

A NATURAL MINDFULNESS



MARK. A. FOOTE

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A Natural Mindfulness
by Mark A. Foote

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Contents

Introduction	xi
Disclaimer	xiii
Waking Up and Falling Asleep	17
Post: "I tried your practice last night"- humbleone, from "The Dao Bums"	21
Post: Feedback from 'humbleone'	25
Post: The Case of the Suffocating Woman	29
Post: Old Habits	35
D. L. Bartilink, "No Special Effort", and the "Best of Ways"	39
Post: Limbering Up	45
Post: Common Ground	49
Post: Shunryu Suzuki on Shikantaza and the Theravadin Stages	53
Post: "Take the Backward Step"	59
Post: Applying the Pali Instructions	63
Post: The Inconceivable Nature of the Wind	75
Post: The Diamond Trap, the Thicket of Thorns	81
Post: "The Place Where You Stop and Rest"	95
Post: Just to Sit	105
Appendix	119
"For a Friend", Revisited	121
Post: A Way of Living From the Early Record	127
	137
Illustrations	147
Ilio-Lumbar Ligaments	148
Transversus Abdominus	149
External Obliques	150
Internal Obliques	151
Obturator	152

Iliosacral Ligaments	153
Obturator--Hip Extension	154
Ilio-Tibial Band Tensors	155
Sartorius Muscles	156
Fascial Displacement--Sacrum	157
Abdominals	158
Facial Displacement--Lower Back	159
Anterior Origins	160
Posterior Origins	161
Fascial Displacement	162
Dermatomes	163
Index	165

INTRODUCTION

The writings that have been the most useful to me from the websites “The Mudra of Zen” and “Zazen Notes” are now collected and edited as “A Natural Mindfulness”.

My thanks to the authors and individuals who provided the information and the inspiration that allowed me to write “A Natural Mindfulness”.

DISCLAIMER

Here's a comment I received about my writing:

I must point out that your writing often carries an authoritative tone, intentional or no, that is not so much questioning as a student would, but of explaining your own interpretations. This can be confusing for new people.

... my point is, in writing to clarify your own thoughts, you're not being honest with the reader. By taking the position of explaining something (for your own benefit), you are putting yourself out there as an authority that has something to explain (which leads to the confusion of others looking for guidance).

("Rinzai Zen Discussion", Facebook public group)

The complaint here is really that I'm not a lineage-holding, authorized teacher in any wisdom tradition, and yet I comment on texts that belong to the Buddhist tradition, and I comment on seated meditation as it is practiced in Zen Buddhism. Apparently the author of the criticism feels that if I am not an authorized teacher, nothing that I write on these topics can be appropriate for a Zen student to read, and he fears that the tone with which I write will cause some Zen students to think otherwise.

I can only say, that I can't help the style with which I write. If I did not strive to be beyond doubt in what I have to say, I might not find the words I myself need to hear.

If anyone should be confused by what I have to say or the manner in which I say it, I would recommend the advice given by Gautama the Buddha twenty-five hundred years ago:

Therefore... be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge unto yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to any one besides yourselves. And how... is (one) to be a lamp unto (oneself), a refuge unto (oneself), betaking (oneself) to no external refuge, holding fast to the Truth as a lamp, holding fast as a refuge to the Truth, looking not for refuge to any one besides (oneself)?

Herein, ... (one) continues, as to the body, so to look upon the body that (one) remains strenuous, self-possessed, and mindful, having overcome both the hankering and the dejection common in the world. [And in the same way] as to feelings... mind... mental states, (one) continues so to look upon each that (one) remains strenuous, self-possessed, and mindful, having overcome both the hankering and the dejection common in the world. (1)

The material in "A Natural Mindfulness" is provided for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute providing medical advice or professional services.

1) DN 16, © Pali Text Society vol II p 108; Horner’s “body, feelings, mind, and mental states” [e.g. MN 118] substituted for Rhys Davids’ “body, feelings, moods, and ideas”.

WAKING UP AND FALLING ASLEEP

I have a practice that I'd like to offer, something that I believe is already part of the general repertoire of this community, even though the details I will provide here are new.

The practice I have in mind is a practice that everybody is already familiar with, even if they don't think of it as a practice. What I'm referring to is waking up in the morning, or falling asleep at night; if you've ever had a hard time waking up or falling asleep, then you know that there can indeed be a practice! In my experience, the practice is the same, whether I am waking up or falling asleep: when I realize my physical sense of location in space, and realize it as it occurs from one moment to the next, then I wake up or fall asleep as appropriate.

This practice is useful, when I wake up in the middle of the night and need to go back to sleep, or when I want to feel more physically alive in the morning. This practice is also useful when I want to feel my connection to everything around me, because my sense of place registers the contact of my awareness with each thing, as contact occurs.

Just before I fall asleep, my awareness can move very readily, and my sense of where I am tends to move with

it. This is also true when I am waking up, although it can be harder to recognize (I tend to live through my eyes in the daytime, and associate my sense of place with them). When my awareness shifts readily, I realize that my ability to feel my location in space is made possible in part by the freedom of my awareness to move.

I sometimes overlook my location in space because I attach to what I'm feeling, or I'm averse to it, or I ignore it. The result is that I lose the freedom of my awareness to shift and move, and I have difficulty relaxing or staying alert. When I allow what I feel to enter into where I am, then my awareness remains free, and I can relax and keep my wits about me.

To me, a lot of what this community is about is living life from exactly where we are. When we really live from where we are, we discover that everything and everyone around us is a part of where we are, and that our actions truly belong to where we are. This kind of action is the only really selfless action I know.

There's nothing special about having a sense of place, and yet I find my peace of mind depends on my sense of place most of all. That is why I would like to recommend the practice of "waking up and falling asleep" to everyone.

POST: “I TRIED YOUR PRACTICE LAST NIGHT”
- HUMBLEONE, FROM “THE DAO BUMS”

(Feb 27 2012)

Hi Mark, so I tried your practice last night. My ideal sleep time should be from 10PM-6AM.

I woke up at 4:30 AM. After a quick drink of water, I returned to bed and tried your practice.

I hope I did it correctly, I was somewhat surprized that my mind moved around quite a bit. Not fast, but in slow motion the awareness would shift, from left cheek to right side of torso etc.. The end result was a light sleep state, but I was glued to the bed and then woke up exactly at 6AM, feeling refreshed like I had a complete 8 hours of sleep.

If I am able to gain control over my sleep that would be very significant step for me indeed. Could you please provide some feedback, as to whether I did it correctly?

All the best, humbleone

Hi, humbleone,

Great to hear that you had some success with what I'm describing as "waking up and falling asleep". Yes, that sounds like the practice; I'm grateful that you tried it at that hour of the morning, as in my experience that's a very good time to see the mind moving.

If you do any seated or even standing meditation in the morning, you may see why I'm referring to the practice as "waking up and falling asleep". In waking up, I am looking to relinquish my activity, and allow the place of mind to generate activity out of the stretch I find myself in. I have a description of the translations of motion in the lotus, yet in the end I am convinced that everything I need to know I learn by being where I am, as I am. I just have to be open to it.

Mark

POST: FEEDBACK FROM ‘HUMBLEONE’

(Mar 5 2012)

So after a week of your “Waking Up and Falling Asleep”, I am pleased to say it works for me EVERYTIME without fail. Nights of insomnia, tossing and turning, hopefully are behind me. This has made me much more productive during the wakeful hours.

The real challenge for me is to practice it during the day. As you mentioned there is something special about the early morning hours, the state of mind/body after a few hours of sleep that makes this practice very conducive to working.

-humbleone

(Mar 19 2012)

I have taken it a bit further, experimenting with it during the day. same practice, find the location of the consciousness.

It pulls me into the present. the feeling last 2-3 seconds, but it is something that I have never experienced before. being really present, here and now. the mental projection into the future stops, the past stops. I am just here and

now. no future plans or worries. no goals, no dreams that are waiting to be fulfilled. time stops. no where to go. I am just here and now.

I think you are on to something, with broad applications.

-humbleone

POST: THE CASE OF THE SUFFOCATING WOMAN

(May 2 2017)

I'm reading "Embracing Mind", a collection of some of the talks Kobun Chino Otogawa offered at retreats (sesshins) between 1974 and 1993. Kobun offers some interesting comments about seated meditation, among them:

It's impossible to teach the meaning of sitting. You won't believe it. Not because I say something wrong, but until you experience it and confirm it by yourself, you cannot believe it. (1)

I came across an article a few days ago by the psychiatrist Scott Alexander, entitled The Case of the Suffocating Woman. Here's the way Dr. Alexander described his case:

A 20-something year old woman comes into the emergency room complaining that she can't breathe. The emergency doctors note that she's breathing perfectly normally. She says okay, fine, she's breathing normally now, but she's certain she's about to suffocate. She's having constant panic attacks, gasping for breath, feels like she

can't get any air into her lungs, been awake 96 hours straight because she's afraid she'll stop breathing in her sleep. She accepts voluntary admission to the psychiatric unit with a diagnosis of panic disorder (2)

Dr. Alexander did a little checking online, and discovered some research by a man named Klein:

Klein theorized that the brain has a “suffocation alarm”, which does some pretty complicated calculations to determine whether you're suffocating or not. Its inputs are anything from blood CO2 level to very high-level cognitions like noticing that you're in space and your spacesuit just ruptured. If, after considering all of this, and taking into account confounding factors like whether you're exercising or voluntarily holding your breath, it decides that you're suffocating, it activates your body's natural suffocation response.

And the body's natural suffocation response seems a lot like panic attacks. Increased heart rate? Check. Gasping for breath? Check. Feeling of impending doom? Check. Choking? Check. Chest pain? Check. Faintness? Check. (2)

Down on the comment thread, someone named Liz added the following remarks:

My husband is a spear fisherman and he can hold his breath underwater for almost four minutes. He was trained to do so in a manner similar to how they train Navy Seals. They are able to do relaxation techniques and override their body's impulse to panic. I'm not sure if everyone can accomplish

this or if they are outliers. But one important point that I think fits into the topic here. They have to be wary of something called shallow water black-out. They will hold their breath without the panic response literally until they pass out underwater, and drown (even if they are only sitting on the bottom of a pool with a foot or two of water above them). (3)

In one of his letters, the twelfth-century Chinese Zen teacher Yuanwu wrote:

... Be like a person who has died the great death: after your breath is cut off, then you come back to life. (4)

To my mind, Yuanwu is describing something similar to the Navy Seal training: the abandonment of activity in connection with the movement of breath, through continued relaxation even in the midst of suffocation panic. On the other side of that panic, an acuity of the senses necessary to the movement of breath comes forward.

Sitting allows for the total cessation of habitual activity in the movement of breath. The open secret of such experience has to do with suffering, as Kobun explained:

When we ask what it is which senses this suffering, we have to understand that the one who is breathing in and out, in and out, doesn't suffer. But it does sense suffering. (1)

Kobun was right that no one is going to believe that "the one who is breathing in and out, in and out, doesn't suffer" until they experience it for themselves, and that the meaning of *zazen* practice derives from such experience.

Nevertheless, “The Case of the Suffocating Woman” sheds light on exactly where the difficulty is in having such experience, and that is in the relaxation of specific activity of the body that comes to mind right through the panic of sensing that the breath is cut off.

To me, Kobun embodied “the one who ...doesn’t suffer” in his actions.

Kobun died in Switzerland, when he went into a shallow landscape pool after his five-year-old daughter, Maya, who had somehow fallen in and was drowning. I spoke to the guy who owned the property with the pool, and he shook his head in disbelief that Kobun had actually drowned, because the pool was only about three feet deep.

Kobun once ended a talk by saying, “You know, sometimes zazen gets up and walks around.” It’s my belief that it was in fact zazen that went into the pool after Maya, and that it was the one who does not suffer (but nevertheless senses suffering) that remained under the surface by her side.

1) “Embracing Mind”, edited by Cosgrove & Hall, © 2015 Jikoji Zen Center, p 48.

2) “The Case of the Suffocating Woman”, posted on Slate Star Codex April 5, 2017 by Scott Alexander.

3) *ibid*, commenter “liz”, April 5, 2017 at 10:41 am.

4) “Zen Letters: Teachings of Yuanwu”, © 1994 J.C. and Thomas Cleary, p 84.

POST: OLD HABITS

(Apr 24 2018)

Recently I read a forum post by a piano teacher (and life coach), who said that it's hard to leave old habits behind because of muscle memory. I agree with him that there is muscle memory involved, but at least as far as old habits in sitting, there's also the panic of the suffocation response. Sooner or later, I begin to feel like the posture is affecting my ability to breathe, and there's a certain anxiety associated with that. Knowing about the suffocation response helps me to realize how much I need to emphasize relaxation, if I want to overcome old habits.

Seated meditation has been described as "straightening the chest and sitting precariously" (1). Precariousness in posture also gives rise to anxiety, yet if calm prevails, precariousness can bring forward the senses behind the feeling of place in awareness.

