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Fukan-zazengi
The Standard of Sitting-Zen Recommended for Everyone
A commentary by Mike Chôdô Cross

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Eihei Dôgen (1200-1253)

Fukan-zazengi

The Standard of Sitting-Zen Recommended for Everyone

Master Dôgen's *Fukan-zazengi rufu-bon* (the Popular Edition)
Trans. Gudô Nishijima & Chôdô Cross. New Year 2003.

Now, when we research it, the truth originally is all around: why rely upon practice and experience? The vehicle for the fundamental exists naturally: where is the need to expend effort? Furthermore, the whole body far transcends dust and dirt: who could believe in the means of sweeping and polishing? In general, we never depart from the place where we should be: of what use, then, are the tiptoes of training?

However, if there is a thousandth or a hundredth of a gap, heaven and earth are far apart, and if a trace of disagreement arises, we lose the mind in confusion. Even if, proud of our understanding and richly endowed with realizations, we obtain special states of insight, attain the truth, clarify the mind, manifest a zeal that pierces the sky, and ramble through those remote spheres that are entered with the head; we have almost completely lost the vigorous path of getting the body out.

Moreover, remembering the natural sage of Jetavana park, we can [still] see the traces of his six years of upright sitting. We can still hear rumours of the transmitter of the mind-seal at Shaolin, spending nine years facing the wall. The ancient saints were like that already: how could people today fail to practice wholeheartedly?

So cease the intellectual work of studying sayings and chasing words. Learn the backward step of turning light around and reflecting it. Body and mind naturally drop off, and the original face appears. If we want to attain the matter of the ineffable, we should urgently practice the matter of the ineffable.

In general, a quiet room is good for experiencing Zen balance, and food and drink are taken in moderation. Abandon all involvements. Give the myriad things a rest. Do not think of good and bad. Do not care about right and wrong. Stop the driving movement of mind, will, consciousness. Cease intellectual consideration through images, thoughts, and reflections. Do not aim to become a buddha. How could it be connected with sitting or lying down?

Usually on the place where we sit we spread a thick mat, on top of which we use a round cushion. Either sit in the full lotus posture or sit in the half lotus posture. To sit in the full lotus posture, first put the right foot on the left thigh, then put the left foot on the right thigh. To sit in the half lotus posture, just press the left foot onto the right thigh. Let clothing hang loosely and make it neat. Then place the right hand over the left foot, and place the left hand on the right palm. The thumbs meet and support each other.

Just sit upright, not leaning to the left, inclining to the right, slouching forward, or arching backward. It is vital that the ears vis-à-vis the shoulders, and the nose vis-à-vis the navel, are directed away from each other. Let the tongue spread against the roof of the mouth. Let the lips and teeth come together. The eyes should be kept open. Let the breath pass imperceptibly through the nose.

Having readied the posture, make one complete exhalation, and sway left and right. Sitting in balance in the mountain-still state, *“Think the concrete state of not thinking.” “How can the state of not thinking be thought?” “It is different from thinking.”* This is the secret of sitting-Zen.

What is called sitting-Zen is not learning Zen meditation. It is just a peaceful and effortless gate to reality. It is practice-and-experience which perfectly realizes the Buddha’s enlightenment. The Universe is realized, untouched by restrictions or hindrances. To grasp this meaning is to be like a dragon that has found water, or like a tiger before a mountain stronghold. Remember, true reality is naturally manifesting itself before us, and gloom and distraction vanish at a stroke.

If we rise from sitting, we should move the body slowly. Rise with calm confidence. We should not be hurried or violent.

We see in the past that those who transcended the ordinary and transcended the sacred, and those who died while sitting or died while standing, relied totally on this power. Moreover, changing of the moment through the action of a finger, a pole, a needle, or a wooden clapper; and exact experience of the state through the manifestation of a whisk, a fist, a staff, or a shout, can never be understood by thinking and discrimination. How could they be known through mystical powers or practice and experience? They may be dignified behaviour beyond sound and form. How could they be anything other than a criterion that precedes knowing and seeing?

Therefore, we do not discuss intelligence as superior and stupidity as inferior. Let us not choose between clever persons and dimwits. If we make effort devotedly, that is just wholehearted pursuit of the truth. Practice-and-experience is naturally untainted. The direction of effort becomes more balanced and constant.

Broadly then, in this world and in other worlds, in India and in China, all similarly maintain the Buddha-posture, and solely indulge in the fundamental custom: we simply devote ourselves to sitting, and are caught by the still state.

Although there are myriad distinctions and thousands of differences, we should just pursue the truth through Zen balance. Why should we abandon our own sitting platform, to come and go without purpose through the dusty borders of foreign lands?

If we misplace one step we pass over the moment of the present. We have already received the essential pivot which is the human body: let us not pass time in vain. We are maintaining and relying upon the pivotal essence which is the Buddha's truth: who could wish idly to enjoy sparks [that fly] from flint? What is more, the body is like a dewdrop on a blade of grass. Life passes like a flash of lightning. Suddenly it is gone. In an instant it is lost.

I beseech you, noble friends in learning through experience, do not grow used to images and doubt the real dragon. Apply yourself to the path which is directly indicated and straightforward. Revere people who are beyond study and free of the intention to achieve. Accord with the enlightened state of the buddhas. Be a rightful heir to the balanced state of the ancestors. If you practice the ineffable for a long time, you will be ineffable. The treasure-house will open naturally, and you will receive and use it as you like.

Fukan-zazengi

The Standard of Sitting-Zen Recommended for Everyone

A commentary by Mike Chôdô Cross

The *fu* of *Fukan-zazengi* expresses universality. Master Dôgen wrote this exhortation to practice sitting-Zen not only for Japanese monks of his own time (1200-1254), but for all human beings of all times. This is why people who love sitting-Zen regard *Fukan-zazengi* as Master Dôgen's most important written legacy.

Now, when we research it, the truth originally is all around: why rely upon practice and experience?

The beating of the heart is the truth, the singing of birds is the truth. The universal force of gravity is the truth, and the natural response to gravity of a human organism on planet earth is also the truth. In us and all around us, these truths are always being realized. We need not try to get anything.

The vehicle for the fundamental exists naturally: where is the need to expend effort?

