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A View On Zen Yoga

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At age twenty five, I gave up corporate life in the pharmaceuticals industry, sold my house, gave the money away and became a Zen monk.

At the time my interest, my fascination was with meditation, specifically the utterly simple non-manipulative way of Shikan taza, “Just sitting” taught in the Soto lineage. My knowledge of physical yoga was zero. I shared the common perception that spiritual cultivation was a matter of the mind, not the body. Early steps into intensive Zen training soon put me right.

The practice involved just sitting in the meditation position, facing a wall for hour after hour. I was amazed at how painful it could be.

Great emphasis was placed on physical alignment, both within the sitting and in other activities of life, and this augmented the torture.

I was lucky to find other monks and Zen masters with knowledge of the body and its ways. I was taught how to move and stretch the body, how to massage and how to use accupoints to open the system energetically.

I stayed with it and gradually things shifted.

Zen practices helped me to realize that body, mind, emotions, energy, worldview and a host of other factors constantly interplay to create the

experience that we call being human and that working with any one of these levels affects all of them.

Before monastery life I'd always been quite "heady", an intellectual type. So it was a revelation for me to discover that my way forward was primarily through the body.

I was taught what would be commonly called in the west "yoga". In Japan it was sometimes called that and sometimes called "Zen Taiso" (literally Zen exercise) and sometimes "Doin" (from the Chinese "Dao Yin" (guiding and stretching). I also encountered the Japanese Makko-ho. These are a set of curative exercises originally developed from temple prostration practice that were taken up and extended by Shizuto Masunaga, populariser of shiatsu.

My main emphasis was always zazen meditation and as things opened up physically, the meditation not only became more comfortable but great shifts in awareness occurred too. The Buddha asserted that everything is constantly undergoing change – to the point that in truth there are no things, simply processes. This became utterly obvious, even in the context of something as seemingly solid as the physical body.

In some temples we practiced physical exercises together every day. In others informal groups of interested people practiced together. Over the past twenty-five years working with the body in this way has become a constant in my life.



Zen Master Miyamae Shinzan

In addition, my Zen teachers introduced me to the philosophy of Yogacara (lit yoga practice). Dating back to around the fourth century, Yogacara is one of the two main philosophical systems that underlies Zen. It contains a sophisticated psychology of awakening and emphasizes the practice of mindfulness of body, feelings, thoughts and [dharmas](#) (elements). This mindfulness leads not to an experience but to a total shift in the way we relate to all experiences. This shift is referred to in the Yogācāra tradition as *parāvṛtti*, "turning around".

I learned much from so many teachers. One of the most memorable had been a close student of Japanese teacher, Masahiro Oki, the adventurer, Zen monk and yogi who seems to have been the first to use the term “Zen Yoga”.

Oki founded a Zen Yoga dojo near the base of Mount Fuji and specialized in working with incurable medical cases. He had so much success that he was even invited to teach the Japanese Royal Family.

I learned that even after he passed on the teaching of asana yoga (“dozen” or moving zen) to students, Oki personally taught exercises to cultivate hara – a Japanese term for the abdomen. His definition of yoga practice was to “research, devise and practice how to live a life that would delight

your life-force.”¹



Masahiro Oki

As I was taught it, Zen practice in general and Zen Yoga in particular emphasize three intertwined areas – physical alignment, the flow of energy in the body and awareness or mindfulness (Jp “nen”).

Alignment

In Zen physical alignment is highly emphasized, particularly in the Soto Zen school, in which I trained for fourteen years.

Founder of the Soto school, Master Dogen wrote in his *zazen* (meditation) instructions. “First of all, we must sit with the spine erect, not leaning left nor right, forward nor backward. The nose must be in a vertical line with the belly button and our ears are to be in level with our shoulders.” I was fortunate to meet teachers who taught me how to prepare the body with yoga exercises for prolonged upright sitting.

¹ Oki, Masahiro; Inaugural Lecture for the Yoga and Natural Medicine Society; 29 September 1978; http://www.zencentral.com.au/oki_lecture_1978.pdf

