

My Zazen Sankyu

(san = to participate humbly; kyu = to inquire or explore)

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Notebook (4)

Fragmentary Thought XII <Head and Life>

Meditation practice emphasizes something psychological and perceptible of which one can be aware, and their methodologies and results are no exception. Since advanced mental activities such as our perception, feeling, thinking, and volition are corticocerebral functions, let's categorize these as "Head" for the sake of discussion here. In short, I think meditation tends to be a work that focuses on "Head".

When I started practicing zazen, I also learned the basics of Oriental medicine from Shingu Ito and Kanpu Yokota. One of the things I found interesting was that, in Oriental medicine, harmony among internal organs is the most important, and issues associated with "Head" was regarded as something merely derived from that. This was a thought-provoking suggestion to me, because at the time, I was a psychology major graduate student who was unconsciously inclined to a prejudiced view like "human being = psychology = Head". I thought, "The functions of "Head" tend to be unbalanced because of losing harmony among internal organs which are the bases of our life. We seem struggling to solve the problems created by unbalanced "Head" with still unbalanced "Head". If so, until the harmony among internal organs is regained and "Head" starts working properly, there will be no resolution."

Because of our developed corticocerebral functions, human beings can have self-consciousness, that is the sense of "I". And we are living as if "Head" ("I") is the main character and the body is the servant following orders from "Head". However, from Oriental medicine's point of view on life, it is not only conceit of "Head", but also a total misconception of life. "Head" is just a small part of whole life, and should not hold a privileged position.

In order to maintain its existence by adjusting itself to the environment, life must perform two tasks. First, identify external enemies and stay away from them. Second, identify food and eat it. Our "Head" was the fruit of these abilities highly developed for long time. As a certain part is highly developed out of proportion to other parts, negative impacts from this viewpoint of whole life might start emerging. There are many cases like this found in the history of evolution. Then, is the development of human corticocerebral functions one of these cases? I must say it is up to us.

“Head” left uncorrected might behave like a tyrant without control. Yet, since we are destined to have such “Head”, we have no choice but to accept it. Why do only humans engage into activities such as meditation or zazen that do not contribute directly to our survival? It might also be interesting to study the meaning of meditation and zazen from perspectives of humans who have the problem of over-grown "Heads" in their evolutionary process.

I have no intention to get into this issue further here. Let me just point out that, while meditation tends to take an approach focusing on “Head” and trying to resolve the issue within its framework, zazen focuses more on our living whole body-mind, the basis which let “Head” exist as it is. If split and unbalanced life [is?] untreated, it will be dragged by over-functioning “Head”. But if we give this to the posture of zazen, it will take its course naturally (not as the result of thought in our “Head”, rather, seizure of it) to where it is supposed to be. The “Head” remains in its appropriate place, and the harmonized whole life works as a unified body.

As “Gakudo-Yojinshu(Points to Watch in Buddhist Training)” mentioned “Way may be entered only through the harmonization of body and mind.”, I believe that zazen is practice rooted in the same deep notion of life as that of Oriental medicine.

Fragmentary Thought XIII <Zazen and Functions of Internal Organs 1>

This seemingly strange title is taken from Children's Mind and Functions of Internal Organs written by Shigeo Miki (1925-1987), a comparative anatomist. This book, written primarily for childcare workers, is a precious reference for me to think about zazen.

Soon after I entered into Antaiji in Japan about 18 years ago, Misao Hatori (who studied Noguchi Exercise for years closely under its founder, Sensei Michizo Noguchi, and recently published her own book Noguchi Exercise - Sensation is Power) sent me this newly published book. In her attached letter, she encouraged me by saying “I believe your lifetime will never be wasted by dedicating yourself in just sitting - to observe and capture yourself in visceral system by calming down your “body-wall” system. If you can really feel the existence of your whole self through breathing, don't you think that it is a monumental work for mankind = nature = universe?”

Although I had stopped counting-breath-method during sitting I learned from Rinzai Zen teachers and practiced Shikan-Taza (just sitting) wholeheartedly, I was at a loss - beginning to ask myself “What does it mean to just sit like this?” repeatedly. Then, this book with such letter came at just the right moment like providential help. I felt as if my field of vision suddenly opened up.

In this book, there are a lot of thought-provoking comments and metaphors. For example, “Avidya (fundamental ignorance), which is deemed as a root cause of human sufferings in Buddhism, originally means uncomfortableness of internal organs.” Other interesting concepts from this book are “life memory”, “life vibration”, “Functions of

internal organs are supported by resonance with far-reaching universe.” I feel these are comments connected directly to Buddhism and zazen.

Parts of the human body can be categorized roughly into the “body-wall” system (such as skin, nerve, and muscle) and visceral system (such as digestive system, blood vessels, and kidney). The former controls “animal functions” such as sensation, transmission, and movement. The latter controls “plant functions” such as respiration, circulation, and excretion.

The main character of life is the visceral system controlling the appetite for food and sex. “Body-wall” system controlling sensation and movement serves merely as the “arms and legs” of the visceral system. However, if we look at our daily life, we tend to pay most of our attentions to eye-catching “body-wall” system and neglect visceral system. This means we are literally failing to put first things first. Following the above comments, Shigeo Miki appeals for “reevaluation of guts = revival of internal organs”. Isn't this an important issue in the field of childcare and education as well as a fundamental issue on our whole living?