The regulatory function of postural reflexes is fundamental. The regulatory function of the autonomic nervous system is fundamental. The regulatory function of the information receptors in each body cell is fundamental. These functions work naturally to restore balance. Trying doesn't help them to work. We need not try to get anywhere.

Furthermore, the whole body far transcends dust and dirt: who could believe in the means of sweeping and polishing?

We need not try to get rid of anything.

In general, we never depart from the place where we should be: of what use, then, are the tiptoes of training?

Again, there is nowhere to get to. The truth is the integral state of natural balance — the state in which the postural reflexes, the autonomic nervous system, and the molecular information network which integrates the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems, are all working naturally. Trying to make these systems work only gets in the way.

However, if there is a thousandth or a hundredth of a gap, heaven and earth are far apart,

If a person sits with his head in the clouds, thinking the above thoughts, while gravity wreaks havoc on his body, there is a gap.

and if a trace of disagreement arises, we lose the mind in confusion.

If, in our intellect and in reality, we are pursuing different agendas, confusion is liable to result. When belief in our own intellect causes us to lie to ourself, to remain blind to our own unconscious motives, confusion is liable to result. A person who truly loves sitting-Zen will naturally tend towards a simple life, a life of integrity, in which the word fits the action, and the action fits the word.

Even if, proud of our understanding and richly endowed with realizations, we obtain special states of insight, attain the truth, clarify the mind, manifest a zeal that pierces the sky, and ramble through those remote spheres that are entered with the head; we have almost completely lost the vigorous path of getting the body out.

A boy is standing on the edge of a diving board by a swimming pool, feeling afraid and considering his options. Then he jumps in. In his jumping in, he transcends what he has been feeling and what he has been thinking. In jumping in, he gets his body out.

Getting the body out means stepping out of the prison of feeling and thinking and experiencing the essence of being; it means stepping out of the prison of “body” and “mind,” and experiencing ones real

existence as an integral human being. Going further, getting the body out means stepping out of the prison of automatic reaction, and truly acting.

Our friend with his head in the clouds has lost the path of getting the body out of the area of thinking. Another example is the Zen practitioner who is stuck in the rigid, military-style posture which feels right to him; he lacks the path of getting the body out of the area of feeling. Even the person who finds release in movement — the sportsman, athlete, martial artist, dancer, musician, rider, et cetera — while able, in his enjoyment of action, to get the body partially out of the area of thinking and feeling, is still liable to be trapped in the prison of automatic reaction. In cricket, for example, the fielding side's attempt to trap a batsman is based on the expectation that the batsman will react in a predictable way. Similarly, in the martial arts, a feint works by eliciting an automatic defensive reaction from the opponent. Only those who approach the ideal of a master batsman, or a master martial artist, are more or less able to choose their response to every situation.

The experience of how difficult it is to get the body out of the prison of automatic reaction makes it difficult to be proud of oneself — that may be one reason why sport can be such a great leveller in our world. A person with the intellectual pride that Master Dôgen describes here has not understand how difficult it is to get the body out of the area of automatic reaction and into the area of true, free action.

Moreover, remembering the natural sage of Jetavana park, we can [still] see the traces of his six years of upright sitting. We can still hear rumours of the transmitter of the mind-seal at Shaolin, spending nine years facing the wall. The ancient saints were like that already: how could people today fail to practice wholeheartedly?

The natural sage of Jetavana park means the Buddha, who, it is said, from leaving his family at the age of 29 spent six years training himself in the lotus posture before beginning his teaching career at the age of 35. The transmitter of the mind-seal at Shaolin means Master Bodhidharma, who, according to Chinese legend, spent nine

years just sitting facing a wall, in his effort to transmit the true practice of sitting-Zen from India into China.

So cease the intellectual work of studying sayings and chasing words.

The main thing is to walk the walk. To be able to talk a good talk is also a virtue, but it is never the main thing — and from the mouth of one who does not walk the talk it counts for nothing. In sitting-Zen we cease secondary concerns and come back to the main thing.

Learn the backward step of turning light around and reflecting it.

I firmly believe, from working with children who have what is known as attention deficit disorder, that the lack of attention they bring to schoolwork is caused primarily not by dysfunction of the thinking brain but by dysfunction at a much more primitive level.

Awareness in sitting-Zen also is primitive, but it is not a spotlight of attention concentrated on an object; it is more akin to the all-pervading brightness of the sun the morning. In sitting-Zen we unconcentrate our awareness, refusing to focus it on miscellaneous peripheral matters, bringing it back to the fundamental, integral reality of sitting. When we succeed in this, self-and-environment become suffused with the light of bare awareness.

One reason we experience sitting-Zen as a backward step may be because the most vital parts of the nervous system in sitting-Zen are the most ancient in evolutionary terms. The simple task of upright sitting and breathing, when performed with minimum effort, depends upon the most primitive structures and reflex pathways in the brain and spinal cord, and upon the balanced functioning of the autonomic nervous system in the body.

Going back still further, at the level of individual cells, the practice of sitting-Zen must promote integration and balance through the free flow of endorphins (“endogenous morphine”) and other informational substances.

In her book *Molecules of Emotion*, Professor Candace Pert demonstrates that not only does the nervous system regulate the

body but also, through the flow of these informational substances, the body regulates the nervous system.

It has been known since the early 20th century that the two components of the autonomic nervous system, the parasympathetic and sympathetic nerves are regulated directly by two neurotransmitters: acetylcholine and noradrenaline, respectively. What was not recognized until recently is the importance of other kinds of informational substances, such as slower-working hormones, and endorphins. *“It turns out that in addition to the classical neurotransmitters, all of the known peptides, the information molecules, can be found abundantly in the autonomic nervous system, distributed in subtly different intricate patterns all the way down both sides of your spine.”*

Thus, *“your brain is extremely well integrated with the rest of your body at a molecular level. Every one of the zones, or systems, of the network — the neural, the hormonal, the gastrointestinal, and the immune — is set up to communicate with one another, via peptides and messenger-specific peptide receptors.”*

In other words, it is not only that balance of the autonomic system in sitting-Zen causes individual body-cells to rejoice, but also that when an individual body-cell rejoices in sitting-Zen, that cell causes the autonomic nervous system to rejoice, by releasing endorphins.

