

Zazen

by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
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Good morning.

This morning, you walked to the Monastery door. And as you walked, rain drops fell one by one on your skin. If you were paying attention, you might have noticed the sensation as they fell down your cheek, down your forehead, off the end of your nose.

In the back garden, the rain drops are falling on the bright green blades of the lilies of the valley as these tender little shoots push their way up through the asphalt, and sit there in front of the red brick wall. Much like you're sitting here in front of the white wall of the Zendo.

Today's Dharma Talk, (a Dharma Talk is more informal than a teisho, and addresses more basic issues of practice) is "The Posture of Practice". And this basic posture of zazen is simple and elegant. It is simple in that there's nothing extra needed and it's elegant in that moment after moment we can carefully choose how we are.

"Zazen", Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says in "Four Gates of Zen Practice, A Beginner's Manual", "Zazen is the practice of attending to experience as it presents itself with and as the whole bodymind. While the mind may wander into thoughts of the past, interpretations of the present, and speculations concerning the future, the body is always right here and now. Thus, zazen begins with the body practising an upright and attentive posture."

As you are sitting, now, with eyes open, facing the wall, feeling the breath as the body moves in and out with this breath and this breath, are you feeling the fingers of the mudra, the dharmadhatu-mudra? Are you feeling the right hand resting with the wrist open against the right thigh? The fingers gently curved and cradling the left hand. The left wrist open, resting against the left thigh and the thumbs touching lightly and tenderly.

Are you feeling the left knee where it meets the zabuton? The right knee where it meets the zabuton? Your back side sitting on the zafu?

It is important that your posture be grounded which means that both knees, whether you are sitting in full lotus, half lotus, the Burmese or agura posture, or in seiza, and your backside are grounded so that a stable triangle is formed from which the spine can rise holding the head in the space of the Zendo.

We've spoken of the importance of the triangle of the base, the lower body, to ground and provide support for the rise of the upper body into lightness and balance point.

It can perhaps be useful to, without making a concept out of it, to think of another triangle the base of which is your two butt bones, the "sitz" bones, or ischial crests, and the top of which is somewhere above the top of your head so that as you breathe in and out, you are breathing up as it were, pushing that other triangle so it can rise into and as the space.

I've used the term balance point because the Roshi speaks of balance point.

Our practice seems to be unique in the use of this descriptive terminology for the phenomena of balance and lightness that occurs when the posture of bodymind in zazen is attended to in detail, yet openly.

Other texts that I have been reading which speak of the posture tend to describe the posture of the body almost as if, in some cases, we were trying to fit ourselves into what we see in rupa, the statues, or into ideas of what a good little Buddhist should look like.

Now, there's one text called, "Sitting, a Guide to Good Meditation Practice", which approaches the body in a slightly more realistic and slightly more intimate fashion. One of the comments is, and I quote:

"These days, physical posture and deportment are not especially fashionable topics. Although the benefits of fitness seem to be generally acknowledged, some of the subtler aspects of physical health could perhaps be appreciated more. One such aspect is the relationship between physical and mental health, on the one hand, and physical posture or its kinetic counterpart, deportment, on the other."

In the Shinjin Gatha, Song of the Bodymind composed by Zen Master Anzan Hoshin, this matter is clarified very quickly:

*"Body arises as mind.
Mind arises as body.
Right here, right now,
the Way attains itself."*

Bodymind is the whole way in which experience presents itself as who we are.

By attending to the posture of zazen, moment after moment, we are provided the opportunity to notice how we are and when we see that extras are present, when we notice that we are fixating on thoughts about experiencing, on thoughts about how the body is, on feelings about how we are and about how our life is, at that moment of noticing the fixation, we can simply practise, simply open to the breath presencing in the body. Simply return to balance point, and moment after moment, we are given this marvellous opportunity and very precise instructions as to what to do with body and mind, in this moment, and this moment, and this moment.

In "The Straight Path, Zen Teachings on the Foundations of Mindfulness", the Roshi says:

"It is best if you can sit in a very stable posture such as a full lotus, or a half lotus, or even a quarter lotus. In the full lotus, bring the feet so that the line of the toes is parallel with the outside line of the thighs. In the quarter lotus, just rest your foot on the calf."