Let me jump here to the story of the Buddha. It is said that although the Buddha practiced thoroughly meditation and asceticism, which were typical practices in India at the time, he could not satisfy himself with these methods, and later abandoned them. He chose a unique way of practicing zazen under the bodhi tree, and eventually attained enlightenment. I am pondering what this shift in Buddha's practice really means. Isn't it possible to interpret this as a shift from “body-wall”-system-oriented practice to visceral-system-oriented practice?, borrowing Mr. Miki's theory?

In “body-wall”-oriented practices, we either aim at attaining a spiritual tranquility where body is separated from mind (meditation), or, gaining spiritual freedom through restraint of the body by hurting and tormenting the body (asceticism). These patterns are based on the dualistic notion created by the brain which is the center of the “body-wall” system. Therefore, the “rhythm of food and sex” inside of the visceral system is something should be abandoned because it disturbs and restrains spiritual tranquility and freedom.

On the contrary, visceral-system-oriented practices first release tensions in the “body-wall” system, prepares conditions for the visceral system to regain its original rhythm, and the “body-wall” system refrains from disturbing such rhythm.

If Buddhism was born from this kind of visceral-system-oriented practice, I guess I might be able to say it is the way of “reviving internal organs?” Is this just my too farfetched interpretation?

Fragmentary Thought XIV <Zazen and Functions of Internal Organs 2>

Shigeo Miki said, to distinguish between “Head” and “Heart”, We say “sharp Head”, but don't say “sharp Heart”. We say “warm Heart”, but don't say “warm Head”. “Head” thinks, and “Heart” feels. By questioning why Chinese characters, “Head” and “Heart”

were assigned to the original Japanese words "*atama*(head)" and "*kokoro*(heart)" respectively, he reached the conclusion that, according to their actual physical feeling, ancient Japanese positioned "*atama*" to the head, and "*kokoro*" to the heart. In other words, the following formulas stand - "atama = brain = body-wall system" and "kokoro = heart = visceral system".

If I reexamine zazen using these formulas, I think it must be a practice emphasizing visceral system. Since it is said that Buddha reached enlightenment by zazen and zazen is called "right gate of Buddha way" ("Bendowa(On Endeavoring the Way)"), I drew the conclusion that we might be able to say Buddhism is the way of "reviving internal organs = reviving heart" in the last fragmentary thought.

The distinction between "Head" and "Heart" in our daily living is quite ambiguous, and often used in a confusing way. The reason I felt shallowness in psychology when I was studying it might be the suspicion that psychology actually covers only problems of the "Head" and refrain from those of "Heart". Though I will not get into this issue further here, let me point out that, when he used the word "Heart", its dimension was reaching to a majestic scale such as symphonies with the universe/nature.

When I read the following passage - "Plants rooted deep in the ground are devoted themselves to the harmony with cosmic rhythms. Their bodies are like capillary vessels of the gigantic circulatory systems connecting heaven and earth.", I recalled the words of Kodo Sawaki Roshi such as "Zazen is to tune in to the universe." "Zazen is a method to have a switch to the whole universe." They are talking about the same thing!

Visceral system controls "plant functions" which shift phases of "food and sex" by corresponding with various cycles in the universe. It is zazen where our internal "plant functions" reveal vividly. If so, it was no coincidence that the place Buddha sat was under a plant called bodhi tree and the thing which lead him to an enlightenment was a bright star at dawn. What is the picture of Buddha's enlightenment telling us? They are plants (zazen, bodhi tree) and cosmic rhythms (a bright star at dawn). It is the picture of resonance and symphony between "macro-cosmos" and "micro-cosmos(body)", and that of responsive communion (*kan-no-ko-do*) if Zen terms are used.

We should never overlook the "majesty" kept in zazen that is often seen as tiny practice at a glance. I have been recommending Children's' Mind and Functions of Internal Organs to the friends involved in childcare, because I wish them to feel that the work of childcare has cosmic expanse, and therefore, is serious as well as worth doing. From the same wish, I would like to recommend this book to the people who practice zazen.

I often see people who think zazen is a solution to personal sufferings and problems or the cultivation of an individual. Since these people are simply pulling zazen down to the levels of an "act of a mere person" "small talk" "Head", and its "majesty" "cosmic scale" "Heart" are left outside of their fields of view. I think that reexamining zazen through the theory of Shigeo Miki provides us an extremely effective clue to the problem that zazen tends to be taken with a petty view.

In another book, Miki criticized civilization and warned about the destiny of mankind. “The center of human life is shifting gradually from the “Heart” to the “Head”. This can be a tendency in the history of human thought evolution - the shift from “life-centered thinking” (the “Head” listening to the voices of the heart) to “logos-centered thinking” (“Head” failing to listen to the voices of the heart). On the other hand, we should not forget a possible danger that the original relationship between “animal” and “plant” organs can transform to that of controller and controlled. Can't we say that the posture of “the Head listening to the voices of the heart” is zazen, and the path indicating to recover the relationship between “animal” and “plant” organs is Buddha way? I think that the time has come for us to think the meaning of zazen and Buddha way at much bigger perspective, such as the histories of civilization, mankind, and evolution.

Many interesting themes were touched off by Miki's writing such as “ordinary logic = logic of the mind = discrimination (vikalpa), logic of Buddhism = logic of the heart = non-discrimination (nirvikalpa)”, “life memory = store-consciousness (Alaya-vijnana)”, “the interrelationship between mind and heart”, “sensitivities of internal organs and the formation of language” aside, let us depart from the “world of Shigeo Miki” for now, until the next occasion.