

NOTES ON ZAZEN

by Randal Daigu Pride

INTRODUCTION

In Zen we are advised to find a true teacher. Once we find a true teacher they tell us that zazen is the true teacher. Zazen, like the old southern USA folklore Br'er Rabbit's tar baby, doesn't say nuttin'—just sits there—and we get all balled up with it, wanting something from it, impatient, with busy brains and sore knees. Its intractable seat, the same saddle ridden by all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from the mists of time, miraculously, has been passed down to us intact via all those determined butts and dented cushions.

My first knowledge of Bodhidharma's staring at a wall for nine years of meditation came in a preface to a book of haiku, I think, that I picked up when buying my college freshman books at Auburn University in 1964. Since then, I've been drawn to this practice, at first by trying other kinds of meditation, then finding teacherless Zen friendly groups, then ultimately an actual Zen Center with a teacher. Needless to say, it hasn't been easy, and I'd be lying to say it now is a piece of cake. To be honest, I tried for too long to avoid the "finding the true teacher" part as I was intimidated by the formal rigor of Zen monastic practice—all those black robes and solemn countenances. It had been hard enough to free myself from the religion of my parents: rife with contradictions, hypocrisy, and judgmentalness. I just wanted to skip to dessert without eating my greens, so to speak. But after exhausting all those alternate-route attempts, like an ant trying to find the scent back to home base, I did eventually stumble upon the path with a true teacher in Rev. Teijo Munnich. So, if I can, anyone can.

How do you use language, which is inherently dualistic (i.e., subject vs object), to convey an experiential practice which is essentially non-dual? Our Soto Zen founder Eihei Dogen, on his return to Japan from China, wrote the "Fukanzazengi" (Universal Recommendation for Zazen) to begin that effort in earnest. He cited this reason:

People in Japan have not heard of the Shobo-genzo (Buddha Mind) which has been transmitted outside of the verbal teachings. Moreover, none have heard yet of the way to practice zazen. I came back to Japan from China in the third year of Karoku (1227). Then I wrote this Fukan-zazengi because one of my students asked me to teach the way of zazen.

Dogen translator and commenter Rev. Shohaku Okumura has suggested that the subsequent voluminous *Shobogenzo* compilation of Dogen's writings is an extended commentary on the "Fukanzazengi." In the short essay, Dogen breaks down his description of zazen itself into two essential elements: body and mind, or physical and mental. We'll look at them separately in this review, though, as will be evident, they are intimately intertwined.

UPRIGHT POSTURE

In the late 1960's, while standing at attention in the US Navy's boot camp in Charleston SC, one of our overly anxious recruits managed to fall, stiff as a board, flat on his face. He was so rigid he wasn't breathing adequately and passed out. Dogen does emphasize upright posture numerous times in the "Fukanzazengi" and other writings, but also reminds us to *breathe gently through the nose* and, echoing Nagarjuna, that zazen is the *dharma gate of joyful ease*. Both Alexander Technique teacher Meredith Myuon McIntosh and Rev. Issho Fujita, of the Soto Zen journal *Dharma Eye*, in issue #31, have illustrated this ease with a photo of a one year old baby sitting effortlessly upright on the floor in a natural relaxed posture.

As a result of millions of years of bipedal evolution, the human spine has four, anterior/posterior expressed, alternating convex/concave curves to insure stability in its uprightness. These are the topmost 7 cervical vertebrae that support the skull, the 12 thoracic vertebrae that anchor the ribs, the 5 weight bearing lumbar vertebrae, and the bottommost 9 sacrum-coccyx vertebrae (which are fused by the time of adulthood) that form the back of the pelvis.

So, when we say we are sitting upright, we are not saying the back is as straight as the proverbial ramrod—which that poor sailor must have had in mind. Most vertebrae have intermediated fibrous disks for cushioning and to facilitate flexible movement. Posterior to the column body in the vertebral arch are openings (foramen) for the spinal cord and blood vessels. A pair of spinal nerves also branch out into the body at each vertebral section. The spinal nerves are a mix of motor and sensory types—i.e., sensing the body’s position and making adjustments via the myriad ligaments, tendons, and muscles extending upward into our 10 pound head and downward and outward into our trunk and limbs. Some of that adjusting is unconsciously automatic via the cerebellum in conjunction with our ear’s vestibular balance mechanism; some is consciously applied when we become aware of our body again with mindful attention.