In modern neurobiology, there's a recognition that dysfunction in any of the senses connected with balance (equalibrioception, proprioception, graviception, and ocu-loception) can result in an out-of-body experience, and that the precise nature of that out-of-body experience will depend on exactly which sense is dysfunctional (2).

In some out-of-body experiences, the feeling of place associated with awareness occurs in two locations at once. Such a duality is a particular cause of distress to those who experience it, because the self is so closely identified with a singular feeling of place in awareness.

Our most intimate feeling of self, then, is a coordination of particular senses that gives place to awareness, and like the involuntary activity in the body that comes forward as I relax through the suffocation response, the involuntary activity of the particular senses involved in the experience of place comes forward as I find calm in the face of precariousness.

- 1) "Master Cheng's Thirteen Chapters on T'ai-Chi Ch'uan", by Cheng Man-Ch'ing, © 1982 Douglas Wile, p 21.
- 2) Blanke and Mohr, "Out-of-body experience, heautoscopy, and autoscopic hallucination of neurological origin Implications for neurocognitive mechanisms of corporeal awareness and self consciousness", *Brain Research Reviews*, Vol. 50, Issue 1, 1 December 2005, p 184-199.

D. L. BARTILINK, "NO SPECIAL EFFORT", AND THE "BEST OF WAYS"

D. L. Bartilink took measurements of the pressure generated in the abdomens of weightlifters as they lifted weights. From his measurements, he concluded that the abdominal muscles generate pressure in the "fluid ball" of the abdomen (as he termed it) in proportion to the amount of weight that is lifted. He surmised that pressure generated in the abdomen supports the lower spine, especially when the curve of the lower spine is flattened (as it is when weight is lifted from the floor) (1).

Bartilink theorized that animals (as well as humans) make use of pressure in the "fluid ball":

Animals undoubtedly make an extensive use of the protection of their spines by the tensed somatic cavity, and probably also use it as a support upon which muscles of posture find a hold... (1)

Through measurements of electrical activity, Bartilink found that the muscles that induce pressure in weightlifting are the transverse and oblique abdominals, along with the muscles of the pelvic floor; the diaphragm and rectus are not involved. The diaphragm, he stated, can

move freely even with pressure in the abdomen from the other muscle groups. This, he speculated, might be an evolutionary step:

Breathing can go on even when the abdomen is used as a support and cannot be relaxed. This means that the range of flight of an animal having the lungs outside the fluid ball is greater than that of an animal who has its lungs in the single body cavity, which can just make a spurt and then has to stop to breathe. Could it be that it is for this reason that the mammals have developed a diaphragm? (1)

The abdomen can be made to provide support without the use of the abdominal muscles if the breath is held and pressure is applied by the diaphragm, but as Bartilink noted, to use the diaphragm in such a manner may defeat the purpose of having one.

Moshe Feldenkrais observed that people often hold their breath when they get up out of a chair. He saw the restriction of the movement of breath as a failure to realize physical equilibrium as the basis for movement; he explained how the movement of standing follows from a state of equilibrium and a shift in the center of gravity:

...good upright posture is that from which a minimum muscular effort will move the body with equal ease in any desired direction. This means that in the upright position there must be no muscular effort deriving from voluntary control, regardless of whether this effort is known and deliberate or concealed from the consciousness by habit.

...When the center of gravity has really moved for-

ward over the feet a reflex movement will originate in the old nervous system and straighten the legs; this automatic movement will not be felt as an effort at all. (2)

To help his students learn how to stand without holding their breath, Feldenkrais taught three simple exercises that could be done while seated on a chair: first, he said, lean the upper body forward and backward; second, tip the upper body from side to side; and third, with the torso, neck and head held in a straight line, circle the top of the head around the base of the tailbone.

The exercises that Feldenkrais provided engage the vestibular organs through movement of the body. The vestibular organs detect motion in the three spatial planes, and provide the sense of equilibrium. Important to their function are the otoliths, structures inside the vestibular organs that respond to gravity and movement.

To perceive a center of gravity one more sense must be brought into play, and that is proprioception, the sense of the relative positions of the parts of the body (initiated by proprioceptors in the muscles, tendons, and joints).

My experience is that if awareness of the senses comes forward, and in particular if awareness of the vestibular, otolithic, and proprioceptive senses comes forward, then activity to generate or sustain pressure in the "fluid ball" of the abdomen takes place automatically as the long or short of inhalation or exhalation is comprehended.

The practice that Gautama the Buddha described as the "the best of ways" (3) opens with these particulars:

Mindful [one] breathes in. Mindful [one] breathes

out.

Whether [one] is breathing in a long (breath), breathing out a long (breath), breathing in a short (breath), breathing out a short (breath), one comprehends "I am breathing in a long (breath), I am breathing out a long (breath), I am breathing in a short (breath), I am breathing out a short (breath)." (4)

In my experience, the relaxed comprehension of the long and short of inhalation and exhalation is only possible when there is support for the spine from pressure in the "fluid ball" of the abdomen. The pressure in the "fluid ball", meanwhile, is generated through activity initiated by the "old nervous system", as a reflex response to the location of my awareness.

I identify my self with the location of my awareness, and for me as for most people, the location of that awareness is singular. There are people who experience themselves as being in two locations at once during a particular kind of out-of-body experience, but this is rare (5). When I sense where I am, I can experience the motions that Feldenkrais pointed out as a part of my sense of where I am, and I can likewise experience the weight and placement of the muscles, ligaments, and joints of the body as a part of where I am.

The trick is to allow for movement in where I am, even when I'm not moving. It's a trick because my eyes can reset my sense of location in space, and I become accustomed to feeling the location of my awareness as fixed with respect to my eyes.

I think I learned to disassociate where I am from what I

see by sitting in the dark, and by continuing to practice through the experience of actually falling asleep.

The flattening of the lower back in a seated posture, especially in the half or full lotus posture, can precipitate the experience of the vestibular, otolithic, and proprioceptive senses as awareness takes place, out of a need for support for the lower back in inhalation or exhalation. What Gautama referred to as the comprehension of the long and short in inhalation and exhalation is only natural in such circumstances, to engage the reflex activity of "the old nervous system" appropriately.

Dogen's Soto school is especially associated with a teaching that the activity of *zazen* (literally, "seated Zen") requires no special effort. The science provided by D. L. Bartilink and the description provided by Moshe Feldenkrais make possible an explanation of why that is: the senses come forward naturally out of necessity, and with the experience of the particulars of sense, activity to pressurize the "fluid ball" of the abdomen takes place automatically in support of the spine. The activity of *zazen* is really "reflex movement (that originates) in the old nervous system", and no special effort is required.

1) D.L. Bartilink, "The Role of Abdominal Pressure in Relieving the Pressure on the Lumbar Intervertebral Discs"; *J Bone Joint Surg Br.* 1957 Nov; 39-B(4):718-25.

2) "Awareness Through Movement", © 1972, 1977 Moshe Feldenkrais, p 76, 78.

3) *Sanyutta Nikaya* 54.11, © Pali Text Society vol. V p 289.

4) *MN* 118, © Pali Text Society vol. III p 124.

5) Blanke and Mohr, "Out-of-body experience, heautoscopy, and autoscopic hallucination of neurological origin Implications for neurocognitive mechanisms of corporeal awareness and self consciousness", *Brain Research Reviews*, Volume 50, Issue 1, 1 December 2005, Pages 184-199.

POST: LIMBERING UP

(Mar 7 2015)

Of late, I spend a few minutes when I first sit down doing what you suggest, letting attention go to the area of my sacrum and its movement vis-a-vis the ilia. I also rock back and forward, sideways, and observe the rotation that naturally occurs. Then I think of the basic Alexander Technique instruction, "Let my neck be free." etc. Once I've adjusted and settled in this way, I put my hands in the mudra, and start my zazen. I also use double mats below the cushion at home, or even bed pillows.

Since I started limbering up in this way, I can sit comfortably in half-lotus for two rounds of 40 minutes, with kinhin between. Not just bearably, actually in comfort. I didn't even know that was a possibility. (1)

The part about "let my neck be free", that's interesting to me.

In my writings, I put forward Bartilink's findings about "pressure in the fluid ball of the abdominal cavity" and support for the lower spine, including his observation that activity in the muscles of the pelvic floor and in the

muscles of the abdomen and chest is responsible for the "pressure in the fluid ball". Sometimes I find that the activity in the transverse muscles carries up into the neck and head as well, so maybe there's also support for flexion and extension in the neck when there's "pressure in the fluid ball".

Sometimes transverse muscles at the level of a particular vertebrae are a part of my breathing, and maybe I'm more aware of my neck and head when they are. I can't really say that I'm familiar with Alexander Technique instructions ("let my neck be free", etc.), but I do try to relax the thing that enters into where I am.

1) "Shinchan Ohara", Brad Warner's "Hardcore Zen" blog, comment section, March 4th 2015.

POST: COMMON GROUND

(Nov 12 2022)

I find the “turtle-nose snake” case in the “Blue Cliff Record” helpful in feeling my jaw and skull in the balance of the body. Ch’an teacher Yuanwu offered the case (I’ll include only the first line):

‘Hsueh Feng taught the assembly saying,
“On South Mountain there’s a turtle-nosed
snake. All of you people must take a good
look.”’

(Yuanwu’s commentary) ... When Hsueh Feng speaks this way, ‘On South Mountain there’s a turtle-nosed snake,’ tell me, where is it?

My late teacher Wu Tsu said, “With this turtle-nosed snake, you must have the ability not to get your hands or legs bitten. Hold him tight by the back of the neck with one quick grab. Then you can join hands and walk along with me.” (1)

The nose that came to mind when I read the case was a sea turtle’s nose—basically a pair of holes in a skull.

I find that awareness of the air moving through the holes

in the skull behind the nose contributes both the dynamic of inhalation or exhalation and the balance of the head to the location of the center of balance.

Wu Tsu's "join hands and walk with me", I take to be a reference to an interaction between the placement of the arms and legs and the center of balance. Regarding "one quick grab", I can only say:

I'm bound to be bitten by Wu Tsu, if I take his advice to mean there's something I should do. It's about realizing a cessation of "doing", but I think I might run into him, in the stretch of ligaments. (2)

1) "The Blue Cliff Record", © 1977 Cleary & Cleary, "Twenty-second Case: Hsueh Feng's Turtle-Nosed Snake", Shambala p 144.

2) "Transition", July 5, 2022, zenmudra.com/zazen-notes.

POST: SHUNRYU SUZUKI ON SHIKANTAZA AND THE THERAVADIN STAGES

(Oct. 25, 2023)

In one of his lectures, Shunryu Suzuki spoke about the difference between “preparatory practice” and “shikantaza”, or “just sitting”:

But usually in counting breathing or following breathing, you feel as if you are doing something, you know-- you are following breathing, and you are counting breathing. This is, you know, why counting breathing or following breathing practice is, you know, for us it is some preparation-- preparatory practice for shikantaza because for most people it is rather difficult to sit, you know, just to sit. (1)

Suzuki said that directing attention to the movement of breath (“following breathing... counting breathing”) has the feeling of “doing something”, and that “doing something” makes such practice only preparatory.

Although attention can be directed to the movement of

breath, necessity in the movement of breath can also direct attention, as I wrote previously:

There can... come a moment when the movement of breath necessitates the placement of attention at a certain location in the body, or at a series of locations, with the ability to remain awake as the location of attention shifts retained through the exercise of presence.

There's a frailty in the structure of the lower spine, and the movement of breath can place the point of awareness in such a fashion as to engage a mechanism of support for the spine, often in stages.

In the "question and answer" period after the lecture, Suzuki mentioned first, second and third stages in Theravadin practice:

Of course, to have good shikantaza, we have preparatory zazen. You know, from old, old time, you know, we have that technical term, konpunjo. Konpunjo means "to enter," you know. That is started from Theravada practice, you know. To prepare for the first stage or second stage or third stage, they practice some special practice. Those practice is not the practice of the first stage or second stage or third stage, but to prepare for those stages. (1)

Suzuki's assertion that practicing some special practice is not the same as practicing concentration accords well with Gautama's teaching. With regard to each of the stages of concentration, Gautama said:

... for whatever [one] imagines it to be, it is otherwise. (2)

Moreover, Gautama described the key to the attainment of each of the stages of concentration as “lack of desire”.

Suzuki mentioned three stages in Theravadin practice. Gautama generally spoke of four, and Suzuki’s omission here is curious, as he did speak of four stages in another lecture (3).

The fourth stage (the “fourth musing”) is different from the first three, in that a particular quality of mind is applied:

Again, a [person], putting away ease... enters and abides in the fourth musing; seated, [one] suffuses [one’s] body with purity by the pureness of [one’s] mind so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded with purity by the pureness of [one’s] mind. (4)

“Pureness of mind” is what remains when “doing something” ceases. When “doing something” has ceased, and there is “not one particle of the body” that cannot receive the placement of attention, then the placement of attention is free to shift as necessary in the movement of breath.

