

ask a godo

Question:

“In Soto Zen there is great emphasis on correct posture. Why is this? And what about those who through injury or infirmity are prevented from maintaining a ‘correct’ posture?”

Reiryu Philippe Coupey replies:

The knees press the earth, the head the sky. The lower back is stretched and erect, the head is straight on the shoulders, which fall naturally, as does the gaze. And the breathing: the exhalation is deep and long, the inhalation is short and vital. If you can manage to concentrate on, say, the position of the thumbs, or on the exhalation of air, for any length of time - and all of this while thinking-not-thinking - then you can concentrate on everything all at once. This is the essential and correct practice of zazen.

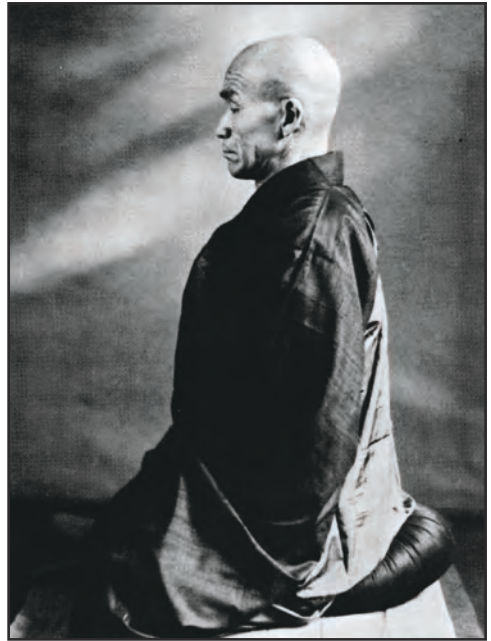
I have known people who had great postures in zazen. They sat very correctly with their hands firmly up against the abdomen, backs straight as straight could be, shoulders down, chin in. Certainly they were struck by the authenticity of the master and his teaching. And yet it would seem for them that the posture didn't mean more than that. One man, who'd been practising

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for some years and who was also oriented towards temple life and ceremonies, told me that he gave no more importance to the seated posture than, for instance, the posture during the Hannya Shingyo ceremony, or the position of one's hands in gassho, in shashu, or during sampai. In other words, so much for pressing the meridian points inside the inner thighs with the heels of the feet, so much for stretching the backbone at the fifth lumbar vertebrae, keeping the tip of the nose in a vertical line with the navel, the shoulders in line with the ears and so on. So much for turning all one's thoughts towards this posture and this breathing for an hour or two a day. This is all just fine, he would

say, but still it's just another posture, one of many postures a man or woman can practice in a lifetime. So what's the big deal?

Well for one, it's hard to continue to sit in the posture when you don't see it as the center of the practice of the Way. Because indeed this is what it is, right down to the last detail: the center of the practice and at the same time the center of the whole world. Without complete faith in every detail of it--and god knows there are a lot of them, from how to cross the legs, how to stretch the back, how to hold the hands, head and shoulders, to how to lower the eyes, how to place the tongue and where to place the upper teeth vis-a-vis the lower; and also how to breathe and how to think-not-think; all the details without exception and all of it at once as well, and not from the frontal



Kodo Sawaki seated in Zazen

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brain either but from the hara, from the ki, from the center, the center of cosmic compassion--if you don't know this, then sooner or later you quit. A person just can't neglect the details and continue for long. If you relegate the posture to some kind of position or place of importance, like first or second, or worse, if you put the ceremonial form first, or even at the same level

neck-and-neck with the exact seated posture, it is difficult to continue. At one time or another, in five years or in fifteen, you just end up doing something other than zazen with your life (or what's left of it), that's all.

Imagine how one's brain must feel when it finds itself prisoner in a body sitting somewhat weakly and somewhat slothfully on a zafu with its head slumped forward, chin slightly out, back slightly bent, hands held loosely in front of the lower abdomen with thumbs drooping... Or for that matter the opposite, with thumbs sticking skywards in the air like King Kong, shoulders up and hard as coat racks, with fast uneven breathing and eyes wide open like saucers:

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Kodo Sawaki seated in Zazen

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what can be going on in such a brain at that moment, one might wonder. Whatever it is, the brain won't be happy with itself. Not happy like when it finds itself in the normal condition of body and mind. If you observe yourselves by means of this posture, as I have touched upon above, the brain will sooner or later do just that, it will return to its true abode, to its fundamental source, its essence, which is where there is simple movement and simple non-movement, the muso (no-posture) of shikantaza (correct sitting in zazen). And at that moment, with the backbone correctly straight, the chin correctly tucked in, and with the correct tension in the center, in the hara, what

teaching does the mind (the body-mind) not receive, one might also ask.

The importance we give to the posture is clearly beneficial to ourselves personally, for better breathing and better functioning of the brain; but it's also beneficial to our entire Soto lineage as well. You're always being reminded how to sit, how to breathe and how to think-not-think, and if it weren't for this we probably wouldn't be here! Because it's this 'correctly done posture,' which is the same as saying 'correctly done practice,' which keeps us alive and well today, and which kept us going through the pre-Tang dynasties in China, through the Meiji

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in Japan, from the 500's in Northern China right up into the 2000's in Europe, and without showing the slightest sign of fatigue or decay. And what's more, because of the correct posture having been transmitted through to us from the distant past, we function no differently today, and this is almost incredible! Because of the seated posture, done 'correctly' as you say in your question, we still exist in the same way as before. Without stretching the backbone, pressing down on the diaphragm and letting thoughts pass, as described in detail during the kusens, and without each of us following these instructions correctly, while

at the same time sitting each in his own way, we would not exist today. We would have died off a long time ago. Like the Sozan line, which gradually broke away from the correctly transmitted posture when Sozan (d. 901) and his disciples began to place more emphasis on the 'brain' than on the human body while seated in zazen. And so their line, though very much in fashion in their lifetime, died out within a few hundred years.

This narrowness of the practice - one posture, one breathing, one mind - not only keeps Zen alive today, it also makes for its great depth. It's like drilling for oil: the deeper you drill, the more you find. Or always pricking with an acupuncture needle in the same spot, the same ego, the same ignorance. At the end of this, at the end of the needle, is everything, the whole world.

And what about the handicapped, you ask. On the Great Way there are no handicapped nor are there handicaps. There is only the normal condition of body and mind. Thus there is absolutely no difference between someone who sits hunchbacked, knees in the air, chin out and all that, and someone who sits straight as a tin soldier. There are no differences in a dojo which, in the end, only practises the great awakening.

One university professor and specialist on meditation, Doctor Jacques Vigne, observed in his study on the wholesome after-effects of meditation

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that the “quality” of one's meditation reflects the quality of one's posture. Most everyone who practices meditation knows this. Quality/meditation certainly reflects quality/posture. But this does not mean that quality/posture in turn reflects quality/

meditation. In fact this is impossible. Why? Because the mind in meditation is no-mind (mushin), and no-mind cannot reflect.

The posture is not something you look at from the outside, nor is it something you study in a how-to book (though sometimes its description does appear in one). It is something you look at from the inside.

So one might ask in all legitimacy: Is there finally a correct posture? Is there an incorrect one? No, I don't really think there is. The only correct posture, as I see it, is one's own posture, corrected. It is not a matter of correcting the posture, it is a matter of being corrected by it. There is no contradiction.

