

My Zazen Sankyū

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

Rev. Issho Fujita, Valley Zendo, Massachusetts

with assistance from Tansetz Shibata and Tesshin Brooks

Notebook (2)

Fragmentary Thought VI <Shoshin-Tanza 1 - Posture and Gravity>

“Sit upright. Leaning to neither left nor right, front nor back (1), your ears should be on the same plane as your shoulders and your nose in line with your navel (2).”

This is the description of Shoshin-Tanza (sitting in correct posture; sitting upright) in the volume of “Manner of Zazen” in Dogen Zenji’s Shōbōgenzō. (1) means that, without tilting left or right, front or back, the central axis of the body should be precisely the same as the direction of gravity. (2) means that head and body should be in place by looking from the sides and from the front/back. Why were these two points presented as the most basic and important conditions of the correct sitting posture?

All things on the ground are always pulled toward the center of the earth by gravity. In this plane of gravity, every form of life survived by harmonizing itself with gravity in various ways. We human beings attained upright posture (standing with the central axis of the body vertically) after a long evolutionary process. Known also as “anti-gravitational posture,” upright posture cannot exist without uniquely human intention and volition to stand the body upright decisively. (As a proof for this, we lie down when we sleep. It is also difficult for us to maintain upright posture when low in spirit because of disease or fatigue.) I believe that the meaning of zazen can also be studied in the broad context of the history of such relationship between life and gravity.

Besides that, isn't the word “correct”, as in correct posture, regarded as an adjective describing the quality of the relationship between gravity and posture? Doesn't correct posture mean that body and the center of the earth are connected in the most stable manner?

Although the posture in which the central axis of the body and the direction of gravity are in complete accord can be regarded as “anti-gravitational” from one viewpoint, we should not forget it is also “pro-gravitational” (following gravity). When the body is tilted, in order to maintain upright posture, certain muscles will become tense. On the contrary, if various parts of the body are integrated correctly along a vertical line, then the weight is supported by skeletal frame, unnecessary tensions in the muscles is released, and the whole body submits to the direction of gravity. The subtlety of sitting posture seems to lie in the fact that “anti-gravitational” and “pro-gravitational” states which may seem contradictory at a glance coexist quite naturally. Our relationship to gravity in Shoshin-Tanza is neither an “anti-gravitational” way of fighting with gravity

through tense muscles and stiff body, nor a “pro-gravitational” way of being defeated by gravity through flaccid muscles and an untidy limp body. Our body should be neutral and in the middle way. (1) quoted above from “Manner of Zazen” is a “body koan.” “You should neither resist gravity nor be defeated by gravity. What are you going to do?” We have to answer this with the realization of “upright/middle/right” posture.

Fragmentary Thought VII <Shoshin-Tanza 2 - Head and Trunk>

In addition to (2) in “Manual of Zazen” of Shobogenzo, as “the model for engaging the way” in the Pure Standards of Eihei Dogen Zenji, it says, “With the back of your head, straight above your spine”, it is vital to place and maintain the head/neck and the trunk in right alignment.

F. M. Alexander (1869-1955), an Australian, found that wrong postures (i.e., incorrect uses of postures) are related closely to various body and psychological problems. He developed the technique to adjust such incorrect posture. His system, called the Alexander Technique, put the highest emphasis on the correct use of head and neck.

While training in the Alexander Technique, I realized various mistakes of my sitting posture. Particularly, I noticed I need to pay more detailed attention to the positioning of my head and neck.

Because of our developed brain, human beings have a very heavy head. Therefore, the head should be placed above the trunk correctly in a manner that the center of gravity of the head should fall accurately into the vertical line of the trunk. If the head and the trunk are not in correct position, the muscles around the neck have to continually tense in extreme in order to maintain the head above the trunk. Otherwise, the head would collapse, being pulled down by gravity. The sitting posture therefore could not be maintained. This unnecessary tension around the neck will extend to the other parts of the body and affect movement of the whole body negatively. Moreover, because important veins and nerves are concentrated around the neck, unnecessary pressures to the neck could possibly create problems in breathing, voice projection, chewing, swallowing, and in general mental activities. The neck can literally be a “bottleneck” of life.