Gautama recommended a way of living he called “the intent concentration on inbreathing and outbreathing”. The “intent concentration on inbreathing and outbreathing” consisted of sixteen thoughts, each applied or sustained in an inhalation or exhalation (5).

Applying and sustaining thought would appear to be a preparatory practice, but in Gautama’s “intent concentration”, the thought comes out of necessity in the free

placement of attention in the movement of breath. When a presence of mind is retained as the placement of attention shifts, then the natural tendency toward the free placement of attention draws out thoughts initial and sustained, and brings on the stages of concentration:

... there is no need to depend on teaching. But the most important thing is to practice and realize our true nature... [laughs]. This is, you know, Zen. (6)

(Shunryu Suzuki)

1 “The Background of Shikantaza”, Shunryu Suzuki; San Francisco, February 22, 1970; transcript from shunryusuzuki.com.

2 MN 113, © Pali Text Society vol. III pp 92-94; bracketed material paraphrases original.

3 Shunryu Suzuki, Los Altos 17, 65-10-28; transcript shunryusuzuki.com.

4 AN 5.28, © Pali Text Society vol. III pp 18-19, see also MN 119 Pali Text Society pp 132-134.

5 see “Appendix—From the Early Record”.

6 Shunryu Suzuki, Tassajara 68-07-24, transcript from shunryusuzuki.com.

POST: “TAKE THE BACKWARD STEP”

(May 31, 2024)

On a forum site I frequent, someone wrote:

Even if you have no identity, you still exist. As what? The spirituality that I follow would say “as existence”, or “as pure consciousness”.

I was reminded of Nisargadatta, a famous teacher who lived in India in the last century:

You are not your body, but you are the consciousness in the body, because of which you have the awareness of “I am”. It is without words, just pure beingness. Meditation means you have to hold consciousness by itself. The consciousness should give attention to itself. (1)

“The consciousness should give attention to itself”—in thirteenth-century Japan, Eihei Dogen wrote:

Therefore, ...take the backward step of turning the light and shining it back. (2)

That’s a poetic way to say “the consciousness should give

attention to itself”.

I used to talk about the location of consciousness, but a friend of mine would always respond that for him, consciousness has no specific location. As a result, I switched to writing about the placement of attention:

There can... come a moment when the movement of breath necessitates the placement of attention at a certain location in the body, or at a series of locations, with the ability to remain awake as the location of attention shifts retained through the exercise of presence.

In his “Genjo Koan”, Dogen wrote:

When you find your place where you are, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point. (3)

Given a presence of mind that can “hold consciousness by itself”, activity in the body begins to coordinate by virtue of the sense of place associated with consciousness. A relationship between the free location of consciousness and activity in the body comes forward, and as that relationship comes forward, “practice occurs”. Through such practice, the placement of consciousness is manifested in the activity of the body.

Dogen continued:

When you find your way at this moment, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point... (3)

“When you find your way at this moment”, activity takes place solely by virtue of the free location of consciousness. A relationship between the freedom of consciousness and

the automatic activity of the body comes forward, and as that relationship comes forward, practice occurs. Through such practice, the placement of consciousness is manifested as the activity of the body.

I sit down first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and I look to experience the activity of the body solely by virtue of the free location of consciousness. As a matter of daily life, just to touch on such experience as occasion demands—for me, that's enough.

1 Gaitonde, Mohan [2017]. *Self – Love: The Original Dream* [Shri Nisargadatta Maharaj's Direct Pointers to Reality].

2 “Fukan zazengi” Tenpuku version; tr. Carl Bielefeldt, “Dogen’s Manuals of Zen Meditation”, © 1988 The Regents of the University of California, p 176.

3 “Genjo Koan [Actualizing the Fundamental Point]”, tr. Robert Aitken and Kazuaki Tanahashi, from “Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen”, © 1985 San Francisco Zen Center, p 69.

POST: APPLYING THE PALI INSTRUCTIONS

(July 19, 2024)

On The Dao Bums forum site, someone wrote:

First jhana is concentration on the sensation of piti. There is still thought. I don't think it is possible that thought and one-pointedness co-exist.

Gautama equated “right concentration” with “one-pointedness of mind”:

And what... is the (noble) right concentration with the causal associations, with the accompaniments? It is right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right mode of livelihood, right endeavor, right mindfulness. Whatever one-pointedness of mind is accompanied by these seven components, this... is called the (noble) right concentration with the causal associations and the accompaniments. (1)

That implies that “one-pointedness of mind” is present in any “right concentration”, including the first.

There are also sermons where Gautama spoke of “one-

pointedness” in conjunction with the first concentration:

Herein... the (noble) disciple, making self-surrender the object of (their) thought, lays hold of concentration, lays hold of one-pointedness. (The disciple), aloof from sensuality, aloof from evil conditions, enters on the first trance, which is accompanied by thought initial and sustained, which is born of solitude, easeful and zestful, and abides therein. (2)

I would say that one-pointedness depends in part on the sense of gravity, and that along with a sense of gravity comes a feeling of momentum. That feeling of momentum can underlie a train of thought, so that one-pointedness can in effect be rejoined as the thoughts conclude, rather than re-initiated.

If Gautama is to be believed, thoughts don't cease in concentration, even with the final concentration (3). What does cease is volition in thinking, beginning in the first concentration with volition in the formulation of speech, and ending in the final concentration with volition in the actions of feeling and perceiving.

As might be expected with the cessation of volition in speech, thought in the first concentration comes out of a particular necessity:

... the thought comes out of necessity in the free placement of attention in the movement of breath. When a presence of mind is retained as the placement of attention shifts, then the natural tendency toward the free placement of attention draws out thoughts initial and sustained, and brings on the stages of concentration... (4)

Gautama described the feeling of the first concentration with a metaphor about a “bath-ball”:

... just as a handy bathman or attendant might strew bath-powder in some copper basin and, gradually sprinkling water, knead it together so that the bath-ball gathered up the moisture, became enveloped in moisture and saturated both in and out, but did not ooze moisture; even so, (a person) steeps, drenches, fills, and suffuses this body with zest and ease, born of solitude, so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this lone-born zest and ease. (5)

I’ve written about the “bath-ball” (6):

If I were kneading soap powder into a ball in a copper vessel, I would have one hand kneading soap and one hand on the vessel. The press of the hand kneading soap would find something of an opposite pressure from the hand holding the vessel, even if the bottom of the vessel were resting on the ground.

More particularly:

... the exercise becomes in part the distinction of the direction of turn that I’m feeling at the location of awareness... that distinction allows the appropriate counter from everything that surrounds the place of awareness.

I would say that gravity and handedness (I’m right-handed) are the source of my feeling of outward force

at the location of awareness, and the activity of the muscles of posture in response to the stretch of ligaments is the source of the counter.

Omori Sogen, a Rinzai Zen teacher, spoke about centrifugal and centripetal forces connected with seated meditation:

Thus, by means of the equilibrium of the centrifugal and the centripetal force, the whole body is brought to a state of zero and spiritual power will pervade the whole body intensely. (7)

I've also written about Gautama's choice of words in the second half of his "bath-ball" metaphor:

Words like "steeps" and "drenches" convey a sense of gravity, while the phrase "not one particle of the body that is not pervaded" speaks to the "one-pointedness" of attention, even as the body is suffused. (6)

My experience of "zest and ease" (Pali "piti" and "sukha") depends on my experience of the senses connected with balance, particularly the sense of gravity:

If I can find a way to experience gravity in the placement of attention as the source of activity in my posture, and particular ligaments as the source of the reciprocity in that activity, then I have an ease.

The feeling of ease I get is accompanied by a feeling of clarity, a clarity that has a certain energy. I would guess that energy is Gautama's "zest". (8)

Gautama said:

... a good [person] reflects thus: “Lack of desire even for the attainment of the first meditation has been spoken of by [me]; for whatever (one) imagines it to be, it is otherwise” [Similarly for the second, third, and fourth initial meditative states, and for the attainments of the first four further meditative states]. (9)

The “Dao Bums” member continued:

I'd still love a plain English version of what you are suggesting here. I might try it, but I'd need some clarity about what you mean.

The pattern of thought Gautama identified as his way of living seems natural enough to me. Here are the highlights:

- 1) Relax the activity of the body in inhalation and exhalation;
- 2) Find a feeling of ease and calm the senses connected with balance, in inhalation and exhalation;
- 3) Appreciate and detach from thought, in inhalation and exhalation;
- 4) Look to the free location of consciousness for the automatic activity of inhalation and exhalation.

Regarding “calm the senses connected with balance”—the Pali can be translated as “calm the mental factors” (10), but no applicable explanation of “mental factors” is given in the sermons.

Regarding “look to the free location of consciousness for the automatic activity of inhalation and exhalation”—the Pali can be translated as “I will breathe in observing stopping, I will breathe out observing stopping” (11), where “stopping” is the cessation of the exercise of volition. Ceasing the exercise of volition while mindful of inhalation and exhalation only occurs when the activity of inhalation and exhalation is solely by virtue of the free location of consciousness. I’ll have more to say about that later.

Thought “initial and sustained” ceases in the second concentration, though in my experience thought as in the four points above can recur. Gautama provided another metaphor:

... imagine a pool with a spring, but no water-inlet on the east side or the west side or on the north or on the south, and suppose the (rain-) deva supply not proper rains from time to time—cool waters would still well up from that pool, and that pool would be steeped, drenched, filled and suffused with the cold water so that not a drop but would be pervaded by the cold water; in just the same way... (one) steeps (their) body with zest and ease... (5)

Sogen wrote:

... It may be the least trouble to say as a general precaution that strength should be allowed to come to fullness naturally as one becomes proficient in sitting. We should sit so that our energy increases of itself and brims over... (7)

Omori quoted one Hida Haramitsu:

We should balance the power of the hara (area below the navel) and the koshi (area at the rear of the pelvis) and maintain equilibrium of the seated body by bringing the center of the body's weight in line with the center of the triangular base of the seated body. (12)

The equilibrium that Haramitsu described can follow a necessity of breath that places consciousness in the lower abdomen, given a feeling of ease at the point of consciousness and the experience of gravity as the source of activity and stretch.

I'm partial to Yuanwu's "turning to the left, turning to the right, following up behind" (13). If I relax the muscles of the lower abdomen and the muscles behind the pelvis, and calm the stretch of ligaments between the pelvis and the sacrum, gravity can yield a "turning to the left, turning to the right".

"Following up behind" I believe refers to support engaged behind the sacrum and spine. As I wrote previously:

There is... a possible mechanism of support for the spine from the displacement of the fascia behind the spine, a displacement that may depend on a push on the fascia behind the sacrum by the bulk of the extensor muscles, as they contract. (14)

There's a frailty in the structure of the lower spine, and the movement of breath can place the point of awareness in such a fashion as to engage a mechanism of support for the spine, often in stages. (4)

That brings us to the third concentration. Gautama described the third concentration as like "water-lilies" of

three different colors in a pond, lilies that never break the surface of the water:

... free from the fervor of zest, (one) enters and abides in the third musing; (one) steeps and drenches and fills and suffuses this body with a zestless ease so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this zestless ease. ... just as in a pond of blue, white, and red water-lilies, the plants are born in water, grow in water, come not out of the water, but, sunk in the depths, find nourishment, and from tip to root are steeped, drenched, filled and suffused with cold water so that not a part of them is not pervaded by cold water; even so, (one) steeps (one's) body in zestless ease. (5)

The water-lilies I believe represent the influence of the legs, the arms, and the head on activity in the abdominals, and consequently on stretch in the ligaments of the spine. The feeling of a combined influence of the extremities in the abdomen could be said to be like lilies of three colors floating under the surface of some body of water. The exact influence of each extremity remains unclear (zest ceases), yet with a sense of gravity and a stretch in particular ligaments, I can arrive at an ease.

Gautama declared that the sages abide in the third concentration. I remind myself that the activity of the body in inhalation and exhalation tends toward coordination by the free placement of consciousness, and look for ease.

Things can shift from activity of the body coordinated by the free placement of consciousness, to activity that takes place solely by virtue of the free location of consciousness. Here's Gautama's description of the fourth concentration:

Again, a (person), putting away ease... enters and abides in the fourth musing; seated, (one) suffuses (one's) body with purity by the pureness of (one's) mind so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded with purity by the pureness of (one's) mind. ... just as a (person) might sit with (their) head swathed in a clean cloth; even so (one) sits suffusing (their) body with purity... (5)

The transition to activity solely by virtue of the free location of consciousness can involve a leap of faith, as Dogen pointed out:

Suppose that you have climbed to the top of a hundred-foot pole, and are told to let go and advance one step further without holding bodily life dear. In such a situation, if you say that you can practice the Buddha-Way only when you are alive, you are not really following your teacher. Consider this carefully. (15)

Complete relinquishment of volitive activity in the body involves letting go of the activity of breath while yet conscious of the need to inhale and exhale. That can feel like letting go of life itself.

The location of consciousness in the third concentration is the place from which to “advance one step further”. That location may shift and move, yet that is the place where automatic activity in the movement of breath can be engendered solely by virtue of the location of consciousness.