These peptides, or information molecules, are *“messengers carrying information to link the major systems of the body into one unit that we can call the body-mind.”*

Body and mind naturally drop off, and the original face appears.

Our original face is that of a human being, an individual, integral, indivisible human being who belongs to the Universe and to whom the Universe belongs.

If we want to attain the matter of the ineffable, we should urgently practice the matter of the ineffable.

The way that can be described is not the true way. A rigid military-style posture is easy to describe and easy to practice. A slump is easy to describe and easy to practice. Balanced upright sitting is impossible to describe adequately and is difficult to practice.

In general, a quiet room is good for experiencing Zen balance.

Quietness suggests lack of noise, not necessarily lack of sound. A quiet room, for example, might be filled with the sound of birds singing and water flowing. To find such a room is not always easy. Sound therapists have argued that noise pollution in modern industrialized societies is the cause of an unrecognized health crisis.

At the same time, the presence or absence of noise is not independent of the ear of the subject. For example, my master Gudô Nishijima is in his own words “*strong to noise*,” whereas I am easily prone to be disturbed not only by modern sounds such as engines revving, but also by sounds with which humans have been living for millennia, such as dogs barking and children shouting excitedly.

The ear is the key organ for both hearing and balance. I suppose that my tendency to be disturbed by noise may have its basis in congenital dysfunction of the ear (deafness and balance problems run in both sides of my family).

Developmentally, the importance of the ear is indicated by the fact that it is the earliest of the sensory organs to establish a mature connection with the brain-stem — the vestibular, or VIIIth cranial, nerve is already myelinated at 6 months after conception. Many important primitive reflexes — notably the Moro (or baby panic reflex), tonic labyrinthine (or baby balance reflex), and the asymmetrical and symmetrical tonic neck reflexes — rely on appropriate vestibular input in order to come to maturity.

In sitting-Zen practice also, I think the ear is the key sensory organ, not only as the arbiter of head balance, but also in its role as integrator of the vestibular, proprioceptive, tactile, and visual senses.

So, not only for those of us with imperfect ears, but for all of us, a quiet room is good. If circumstances become noisy, we are faced with the choice of enduring the noise until it passes, or attempting to change our circumstances.

Food and drink are taken in moderation.

In moderation means not too much. As always, however, the middle way is appropriate. I remember walking up a small hill in Tôkyô with Gudô Nishijima while I was on a sparse vegetarian diet, and complaining of finding it hard going. He laughed and commented, *“Without fuel, the engine does not work!”*

Abandon all involvements. Give the myriad things a rest.

Forget plural concerns. Sitting-Zen is integration, integrity, unity, oneness.

Do not think of good and bad.

Here is one of the ironies of sitting-Zen practice. In order to realize a good posture, it is necessary not to think of good and bad. Good posture is primarily a function of the old brain. Thinking of good and bad stimulates structures in the new brain which interfere with the proper functioning of the more vital structures in the old brain.

Do not care about right and wrong.

Worrying about right and wrong is both a symptom and a cause of shortening of neck muscles. In order to go in the right direction, the direction of muscular release, it is necessary to stop worrying about right and wrong. In other words, trust the process.

Stop the driving movement of mind, will, consciousness. Cease intellectual consideration through images, thoughts, and reflections.

This is asking for a conscious decision not just to pause but to stop. An analogy used in the FM Alexander technique is the difference between pressing the pause button and pressing the stop button on a cassette player: pressing the pause button leaves the motor still

engaged, ready to continue only in one direction. Pressing the stop button makes the situation more open.

Do not aim to become a buddha.

The Sanskrit word “buddha” means one who is enlightened, one who is awake. But our true aim in sitting-Zen is only to be a human being, to be the human being we are. Trying to become a buddha stops us from truly being human. When we have no idea of becoming anything, then we are free to be truly human. Enjoy being a human being. Let awakening take care of itself.

How could it be connected with sitting or lying down?

Sitting and lying down are examples of actions in the daily round. Sitting-Zen is part of the daily round, but at the same time it sets a standard of action which regulates all other actions in the daily round, and so in this sense it is transcendent to and separate from the daily round.

Usually on the place where we sit we spread a thick mat, on top of which we use a round cushion.

The round cushion, called a *zafu* in Japanese is usually of thick black material, which is filled densely either with kapok or with a synthetic stuffing. The function of the cushion is to enable stability, wherein the sitting bones (ischial tuberosities) are supported by the cushion while both knees are on the mat. Without a cushion it is practically impossible for the sitting bones and both knees to be in contact with the supporting surfaces.

Either sit in the full lotus posture or sit in the half lotus posture. To sit in the full lotus posture, first put the right foot on the left thigh, then put the left foot on the right thigh. To sit in the half lotus posture, just press the left foot onto the right thigh.

These directions may be reversed every time you sit: for example, you might sit with left foot uppermost in the morning and right foot uppermost in the evening. If you cannot yet manage the half lotus posture, at least sit cross-legged. Try to ensure that your hip-joints

are higher than your knees. To accomplish this you may need extra support under your pelvis — e.g. put some big books under your cushion. Keep your pelvis as balanced as you can: don't twist your pelvis in an effort to get a knee on the floor. Also it is OK to support your knees with cushions, blocks, or books, so that you can direct the knees downwards into the support rather than straining to hold the knees in position. If you sit like this every day, regularly enduring a reasonable but not an undue amount of pain, gravity will gradually free up the joints of your hips, knees, and ankles, thus taking you in the direction of the lotus posture. Even if you suppose that you will never be able to sit in full the lotus posture, it doesn't matter: the important thing is to go in that direction, no matter how slowly. For this reason, I think it is better to sit cross-legged, however miserable your posture may feel, than to kneel.

Let clothing hang loosely and make it neat. Then place the right hand over the left foot, and place the left hand on the right palm.

Conversely, if the right foot is uppermost, the right hand also is uppermost. The lower hand may be held above the upper foot or it may be rested lightly on the foot.

The thumbs meet and support each other.

The thumbs are directed towards each other, and away from each other, in roughly a horizontal plane, *“making neither a mountain nor a valley.”*

Just sit upright, not leaning to the left, inclining to the right, slouching forward, or arching backward.