When the head is positioned above the trunk correctly by following the instruction in (2), one can release excessive tension of muscles around the neck without disrupting the central axis of the body. This state is described as “neck free, head forward and up” in the terms of the Alexander Technique. Thus, the head is connected to the trunk naturally and incorporated into the whole sitting posture, and the body axis is unified completely so that “the back lengthens and widens.”

I do believe that we have to study the connection between the head and the trunk in zazen more deeply based on our practice and experience.

Fragmentary Thought VIII <Problems in Instruction of Sitting Posture>

Speaking from my own experience in studying the Alexander Technique, I would say that it is extremely difficult to change the long-accustomed “incorrect use of postures” into “correct use.” Even when an instructor points out “wrong use,” I tend to feel it is still “correct,” and feel “correct use” as unnatural. The attachment to the thing which one is accustomed to is strong. The willingness to correct mistakes can also lead to creation of new tension patterns and increase “wrong use” instead.

Therefore, we have to ponder deeply how to instruct the correct sitting posture. Shouting “stretch your back,” or straightening the back by touching with *kyosaku* only tend to create an unnatural posture, like the standing posture in the military with the chest thrust forward. Or, being deceived by a sitting posture with what at first glance looks like a straight back, we tend to miss internal tensions within the body. These unnatural postures which cannot be maintained for long periods of time, only serve to deteriorate one's health, and are completely different from *Shoshin-Tanza*.

I hardly believe that the traditional *zazen* instructions including my own are leading practitioners successfully to *Shoshin-Tanza*. This might be because my understanding of *Shoshin-Tanza* is shallow or incorrect.

Before starting *zazen* practice, I studied *Noguchi Exercise*, an “exploration of the human being,” for five years from its founder, Michizo Noguchi. I learned numerous lessons from him. Among them, the practice of standing a raw egg on end had one of the strongest impacts on me. My current model for *Shoshin-Tanza* is this “egg balanced on end.”

“What is the standing raw egg telling us? ...Its inside is not tense and remains fluid, while the outer structure remains strong and firm. It is at ease, calm, clear and magnanimous. It is not standing forcefully with props, nor pulling net.it is standing because it already possesses conditions to stand. It is neither fabrication nor deception.” (“Human Beings as Primordial Life” by Michizo Noguchi)

“A raw egg is standing as if it is the matter of course. It does not particularly look like bearing its weight. Rather, it is standing calmly, transparently, and serenely.” (“Consulting (the Oracle of) Weight” by Michizo Noguchi.)

Isn't to sit with these qualities *Shoshin-Tanza*? Or, is *Shoshin-Tanza* for creating these conditions inside the body? In *Shoshin-Tanza*, while the body sits immovably like a mountain, the internal body is released, unwound and relaxed in every corner. Except for minimally necessary muscles, everything is at rest quietly. The more relaxed the muscles, the more sensible one would be, and the relationship with gravity will be adjusted more minutely and accurately, thus, more muscle relaxation, and increased sensibility.... likewise, *Shoshin-Tanza* gets deepened infinitely. I, at least, would like to strive for *Shoshin-Tanza* like this. To get oneself closer to *Shoshin-Tanza*, to sit for some reason or other, or, to sit recklessly is not a right approach; meticulous *Sankyū* is essential.

I am sorry to say that I could find neither a specific means nor an instruction method to foster the zazen of mine and others toward these directions in the tradition of Zen. I am now exploring different avenues of instruction, borrowing greatly from Noguchi Exercise and Alexander Technique.