The thoracic and sacrum-coccyx vertebrae curves are already set in the womb, but the cervical curve develops after the baby lifts its head and sits up, and the lumbar curve develops after the baby begins walking. These more flexible and vulnerable areas of our spine are the most prone to misuse, injury, and disease. (*The four most common types of pain include: low back pain (28%), knee pain (19%), headache (16%), and neck pain (15%).*) They are also the two areas that are most likely to drift out of optimum position during zazen—the shoulders and the hands next in my experience. The back and neck in our modern economies are common chronic culprits in downtime at work from poor posture hunched in front of computers or improperly standing and lifting on the factory floor. We meditators too often replicate these poor posture habits on the cushion. The reason we sit on a cushion is to have the knees be lower than the pelvis’s pubic-ischium bones—our sit bones, the ones that contact the cushion. That opens the pelvis to be able to rock more easily forward and backward with the rib cage’s expansion and contraction during breathing, and also, for us to consciously do the same when we notice some discomfort in our back (i.e., the variable pelvic-tilt is the anchor affecting the rest of the spine’s alignment upwards through the lumbar, thoracic, and cervical curves). If its position is tilted too far off center, the lower back will be thrust too far forward or too far backward, which makes the shoulders and neck be too far backward or forward—putting undue pressure on our vertebral disks, nerves, and internal organs. Since one zafu cushion height does not fit all bodies at all times, most zendos have supplemental flat cushions to add under the thicker zafu; and if a knee injury puts you in a chair you may still need a cushion of some kind on the chair bottom to allow your legs to slope at a downward angle.

In his instructions on posture in the “Fukanzazengi,” Dogen very simply says:

Sit upright, leaning neither to the left nor right, neither forward nor backward. Your ears should be in line with your shoulders; your nose should be in line with your navel.

Possibly, within his 13th century zendo, he had other posture hints for the monks. However, that brevity of instruction did avoid over complicating the issue. Understanding the modern science of our anatomy at the layperson level can be helpful, I think, without over conceptualizing the matter. Also, a little poetic expression can be of use when orienting ourselves on the cushion: such as visualizing a virtual, carpenter’s plumb line, in its fealty to gravity, extending from the top of our head through the four curves of our vertebral column to end at the sit bones or imagining our head as a helium filled balloon lifting and stretching our axial trunk ever so slightly above its pelvic root, planted firmly in the zafu ground. Without our consciously moving a muscle, the muscles will move on their own as if they already know what to do. With practice, there will be times when your spine is as light as a feather.

LEGS, ARMS, & HANDS

My emphasis in these notes is on the spine since the same consideration applies whether we are sitting full lotus (each foot on the opposite thigh), half lotus, seiza kneeling, or in a chair. As far as the arms, the main point is to not have them drag down on or put tension into the shoulders. Because of various injuries from my reckless youth, I cannot sit in a proper lotus position and must put a small cushion or folded garment in my lap to rest my hands on. Adjusting the height of this lets the arms rest in a comfortable, neutral position with gaps between them and the sides of the body. The traditional mudra of hands resting palm in palm, thumb-tips gently touching is an aid in settling and maintaining one’s attention.

EYES & HEAD

All Dogen says about the eyes is to keep them open, but these days we are told to cast them downward at a 45 degree angle—the idea being that it will put the neck and skull in the correct position. If the pelvis is in the sweet spot and we visualize the spine's vertical alignment with gravity and its gentle rise-up through gravity, the head should rest comfortably at the top of the cervical vertebrae neither too far forward or back (*ears aligned with shoulders*) nor too far to the left or right (*nose aligned with the navel*). However, the cervical vertebrae are the most flexible in the spine allowing for the neck's flexion/extension (C1), sideways bending (C2), and rotation (C3-C7) and therefore easy to defy the pelvic intention and drift, with our thoughts, off alignment. Somewhere inward of the ears is that junction of the skull and C1/C2, and we do well to visualize and monitor it as well as the pelvis and, of course, the rest of our posture. Most of our zazen-heads do tend to drift backwards and slightly collapse with inattentiveness, hence the 45 degree gaze can aid as a correction. We needn't be hung up on where 45 degrees is, precisely, but heed the hinge.

BREATH

As I mentioned earlier, all Dogen had to say about the breath is to *breath softly through the nose*. Some instructors suggest observing our breath as an object of meditation, as it is very reliably available and generic, though, so too is our posture or the wall in front of us. Perhaps it's because of breathing's dynamic function: its in-and-out, up-and-down sequences being easier to stay present with. Some even suggest observing the breath's terminus in the tanden or hara, which is in the area near the bottom of the abdomen. That may be traced back to the Hindu concept of the body's energy centers—which early Buddhism adopted to some extent since it arose within that milieu. However, the hara not only encompasses the bottom of the abdomen area but also the lower-lumbar/upper-pelvis region.