Upright balance requires the integration of a wide variety of sensory information — primarily through the vestibular, proprioceptive, visual, and tactile channels. The task of integration is different for each individual, depending on individual strengths and weaknesses. A person who is weak in the vestibular channel — one who is prone to motion sickness, for example — will tend to rely more on visual and tactile input. To improve the reliability of one's individual sense of upright balance, the help of a skilled teacher (for example, an experienced Alexander teacher) is likely to be invaluable in all cases.

For people with more serious sensory weaknesses — e.g. those exhibiting the symptoms of dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder, vertigo et cetera — assessment by a neuro-developmental therapist, to identify immature primitive reflexes and associated sensory deficits, may also prove enlightening.

It is vital that the ears vis-à-vis the shoulders, and the nose vis-à-vis the navel, are directed away from each other.

The vital thing to understand here is that this is not an instruction to adjust one's posture in a piecemeal fashion. It is in no way an instruction to achieve a good posture by trying.

Don't try to force yourself into a mould conceived by your intellect. If you are inwardly down, don't try to cover up your real state by sitting in an outwardly upright, but forced military-style posture. To do that, as I know all too well from experience, is to set up a war within yourself.

When we are inwardly and outwardly down, these directions — *“ears away from shoulders; nose away from navel”* — can help us find ease in our slumped state. Being at ease in the state we are in is conducive, eventually, to lengthening and widening in stature. This lengthening and widening is a process of opening up both outwardly and inwardly. It is a process which is quite different from straightening up by trying.

Trying results in undue muscular contraction, which is exactly the opposite of the condition of antagonistic muscular stretch that is called for here.

Muscles which can cause the ears and shoulders to be drawn towards each other include the trapezius, sterno-cleido-mastoids, scalenes, splenius, semi-spinalis, levator scapulae, rhomboids, pectoralis major and minor, latissimus dorsi, and rotator cuff muscles. Imbalanced conditions of fear, anger, greed, delusion, fatigue, et cetera, are associated with loss of proper tone of these muscles through over-contraction or undue laxity, or both. To direct the ears and shoulders away from each other is to observe the natural tendency for a condition of proper tone, or antagonistic

stretch, to establish itself in the musculature of the neck, shoulders, and upper torso.

To direct the nose and navel away from each other is to observe the natural tendency for the body to lengthen in stature. If there is antagonistic stretch throughout the antigravity musculature (i.e., proper tone, without undue contraction, of the extensor and flexor sheets which wind around the torso in a double spiral structure to connect the head, torso, and limbs) the tendency to lengthen in stature is associated with a simultaneous tendency to expand outwards.

This proper tone in the neck and shoulders, and this lengthening and widening direction in the torso, are vital to our health: without them, the bony skeleton, the nervous and lymphatic systems, the heart and lungs, and all the other vital systems and organs, are compressed downwards and inwards, which hinders their function.

Let the tongue spread against the roof of the mouth.

In Chinese medicine, this is thought to be important for connecting the *yin* and the *yang*.

Let the lips and teeth come together. The eyes should be kept open.

Keeping the eyes open allows the ocular head-righting reflexes the opportunity to work. Gudô Nishijima used to sit facing a vertical wooden pillar that was part of the wall of his house. He once joked that the pillar was his teacher.

Let the breath pass imperceptibly through the nose.

Audible breathing is a sign of constriction of the airways. In natural breathing reflex mechanisms keep the alae nasi dilated, so that breath passes silently.

Having readied the posture, make one complete exhalation,

Notice that this is not an instruction to take a deep breath. A deep breath is the natural result of a properly executed complete

exhalation, but Master Dôgen instructs us to employ the means, not to go directly for the end.

and sway left and right.

Swaying left and right, like a metronome, can help to give a sense of the head-neck-back working together in one integrated piece. Moreover, this movement stimulates the connection between balance mechanisms of the inner ear and many deep brain centres. Especially if it is done slowly as a daily practice, swaying can be a powerful tool to re-educate the vestibular system of the inner ear.

Sitting in balance in the mountain-still state, “*Think the concrete state of not thinking.*”

The words in quotation marks are the response of an ancient master to his student’s question: “*What are you thinking in the mountain-still state?*”

What are you thinking? is a good question, not one that should be easily passed over. It can be a very practical question. It is a question that people often ask each other in Alexander work.

FM Alexander described his technique as an exercise in learning how to think. He told his class of student teachers, “*None of you knows how to think.*” What Alexander meant by thinking was not what we usually mean by thinking.

Similarly, thinking in sitting-Zen, thinking the concrete state of not thinking, does not mean abstract consideration. It means thinking that is directed toward the integral state of being/action/reality/the ineffable — that which is not thinking.

Thinking like this is not something added onto the act of sitting in balanced stillness. This thinking emerges from the effort to sit in balanced stillness; and the act of sitting in balanced stillness may be the concrete manifestation of this thinking. Thus, Master Dôgen wrote in *Shôbôgenzô* that to wear out a sitting-cushion is right thinking.

“How can the state of not thinking be thought?”

This is the student’s next question: How? It also is a very good question, a question to which I too have eagerly sought the answer: What is the method? What is the technique? What is the secret?

The most vital mechanisms of balance and integration are not under the direct control of the thinking brain. The postural reflexes, for example, are unconscious and automatic. They have evolved over millions of years of human evolution, to enable us to cope automatically with life on Mother Earth, with her gravitational pull of 1 G; and this evolution is recapitulated in the development of each individual human being. How can consciousness stimulate into action that which is unconscious and automatic?

“It is different from thinking.”

This is the master’s answer. Not only is the state ineffable, but the how also is ineffable.

It is not the kind of answer I was seeking.

Is the inadequacy in the answer? Or is the inadequacy in the attitude of one who’s intellect seeks to know how?

This is the secret of sitting-Zen.

Yô means pivotal, vital, essential. *Jutsu* means art, technique, skill, means, artifice, trick. So *yôjutsu* means the essential technique or the secret.

The idea of a secret technique for sitting-Zen has held me in its grasp for over 20 years. If there is a secret technique, I would dearly love to know it. I would go to any lengths to discover it. Oh how I would love to possess the secret. I would like to distil it, bottle it up, and sell it. I would be a millionaire.