In some sermons, Gautama offered a variation on his metaphor for the fourth concentration:

... it is as if (a person) might be sitting down who

had clothed (themselves) including (their) head with a white cloth; there would be no part of (their) whole body that was not covered by the white cloth. (16)

In the fourth concentration, ease in the nerve exits between vertebrae along the sacrum and spine provides an ability to feel right to the surface of the skin all over the body, such that “there is not one particle of the body” that cannot receive the placement of consciousness.

Gautama spoke of four initial concentrations. After his description of the fourth concentration, he would often outline what he called “the fifth limb” of concentration, “the survey-sign”:

Again, the survey-sign is rightly grasped by (a person), rightly held by the attention, rightly reflected upon, rightly penetrated by insight. ... just as someone might survey another, standing might survey another sitting, or sitting might survey another lying down; even so the survey-sign is rightly grasped by (a person), rightly held by the attention, rightly reflected upon, rightly penetrated by insight. (5)

The survey-sign is a feeling for the body as a whole, to be arrived at after the attainment of the fourth concentration. Such a feeling allows for a return to activity of inhalation and exhalation solely by virtue of the free location of consciousness, as appropriate.

I sit down first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and I look to experience the activity of the body solely by virtue of the free location of con-

sciousness. As a matter of daily life, just to touch on such experience as occasion demands—for me, that’s enough. (17)

Let me know if there’s anything I can clarify.

- 1) MN 117, © Pali Text Society vol III p 114; “noble” substituted for Ariyan; emphasis added.
- 2) SN 48.10, © Pali Text Society vol V p 174; “noble” substituted for Ariyan; Horner’s “initial” (MN 119) substituted for Woodward’s “directed”.
- 3) MN 121, © Pali Text Society vol III pp 151-152; presuming “thoughts” are in part the “disturbance” of the mind.
- 4) see ‘Shunryu Suzuki on Shikantaza and the Theravadin Stages’.
- 5) AN 5.28, © Pali Text Society vol. III pp 18-19, see also MN 119, Pali Text Society vol. III pp 132-134.
- 6) see “Common Ground”, zenmudra.com/zazen-notes; “metaphor” in place of “analogy”.
- 7) “An Introduction to Zen Training: A Translation of Sanzen Nyumon”, Omori Sogen, tr. Dogen Hosokawa and Roy Yoshimoto, © Daihouzan Chozen-ji, Tuttle Publishing, p 59.
- 8) see this author’s “To Enjoy Our Life”, zenmudra.com/zazen-notes.
- 9) MN 113, © Pali Text Society vol III pp 92-94.
- 10) SN 54.1, © Pali Text Society vol V p 276.
- 11) MN 118, © Pali Text Society vol. III p 124.
- 12) Hida Haramitsu, “Nikon no Shimei” [“Mission of Japan”], parentheticals added; referenced without publisher and date in (7).
- 13) “The Blue Cliff Record” Case 17, © 1977 Cleary & Cleary, Shambala p 114.
- 14) see ‘A Way of Living’.
- 15) “Shobogenzo-zuimonki: Sayings of Eihei Dogen Zenji, recorded by Koun Ejo”, 1-13, tr Shohaku Okumura, Soto-Shu Shumucho, © 2004 Sotoshu Shumucho, p 45-46.
- 16) MN 119, © Pali Text Society vol. III p 134.
- 17) see “Take the Backward Step”.

POST: THE INCONCEIVABLE NATURE OF THE WIND

(July 20, 2024)

I wrote recently about two lines from Eihei Dogen's "Genjo Koan" (1). Both lines speak about "actualizing the fundamental point".

There's a third line about actualization in "Genjo Koan":

Although actualized immediately, the inconceivable may not be apparent. (2)

Kobun Chino Otagawa gave a practical example of that third line, even though he wasn't talking about "Genjo Koan" at the time:

You know, sometimes zazen gets up and walks around. (3)

Activity of the body solely by virtue of the free location of consciousness can sometimes get up and walk around, without any thought to do so.

Action like that resembles action that takes place through

hypnotic suggestion, but unlike action by hypnotic suggestion, action by virtue of the free location of consciousness can turn out to be timely after the fact. When action turns out to accord with future events in an uncanny way, the source of that action may well be described as “the inconceivable”.

I have found that *zazen* is more likely to “get up and walk around” when the free location of consciousness is accompanied by an extension of friendliness and compassion, an extension beyond the boundaries of the senses. Gautama the Buddha described such an extension:

[One] dwells, having suffused the first quarter [of the world] with friendliness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; just so above, below, across; [one] dwells having suffused the whole world everywhere, in every way, with a mind of friendliness that is far-reaching, wide-spread, immeasurable, without enmity, without malevolence. [One] dwells having suffused the first quarter with a mind of compassion... with a mind of sympathetic joy... with a mind of equanimity that is far-reaching, wide-spread, immeasurable, without enmity, without malevolence. (4)

Gautama said that “the excellence of the heart’s release” through the extension of the mind of compassion was the first of the further concentrations, a concentration he called “the plane of infinite ether” (5).

The Oxford English Dictionary offers some quotes about “ether” (6):

They [sc. the Brahmins] thought the stars moved, and the planets they called fishes, because they

moved in the ether, as fishes do in water.

(Vince, Complete System. Astronomy vol. II. 253 [1799])

Plato considered that the stars, chiefly formed of fire, move through the ether, a particularly pure form of air.

(Popular Astronomy vol. 24 364 [1916])

When the free location of consciousness is accompanied by an extension of the mind of compassion, there can be a feeling that the necessity of breath is connected to things that lie outside the boundaries of the senses. That, to me, is an experience of “the plane of infinite ether”.

Dogen didn't offer an explanation of his third line, but he did provide a case study from the literature of Zen:

Mayu, Zen Master Baoche, was fanning himself. A monk approached and said, “Master, the nature of wind is permanent and there is no place it does not reach. Why then do you fan yourself?”

“Although you understand that the nature of the wind is permanent,” Mayu replied, “you do not understand the meaning of its reaching everywhere.”

“What is the meaning of its reaching everywhere?” asked the monk again. Mayu just kept fanning himself... (2)

The wind that reaches everywhere was actualized immediately in Mayu's fanning.

Kobun said:

It's impossible to teach the meaning of sitting. You won't believe it. Not because I say something wrong, but until you experience it and confirm it by yourself, you cannot believe it. (7)

- 1) see "Take the Backward Step".
- 2) "Genjo Koan [Actualizing the Fundamental Point]", tr. Robert Aitken and Kazuaki Tanahashi, from "Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen", p 69, © San Francisco Zen Center.
- 3) Kobun Chino Otogawa, this author's recollection of a lecture at S. F. Zen Center in the 1980's.
- 4) MN 7, © Pali Text Society vol I p 48.
- 5) MN 111; © Pali Text Society vol III p 79
- 6) Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "ether (n.)," March 2024.
- 7) Kobun Chino Otogawa, "Embracing Mind", edited by Cosgrove & Hall, © 2015 Jikoji Zen Center, p 48.

POST: THE DIAMOND TRAP, THE THICKET OF THORNS

(May 5, 2025)

Modern neuroscience now includes the study of the “bodily self”:

A key aspect of the bodily self is self-location, the experience that the self is localized at a specific position in space within one's bodily borders (embodied self-location). (1)

The “self (that is) localized at a specific position in space” is commonly associated with consciousness. The Indian sage Nisargadatta spoke about “the consciousness in the body”:

You are not your body, but you are the consciousness in the body, because of which you have the awareness of “I am”. It is without words, just pure beingness. (2)

The specific position in space of “the consciousness in the body” is often assumed to be fixed somewhere behind the eyes. Zen teacher Koun Franz suggested that the location is not fixed:

... as an experiment, I recommend trying it, sitting in this posture (legs crossed in seated meditation) and trying to feel what it's like to let your mind, to let the base of your consciousness, move away from your head. One thing you'll find, or that I have found, at least, is that you can't will it to happen, because you're willing it from your head. To the extent that you can do it, it's an act of letting go—and a fascinating one.(3)

Franz spoke about “letting go”; Gautama spoke about “making self-surrender the object of thought”:

Herein... the (noble) disciple, making self-surrender the object of (their) thought, lays hold of concentration, lays hold of one-pointedness. (4)

Laying hold of “one-pointedness” is retaining consciousness with embodied self-location, wherever embodied self-location takes place.

Consciousness can be fixed in place by the exercise of will, as Gautama explained:

That which we will..., and that which we intend to do and that wherewithal we are occupied:--this becomes an object for the persistence of consciousness. The object being there, there comes to be a station of consciousness....

But if we neither will, nor intend to do, nor are occupied about something, there is no becoming of an object for the persistence of consciousness. The object being absent, there comes to be no station of consciousness. (5)

A surrender of the exercise of will, of intention and deliberation, is necessary to allow the “base of consciousness” to move away from the head, to allow a laying-hold of “one-pointedness”.

In one of Gautama’s lectures, he stated that “one-pointedness” allows the induction of the first concentration, and that with the first concentration, willful activity of speech ceases. In the same lecture, he went on to declare that in a “fourth” concentration, willful activity of the body ceases, and in a final, “signless” concentration, willful activity of the mind ceases (6).

In the long version of his most famous sermon (Satipatthana), Gautama declared that mindfulness of the first four concentrations was a part of the mindfulness of the state of mind (7). In another sermon, he declared that mindfulness of the four concentrations was a part of the mindfulness of the body (8).

Gautama made no mention of the concentrations in his outline of his own mindfulness, the mindfulness that he identified as his way of living (9).

I have summarized the mindfulness that Gautama said was his own:

- 1) Relax the activity of the body, in inhalation and exhalation;
- 2) Find a feeling of ease and calm the senses connected with balance, in inhalation and exhalation;
- 3) Appreciate and detach from thought, in inhalation and exhalation;

4) Look to the free location of consciousness for the automatic activity of the body, in inhalation and exhalation. (10)

Gautama recommended a cross-legged seated posture for “arousing” mindfulness. I believe, based on my own experience, that the cross-legged posture exacerbates the shearing stress on vertebrae of the lower spine in the movement of breath. In my experience, consciousness can take place in a specific location in response to that stress, and the location of consciousness can lead the balance of the body to engage activity in order to relieve that stress.

A frailty in the structure of the lower spine emerged in the 1940’s, when research demonstrated that the discs of the spine cannot, on their own, withstand the pressure of lifting significant weight.

In the 1950’s, D. L. Bartelink concluded that pressure in the “fluid ball” of the abdominal cavity takes load off the structure of the spine when weight is lifted (11). The pressure in the “fluid ball” is induced by activity in the abdominal muscles.

Bartelink theorized that animals (as well as humans) make use of pressure in the abdominal cavity to protect the spine, and he noted that breathing can continue even when the abdomen is tensed:

Animals undoubtedly make an extensive use of the protection of their spines by the tensed somatic cavity, and probably also use it as a support upon which muscles of posture find a hold...

Breathing can go on even when the abdomen is used as a support and cannot be relaxed.

(ibid)

In the 1980's, Gracovetsky, Farfan and Lamay suggested that in weight lifting, the abdominals work against the extensor muscles of the spine to allow the displacement of the fascial sheet behind the sacrum and spine:

If this interpretation is correct, it would partly explain why the abdominal muscles work hard during weight-lifting. They apparently work against the extensor muscles. Furthermore their lever arm gives them considerable effect. In fact, we propose that the effect of the abdominal muscles is two-fold: to balance the moment created by the abdominal pressure (hence, the abdominal muscles do not work against the weight lifter) and to generate abdominal pressure up to 1 psi, which would help the extensors to push away the fascia.

It is essential that the supraspinous ligament and the lumbodorsal fascia be brought into action to permit weight lifting without disk or vertebral failure. ... It must be kept in mind that in some circumstances ligament tension may reach 1800 lb., whereas no muscle can pull as hard. (12)

Dr. Rene Cailliet summarized these findings:

In the Lamy-Farfan model the abdominal pressure is considered to be exerted posteriorly against the lumbodorsal fascia, causing the fascia to become taut.... thus relieving the tension upon the erector spinae muscles. (13)

Farfan, Lamay and Cailliet referred to the "lumbodorsal

fascia”. That fascia is now more commonly referred to as the “thoracolumbar fascia”.

The Lamay-Farfan model presupposed a flattening of the lumbar curve, like that of a person bent over to lift weight from the floor, but acknowledged that the control of the ligament system afforded by activity between the abdominals and extensors could not be directly accounted for in the model. My assumption is that in the cross-legged posture, activity engendered by the location of consciousness can bring about at least a partial engagement of fascial support behind the spine.