If that is not possible, then you can use the Burmese or agura posture with the legs uncrossed but just folded before you with the knees touching the mat. Or, you can use the kneeling seiza posture. If you have difficulties with the back or some form of injury to the knees you can sit upright on a chair with your feet planted squarely and your back away from the backrest of the chair. The main thing is that the lower part of the body should be well grounded and the spine upright."

Allow the spine to rest itself in its own natural posture and bring everything into balance. The head rests

evenly on top of the neck, ears over the shoulders and the nose right over the navel, so that everything is straight. Feel the top of the head and allow the spine to lengthen. When you feel that the upper part of the body is straight and relaxed, lean back just a fraction of an inch. Feel as if the spine ended in a tail and that you could rest back on that. After a while, perhaps a few moments, or perhaps many years, you will find a point, called "balance point". When you sit in balance point, the upper part of the body feels so light it almost feels transparent, and the lower part of the body is very grounded.

The hands are placed palm up in the lap with the blades of the hands at the tanden. Rest the back of the right hand on the uppermost heel if you are sitting in full-lotus; if you are using the Burmese or seiza postures, rest the back of the wrists against the thighs, close to the body. Put the left hand atop the right so that the first knuckles of the left hand meet the back of those of the right. Let the thumbs touch lightly. So lightly that a piece of paper can slide in between them but not so far apart that they don't contact. Rest the thumbs lightly, don't arch them up or this will generate tension, don't let them fall or it will be easy to just drift around in you zazen. This is called the "hokkai-join" in Japanese or the "Dharmadhatu mudra" in Sanskrit, which means "the gesture of things as they are". Actually, it is a kind of steering wheel that will help to guide your practice.

A good zazen posture is one which helps you to see clearly. When you begin to become lost in a thought, you start to lean into it, and you can feel it as a quality of weight coming up. If you are tense, you will notice that the thumbs are pressing into each other. When you start to sink, or your attention becomes lax, or you get sleepy or drowsy, [OR YOU GET SLEEPY OR DROWSY-the O-sensei said in a louder voice to those who were sleepy and drowsy in the Hatto when the talk was given], then the posture tends to collapse, including the mudra, and you can also recognize that as a kind of weight. When you are tense you feel it as a kind of weight. Simply take the weight off and bring it back into the balance point."

The balance point can only be felt by you as you sit. It's very tender.

The bodymind is very open, there is a weightlessness, there is a transparency to experiencing and we have to be very careful because as soon as we notice, as soon as self-image notices this weightlessness it tries to grab on to it. It tries to make it into something. It tries to make it into someone sitting in a good zazen posture hoping that the Roshi or the practice advisors will notice how well we are doing. At that point, we can recognize we have moved into posturing. Not simply sitting in the elegance of balance point.

It is as tender as the breath. It is as tender as the raindrops on the skin. Anything extra tilts the balance. When the balance tilts, this is a point where in the noticing of the tilt, we can release what is extra by practising, by sitting up straight, feeling the breath, opening peripheral vision. We can then notice the return to balance point.

The Roshi has told the monks a story in which when he was studying with his teacher, Joshu Dainen roshi, Anzan Hoshin, Roshi gave a description of the body sitting in zazen, in balance point, to his teacher. Joshu roshi was very old at that time, and he exclaimed, *That's right. That's it exactly. It took me twenty years of sitting to discover that. But I've never had a way of talking about it. As with many things about practice, you're just suppose to find out.*

So we have it. We have this very vivid, precise instruction as to how to notice the details of the experiencing of bodymind moment to moment. To notice the toes and the heels and the ankles and the knees and the hips.

To notice the vertebrae. To notice the arching of the spine. To notice the skull, and the arms, and the fingers. To notice the pains as they come and go. To notice when the sensation of pain turns into the concept of pain with its attendant dire consequence stories. And, at the moment of noticing, we can simply choose the simple posture, the elegant posture of zazen.

I'll close with a quote that came from a conversation with Zen Master Anzan Hoshin about simplicity being simple elegance.

"Simplicity opens into richness. Simplification folds down into contraction."

Keep it simple!

Thank you for listening.