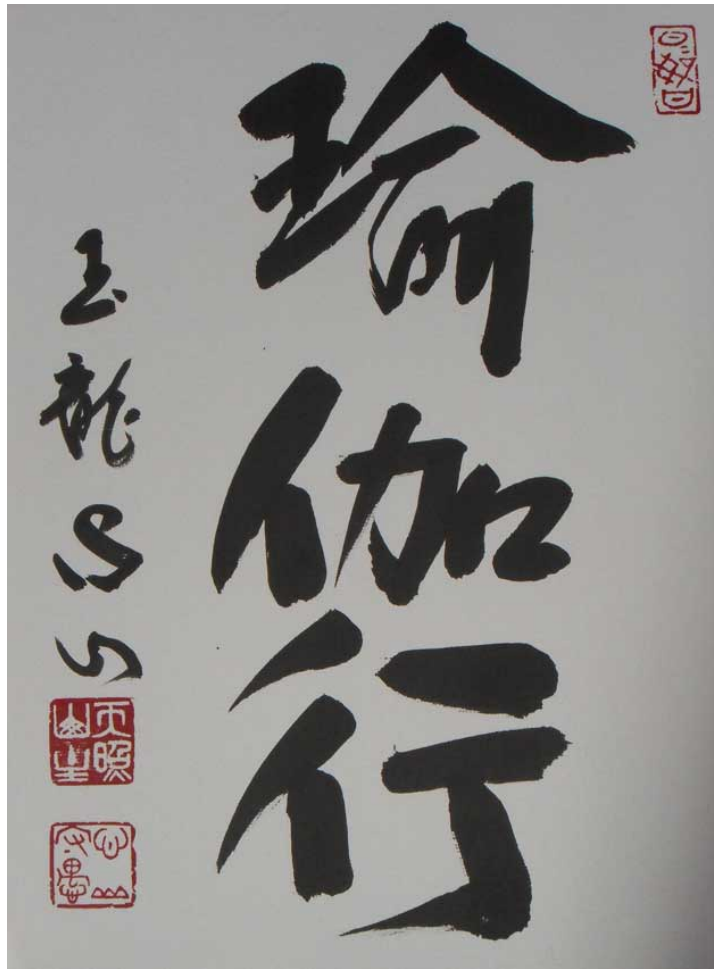
This alignment is then carried out into all activities. Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki teaches, “So try always to keep the right posture, not only when you practice zazen, but in all your activities. Take the right posture when you are driving your car, and when you are reading. If you read in a slumped position, you cannot stay awake long. Try. You will discover how important it is to keep the right posture... The state of mind that exists when you sit in the right posture is itself enlightenment.”²

Energy Flow

One of the reasons why correct posture is so emphasized is because it powerfully influences both our mind-state and our energy. Underlying Zen is a conception of the human system as an energetic phenomenon.

This energy or ki is seen as something that can be enhanced or depleted. Moreover the courses of energy flow are not random but follow particular directions and routes. Zen is based squarely in the East Asian conception of these energy routes (Japanese “myaku”). This energy has two basic dimensions – one that influences our health, wellbeing and emotional state, and one that takes us beyond any particular state to a condition of non-dual awareness.

² Suzuki, Shunryu; Zen Mind Beginner's Mind 40th Anniversary Edition; Shambhala Publications; 2010; p. 10



Yugagyō (Yogacara) Calligraphy by Miyamae Shinzan Roshi

I sometimes characterize these two energetic dimensions as:

1. Problem-solving – making life better, healthier, more alive.
2. The condition in which we realise that there was never a problem in the first place.

Energy and consciousness are inextricably linked – when we change the energy, we change the consciousness and vice versa. One of the traditional names for yoga, *doin*, translates as “guiding and stretching”.

Through the yoga practice we stretch and guide the energy in beneficial directions. There is a measure of intentionality in this work – energy follows intention. So intention is ultimately the means through which this guiding happens. The manifestation of intention may be through the breath, through imagery or simply through focused attention.

With this conception of the energetic systems of the body, it becomes

clear that we can be impacted by three possible problems.

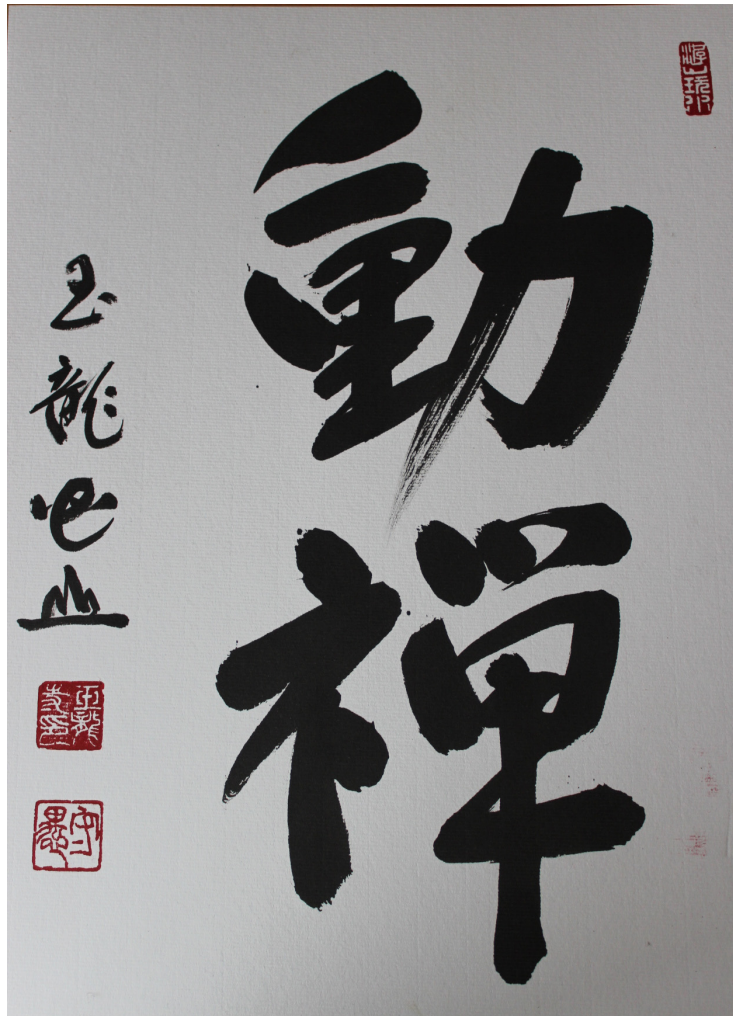
1. An energy route may be blocked.
2. There may be too little energy flowing through a particular route - a condition of depletion.
3. There may be too much energy flowing through a particular route - condition of excess.

