you cannot “fix” it later. Once everyone is settled and the room is quiet, we begin the sitting round with the set of forms all students are instructed to use: We bow forward and exhale; we straighten and inhale; we settle into balance point.

Everything is positioned as well as you can position it. You are sitting up straight, nose over the navel, ears over the shoulders, balanced and aligned. Your hands are resting in the mudra, with all of the fingers in full contact with one another, the thumbs forming a gentle arch.

Now stay like that.

No movement for the next 30 minutes: No fidgeting, no fixing anything, no changing posture. Sit still. If you don’t move out of alignment, there’s nothing to fix, no corrections to be made.

Anything, any thought, any feeling, any impulse, any idea, any movement of attention, any reactivity that causes you to begin to move at all needs to be noticed and released immediately. The only way that you can do that is if you are feeling into the sensations of the body from the beginning of your sitting round, and moment after moment, doing this continuously for the next 30 minutes. This means you will need to refresh your practice again and again and again and again. It means that you have to actually pay attention with each breath. This is what practice is – continuous mindfulness of whole-bodily experience,

opening to the seeing and hearing. This is not the time to think about anything, let alone think about how you feel about anything. It requires that you make an effort to open past thoughts and feeling tones.

An occasional adjustment to the posture such as straightening the spine a little or realigning the mudra is acceptable, but this shouldn't be necessary more than two or three times during a half-hour sitting round even if you are very tired. Again, if you are continuously feeling into the sensations of the body, releasing any states, thoughts or feelings that begin to pull the bodymind out of alignment as soon as they come up, you won't go out of alignment in the first place, so there is no need to constantly adjust your posture.

The 18th case of the Hekiganroku or Blue Cliff Records says,

*A monk asked Xianglin, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?"*

*Xianglin said, "Sitting for a long time, becoming tired."*

The meaning of the Ancestor's coming from the west is a traditional phrase that refers to the Transmission of the practice of the realization of the Dharma. Why did Bodhidharma travel all of the way from India to China? In order to transmit the Dharma. So the question really asks, "What is the essence of the Dharma?" Master Xianglin is saying that the essence of the Dharma is to be found in zazen, in, "Sitting for a long time" even when tired.

There is a difference between being genuinely physically exhausted and allowing oneself to fall into sinking mind. For the most part what students experience is not physical exhaustion, it is just sinking mind. How do I know this? Because I have observed students glazing, allowing their posture to collapse and so forth. And then have found that when I see them in a hallway no more than two or three minutes following a sitting, they are all chipper, walking normally, smiling brightly, not displaying the least sign of the supposedly mind-numbing exhaustion they were commiserating with themselves about only minutes before.

Sinking mind is not limited to states of fatigue, of course. It is a passivity that causes us to internalize attention. We become passive, when we stop paying attention to the fact that that we are sitting and instead turn attention to what Eihei Dogen zenji described as our "circles of self-concern". We have turned away from the vividness of experiencing by propagating the very states we should be opening around if we want to Wake Up.

When we are following a train of thought, we are not choosing. We are following compulsion. Only choosing to open is an actual choice.

Right now we can make the choice to open by practicing the posture and by paying attention to what the posture is pointing to. As I speak, we sit in posture in the Hatto or Dharma Hall of the monastery. The room is warm, clean and spacious and everything about it supports us in our efforts to practice clearly. We have no justification for wasting this opportunity to practice.

We are most fortunate to be able to sit in these conditions. In other places around the world there are practitioners who presently sit in much less favourable conditions. In the past, countless students have sat in conditions that we would find untenable, but they did sit. And it is because they did that the Teachings we receive in this time and place are available to any who would make space in their lives for them.

Our own Teacher, Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi himself sat in conditions that we would find unimaginably difficult when he was training as a student of our grandfather in Dharma, Joshu Dainen Hakukaze Daiosho. Anzan Hoshin roshi and the students who trained alongside him sat in an unheated barn known as “the Barndo” at Hakukaze-ji, the monastery Joshu Dainen roshi established on a piece of farmland in Southern Ontario. It was bitterly cold in the winter, and the wind whipped through the spaces between the boards. In the summer the heat of the sun made the stench of mouse urine and similar ingredients “so strong your eyes would sting” as Roshi has said.

One of the people who trained with Anzan Hoshin roshi, who was also a student of Joshu Dainen roshi, was a monk named “Endon”. Recently Endon recounted a story about sitting at Hakukaze-ji in some correspondence with me, which he gave me permission to read to you. Endon wrote about Joshu Dainen roshi,

*I was feeling very sad, cold, and lonely one day (well, not just the one day but on this day). Roshi was doing jundo (making the round in the Barndo during gyotan when we're sitting facing outwards and all come to gassho as he passes). As he approached I came to gassho. Roshi stopped in front of me, turned, and stood there for a while.*

*Then he yelled, “You have strength to lift arms. Lucky. For now. One day, no strength. Then dead.” After a pause he said, “You understand?”*

*I said “Yes”.*

*He said, “No. Dead. You know ‘dead’? Dead.”*

*I said, “I know.”*

*He said, “You don't know. But you will.”*

*I said “Yes”.*

*He said, “I am cheering you up. Are you happier?”*

*I said “Yes”.*

*Roshi said, “No. But, happy or sad, alive or dead, if you can lift arms you can wake up and be Buddha, neh?”*

*I said “Yes”.*

*He said, “You don't understand.” Then he came very close to me and said softly, “I mean it. You have strength. Can lift arms. Can sit. Not fall over. Lucky for now. Wake up.”*

*Then he continued the jundo.*

For now, we are lucky. We have the strength to lift our arms, to sit up straight, and to pay attention to our lives as they really are. Which includes all kinds of things we would rather avoid but will never be able to: illness, aging and decay, pain, death. We are lucky, for now, because we now have the opportunity to practise reality through zazen and the continuous practice of mindfulness provided by the forms and the

practice environment. We have access to Teachers and practice advisors and a nice white wall to sit in front of.

But because our attention tends to be so heavy-handed we can easily poison the vividness and richness of our own experience through discursiveness. When we become lost in internalized imagery, and sink into wave after wave of feeling tones the body tends to be pulled forward, to collapse, to harden. But we have forms for working with these things so that we can release the coarse effects of our slumping with body and mind. The posture itself is a form which continuously points to and opens into the natural dignity and clarity and ease of the structure and capacities of bodymind. Practising the posture, we attend to the whole moment using the breath as a touchstone. We touch the breath and then use it to open to what is arising all around us.

Right now and throughout this Dharma Assembly, let us use the time we have to practice the posture and make ourselves available to what the posture is pointing to: that each and every sensation and sound and colour and form and experience is the Radiance of the Luminosity of Knowing in Itself.

Nothing we think or feel is more important than reality.

Have a good morning.