But sadly, I have come to see a pinch of irony in Master Dôgen’s words. Ultimately, I fear, there may be no secret technique, no trick.

The separate existence of “I”, “the truth,” and a “secret technique” by which “I” might realize “the truth,” is an illusion which the thinking brain constructs in the attempt to make sense of the unfathomable.

The ultimate secret is not a technique. The ultimate secret is only reality itself. In other words, the ultimate secret is that there is no secret. There is nothing to get, nowhere to get to, nothing to get rid of. There is only the integral reality of sitting, here and now, which is different from thinking.

What is called sitting-Zen is not learning Zen meditation.

In the word *zazen*, “sitting-Zen,” there is no separation between the sitting and the Zen. *Zazen* does not mean sitting and meditating, or seated meditation. It means sitting-meditation or sitting/meditation. The sitting is the meditation. The meditation is the sitting.

It is just a peaceful and effortless gate to reality.

The Japanese words *anraku* mean peaceful, effortless, easy, joyful, comfortable. Reality is the *Dharma*, not only objective reality, but reality as realized by sitting.

The ultimate secret of sitting-Zen practice, the one thing which above all my master in Japan took pains to try and teach me, is the difference between thinking and reality. It is the difference, to which I have previously alluded in this commentary, between talking the talk and walking the walk. One who talks a good talk may or may not be a true Zen practitioner. One who walks the walk, even if he never produces a word such as I am producing now, is in every case a true Zen practitioner.

It is practice-and-experience which perfectly realizes the Buddha’s enlightenment.

“*I shall endure hard practice now so that I may experience enlightenment in future:*” this attitude, in which means and end are divided, is not true sitting-Zen. It makes sitting-Zen into a vehicle for the egotistical fantasies of would-be saints and supermen.

Enlightenment in Buddhism does not mean to enter a spiritual realm as a saint, or to enter a special realm as a superman. It means to wake up to reality as the human being I really am.

The Universe is realized, untouched by restrictions or hindrances.

Again, the Universe does not mean something out there: it means the oneness of inside/outside, the integral reality realized in action.

To grasp this meaning is to be like a dragon that has found water, or like a tiger before a mountain stronghold.

In their natural element, the dragon and the tiger are totally without fear. When I was younger I saw the dragon and tiger as metaphors for martial virtues such as fighting spirit and physical strength, but on more mature reflection I see that these martial attributes sometimes represent a response to fear rather than an absence of it. I think it may be more true to see the dragon and tiger as symbols of quiet inner confidence. The fearlessness that sitting-Zen confers upon us arises not from the invincibility of a mighty warrior but rather from a human being's consummation of the longing to belong.

I was going to suggest that sitting-Zen confers on us the invincibility of a drop in the ocean, but that metaphor would miss something of the sense of individual dignity which is conveyed by the image of the dragon and tiger. Belonging does not negate individuality, and neither does individuality negate belonging. In sitting-Zen the Universe is realized, and if you grasp this meaning, whatever your peculiarities as an individual, you belong.

I think in particular of a late Buddhist friend of mine, Colin, a gay man who was much troubled by the perception that his family did not accept his sexuality. In retrospect, I wish that I had emphasized this aspect of Master Dôgen's teaching to Colin while he was alive. Master Dôgen is saying here that it doesn't matter what is your sexuality, race, disability, intellectuality or non-intellectuality: In sitting-Zen the Universe is realized, and if you grasp this meaning, you belong.

The physiological counterpart of this sense of belonging is balance. In recent years, work as an Alexander technique teacher and neuro-developmental therapist has afforded me glimpses into the profound mutual relation between balance and confidence — or, conversely, between imbalance and fear.

The Moro, or baby panic reflex, is a key to such understanding. It is most easily elicited through vestibular input — a midwife will sometimes let a new-born baby drop for a few inches to check that the reflex is present, as indeed the reflex should be present to aid the baby's survival and development in its first few months. After the first year of infancy, however, after the Moro reflex has reached maturity and been inhibited by the development of higher brain centres, it should no longer be possible to elicit the Moro reflex in normal circumstances. This is an accepted medical fact. What doctors generally do not recognize is in how many of us the Moro reflex fails to come to full maturity. Instead it remains partially aberrant, immature, uninhibited, causing undue reactions to any stimulus that we unconsciously perceive to be unexpected or threatening.

An immature Moro reflex will impair the functioning of not only the vestibular system, which is responsible for balance in the gravitational field, but also the autonomic nervous system, which is responsible for emotional balance.

One of the developmental functions of the Moro reflex is to oppose an even more primitive fear reaction known as the fear paralysis response (FPR). In the animal world, the FPR may be observed in the frog that plays dead or the rabbit caught in a car's headlights. In normal circumstances, the FPR should not be seen in human beings outside the womb, although in people who have an immature Moro reflex a remnant of the FPR will often be observable — in response to perceived danger, they will sometimes turn red as the Moro takes over and then turn white as the FPR comes through. Again, it may be that free divers who are able to remain under water for extraordinary lengths of time are in some way accessing the FPR.

The FPR is associated with extreme dominance of the parasympathetic nervous system, with pallor, loss of muscle tone,

and slowing of heart beat and respiration to conserve energy. The Moro, in contrast, is associated with extreme dominance of the sympathetic nervous system, with reddening of the skin, heightened muscle tone, and faster heart beat and respiration in preparation for rapid expenditure of energy for fight or flight.

Children who have retained these fear reflexes in immature form invariably suffer from both a tendency towards imbalance of the autonomic nervous system (labile emotions) and dysfunction of the vestibular system. But even if the fear reflexes are reasonably well integrated, if the child's sense of balance is imperfect, this vestibular imbalance alone will account for a tendency towards imbalance of the autonomic nervous system. Children who are insecure in their relation with gravity are emotionally insecure. The first thing that invariably changes with vestibular re-education, usually within the first few weeks, is that the child suddenly becomes more confident.

My work with such children, alongside Alexander work with supposedly normal adults, has led me to believe that such deep-seated physiological problems with fear and imbalance are present to some degree in almost all the people I meet here in the UK.