My feeling is that both our breath and our spine are marvels of our species' long evolutionary journey, as well as each individual's temporal existence, and, when we are sitting zazen, we are honoring them as precious gifts that connect us to the rest of the web of creation.

NON-THINKING

The following excerpt from the “Fukanzazengi” is Dogen's primary instruction of what to do with our mind after setting our posture:

After having regulated your posture, exhale completely and take a breath. Sway your body from left to right a few times. Sit stable in samadhi. Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not thinking? Beyond-thinking. This is the essential way of zazen.

This rather cryptic remark has begged for further explication since Dogen wrote it in the 13th century. Some have suggested it means “leave thinking as it is,” others have relied on “letting thoughts go as they arise,” or, metaphorically, we have Kosho Uchiyama Roshi's elegant “opening the hand of thought.” Or my favorite, Dainin Katagiri Roshi's “not thinking means please, rest your frontal lobe,” which in these modern times of mapping the human brain with our various brain peeking gizmos, might be more to the point.

Another clue from the “Fukanzazengi” is found in the following excerpt:

In addition, turning the Dharma wheel with a finger, a banner, a needle, or a mallet, and realizing it with a whisk, a fist, a staff, or a shout—these cannot be understood by discriminative thinking.

These, of course, refer to the recorded tales of realization or enlightenment during nonverbal interchanges between teachers and students throughout the history of Chinese Chan Buddhism (Zen Buddhism in Japanese). What is discriminative thinking? Whether or not it can be located in the frontal lobe or some other neuronal cubby hole, language is basically discriminative, i.e., subject vs object, with an intervening predicate: “I like my teacher, I hate my job, etc.,” situating us on the like (attachment) / dislike (aversion) of fundamental suffering's seesaw. Whereas the

statement “I sit on the cushion” is neutral, it still separates us from the cushion and from the activity itself. Dogen Zenji referred to his zazen as *shikantaza*. The *ta* (hit) combined with *za* (sit) means sitting; *shikan* means nothing other than or just. Hence the phrase “just sitting” sidesteps the dualistic, self-other framing, and we become one with the sitting as both subject and object conjoined. However, the brain really likes thinking; its impulse is not unlike our automatic breathing—continuing in the background when not in the foreground. Though our intention to cease thinking is also in the brain and can interrupt the thought train, it’s like holding an inflated rubber ball underwater; as soon as our grip slips, it bobs to the surface again. Actually, we cannot stop our thinking, though we may wear it out in repeatedly letting it go. In the modern Sotoshu pamphlet “The Practice of Zazen” is this following statement:

The most essential thing in doing zazen is to awaken from distraction (thinking) or dullness (drowsiness) and return to the right posture moment by moment.

PRACTICE / ENLIGHTENMENT

The Rolling Stones famously sung: “You can’t always get what you want, but if you try, you just might find, you get what you need.” We come to this practice with the goal of ending our suffering: to achieve peace of mind or enlightenment. The enigma of zazen—the conundrum, the paradox—is that our intended goal has to share the cushion with non-attachment to that goal. Dogen, with sleight of hand, pulls the goal out from under us on the get-go. Again, from the “Fukanzazengi,” he says:

How can we distinguish practice from enlightenment? Making the effort to obtain the Way, is itself, the manifestation of the Way in your daily life. If you practice suchness continuously, you will be suchness.

He’s essentially saying that this “just sitting” is itself the Buddha seat. This is not “learning zen” but direct, selfless, awareness from the beginning, i.e., beginner’s mind is buddha mind.

Originally, our goal of wanting to escape from suffering is from a selfish standpoint. When we take our ordination as a monk or lay practitioner, we accept the bodhisattva vow to save or benefit all beings not just ourselves. This, in the beginning, may be a nice idea we ascribe to but eventually becomes an emotion that bubbles up from our own wholehearted practice and sets up conundrum or paradox number two. As Buddha tells Subutu in the *Diamond Sutra*’s teachings on emptiness: *even if I saved everyone, there’s no one to be saved and no one to do the saving*. Contemporary poet and Zen practitioner Gary Snyder initially had misgivings about the hubris of him saving anyone not to mention everyone. Then he realized that when he was making this vow, he was also giving everyone permission to save him.

Since most of us, like Gary Snyder, are not monastics, I’d like to close with this quote by Uchiyama Roshi from his book *Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo* about his teacher Kodo Sawaki Roshi:

The other day, someone visited me and asked, “I wish to practice zazen under your guidance. But because I live far away, I can’t come to Antaji (Uchiyama’s temple) very often. I’d like to practice zazen at home. What should I keep in mind to avoid doing zazen in a mistaken way?” I responded, “If your wife and children say, “Daddy has become nicer since he began to do zazen,” then your practice is on the right track.