There may be another factor at work in the engagement of fascial support. Behind the sacrum, the fascia can be stretched rearward by the mass of the extensor muscles as they contract. As Farfan noted:

There is another peculiarity of the erector muscles of the spine. Below the level of the fifth lumbar vertebra, the muscle contracts in a compartment enclosed by bone anteriorly, laterally, and medially. Posteriorly, the compartment is closed by the lumbodorsal fascia. When contracted, the diameter of the muscle mass tends to increase. This change in shape of the muscle may exert a wedging effect between the sacrum and the lumbodorsal fascia, thereby increasing the tension in the fascia. This may be one of the few instances where a muscle can exert force by pushing. (14)

Farfan mentions a “wedging effect” on the “lumbodorsal fascia” caused by the mass of the extensor muscles as they contract. The extensor muscles run in two sets behind the spine, one on either side of the vertebral column, and the wedging effect of the extensors on the thoraco-

lumbar fascial sheet can therefore alternate from side to side.

That alternation may be the source of a comment made by Ch'an teacher Yuanwu:

... Hsiang Lin said, "Sitting for a long time becomes toilsome." If you understand this way, you are "turning to the left, turning to the right, following up behind." (15)

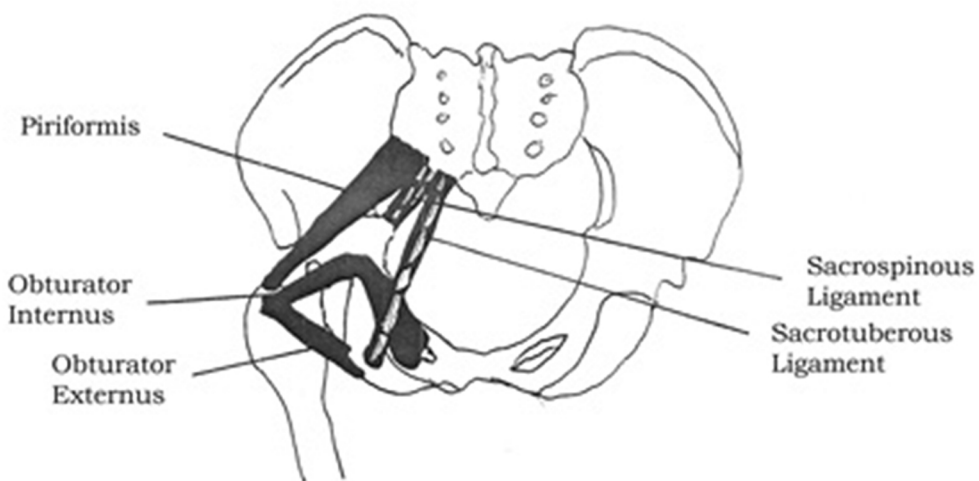
I believe "turning to the left, turning to the right" is a description of the feeling imparted by the wedging of the extensors, first on one side, then on the other. "Following up behind", meanwhile, is a description of the feeling sustained by the wedging, behind the sacrum.

The fascial sheet behind the neck and the base of the skull, the nuchal fascia, is in part a continuation of the thoracolumbar fascia. Through the nuchal fascia, the alignment of the skull and the placement of the jaw can enter into the tension on the thoracolumbar fascial sheet.

Some of the ligaments of the pelvis attach directly to the thoracolumbar fascia:

At the base of the lumbar spine all of the layers of the thoracolumbar fascial sheet fuse together into a thick composite that attaches firmly to the posterior superior iliac spine and the sacrotuberous ligament. (16)

The iliolumbar ligaments also attach directly to the thoracolumbar fascia, behind their attachments to the spine (16). The ilio-lumbar ligaments provide support to the base of the spine in the flexion and extension of the spine.



In Flexion:

In Extension:



In research done at the close of the 1990's, the ligaments that hold the sacrum to the pelvis (the sacroiliac ligaments) were shown to regulate activity in the gluteous muscles and the muscles of the lower spine (17). I would say, based on my own experience, that the sacrotuberous, sacrospinous, and iliolumbar ligaments can also regulate activity in the muscles of the pelvis and lower back, and in the muscles of the lower abdomen.

Likewise, I believe that the ligaments between the vertebrae of the spine can regulate activity in the muscles of abdomen and chest, and the ligaments between the spine and the skull can regulate activity in the muscles of the neck and jaw.

In my experience, the relinquishment of willful activity in the body can depend on realizing a reciprocity in muscular activity, a reciprocity regulated by the stretch of ligaments. An appropriate stretch of ligaments can, in turn, depend on particulars in the alignment and stretch of the thoracolumbar fascial sheet.

I would guess that even when the spine is not under significant load, activity to align and displace the thoracolumbar fascial sheet is still engaged to provide support to the structure of the spine. Such support would serve to ease the nerve exits between vertebrae along the sacrum and spine, and the free occurrence of consciousness in the body I believe depends in part on such ease.

In the mindfulness of Gautama's most famous sermon (18), the mindfulness of feelings consisted of a mindfulness of the pleasant, the painful, and the neither-pleasant-nor-painful. In the mindfulness that was Gautama's way of living, however, the mindfulness of feelings consisted of a mindfulness of feelings of zest and ease, and of

feelings of calm.

Gautama identified the feeling of ease as characteristic of each of the first three concentrations (19). I would now have to say that the feeling of ease that emerges in concentration is the feeling of ease that arises from activity of the body by virtue of the location of consciousness. Activity of the body can follow automatically as the location of consciousness leads the balance of the body. Automatic activity of the body by virtue of the location of consciousness has a feeling of ease, and initially a feeling of energy (or “zest”) as well.

Gautama spoke of the extension of the feeling of ease, an extension such that “there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this... ease”. He used the words “steeps, drenches, fills, and suffuses” to describe how the feeling of ease pervades the body, indicating that the feeling is accompanied by a fluid sense of gravity.

The extension Gautama described maintains an openness of the body to the placement of consciousness at any point, and to ease through automatic activity of the body by virtue of the location of consciousness at that point.

Gautama taught that the feeling of ease ceases in the fourth concentration. Instead of ease, a “purity by the pureness of mind” is extended:

... (one) suffuses (one’s) body with purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded with purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind. (20)

The “pureness of (one’s) mind” is the pureness of the mind in the absence of any will, intention, or deliberation with

regard to activity in the body.

Gautama began his instructions on mindfulness with advice on the appropriate setting, and on the posture to adopt:

Herein... (one) who is forest-gone or gone to the root of a tree or gone to an empty place, sits down cross-legged, holding (their) back erect, arousing mindfulness... (21)

That Gautama's mindfulness was his way of living implies that once he had aroused his mindfulness, he could continue that mindfulness in other settings and in other postures.

At the start of his descriptions of the fourth concentration, Gautama noted that:

(A person)... comes to be sitting down... (22)

Nevertheless, I believe that once Gautama had attained the fourth concentration, he could surrender activity of the body to the free location of consciousness in any posture.

Yuanwu cautioned:

Those who leap out of the diamond trap make an effort to leap out, those who swallow the thicket of thorns swallow it with care. (23)

The effort to leap out of the diamond trap is, at least in part, the effort to realize dispassion with regard to the pleasant and the painful of feelings, such that consciousness can take place freely in the body.

Applying past understandings to the experience of the present can be like swallowing a thicket of thorns. I bear in mind the assertion Gautama made with regard to each of the stages of concentration:

Lack of desire even for the attainment of (the concentration) has been spoken of by [me]; for whatever (one) imagines it to be, it is otherwise. (24)

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- 2) Gaitonde, Mohan [2017]. Self – Love: The Original Dream [Shri Nisargadatta Maharaj’s Direct Pointers to Reality].
- 3) “No Struggle [Zazen Yojinki, Part 6]”, by Koun Franz, from the “Nyoho Zen” site, parenthetical added.
- 4) SN 48.10; © Pali Text Society vol. V p 174.
- 5) SN 12.38; © Pali Text Society SN vol. II p 45; “persistence” in original.
- 6) SN 36.11; © Pali Text Society vol IV p 146.
- 7) DN 22, © Pali Text Society vol II p 345.
- 8) MN 119, © Pali Text Society vol III pp 132-134.
- 9) SN 54.11, © Pali Text Society vol. V p 279.
- 10) see “Applying the Pali Instructions”.
- 11) “The Role of Abdominal Pressure in Relieving the Pressure on the Lumbar Intervertebral Discs”; J Bone Joint Surg Br. 1957 Nov; 39-B[4]:718-25.
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- 13) “Low Back Pain Syndrome”, ed. 3, © 1981 F. A. Davis Co., pp 140-141 (“Lamy”, sic).
- 14) “Mechanical Disorders of the Low Back”, H. F. Farfan; © 1973 Lea & Febiger, p 183.
- 15) “The Blue Cliff Record”, Yuanwu, Case 17; © 1977 Cleary & Cleary, ed. Shambala, p 114.
- 16) J Anat. 2012 May 27;221(6):507–536.
- 17) Indahl, A., et al., “Sacroiliac joint involvement in activation of the porcine spinal and gluteal musculature”, Journal of Spinal Disorders, 1999. 12[4]: p. 325-30.
- 18) Satipatthana, MN 10, © Pali Text Society vol. I p 76.
- 19) SN 54.1, © Pali Text Society vol. V p 279; SN 48.10; © Pali Text Society vol. V p 174.
- 20) AN 5.28, © Pali Text Society Vol. III p 19. 21) MN 119, © Pali Text Society vol. III pp 130-132.
- 22) MN 119, © Pali Text Society p 134.
- 23) Yuanwu, “Zen Letters of Yuanwu”, © 1994 Cleary & Cleary, p 67.
- 24) MN 113, © Pali Text Society vol III pp 92-94.

POST: “THE PLACE WHERE YOU STOP AND REST”

(July 25, 2025)

In one of his letters, twelfth-century Ch’an teacher Yüanwu wrote:

Actually practice at this level for twenty or thirty years and cut off all the verbal demonstrations and creeping vines and useless devices and states, until you are free from conditioned mind. Then this will be the place of peace and bliss where you stop and rest.

Thus it is said: “If you are stopping now, then stop. If you seek a time when you finish, there will never be a time when you finish.” (1)

In my teenage years, I became keenly aware of the “creeping vines” of my mind. I read a lot of Alan Watts books on Zen, thinking that might help, but I soon found out that what he had to say did nothing to cut off the “creeping vines”.

I was looking for something Shunryu Suzuki described

in one of his lectures, though I didn't know it at the time:

So, when you practice zazen, your mind should be concentrated in your breathing and this kind of activity is the fundamental activity of the universal being. If so, how you should use your mind is quite clear. Without this experience, or this practice, it is impossible to attain the absolute freedom. (2)

I began to try to sit zazen, based on the illustrations in the back of "Three Pillars of Zen", by Philip Kapleau.

Zazen is almost always taught to beginners as sitting with a straight back and paying close attention to inhalation and exhalation. With regard to the straight back, Moshe Feldenkrais wrote:

"Sit straight!" "Stand straight!" This is often said by mothers, teachers, and others who give this directive in good faith and with the fullest confidence in what they are saying. If you were to ask them just how one does sit straight or stand straight, they would answer, "What do you mean? Don't you know what straight means? Straight is straight!"

Some people do indeed stand and walk straight, with their backs erect and their heads held high. And of course there is an element of "standing straight in their posture.

If you watch a child or an adult who has been told to sit or stand straight, it is evident that he agrees that there is something wrong with the way he is managing his body, and he will quickly try to straighten his back or raise his head. He will do this thinking that he has thereby achieved the

proper posture; but he cannot maintain this “correct” position without continuous effort. As soon as his attention shifts to some activity that is either necessary, urgent, or interesting, he will slump back to his original position. (3)

For many years, whenever I sat at a zendo with a teacher who walked the room during a sitting, the teacher would invariably stop behind me and correct my posture. I generally couldn’t maintain their correction to the end of the sitting.

With regard to close attention to inhalation and exhalation, Shunryu Suzuki described such attention as only a “preparatory practice”:

... usually in counting breathing or following breathing, you feel as if you are doing something, you know— you are following breathing, and you are counting breathing. This is, you know, why counting breathing or following breathing practice is, you know, for us it is some preparation— preparatory practice for shikantaza because for most people it is rather difficult to sit, you know, just to sit. (4)

Shikantaza, or “just sitting”, is emphasized in the Soto school of Zen Buddhism, the school to which Shunryu Suzuki belonged.

The Soto school was founded in the 13th century by Eihei Dogen. In one of Dogen’s most famous essays, called “Genjo Koan”, he wrote:

When you find your place where you are, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point. (5)

Dogen said nothing here about sitting up straight or paying close attention to the breath. Instead, he asserted that “practice occurs” as a natural consequence of finding “your place where you are”. Dogen went on to say that the activity effected by practice is precisely “actualizing the fundamental point”, even though he never explained what the “fundamental point” was.

Neuroscientists describe “your place where you are” as your “embodied self-location”:

A key aspect of the bodily self is self-location, the experience that the self is localized at a specific position in space within one’s bodily borders (embodied self-location). (6)

Dogen’s “Genjo Koan” can be paraphrased in terms of “self-location”:

When you find the “specific position in space” where you feel your bodily self to be, activity in the body begins to coordinate by virtue of that place. A relationship between the place of “embodied self-location” and activity in the body comes forward, and as that relationship comes forward, practice occurs. Through such practice, the point that is the “specific position in space” of embodied self-location is manifested in activity.

