

THE FOUR RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SITTING AND ZEN

Omori Sogen An Introduction to Zen Training

It is noted in Zen Master Iida Toin's book *Sanzen Manroku*³⁵ that there are "four ways of viewing zazen." I do not know whether that is an original opinion by Toin, but something similar to Toin's first three ways is found in a recently translated book by a scholar named Hu Shih.³⁶ In his explanation of the Zen method in ancient China, Hu Shih quotes the following passage from the *Shugyodoji-gyo* (Yogacarya-bhumi Sutra)

The discipline consists of three kinds: the first is said to be the body exercising the Way without the mind attendant on it; the second is said to be the mind investigating the Way without the body accompanying it; the third is said to be conducting oneself according to the Way with both mind and body realizing it.

Hu Shih continues,

Even though one sits in the full-lotus position and becomes immovable like a mountain, one's mind is lost and scattered— this is the second kind. The third kind is where the body sits correctly and the mind is not dissolute—inwardly its roots are all quieted and outwardly it does not run wildly about after all kinds of karmic influences.

I do not know whether or not there are classifications other than Zen Master Toin's which divide zazen into four kinds. Although I do not know what the similarities and differences might be, I think it will be very interesting to base my own classification on that four-part division.

The first is for those who sit but do not practice Zen. It corresponds to the first category used by Hu Shih. This kind of sitting follows the prescribed form of the full-lotus or half-lotus position, but it is still not well-integrated sitting. This is an experience many of us had when we first learned zazen, probably because the instruction we received was not good.

When we went to a class for zazen, senior students taught us how to cross our legs and position our hands—the form, but they did not teach us anything about the content—the way of getting into the state

of samadhi. Consequently, I thought for quite a long time that if I sat according to the set form I would somehow be graced with satori by Heaven. But even if I had been taught how to be well integrated, in the beginning I still would have been likely to remain separate from objects, seeing myself and other things as two. But I simply did not know anything about that. Perhaps it is just that it is very difficult for anyone to understand what the truly integrated realm is. Master Toin states,

Evil passions, earthly desires, carnal lust, taken all together, are due to two conditions: low vital energy and scattered wits.³⁷

In short, even though we sit with the form of Bodhidharma, if the essence of our sitting is like that described by Hakuin—"The mind is as confused as the defeated warriors of the Heike Clan at the battles of Yashima and Dannoura"³⁸—our sitting will be confused and without concentration. These are the attributes of one who sits without practicing Zen.

Unless the mind is simultaneously concentrated and unified with vigorous energy and dynamism, we cannot claim to be practicing Zen, no matter how long we may sit with our legs crossed. In the Soto Sect of Zen Buddhism, use of the term "shikantaza"³⁹ does not by any means suggest that it is acceptable to let your mind wander so long as you sit with your legs crossed. Far from it; shikan means that the sitter must be totally integrated with sitting itself and sit in a commanding manner.

Though we do not see many these days, there are those who believe that they are not disciplining themselves unless they sit at any cost or as we say, "like frogs." They certainly belong to the group of people who sit without practicing Zen. This is one of the types of sitting that Hakuin disliked the most. Without doing anything from morning until night, they merely sit like stone Jizo in the mountains. Hakuin scolded them severely, saying that they would be better off gambling.

The empty and tranquil nap-taking Zen, angrily scorned by the Zen teachers of old as the "ghost's cave at the foot of the black mountain,"

also belongs to this category. It is necessary for us to be extremely careful not to fall into the bad habit of sitting without practicing Zen.

The second group of undesirable students of Zen are those who practice Zen without sitting. I think those who are known in the world as scholars of Zen Buddhism belong to this category, corresponding to the second one mentioned by Hu Shih.

Master Toin wrote:

There are those who repeat the phrase, "Walking is also Zen, sitting is also Zen; Zen is speaking, being silent, moving, resting." Or they ask, "Why should Zen be

restricted to sitting and lying down?" This group also misunderstands the words of the ancients.⁴⁰

Generally speaking, the true meaning of the phrase, "Walking is also Zen, sitting is also Zen; Zen is speaking, being silent, moving, resting," is that self and object are mutually integrated to such an extent as to become completely unified. After transcending integration, no matter what the surroundings, you are in a deep samadhi in which you do not lose your calm and immovable Zen concentration.

While it is not a mistake to say that a wave of your hand or a kick of your leg are all expressions of Zen, such a visceral understanding comes to those who have thoroughly seen their own true self-nature. For novices, it is a distant future ideal they can reach only with severe training. In principle, there is no denying that clearing one's throat or lifting a single finger are the workings and doings of Buddhahood, but in reality, unless we become so integrated with things in themselves that it is no longer possible to search for our own self, it is neither the workings of Buddha nor the doings of Buddha. Then we can be active in that realm of integration after having forged our integration sufficiently in zazen, no doubt our walking will also be Zen and our sitting will also be Zen. However eloquent we may be, unless we sit at least for the time it takes one stick of incense to burn we are studying Zen without sitting.