Is the aim of Zen practice to transcend these problems? Or is the aim of Zen practice to fix these problems? I think both. Here and now, the practice of sitting-Zen transcends these problems. Over many years, I believe that daily practice of upright sitting, including the practice of exhaling and swaying as Master Dôgen describes, may contain all that we need to re-educate the vestibular system and bring primitive reflexes to maturity. For me, this remains a hypothesis: I do not consider myself to be the finished article by any means. The example of Gudô Nishijima may be taken in support of the hypothesis: I have never seen him in a condition of undue imbalance or fear. On the other hand, by his own admission his inherent nervous constitution has always been strong, and so whether his sixty years of Zen practice have had a remedial effect in terms of the integration of primitive reflexes, remains an open question.

Putting such long-term questions aside, what can be said with confidence is that, here and now, the inherent balance and stability

of the lotus posture is conducive to a condition of relative fearlessness.

Remember, true reality is naturally manifesting itself before us, and gloom and distraction vanish at a stroke.

At the beginning of *Shôbôgenzô*, Master Dôgen states that the criterion for the transmission of the Buddha's truth is the balanced state of receiving and using the self. Gudô Nishijima has interpreted that "receiving the self" expresses the energy-conserving function of the parasympathetic nervous system, while "using the self" expresses the energy-expending function of the sympathetic nervous system.

When the sympathetic nervous system is unduly active — for example, when we are worrying about something or concentrating hard on some pressing task — reality takes on gloomy hue. When parasympathetic nervous predominates — for example, after a heavy meal — it is difficult to attend to reality.

In the state of natural balance, or state of zero, in which the antagonistically acting sympathetic and parasympathetic nerves cancel each other out, there is nothing other than reality. This is the fundamental teaching of Gudô Nishijima.

If we rise from sitting, we should move the body slowly.

I think that the use of the word "if", rather than "when," though a seemingly small matter, may provide a glimpse into Master Dôgen's secret thoughts. It seems to betray a certain detachment in regard to what may lie beyond the present practice of sitting-Zen.

Rise with calm confidence. We should not be hurried or violent.

In general, we are prone to react too quickly, before a conscious decision has had a chance to be made. Slowing down gives more opportunity for awareness of the gap between stimulus and response, wherein freedom resides.

To demonstrate to yourself how slower movement is conducive to greater attention, first write your signature at normal speed, and

then try to replicate your signature while writing as slowly as you can. You will find that at normal speed your signature emerges as an automatic response, requiring negligible attention. But to replicate your signature slowly requires you to attend to every moment of the process.

We see in the past that those who transcended the ordinary and transcended the sacred, and those who died while sitting or died while standing, relied totally on this power.

From here, Master Dôgen sings the praises of sitting-Zen: it promotes a state of integration, in which dualistic distinctions like ordinary and sacred drop away; it promotes a state of balance, such that masters of the past have breathed their last breath in an upright posture.

Moreover, changing of the moment through the action of a finger, a pole, a needle, or a wooden clapper; and exact experience of the state through the manifestation of a whisk, a fist, a staff, or a shout, can never be understood by thinking and discrimination.

For most of us, the feeling of autonomy is an illusion. We feel we have the power to change things, but in reality we just react, like robots. In the action of just sitting, masters of the past found freedom from the prison of automatic reaction. Each expressed this freedom in his or her own way: Master Gutei, for example, answered philosophical questions simply by raising a finger. Master Baso was famous for the power of his voice, as was Gautama Buddha, whose voice was known as “the lion’s roar.” Because of the virtue of his practice of sitting-Zen, when Master Baso let out a roar he did so in the same state as Gautama Buddha. Such actions are unfathomable to the thinking brain.

How could they be known through mystical powers or practice and experience?

Of the mystical powers discussed, for example, in the Lotus Sutra, one is the power to know others’ minds. But Master Dôgen explains in *Shôbôgenzô* that, if we want to know the body-mind of a buddha, this kind of mystical power is useless. The body-mind of a buddha is

realized in sitting here and now for the sake of sitting here and now; it is not realized by practice now for the sake of experiencing enlightenment in future.

They may be dignified behaviour beyond sound and form.

Dignified behaviour in the balanced state is something total, greater than the sum of its parts. Even if the most sophisticated audio-visual equipment in the world were used in the attempt to transmit the dignified behaviour of a Zen master, the attempt would fail. But when teacher and student are engaged in Buddhist practice in each other's presence, something which makes behaviour dignified is transmitted. Gudô Nishijima used the analogy of the sympathetic resonance of tuning forks.

How could they be anything other than a criterion that precedes knowing and seeing?

The criterion which is met by these instances of dignified behaviour is the natural state of integration and balance. It may be the state of autonomic balance of a baby in the womb, prior to any intellectual recognition, prior to the baby's opening of its eyes. Going back still further, it may be the state of a primitive single-celled organism like the tetrahymena, which, it turns out, produces insulin, and endorphins, and many of the other informational substances which work to integrate the body-mind of human beings and primitive bugs alike.

Therefore, we do not discuss intelligence as superior and stupidity as inferior. Let us not choose between clever persons and dimwits.

Relative intelligence is irrelevant because integration and balance are primarily a function of brain structures which are much more primitive than the neo-cortex, the thinking brain. For example, the cerebellar-vestibular system plays a vital role in integrating sensory input and regulating postural reflexes. The hypothalamus is vital in regulating the autonomic nervous system. The reticular activating system of the brain-stem is key to the regulation of wakefulness.

Even the most eminent neuroscientists do not yet have a clear understanding of how such deep brain structures co-operate with each other, and with the glands, spleen, bone marrow, lymph nodes and other vital organs of the body's self-integrating information network. But what has already become clear is that these older, deeper structures are more vital — not only for basic human health but also for everyday activities in walking, standing, and sitting — than the thinking brain.

If we make effort devotedly, that is just wholehearted pursuit of the truth.

The great attraction of Master Dôgen's teaching for me has always been that, while his philosophy is enormously wide and multifaceted, never simplistic, it always reduces down to this one simple teaching: just practice sitting-Zen. This struck me forcibly in my early attempts to make sense of *Shôbôgenzô*. Every chapter, while full of sentences that were unfathomable to me, always seemed to come to the same simple conclusion: just practice sitting-Zen.

Practice-and-experience is naturally untainted.