Most of us are unaware of our breathing most of the time. Moshe Feldenkrais wrote of how people can be unaware that they hold their breath in getting up from a chair. He explained why the breath is held:

The tendency to hold one’s breath is instinctive,

part of an attempt to prevent the establishment of shearing stresses or forces likely to shift the vertebrae horizontally, out of the vertical alignment of the spinal column that they constitute. (7)

Holding the breath creates pressure in the abdomen, pressure that allows the “fluid ball” of the abdomen to bear load and thereby relieves shearing stress on the spine (8).

Feldenkrais described an effortless way to overcome the tendency to hold the breath in standing:

...When the center of gravity has really moved forward over the feet a reflex movement will originate in the old nervous system and straighten the legs; this automatic movement will not be felt as an effort at all. (9)

Feldenkrais stipulated, there must be “no muscular effort deriving from voluntary control”:

... there must be no muscular effort deriving from voluntary control, regardless of whether this effort is known and deliberate or concealed from the consciousness by habit. (10)

Feldenkrais suggested shifting the center of gravity over the feet. In Omori Sogen’s “Introduction to Zen Training”, Hida Haramitsu advised shifting the center of the body’s weight over “the triangular base of the seated body” in seated meditation:

We should balance the power of the hara (area below the navel) and the koshi (area at the rear of the pelvis) and maintain equilibrium of the seated body by bringing the center of the body’s weight in

line with the center of the triangular base of the seated body. (11)

Haramitsu's advice is similar to Feldenkrais's, in that a shift in the center of gravity ("the center of the body's weight") is expected to generate the necessary activity without recourse to "muscular effort deriving from voluntary control".

Gautama made reference to the sense of gravity in some of his descriptions of concentration, although the reference was indirect. Here's Gautama's description of the initial concentration:

Herein... the (noble) disciple, making self-surrender the object of (their) thought, lays hold of concentration, lays hold of one-pointedness. (The disciple), aloof from sensuality, aloof from evil conditions, enters on the first trance, which is accompanied by thought initial and sustained, which is born of solitude, easeful and zestful, and abides therein. (12)

The feelings of "zest" and "ease" are to be extended as a part of that concentration:

... (a person) steps, drenches, fills, and suffuses this body with zest and ease, born of solitude, so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this lone-born zest and ease. (13)

Words like "steps" and "drenches" convey that a sense of gravity accompanies the feelings of zest and ease as they are suffused throughout the body.

In Gautama's description of the first concentration, con-

centration begins when a person lays hold of “one-pointedness”, something Gautama also referred to as “one-pointedness of mind”. Translated into the language of the neurobiologists, concentration begins when consciousness is retained at the “specific position in space” of “embodied self-location”.

The zest and ease of the initial concentration are a result of the effortlessness of the automatic activity initiated by gravity where one-pointedness of mind takes place. To drench the entire body with the feelings of zest and ease such that “there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded” ensures that the consciousness retained with “embodied self-location” can remain “one-pointed”, even as the “specific position” of “embodied self-location” shifts and moves.

There can come a moment when the experience of consciousness retained with “embodied self-location” becomes the experience of “embodied self-location” retained with consciousness.

Dogen continued his “Genjo Koan”:

When you find your way at this moment, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point... (5)

To paraphrase:

“When you find your way at this moment”, a relationship between the freedom of consciousness and the automatic activity of the body comes forward, and as that relationship comes forward, practice occurs. Through such practice, the place of occurrence of consciousness in the moment is manifested as the activity of the body.

“When you find your way at this moment”, the activity of the body in posture and in the movement of breath becomes solely by virtue of the singular location of consciousness. At such a time, said Gautama:

... (one suffuses one’s) body with purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded with purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind. (13)

The “purity” that suffuses the body is the pureness of the mind without any will or intention with regard to the body.

I believe that activity of the body solely by virtue of the location of consciousness is what Shunryu Suzuki referred to as “just sitting”. “Doing something” with regard to the body or the breath, whether “known and deliberate” or “concealed from the consciousness by habit”, has ceased.

Suzuki cautioned:

Sometimes when you think that you are doing zazen with an imperturbable mind, you ignore the body, but it is also necessary to have the opposite understanding at the same time. Your body is practicing zazen in imperturbability while your mind is moving. (14)

The freedom of “your way at this moment” is touched on in daily living through “your place where you are”. That’s Yuanwu’s “place of peace and bliss where you stop and rest”.

When the body rests from volition, so does the mind, even in the midst of activity. In my experience, that is how the

“creeping vines” of the mind come to be cut off.

- 1) “Zen Letters: Teachings of Yuanwu”, © 1994 Cleary & Cleary, Shambala p 99.
- 2) “Breathing”, Shunryu Suzuki; November 4th 1965, Los Altos; emphasis added.
- 3) “Awareness Through Movement”, Moshe Feldenkrais, © 1972, 1977 Moshe Feldenkrais, p 66.
- 4) “The Background of Shikantaza”, Shunryu Suzuki; February 22, 1970, San Francisco.
- 5) “Genjo Koan [Actualizing the Fundamental Point]”, tr. Robert Aitken and Kazuaki Tanahashi, from “Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen”, © 1985 San Francisco Zen Center, p 69.
- 6) Journal of Neuroscience 26 May 2010, 30 (21) 7202-7214.
- 7) “Awareness Through Movement”, Moshe Feldenkrais, © 1972, 1977 Moshe Feldenkrais, p 83.
- 8) D. L. Bartilink, J Bone Joint Surg Br. 1957 Nov; 39-B[4]:718-25.
- 9) “Awareness Through Movement”, Moshe Feldenkrais, © 1972, 1977 Moshe Feldenkrais, p 78.
- 10) “Awareness Through Movement”, Moshe Feldenkrais, © 1972, 1977 Moshe Feldenkrais, p 76.
- 11) “An Introduction to Zen Training: A Translation of Sanzen Nyumon”, Omori Sogen, tr. Dogen Hosokawa and Roy Yoshimoto, © Daihouzan Chozen-ji, Tuttle Publishing, p 59; Hida Haramitsu, “Nikon no Shimei” [“Mission of Japan”], parentheses added.
- 12) SN 48.10, © Pali Text Society vol V p 174; parentheses paraphrase original; Horner’s “initial” (MN 119) substituted for Woodward’s “directed”.
- 13) AN 5.28, © Pali Text Society vol. III pp 18-19.
- 14) “Whole-Body Zazen”, Shunryu Suzuki; June 28, 1970, Tassajara (edited by Bill Redican).

POST: JUST TO SIT

(September 28, 2025)

I have a neighbor who is interested in sitting with me. He has never practiced any kind of meditation before, apart from a failed attempt to sit cross-legged with me over a year ago.

This time around, I will offer him a chair.

I find myself wondering what advice, if any, I should give him. The advice most zendos give beginners is to “follow the breath”, though as Shunryu Suzuki said, following the breath is only a preparatory practice:

... usually in counting breathing or following breathing, you feel as if you are doing something, you know– you are following breathing, and you are counting breathing. This is, you know, why counting breathing or following breathing practice is, you know, for us it is some preparation– preparatory practice for shikantaza because for most people it is rather difficult to sit, you know, just to sit. (1)

Suzuki described shikantaza in more detail:

So most teacher may say shikantaza is not so easy, you know. It is not possible to continue more than one hour, because it is intense practice to take hold of all our mind and body by the practice which include everything. So in shikantaza, our mind should pervade every parts of our physical being. That is not so easy. (2)

Gautama spoke similarly about the mind pervading the body:

... seated, (one) suffuses (one's) body with purity by the pureness of (one's) mind so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded with purity by the pureness of (one's) mind. (3)

“The pureness of mind” Gautama referred to is the pureness of the mind without any will or intent with regard to the activity of the body.

In Gautama's teaching, the extension of “purity by the pureness of mind” belonged to the last of four concentrations. The initial concentration is induced, said Gautama, by “making self-surrender the object of thought”:

... the (noble) disciple, making self-surrender the object of (their) thought, lays hold of concentration, lays hold of one-pointedness. (The disciple), aloof from sensuality, aloof from evil conditions, enters on the first trance, which is accompanied by thought initial and sustained, which is born of solitude, easeful and zestful, and abides therein. (4)

In my experience, “one-pointedness” occurs when the movement of breath necessitates the placement of attention at a singular location in the body, and a person “lays hold of one-pointedness” when they remain awake as the singular location shifts.

Gautama described the “first trance” as having feelings of zest and ease, and he prescribed the extension of those feelings:

... (a person) steeps, drenches, fills, and suffuses this body with zest and ease, born of solitude, so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this lone-born zest and ease. (3)

Words like “steeps” and “drenches” convey that the weight of the body accompanies the feelings of zest and ease.

The weight of the body sensed at a particular point in the body can shift the body’s center of gravity, and a shift in the body’s center of gravity can result in what Moshe Feldenkrais termed “reflex movement”. Feldenkrais described how “reflex movement” can be engaged in standing up from a chair:

...When the center of gravity has really moved forward over the feet a reflex movement will originate in the old nervous system and straighten the legs; this automatic movement will not be felt as an effort at all. (5)

“Drenching” the body “so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded” with zest and ease allows the weight of the body to effect “reflex movement” in the activity of the body, wherever “one-pointedness” takes place.

In falling asleep, the mind can sometimes react to hypnagogic sleep paralysis with an attempt to reassert control over the muscles of the body, causing a “hypnic jerk”. The extension of a weighted zest and ease can pre-empt the tendency to reassert voluntary control in the induction of concentration, and make possible a conscious experience of “reflex movement” in inhalation and exhalation.

Gautama offered a metaphor for the first concentration that emphasized the cultivation of one-pointedness. Here’s the full description:

... just as a handy bathman or attendant might strew bath-powder in some copper basin and, gradually sprinkling water, knead it together so that the bath-ball gathered up the moisture, became enveloped in moisture and saturated both in and out, but did not ooze moisture; even so, (a person) steeps, drenches, fills, and suffuses this body with zest and ease, born of solitude, so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this lone-born zest and ease. (3)

The juxtaposition of a singular bath-ball with the extension of zest and ease such that “there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded” might seem dissonant, yet in my experience the two can be realized together, and at least initially neither can be sustained alone.

Gautama also taught the extension of zest and ease in the second concentration:

... imagine a pool with a spring, but no water-inlet on the east side or the west side or on the north or on the south, and suppose the (rain-) deva sup-

ply not proper rains from time to time—cool waters would still well up from that pool, and that pool would be steeped, drenched, filled and suffused with the cold water so that not a drop but would be pervaded by the cold water; in just the same way... (one) steeps (their) body with zest and ease, born of solitude, so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this lone-born zest and ease. (3)

In the third concentration, the feeling of zest drops away, and only the feeling of ease is extended:

... (one) steeps and drenches and fills and suffuses this body with a zestless ease so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded by this zestless ease. ... just as in a pond of blue, white, and red water-lilies, the plants are born in water, grow in water, come not out of the water, but, sunk in the depths, find nourishment, and from tip to root are steeped, drenched, filled and suffused with cold water so that not a part of them is not pervaded by cold water; even so, (one) steeps (one's) body in zestless ease. (3)

Even though Gautama's metaphor for the third concentration lacks a clear singularity, "one-pointedness" can be said to be present, as for Gautama concentration was synonymous with "one-pointedness of mind" (6).

Gautama said that arahants (enlightened individuals) praised the ease of the third concentration, because that ease was associated with equanimity and mindfulness (7). That suggests that the arahants favored the third concentration in seated meditation.

The feeling of ease, said Gautama, ceases entirely in the fourth concentration as “(one) suffuses (one’s) body with purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind”.

I would say the activity of the body in the fourth concentration is entirely “reflex movement” occasioned by the placement of attention. To remain awake as the location of attention shifts and activity of the body takes place is “just to sit”.

Gautama detailed the four concentrations in a description of the mindfulness of states of mind. He concluded his description by saying:

... with the consciousness ‘There are (the states of mind), mindfulness thereof is thereby established, far enough for the purposes of knowledge and of self-possession. And (a person) abides independent, grasping after nothing in the world whatever.
(8)

About the first three concentrations, Shunryu Suzuki said:

To prepare for the first stage or second stage or third stage, (Theravadin Buddhists) practice some special practice. Those practice is not the practice of the first stage or second stage or third stage, but to prepare for those stages. (1)

Just as with “counting breathing or following breathing”, doing something with regard to a state of concentration is only “preparatory practice”, and not the state of concentration.

In the same vein, Gautama taught:

... a good (person) reflects thus: “Lack of desire even for the attainment of the first (concentration) has been spoken of by (the Gautamid); for whatever (one) imagines it to be, it is otherwise” [Similarly for the second, third, and fourth concentrations]... (9)

I don't think I'll advise my friend to “follow the breath”. I don't think I'll tell him the practice is “just to sit”, either.