Fragmentary Thought IX <Meditation Practice in Buddhism - *Shamata* and *Vipasyana*>

Suppose meditation is defined as “techniques which are used intentionally and self-consciously to change the mental condition of human beings into a certain preferable state.” Philosophical discussions and practical studies on these meditation practices have occupied a position at the heart of Buddhism. Although Buddhism has various meditation techniques, I think that these can be categorized into two large groups by their purposes.

The two different types of meditation practices are *shamata* and *vipasyana*. *Shamata* is described in *Awakening of Faith* as follows: “To put a stop to all characteristics of the world of sense, objects, and of the mind.” The objective of this is to stop all mental activities by training one's mind so that it can concentrate on a certain object (single-pointedness, *samadhi*) without being affected by external circumstances and internal thoughts. This type of practice is trying to reach nirvana by the cessation of the activity of the mind, assuming emotional attachments (desires, clinging to self) are the major causes of human sufferings.

On the contrary, *vipasyana* is described in *Awakening of Faith* as follows: “Perceive distinctly characteristics of the causally-conditioned phenomena.” The objective of this is to gain insights (wisdom) into truth by observing one's psychological and physiological processes carefully and vividly, or, by internalizing basic doctrines of Buddhism repeatedly. This type of practice is an attempt to reach awakening of truth (enlightenment) by a paradigm shift in recognition and perception, assuming the fundamental problem of human beings lies in un-enlightenment (fundamental ignorance of the true nature of things).

Shamata and *vipasyana* are often used as *shamata-vipasyana* in one word. *Awakening of Faith* says “One should practice both *shamata* and *vipasyana* side by side.” It is also often said “*Vipasyana* is mastered based on *shamata* so that both of them are in an inseparable relationship.” However, as contrasted above, I think both are essentially different undertakings. Logically speaking, the complete state of *shamata* seems to have no capacity to develop to *vipasyana*. Anyway, I think that various meditation methods in Buddhism can be categorized, put in an order sequence, and analyzed on a spectrum which runs from *shamata* to *vipasyana* with a varying internal tension between the two. For example, we may find meditation with emphasis on *shamata*, or, on *vipasyana*, or, meditation combining *shamata* and *vipasyana* in a certain ratio, etc. Then, where should we position zazen of Shikan-Taza (just sitting)? Is it possible to position it somewhere between *shamata* and *vipasyana*?

As “*Fukan-Zazengi*(Manner of Zazen Recommended Universally to Everyone)” by Dogen Zenji says “Stop various functions of your mind and various types of meditation...”, If we take these words as they are, Shikan-Taza might seem a practice emphasizing *shamata* and denying *vipasyana*. I remember reading in a book a longtime ago something like “Soto-style zazen is *shamata*, and samadhi/concentration-centered, while Rinzai-style zazen is *vipasyana*, and prajna/wisdom-centered...” Though such differentiation/specialization might have taken place later in history, didn't zazen emerge in the first place as a Chinese protest to or transcendence of meditation-oriented *shamata/vipasyana* practices in Indian Buddhism? If so, isn't zazen based on the totally different context where the framework of *shamata/vipasyana* is no longer valid?

In relation to this issue, the following words of Dogen Zenji come to mind: “Zazen is not step-by-step meditation.” (“*Fukan-Zazengi*”); “Zazen differs from samadhi or dhyana.” (in the fifth Q&A among eighteen Q&A in “*Bendowa*(On Endeavoring the Way)”). Aren't these words indicating that zazen recommended by Dogen Zenji has totally different contents from *shamata/vipasyana*?

If this is true, what kind of genealogy does Shikan-Taza have in the history of Buddhism? Where can we find its roots? Can we trace its roots somewhere in the tradition of *shamata/vipasyana* practices, the mainstream tradition in Buddhism? Or, does it belong to totally different genealogy? Should it be taken as orthodox or heretical? Should it be taken as a mutation emerged in the tradition? I think we need further Sankyū on “genealogy of Shikan-Taza”.