To sit for the sake of sitting is natural: remember the story of the young Shâkyamuni sitting quietly under the rose-apple tree and spontaneously entering into experience of the balanced state. It was the memory of this experience which, twenty years later, led him to give up extreme ascetic practices and thereby realize the truth of the middle way.

The direction of effort becomes more balanced and constant.

People who are unconsciously held in the grasp of the dream of enlightenment are prone to veer erratically between undue optimism and extreme disappointment. Lacking the integrity and constancy of the middle way, they are prone to say one thing and do another. Sitting as the Buddha did, in the middle way, having given up the expectation of enlightenment, is conducive to practising what we preach and preaching what we practice.

Broadly then, in this world and in other worlds, in India and in China, all similarly maintain the Buddha-posture, and solely indulge in the fundamental custom: we simply devote ourselves to sitting, and are caught by the still state.

“The ineffable” sounds more vague, while “the Buddha-posture” sounds more concrete; but in fact the Buddha-posture is ineffable, and practice of the ineffable is the Buddha-posture. If the Buddha-posture were a forced military-style posture, or an overly relaxed slump, its transmission could be received by reading a book. Because the Buddha-posture resides ineffably in the middle way, its transmission has been received in one line, from teacher to student through ninety generations, from the Buddha in India through Master Bodhidharma in India and China through Master Dôgen in China and Japan to Gudô Nishijima in Japan, Europe and the United States.

Words used in the work of FM Alexander, such as “*let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, to let the spine lengthen and the back widen,*” are in my opinion as close as we can get to expressing the Buddha-posture in words. Alexander himself acknowledged in regard to these phrases that “*I think them inadequate, but with a teacher present to demonstrate in person what he means by them, they serve their purpose.*”

With regard to the still state, the eminent Alexander teacher Marjory Barlow has spoken of “*a condition of stillness without fixity.*” Stillness in sitting-Zen does not mean absence of physical movement. The vital functions of respiration, circulation and digestion are just movement — albeit unconsciously motivated movement. The still state of sitting-Zen, called *samâdhi* in Sanskrit, has been explained by Gudô Nishijima as balance of the antagonistically-acting parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems. It is our natural state, and so it is not always necessary for us to pursue it. Rather, when we are enjoying sitting-Zen, the balanced state sometimes catches us, and we don't feel like moving out of the lotus posture. At those propitious times, the best times of our life, the stillness is like a warm bath — “*easy to get into, difficult to get out of.*”

Although there are myriad distinctions and thousands of differences, we should just pursue the truth through Zen balance.

There are many gates to balance: acupuncture, Bach flower remedies, chiropractic... every therapy in the book, and every activity from archery to yachting, before one arrives finally at Z for Zen.

For Master Dôgen, Zen means sitting-Zen. He might not have approved of conceptions such as Zen in the art of archery, Zen in the martial arts, Zen in the art of running, et cetera. Archery, martial arts, and running have their own value, but Zen is sitting-Zen, original and best. Thus, in *Shôbôgenzô*, Master Dôgen praises sitting in the lotus posture as the *samâdhi* which is king of *samâdhis*, i.e., the balanced state which is king of balanced states.

Why should we abandon our own sitting platform, to come and go without purpose through the dusty borders of foreign lands?

This alludes to a story in the 4th chapter of the Lotus Sutra: a youth runs away from his father and wanders abroad for many years, in which time his father becomes wealthy and well-connected. Finally the son's travels bring him, starving, weak and miserable, in search of low-paying menial work, to the house of his father. Seeing his father sitting on a lion seat, like a king, the son is afraid that the powerful man before him might bind him into slavery rather than hire him as a labourer. So he runs away again. The father sends out some lowly intermediaries to hire the son to move rubbish. Then, using skillful means, the father gradually promotes his son. After several years of gradual promotion, the son is not alarmed to hear him say, "You are as if you were my son." Thereafter the father gathers together a great assembly and announces that the son is indeed his own son, who shall inherit his father's seat.

Now that we have met it, the practice of sitting-Zen is where we belong. If, failing to recognize this, we omit to devote ourselves to the daily practice of sitting-Zen, we are like the son running away from his true inheritance.

If we misplace one step we pass over the moment of the present.

“*Back in the back*” is a phrase used among Alexander teachers to describe a condition in which the backbone remains strong and integrated, staying back relative to the head and the knees. Staying back in the back means, for example, not letting the neck bones collapse forward and down under the weight of the head, and not letting the legs pull the pelvis and lumbar spine forward and down towards the legs. A dog, when it is back in its back, wags its tail; it is not wagged by its tail. When we are back in our back, we are fully present, and no step is ever misplaced.

Conversely, when our head is pulling back and down into the past, while the chest is thrusting forward into the future, then every step is liable to further disintegrate the back, like the tail wagging the dog.

As Buddhists, in order not to pass over the here and now, we come back to open and relaxed sitting in the lotus posture — being a human being, back in the back, present in the present.

Open and relaxed sitting like this provides a standard for walking the Buddhist walk, the walk of freedom. When I first set eyes on Gudô Nishijima in the spring of 1982, he was walking towards the station where we were due to meet, along a crowded pavement. Like most of the other Japanese pedestrians, he was wearing a business suit, and in those days his head was not shaved. Yet I spotted him at once as the Zen master to whom I had just spoken on the phone. How? There was something in his walk. At that time I had never heard about staying back in the back, but I noticed a certain random quality to the placing of the feet. It seemed to tell me that this was a person who was living in the moment.

We have already received the essential pivot which is the human body: let us not pass time in vain.

To have been born with a human body affords us the opportunity of truly being a human being. Not a body, not a mind, but a whole human being, integrated by what the pioneering physiologist Sir Charles Sherrington called, *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*. His book of that title was first published in 1906.

By that time, FM Alexander was already established in London, teaching his practical method for improving integration. Forty years later, in discussing the relation between willed movement and reflex action, Sherrington paid the following tribute to Alexander: *“Mr Alexander has done a service to the subject by insistently treating each act as involving the whole integrated individual, the whole psycho-physical man. To take a step is an affair, not of this or that limb solely, but of the total neuromuscular activity of the moment – not least of the head and neck.”*

Considering that Sherrington was talking this talk of integration, and Alexander was walking this walk of integration, one hundred years ago, it is difficult not to feel that we in the west have wasted an awful lot of time during the past century. The teaching of integration has been here in our midst, but now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we see evidence of disintegration all around us.