Zen centers tend to give lots of instruction about posture. Suzuki said:

It will take at least six months before you get your own right posture. Everyone has their own right posture... (10)

But you ask me, what is right posture? [laughs]. You know, that is also mistake. Whatever you do is right. Nothing is wrong with what you do. But some improvement is necessary. Some—something should be done with what you have attained. Even though you attain enlightenment like Buddha, something should be done to human[?]. That is his enlightenment. So, the point is, whether your posture is right or—is not whether your posture is right or wrong—the point is constant effort or way-seeking. (11)

The Tai Chi master Cheng Man Ch'ing wrote:

In general, what the ancients called, “straightening the chest and sitting precariously,” has to do with the work of self-cultivation. ... Therefore, I advise practitioners of T'ai-chi ch'uan to straighten their

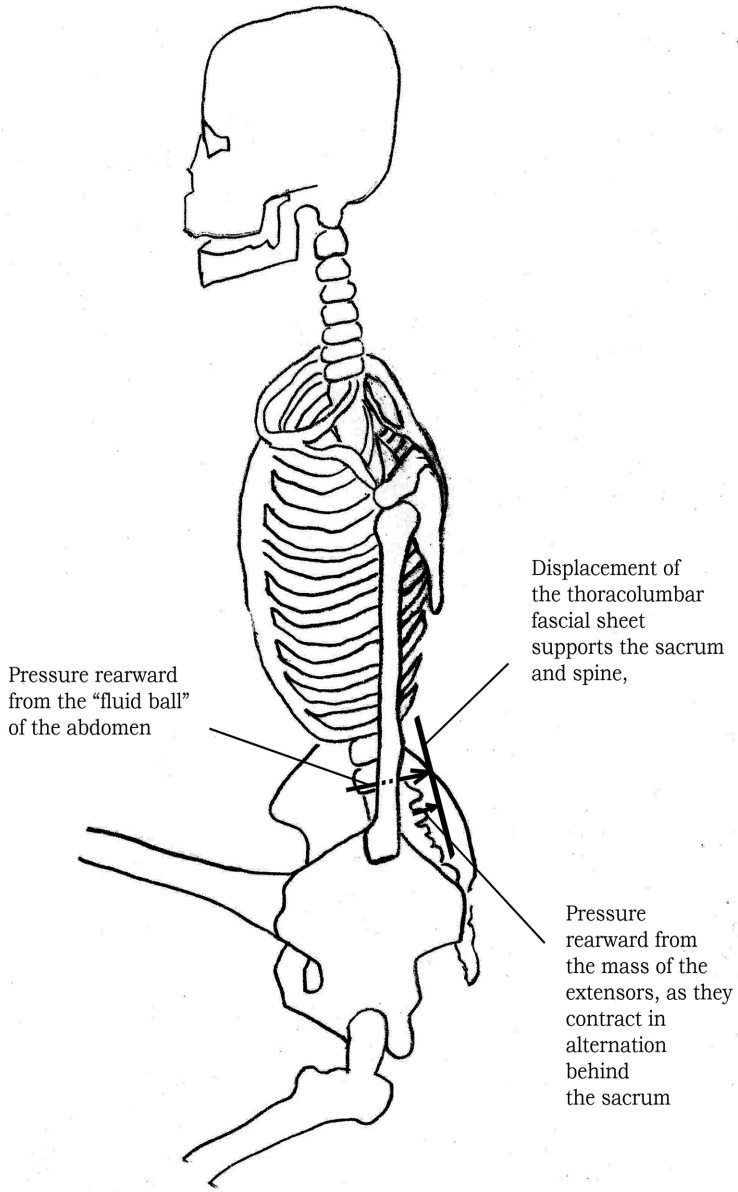
spines. Holding the spine erect is like stringing pearls on top of each other, without letting them lean or incline. However, if one is too tense and stiff, or unnaturally affected, then this too is an error. (12)

I would say that the thread on which the pearls are strung is the fascia behind the sacrum and spine, the thoracolumbar fascial sheet, composed of the thoracolumbar and nuchal fascia.

“Stringing pearls” is allowing the abdominals to work with the extensor muscles of the spine to align vertebrae and thereby permit the displacement of the fascial sheet. Gravity in the abdominals can work against the extensors in a rhythm regulated by the stretch of ligaments, while pressure created in the abdomen as the abdominals work can displace the fascia behind specific vertebrae in support of an overall stretch.

Because the extensor muscles behind the sacrum are enclosed by bone on three sides, the thoracolumbar fascia behind the sacrum can be displaced by the mass of the extensor muscles as they contract. Gravity in the muscles of the lower abdomen and pelvis can work against the extensors, again regulated by the stretch of ligaments, to displace the fascia behind the sacrum in support of an overall stretch.

I find that Gautama’s description of ease in the second concentration accords well with the engagement of “reflex movement” in the lower abdomen, around the pelvic basin, and behind the sacrum. Likewise, Gautama’s description of ease in the third concentration accords well with “reflex movement” in the abdominals and in the extensors of the spine.



I tend to rely on Yuanwu’s “turning to the left, turning to the right, following up behind” (Post: The Diamond Trap, the Thicket of Thorns) and on Hsueh Feng’s “turtle-nosed snake” (Post: Common Ground) to provide an initial sense of stretch behind the sacrum and the spine.

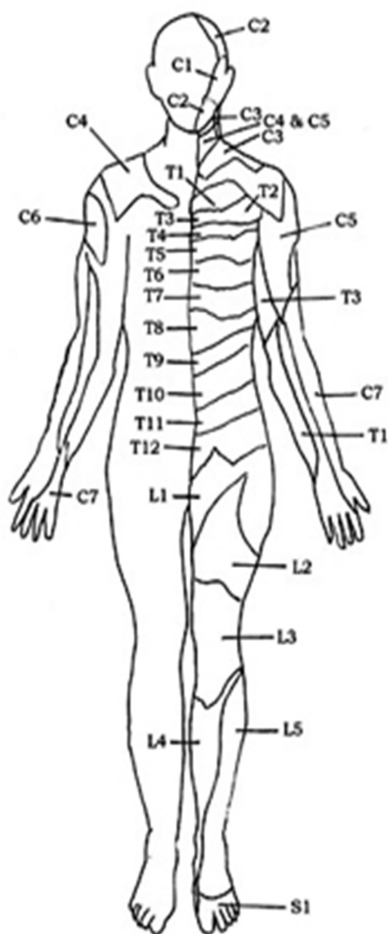
I remember telling Kobun Chino Otagawa that sometimes I had a feeling of stretch along my spine into my head, and that I enjoyed that. To my surprise, he said that he enjoyed that too.

The suffusion of the body with “purity by the pureness of mind” in the fourth concentration can allow the thoracolumbar fascial sheet to sustain an openness of nerve exits along the sacrum and spine. Such an openness is accompanied by an ability to feel throughout the body to the surface of the skin.

That’s reflected in Gautama’s metaphor for the fourth concentration:

... it is as if (a person) might be sitting down who had clothed (themselves) including (their) head with a white cloth; there would be no part of (their) whole body that was not covered by the white cloth.
(13)

There is a relationship between the ease of nerve exits from the sacrum and spine and feeling on the surface of the skin. Here is a chart from the early 1900’s of the specifics of that relationship on the front of the body:



Dermatomes

Sensation in the areas mapped above depends on the free passage of nerves from the indicated vertebrae to the surface of the skin.

Cervical Vertebrae C1-C7
 Thoracic Vertebrae T1-T12
 Lumbar Vertebrae L1-L5
 Sacral Vertebrae S1-S5

The free placement of attention in the movement of breath depends on an ability to feel throughout the body to the surface of the skin. As I wrote previously:

When a presence of mind is retained as the placement of attention shifts, then the natural tendency toward the free placement of attention draws out thoughts initial and sustained, and brings on the stages of concentration. (14)

As regards posture, I will probably tell my neighbor to sit on the edge of his chair, and to have one foot flat on the floor and the other foot drawn back so that the ball of the foot makes contact with the floor. I will tell him to place the fingers of one hand on the palm of the other, resting the wrist of the lower hand on the upper thigh of the flat-footed leg. That's basically how I sit, when I sit in a chair.

As regards the breath, I expect I will tell him to let the place where his attention goes do the sitting, and maybe even the breathing.

- 1) “The Background of Shikantaza”, Shunryu Suzuki; San Francisco, February 22, 1970.
- 2) “I have nothing in my mind”, Shunryu Suzuki, July 15, 1969; emphasis added.
- 3) AN 5.28, © PTS vol. III pp 18-19, parentheses paraphrase original.
- 4) SN 48.10, © PTS vol V p 174; parentheses paraphrase original; “initial” for “directed”, as at SN 36.11, © PTS vol IV p 146.
- 5) “Awareness Through Movement”, Moshe Feldenkrais, © 1972, 1977 Moshe Feldenkrais, p 78.
- 6) MN 117, © Pali Text Society vol III p 114; “noble” substituted for Ariyan; emphasis added.
- 7) MN 119, © Pali Text Society vol III p 133.
- 8) DN 22, © Pali Text Society vol ii ppp 345-346, parentheses paraphrase original.
- 9) MN 113, © Pali Text Society vol III pp 92-94; parentheses paraphrase original.
- 10) “True Zen”, Shunryu Suzuki, published, January, 1962, Wind Bell #2, © S. F. Zen Center.
- 11) “The Way-Seeking Mind”, Shunryu Suzuki, March 26, 1966.
- 12) “Master Cheng’s Thirteen Chapters on T’ai-Chi Ch’uan”, © 1982 Douglas Wile, p 21.
- 13) MN 119, © Pali Text Society vol. III p 134.
- 14) “Post: Shunryu Suzuki on Shikantaza and the Theravadin Stages”, Oct. 25, 2023.

APPENDIX

“FOR A FRIEND”, REVISITED

(October 23, 2021)

In the 6th century C.E. in China, the Buddhist monk Fuxi wrote:

The empty hand grasps the hoe handle
Walking along, I ride the ox
The ox crosses the wooden bridge
The bridge is flowing, the water is still (1)

Another translation:

The handless hold the hoe.
A pedestrian walks, riding on a water buffalo.
A man passes over the bridge;
The bridge (but) not the water flows. (2)

I would say “the empty hand grasps the hoe handle” is a reference to the role of ligaments at the sacrum in activity related to posture. Here’s a summary of a study that confirms that some of the activity of the lower body is “regulated” by the iliosacral ligaments:

This study (research by Indahl, A., et al.) established that the ligamento-muscular reflex existed

between the sacroiliac joint and muscles that attach to the bones that make up the sacroiliac joint. (The study's authors) suggested that the sacroiliac joint was a regulator of pelvic and paraspinal muscles and, thereby, influences posture and lumbar segmental stability. (3)

There's a phenomena called "reciprocal innervation" that can enter into the activity of posture. I first read about "reciprocal innervation" in the writings of Dr. John Upledger, in a description he gave of his experience lying on salt water in an isolation tank:

At some point my body began to make fish-like movements, as though my pelvis and legs were the lower part of a fish moving its tail from side to side. This movement was nice and easy. The neurophysiologist in me related these movements to an expression of what we call 'reciprocal innervation'. The principle here is that, when your trunk is bent to the side in one direction past a certain threshold, the muscles on the other side of the trunk contract. In doing so, the nerve impulses are diverted from the side to which you are bent, and those muscles relax. Your trunk now bends in the opposite direction until that side-bending threshold is passed. The nerve impulses are then diverted again to the opposite side, causing muscle contraction and side bending in that direction. (4)

In a seated posture, reciprocating activity in the muscles of the legs can feel like walking, with the reciprocity controlled by the stretch of ligaments between the sacrum and the pelvis: "walking along, I ride the ox".

The stretch allowed by a ligament is slight (less than 6%

of the total length of the ligament (5)), and yet as the study by Indahl and associates showed, even a slight stretch can influence muscular activity.

I think it's possible that a "ligamento-muscular reflex" also exists between the intervertebral ligaments of the spine and the muscles of the abdomen and lower back.

I have read that a reference to a "wooden bridge" in Fuxi's day was really a reference to a log across a stream. However, I'm not able to confirm that explanation; neither do I see any reference to "wood" or "wooden" in any of a dozen other translations of the poem (6).

The second translation I quoted above renders the third line:

A man passes over the bridge

To me, the characterization of what passes over the bridge as "a man" speaks to a particularly human balance. I have written previously about Gautama's analogy for the third state of concentration (white, red, and blue lotuses that never break the surface of a pond (7)). I believe Gautama's analogy refers to the balance of the legs, arms, and head around the place of occurrence of consciousness. I would say "a man passes over the bridge" is an allusion to such a balance, with the place of occurrence of consciousness being the bridge.

The last line of the poem is:

The bridge is flowing, the water is still

The place where consciousness occurs suddenly becomes the source of action of the body, the place seeming to flow

from moment to moment, while action based on volition or habit ceases entirely, or falls still.