Hida Harumitsu, the founder of a discipline called “The Correct Method of Centering Oneself in Training,” once had a sitting competition with Master Toin. According to Hida, Master Toin sat with ease at first in the full-lotus position, then gradually raised the upper part of his body. At the very instant that Hida thought, “Ah, right there!” Master Toin’s upper body suddenly stopped moving. His center of gravity had settled right in the center of the pyramid formed by the posture of his legs and torso. With his compassionate eyes, calm expression, dignified appearance, and stately posture, he was immovable. There were no vulnerable openings, only the great spirit reflected in his posture of full emptiness. After all, it goes without saying that as long as the term zazen is used, it must be

substantiated by such a way of actual sitting before it may truly be called Zen.

We often have visitors, some of whom evidently have read widely on Zen Buddhism, who like to discuss difficult theoretical problems. Judging from their words, they seem to be great Zen men, but most of them have not sat enough for their vital buttocks to be familiar with their zazen cushions.

It is bad for those who are learning Zen to become like those who study Zen but do not sit. After all, you must have the discipline to sit every day. Ashikaga Takauji⁴¹ had an evil reputation as a traitor, but it is said that he sat zazen for some time every night and never failed to engage in this daily practice even when he became intoxicated. I think this should be a lesson to students of Zen.

The third category pertains to those who sit and practice Zen at the same time. According to Master Toin, these are people who do not have to force themselves to do zazen but who naturally come to sit. This is Hu Shih’s third category, the true zazen in which attachments fall away from mind and body.

We are likely to think, “I practice zazen,” but when that happens, zazen and self are two, and one’s existence with Heaven and Earth is no longer absolute. It is not that we do zazen, but it must be that

zazen does zazen. We should enter that state of true integration—even one time is enough—for without the experience of completely forgetting our self, this may be difficult to understand. Even if we count our breaths according to the breath-counting method, in the beginning, no matter what, we tend to be conscious of ourselves counting. Because our self which is counting is separated from the numbers being counted it cannot be said to be the true breath-counting method.

In the tradition of the Mugai-ryu (a school of swordsmanship) there is a phrase, “Mind and hands become one, like remembering and forgetting in oneness.” It refers to the experience in which the mind forgets the hands, and the hands forget the mind and both become totally one. For example, when one faces an enemy, in the time it takes to think, “This is where to attack,” one’s hands are

already in motion and cutting. In that interval there is no opening to insert even a strand of hair. Or when you cut your opponent, it is simultaneous with your mind moving to decide to do that. This kind of state where one’s self and one’s sword are joined in oneness is what is called mind and hands becoming one. Sitting and practicing Zen at the same time is the same condition. This is the Great Sitting where one’s existence between Heaven and Earth is absolute, with no Self outside of sitting and no sitting outside of Self.

For a person who sits and practices Zen at the same time, according to Master Toin, it goes without saying that they could do the second type, practicing Zen without sitting, but it is not an easy thing. A noble man does not court danger. You who are just beginning your training, first practice sitting thoroughly and sit all you can. As for what lies beyond that, leave it alone until it naturally emerges from yourself.

The fourth category is for those who neither sit nor practice Zen. They are ignored by Master Toin who writes, “It is hard to save those who do not have the right conditions” and “their favor is limited.” Accordingly, I, too, will not discuss this fourth group for the time being. The people who read this book are likely to be interested in starting

Zen discipline, and so I think it is all right to be totally unconcerned with the category of people who do not sit and do not practice Zen.

Beginners especially should beware of the bad habit of sitting without practicing Zen. I wish the reader to be most careful not to sit in the ways which are not in keeping with the true practice of Zen. To seek for some target outside of oneself is not the true meaning of zazen.

To sit in order to cure neurosis or to develop hara⁴² so as not to be frightened by things is really up to each person and probably is not bad. Whether such people will be guided from there to training according to the true way of Zen discipline depends on the ability of the instructor. But, if we recall the original aim of zazen, it is correct to say that zazen has no purpose other than zazen.

Zen Master Dogen said that to transmit Dharma means to transmit zazen. Explaining that Dharma is identical to zazen, he writes, "Ever since days of old, only a few people have known that the purpose of zazen is zazen."⁴³ He means that zazen is not the means of attaining any goal other than zazen and also that zazen is not the way of learning Zen. He goes on to say, "Zazen is something which makes us want to sit in zazen." It is hard for beginners to understand this, but it is an important point to remember.

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An Introduction to Zen Training, pp. 24-29