In education, for example, ever greater emphasis is put on achievement of results, without proper consideration of the means whereby a child naturally develops. Thus, in education, in science, in politics, and in business, as in the sphere of individual action, the tail wags the dog.

We continue to acquire marvellous scientific knowledge of how the body integrates itself, but we haven't yet been inspired in large numbers to apply this knowledge to the integration of our own bodies.

But Master Dôgen's intention here is not to incite us to evangelical social reform. Effort to get others to change their tail-wagging-dog ways is generally a waste of time. Not to pass time in vain is to come back to ourself.

We are maintaining and relying upon the pivotal essence which is the Buddha's truth: who could wish idly to enjoy sparks [that fly] from flint?

The pivotal essence which is the Buddha's truth is the traditional practice of sitting in the lotus posture. When we sit in the lotus posture, with our head and backbone working as one integrated unit,

we give the nervous system the opportunity to do what it wants to do: to perform its integrative action. A moment spent sitting like this is never wasted. It puts us in touch with the eternity of the real Universe. It is not a spark flying from flint.

What is more, the body is like a dewdrop on a blade of grass. Life passes like a flash of lightning. Suddenly it is gone. In an instant it is lost.

Do not underestimate the power of a dewdrop on a blade of grass: it can reflect the whole of the moon and sky in one gulp. But it is fragile. It could fall at any moment and be absorbed back into the earth. The water may remain, but the reflecting dewdrop will be gone forever, and the white crescent moon may never shine as brightly again as it is shining in the vast blue sky of this particular spring morning.

I beseech you, noble friends in learning through experience, do not grow used to images and doubt the real dragon.

For Master Dôgen, like the Buddha, nobility is conferred not by birth, but by what one does with one's life, and the most noble behaviour of all is to sit in the lotus posture. To sit in the lotus posture is to walk the Buddha's walk. Don't be content just to talk the talk. Don't be like the collector whose house was stuffed full of dragon paintings, dragon statues, and dragon poetry, but who could not believe it when a real dragon came to visit.

Apply yourself to the path which is directly indicated and straightforward.

In Chinese and Japanese, the path and the truth is represented by the same word: *tao* or *dô*. It is transmitted and received not by talking the talk but by walking the walk. How can someone who says one thing and does another transmit the path which is directly indicated and straightforward? It is necessary to find a teacher who practices what he or she preaches.

Revere people who are beyond study and free of the intention to achieve.

Such a person is just one who practices what he preaches. Clearly understanding that Buddhism is neither materialism nor idealism, he preaches that there is nothing to get, nowhere to get to, and nothing to get rid of. He preaches this not only in his words but in the openness of his sitting posture. He has no hidden agenda, no secret intention to manipulate events externally or internally. Not only in his words but in the inward and outward openness of his sitting, he preaches that Buddhism is the straight realization of all concrete things and all mental phenomena.

Accord with the enlightened state of the buddhas.

This does not mean make effort to become a buddha. It means wake up to the integral reality of your own existence, not as a body, not as a mind, but as a human being. The essence of Master Dôgen's teaching is that to experience this awakening, described by his teacher in China as "*dropping off body and mind*," it is only necessary to sit in the lotus posture.

Be a rightful heir to the balanced state of the ancestors.

In the Buddhist tradition there is value in ideas such as the four noble truths, and there is value in material objects such as the robe and certificate of transmission, but what is supremely valuable in the Buddhist tradition, the ultimate criterion for the authenticity of the tradition, is the balanced state of the autonomic nervous system. For enjoyment of this state, there is one and only original and true method of entry: upright sitting in the lotus posture.

If you practice the ineffable for a long time, you will be ineffable. The treasure-house will open naturally, and you will receive and use it as you like.

I have studied balance in sitting-Zen, in Alexander work, and in neuro-developmental therapy. I have tried to understand the role of the vestibular system in gravitational balance, and the role of the autonomic nervous system in emotional balance. But ultimately the balanced state cannot be pinned down. I do not know what it is. A

weighing scale in balance has a certain unknowable or unpredictable quality, like the next footstep of an approaching Zen master.

Notwithstanding the ineffability of the balanced state, in each of my fields of experience, Zen, AT and NDT, practical work is predicated on the principle that if we practise balance, we become balanced. I think this is what Master Dôgen is promising here: practise it and you will become it.

How long is a long time? Once during a sitting-Zen retreat at a temple in Japan, when we were discussing the meaning of transcending family life, Gudô Nishijima said to me quite forcefully: “*We are not monks. We are not laymen. We are something ineffable.*” I had been his student for about five years at that time — not long. But amid the silence of the tea fields and ancient trees, it was as if we had been practising together for a long time. It may not be a question of hours and years, but rather of touching eternity, even if only for one moment of practice.

In this conversation, my teacher was not paying me a personal compliment. He was not saying, “*Congratulations. You have become ineffable.*” He was exhorting me to recognize the reality of the situation: Sitting-Zen is just practice of the ineffable. Who are we to worry about what we are?

Nevertheless I do worry. Am I up to the job of transmitting the balanced state of the ancestors? I do not know. Sometimes sitting-Zen makes me feel full of myself, and I understand the words of Master Dôgen to be a promise that, after 20 or so years of daily practice, I have fulfilled. Then, following some error of judgement or inappropriate reaction, self-doubt creeps in and I return to not knowing.

What I do know, what I do have confidence in, is that I am a human being, a fallible human being. As such, I belong to the intended audience of *Fukan-zazengi*, and I feel profound gratitude for the benevolence of Master Dôgen to write *Fukan-zazengi* not for the chosen few, not just for the special ones, but for all human beings.

As a realization, the ultimate aim of Buddhism is not simple, is not easy, is not possible to express in words, and is not possible to nail down and possess. But as an aim, the ultimate aim of Buddhism is very simple and everyone may know it: What Master Dôgen described as the treasure-house is our human self, our existence in the real world as a human being. The ultimate aim is simply to enjoy the balanced state of receiving and using this treasure of the self.

Mike Chôdô Cross, Spring 2003