And broadly speaking there are four types of person identifiable through this categorization:

1. People with the wellbeing energy circuits open and stable but the non-dual areas closed. These people will likely experience robust physical health and relative emotional wellbeing.
2. People with the wellbeing energy circuits functioning at less than optimal level, but the non-dual areas open and clear. These people may be very “spiritual” but may suffer from ill-health, low energy and often ungroundedness.
3. People with both areas functioning at minimal levels. Both wellbeing and non-dual awareness are compromised
4. People with both areas open and functioning well. A state of physical and emotional wellbeing combines with the ability to rest in non-dual awareness.

Obviously the fourth is the ideal condition and the one which we highlight.

The first condition seems to be that aimed for by much modern yoga practice. Although it is a worthwhile and noble aspiration to attain optimal health and wellbeing, the practitioner nevertheless remains in the world of duality, the world of this and that, of me and the universe. Zen is emphatic that within this worldview there is no happy ending to the story of life. However healthy and emotionally balanced we are, we remain in a condition of “this is me and that is the universe.” And the universe is huge, threatening and ultimately indifferent.



Dozen (moving Zen or asana): Miyamae Shinzan Roshi

Fortunately this is just a worldview. It is possible to live in a place which is beyond “this duality. This non-dual place is difficult to speak about because our language and thought patterns are inherently dualistic. We can reconnect with it, however.

The Third aspect of Zen yoga is the application of awareness or mindfulness (Japanese, “nen”). In yogacara philosophy there are four bases of mindfulness – mindfulness of the body, of sensations, of the mind and dharmas – phenomena.

With yoga practice we are primarily concerned with the body and sensations. The application of sustained non-judgemental awareness to the human body has a profound effect.

The Buddha himself is recorded as saying, “There is one thing that leads to happiness in the present and liberation in the future; and what is this

one thing? It is mindfulness of the body.”

How do we find this happiness and liberation? Strangely enough it is through coming face-to-face with our unhappiness and reactivity – in this case as they manifest in the body. One of the pioneers of Japanese yoga in recent years, Nagai Wataru, named his practice Makko-ho which means “the practice of facing things”.

It is a truism in psychotherapy that “the issues are in the tissues”. Bringing attention to areas of tightness, resistance and closure tends to unblock them.

The most important Zen master in my lineage in the last few hundred years is a teacher called Hakuin. He had a saying that Buddhas are like water and ordinary people are like ice. It is your awareness that causes the ice to begin to melt.

Sometimes people have the impression that the result of practice, of this melting, is an inert state – a puddling. But the truth is it’s not like that at all. Rather than a puddle, this liberated water becomes a fountain; it has shape and energy but nevertheless there’s an ungraspable quality.

Yogacara goes on to emphasize that, as the individual changes, they come to inhabit a different world. As the individual becomes free, flowing and dynamic, the experience of life takes on a similar quality.

At the beginning of an important Buddhist text, the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Buddha and his students are sitting and discussing the teaching that only one with a pure mind can see that this land is pure. A student, Shariputra comments, “As I observe this land, it is hills and hollows, brambles and gravel, and rocks and mountains—all filled with defilements.”³ The Buddha reaches out his foot and points just his big toe at the earth. Instantly Shariputra experiences his surroundings as utterly beautiful, radiant with jewels and perfection. For a moment, he sees the environment through the eyes of a Buddha. Then the Buddha withdraws his foot and Shariputra’s vision returns to his normal condition. The dust is thick; the brambles are sharp. Wishing you great success and deep transformation in your yoga practice.

³ McRae, John R. (trans) The Vimalakirti Sutra: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research
2004 p.78