

Practice, Pain, and Posture

from the Series: Bodymind of the Way:
Zen Master Anzan Hoshin's Commentaries
on Eihei Dogen zenji's "Shinjin Gakudo"
Rohatsu 1988 Sesshin, December 1st
Evening Comments

At the end of this morning's sitting I mentioned that if during the seven day training session one's practice were consumed by pain and frustration to the point that one could not practice the posture, then one could move one's legs. To do this, one would come to gassho, but without inhaling deeply. Make only a slight gassho so as not to distract the attention of the rest of the Sangha and then shift the legs, perhaps to seiza position and then continue. One should do this no more than once in a round of sitting, and certainly not in every round of sitting. If you have to move more than once in a round of intensive practice, then perhaps you should take a different posture for the next few hours; perhaps you should do zazen in seiza or in the agura (Burmese) posture rather than a half-lotus or quarter or a full-lotus. If you cannot practice your posture, then find a posture that you can practice, rather than sitting in a particular way only because it looks or feels to you like the 'right' posture or because it looks or feels like a Buddhist 'posture'. Just sit.

The other thing about pain in the knees, pain in the back, pain in the thighs, pain in the neck, pain in the forehead and jaws; as we practice, we allow whatever is present to unfold itself- our confusion as well as our clarity. When we allow ourselves to come face to face with it, a lot of the tension that we hold in the body through the actions of the mind, through the moments of our life, through our days, manifest very clearly in our zazen posture, because our posture is one of practice, of aligning ourselves with the Way and practicing the body. And so tension does come up, pain does come up. Beyond that, sitting with one's legs crossed for many hours a day, naturally the legs will go to sleep. Naturally there will be pain in the ligaments and knees as they are stretched and folded.

And yet if we can allow ourselves to feel the pain without trying to 'relate' to it in any way, without thinking of it as being 'our' pain, something different happens. This is not a matter of discipline, this is not a matter of holding the posture in order to look good. Trying to escape from one's posture is exactly the same as trying to escape from our own suffering as a whole. When we open to what is present, when we feel what is present, if our legs hurt then our legs hurt.

When I practice my legs hurt, and I've been sitting for well over twenty years now - and my legs hurt. This is not a matter of discipline, this is a matter of compassion. When we can feel the pain and allow the pain to practice, just as we allow the breath to practice, just as we allow our confusion to practice, allow our clarity to practice - when we allow the pain in our legs to practice it is no longer pain. It is just alive sensation.

When our legs hurt, they just hurt. Through this pain, if you have to have any relationship to it at all, let that relationship be one of compassion. Through the pain in your body, begin to allow yourself to open to it so that you can understand the incredible pain of the beings throughout these six realms of existence. Through the pain in your legs understand the pain of a body dying of cancer. Understand the pain of anger, understand the pain of frustration, understand the pain of continually struggling and trying to escape where you are to get to some other situation in which things are going to be 'better'. Understand your own pain, and thus understand that of others. Understand how contracted and narrow our experience becomes when

we are living a pattern of avoidance. Allow the pain to practice. Don't avoid it. Don't indulge in it. Just simply feel it.

If you find the posture to be difficult, then sit in a different posture the next round. During this round, if you find the pain to be very difficult and you find yourself to be unable to allow the pain to practice, then simply and gently and compassionately come to gassho, become aware of what you are doing and shift the leg or move the back. Otherwise there should be no visible movement. In your practice of the posture you must realign yourself with the posture constantly. Finding and coming back to the balance point of the breath or the koan as the mind wanders into confusion or sinks into dullness, the posture is formed in similar ways. Recognizing the mind of sinking or wandering, one re-aligns oneself with the mind of the practice in this moment. In the same way, one realigns one's posture. And so therefore one might straighten the neck, drop the scapula, bring the mudra in closer to the belly. Other than that, there should be no visible movement.

The more truly that you practice the posture the more that you will understand shinjin gakudo, how to study the Way through bodymind, and the more that you will understand your own suffering and the suffering of beings. Understanding this, you will be able to open the heart of compassion, And in opening the heart of compassion, begin to open the heart of wisdom.

The more that you continue to practice, the more that you become sensitive to how the bodymind is in this moment, you will begin to find various phenomena arising. For example, waves of energy running and coursing through the body, through the mind. You might find a tight band of tension in the belly, and then suddenly it shifts into a flowering deep in the belly, deep in the heart. You will find the chest opening. You will feel the ribs cracking. You will find tension arising in the jaw and then opening, and then pressure on the cheeks and the forehead. And then this drops. Witness this display of bodymind. Study this bodymind most thoroughly because this is the practice. This is not a matter of some model of discipline, this is a matter of attention, this is a matter of compassion.

Again, technically, the more that you understand how intimately body and mind are related, the more that you will understand how the muscles, the bones, the marrow are intermeshed so that when there is a deep pain in the lower back or the upper back or the shoulders or the neck, you will find that through slightly moving perhaps the knuckle of the right thumb, the pain drops. That muscular contraction can slide away, not through shaking oneself or moving or shifting or squirming or wriggling, but through simply moving the thumb so slightly. The thigh is locked. Moving back the left shoulder, the thigh opens.

Please, attend to this bodymind, study this bodymind. Do not suffer, do not indulge. Simply practice as this bodymind.

I know that these might seem like many hours of practice to you and I understand that. And as I said this morning, I am deeply moved by the sincerity of each and every one of you. Yet still we must allow ourselves to become yet more sincere. We must come to the limits of our sincerity. We must come to the limits of our practice. We must come to the limits of that which we believe possible in terms of body, and in terms of mind in order to let go of all the terms, the 'deals' that we might make, in order to go past our compromises and become alive to our life. So please, practice this body, practice this mind, practice this posture, this breath, this moment, as sincerely as you possibly can.

This is not a self-help course. This is not a mythology. This is not a faith. The things that I say when I talk

about dropping body and mind, or when you hear Dogen zenji and Bodhidharma and the entirety of our lineage display and discuss their experience of the nature of things – is not simply metaphor. We are not kidding.

So please, practice most thoroughly, as thoroughly as you are able to. Understand yourselves most thoroughly. Do what you are able to do, and yet please, allow yourself to go past that limit.

Here in this Rohatsu training session, we celebrate and acknowledge the beginning of our lineage through the practice and realization of Sakyamuni Buddha. It is up to each and every one of you to renew this practice, to renew this lineage, to receive this Transmission, to understand and study this bodymind. To drop this bodymind and understand and actualize that which is living each and every one of you.

So please, do the best that you can, and enjoy yourselves.

* Recommended reading: Anmo Tuina for Zen Knees, from [Zammai 9-10 \(PDF download\)](#).