- 1) “Zen’s Chinese Heritage”, tr. & © 2000 Andy Ferguson, p 2.
- 2) Ch’an and Zen Teaching, Series One by Lu K’uan Yü (Charles Luk); Rider & Co., London, 1960, p. 143-145; Translated from The Imperial Selection of Ch’an Sayings (Yu Hsuan Yu Lu) [Yuxuan yulu (Imperial Selections of Recorded Sayings / Emperor’s Selection of Quotations)]; © 1961 Charles Luk.
- 3) Serola Biomechanics website summary of Indahl, A., et al., Sacroiliac joint involvement in activation of the porcine spinal and gluteal musculature. *Journal of Spinal Disorders*, 1999. 12(4): pp 325-30.
- 4) “Your Inner Physician and You: Craniosacral Therapy and Somatic Emotional Release”, John E. Upledger, © 1991 U I Enterprises, p 165; see also “Reciprocal Innervation and Symmetrical Muscles”, Professor C. S. Sherrington, University of Liverpool, Nov. 13, 1912.
- 5) https://web.mit.edu/tkd/stretch/stretching_3.html.
- 6) “Zen Literature” on Terebess, <https://terebess.hu/zen/fuxi.html>.
- 7) see “Applying the Pali Instructions”.

POST: A WAY OF LIVING

(May 16, 2023)

Gautama's teaching revolved around action, around one specific kind of action:

...I say that determinate thought is action. When one determines, one acts by deed, word, or thought.
(1)

“When one determines”—when a person exercises volition, or choice, action of “deed, word, or thought” follows.

Gautama also spoke of “the activities”. The activities are the actions that take place as a consequence of the exercise of volition:

And what are the activities? These are the three activities:—those of deed, speech and mind. These are activities. (2)

Gautama claimed that a ceasing of “action” is possible:

And what... is the ceasing of action? That ceasing of action by body, speech, and mind, by which one

contacts freedom,—that is called ‘the ceasing of action’. (3)

He spoke in detail about how “the activities” come to cease:

...I have seen that the ceasing of the activities is gradual. When one has attained the first trance, speech has ceased. When one has attained the second trance, thought initial and sustained has ceased. When one has attained the third trance, zest has ceased. When one has attained the fourth trance, inbreathing and outbreathing have ceased... Both perception and feeling have ceased when one has attained the cessation of perception and feeling. (4)

Gautama spoke of the “activity” of deed, but when he spoke of the ceasing of the activities, he spoke of the ceasing of “inbreathing and outbreathing”. Even when “determinate thought” is not directly involved in the movement of the diaphragm, actions in the body that are occasioned by “determinate thought” affect the movement of breath, and can leave a residue of habit that further affects the movement of breath. If “activity” in inbreathing and outbreathing” has really ceased, then the “determinate thought” that gives rise to “activity” in the body of any kind must likewise have ceased.

“The cessation of inbreathing and outbreathing” is not an actual stoppage of breath. Gautama only spoke about the stoppage of breath once, in a description of the practices he undertook as an ascetic:

So I, Aggivessana, stopped breathing in and breathing out through the mouth and through the nose

and through the ears. When I, Aggivessana, had stopped breathing in and breathing out through the mouth and through the nose and through the ears, I came to have very bad headaches... very strong winds cut through my stomach... there came a fierce heat in my body. Although, Aggivesana, unsluggish energy came to be stirred up in me, unmuddled mindfulness set up, yet my body was turbulent, not calmed, because I was harassed in striving by striving against that very pain. But yet, Aggivesana, that painful feeling, arising in me, persisted without impinging on my mind... (5)

Stopping the breath in and the breath out did not satisfy Gautama's quest to "bring to a close the (holy)-faring". Only after he had abandoned such ascetic practices did he enter the states of concentration, and attain the insight that caused him to say, "done is what was to be done".

Just as he pointed to the "activity" of inhalation and exhalation instead of the "activity" of deed, Gautama pointed to the "activity" of perception and feeling instead of the "activity" of mind. Apparently in Gautama's experience, when the "determinate thought" that gives rise to perception and feeling has ceased, the "determinate thought" that gives rise to "activity" in the mind can also be said to have ceased.

Gautama said that after he lectured, he returned to concentrating his mind:

And I... at the close of (instructional discourse), steady, calm, make one-pointed and concentrate my mind subjectively in that first characteristic of concentration in which I ever constantly abide. (6)

“That first characteristic of concentration” is “one-pointedness of mind”, as here in Gautama’s description of “right concentration” (“right concentration”, part of “the eight-fold path” that leads to the end of suffering):

And what... is the (noble) right concentration with the causal associations, with the accompaniments? It is right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right mode of livelihood, right endeavor, right mindfulness. Whatever one-pointedness of mind is accompanied by these seven components , this... is called the (noble) right concentration with the causal associations and the accompaniments.
(7)

Gautama spoke of laying hold of “one-pointedness” in the induction of the first “trance”:

Herein... the (noble) disciple, making self-surrender the object of (their) thought, lays hold of concentration, lays hold of one-pointedness. (The disciple), aloof from sensuality, aloof from evil conditions, enters on the first trance, which is accompanied by thought initial and sustained, which is born of solitude, easeful and zestful, and abides therein. (8)

I have described the experience of “one-pointedness of mind” as something that can occur in the movement of breath:

The presence of mind can utilize the location of attention to maintain the balance of the body and coordinate activity in the movement of breath, without a particularly conscious effort to do so. There

can also come a moment when the movement of breath necessitates the placement of attention at a certain location in the body, or at a series of locations, with the ability to remain awake as the location of attention shifts retained through the exercise of presence.

In my experience, the “placement of attention” by the movement of breath is only completely free in what Gautama described as “the fourth musing”:

Again, a (person), putting away ease... enters and abides in the fourth musing; seated, (one) suffuses (one’s) body with purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind so that there is not one particle of the body that is not pervaded with purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind. (9)

The “pureness of mind” refers to the absence of any intention to act. Suffusing the body with “purity by the pureness of (one’s) mind” is widening awareness so that there is “not one particle of the body” that cannot become the location where attention is placed.

The classic literature of Tai Chi appears to identify the ligaments of the body as a source of activity. The literature describes three levels in the development of “ch’i”, a word that literally translates as “breath” but in practice is taken to refer to a fundamental energy of the body, and each of the three levels has three stages.

The stages of the first level are:

“... relaxing the ligaments from the shoulder to the wrist”; “from the hip joint to the heel”; “from the sacrum to the headtop”. (10)

Unlike the contraction and relaxation of muscles, the stretch and resile of ligaments can't be voluntarily controlled. The muscles across the joints can, however, be relaxed in such a way as to allow the natural stretch and resile of ligaments—that would seem to be the meaning of the advice to “relax the ligaments”.

The stages of the second level are:

“sinking ch'i to the tan t'ien” (a point below and behind the navel); “the ch'i reaches the arms and legs”; “the ch'i moves through the sacrum (wei lu) to the top of the head (ni wan)”. (10)

Tai Ch'i master Cheng Man Ch'ing advised that the ch'i will collect at the tan-t'ien until it overflows into the tail-bone and transits to the top of the head, but he warned against any attempt to force the flow.

Omori Sogen cautioned similarly:

... It may be the least trouble to say as a general precaution that strength should be allowed to come to fullness naturally as one becomes proficient in sitting. We should sit so that our energy increases of itself and brims over instead of putting physical pressure on the lower abdomen by force. (11)

I would posit that the patterns in the development of ch'i reflect involuntary activity of the body generated in the stretch of ligaments. There is, in addition, a possible mechanism of support for the spine from the displacement of the fascia behind the spine, a displacement that can be effected by pressure generated in the abdominal cavity and that may quite possibly depend on a push on

the fascia behind the sacrum by the bulk of the extensor muscles.

The final level in the development of ch'i concerns "chin". According to the classics, "chin comes from the ligaments" (10).

The three stages of the final level are:

"t'ing chin, listening to or feeling strength"; "comprehension of chin"; "omnipotence". (10)

Another translator rendered the last stage above as "perfect clarity" (12). In my estimation, "perfect clarity" is "the pureness of (one's) mind" that Gautama associated with "the cessation of inbreathing and outbreathing" in the fourth concentration.

The Tai Chi classics emphasize relaxation. For me, calm is also required with regard to the stretch of ligaments, if "automatic movement" is to be realized. The stretch of a ligament prior to strain is small (6%), and I would say that automatic movement is only initiated at the edge of the range.

Cheng Man Ch'ing mentioned a Chinese description of seated meditation, "straighten the chest and sit precariously"—I think that also speaks to the necessity of calm (13).

In my experience, "automatic" activity in the movement of breath can at times depend on the relaxation of particular muscle groups and the exercise of calm with regard to the stretch of particular ligaments. I believe that a pattern in the circulation of "automatic" activity can develop, especially when a bent-knee posture or carriage is maintained

over a period of time.

I've written about my approach:

I begin with making the surrender of volition in activity related to the movement of breath the object of thought. For me, that necessitates thought applied and sustained with regard to relaxation of the activity of the body, with regard to the exercise of calm in the stretch of ligaments, with regard to the detachment of mind, and with regard to the presence of mind. I find that a presence of mind from one breath to the next can precipitate "one-pointedness of mind", but laying hold of "one-pointedness of mind" requires a surrender of willful activity in the body much like falling asleep.

(14)

Many people in the Buddhist community take enlightenment to be the goal of Buddhist practice. I would say that when a person consciously experiences automatic movement in the activity of the body in inhalation and exhalation, finding a way of life that allows for such experience in the natural course of things becomes the more pressing concern. Gautama taught such a way of living, although I don't believe that such a way of living is unique to Buddhism.

- 1) AN 6.63, © Pali Text Society vol III p 294.
- 2) SN 12.2, © Pali Text Society Vol II p 4.
- 3) SN 35.146, © Pali Text Society vol IV p 85.
- 4) SN 36.11, © Pali Text Society vol IV p 146.
- 5) MN 36, © Pali Text Society vol I pp 298-299.
- 6) MN 36, © Pali Text Society vol I p 303.
- 7) MN 117, © Pali Text Society vol III p 114; “noble” substituted for Ariyan.
- 8) SN 48.10, © Pali Text Society vol V p 174; “noble” substituted for Ariyan; Horner’s “initial” (MN 119) substituted for Woodward’s “directed”.
- 9) AN 5.28, © Pali Text Society vol. III pp 18-19, see also MN 119, © Pali Text Society vol. III pp 132-134.
- 10) “Three Levels” from “Cheng Tzu’s Thirteen Treatises on Ta’i Chi Chuan”, Cheng Man Ch’ing, tr. Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo and Martin Inn, © 1985 Juliana T. Cheng, pp 77-78.
- 11) “An Introduction to Zen Training: A Translation of Sanzen Nyumon”, Omori Sogen, tr. Dogen Hosokawa and Roy Yoshimoto, © Daihouzan Chozen-ji, Tuttle Publishing, p 59.
- 12) “Master Cheng’s Thirteen Chapters on T’ai-Chi Ch’uan”, © 1982 Douglas Wile, p 57.
- 13) *ibid*, p 21.
- 14) “Response to ‘Not the Wind, Not the Flag’”, zenmudra.com/zazen-notes Sept. 11 2022.

FROM THE EARLY RECORD

Gautama taught that thought applied and sustained is present in the initial state of concentration, and he described his way of living as sixteen particular thoughts, each applied or sustained while mindful of the breath in or the breath out. The first four of the sixteen constituted a particular mindfulness of the body:

Setting mindfulness in front of (oneself), (one) breathes in mindfully and mindfully breathes out.

As (one) draws in a long breath (one) knows: A long breath I draw in. [As (one) breathes out a long breath (one) knows: I breathe out a long breath.] As (one) draws in a short breath (one) knows: A short breath I draw in. As (one) breathes out a short breath (one) knows: I breathe out a short breath.

Thus (one) makes up (one's) mind:

I shall breathe in, feeling it go through the whole body. Feeling it go through the whole body I shall breath out.

Calming down the bodily aggregate I shall breathe in. Calming down the bodily aggregate I shall breathe out. (1)

Where Woodward has "feeling it go through the whole body", the later translator Horner has "experiencing the whole (breath-)body" (2). Where Woodward has "calming down the bodily aggregate", Horner has "tranquillising the activity of body".

Gautama continued with four applications of thought that he said constituted mindfulness of feelings:

Thus (one) makes up (one's) mind:

Feeling the thrill of zest I shall breathe in.
Feeling the thrill of zest I shall breathe out.

Feeling the sense of ease I shall breathe in.
Feeling the sense of ease I shall breathe out.

(One) makes up one's mind:

"Aware of all mental factors I shall breathe in. Aware of all mental factors I will breathe out.

Calming down the mental factors I shall breathe in. Calming down the mental factors I shall breathe out. (1)

Where Woodward has "aware of all mental factors", Horner has "experiencing the activity of thought". Where Woodward has "calming down the mental factors", Horner has "tranquillising the activity of thought".

I myself find an awareness of the senses that locate the mind (equalibrioception, graviception, proprioception, and oculoception), and of the range of these senses, pro-

vides a good approximation to "mental factors". I look for calm in these senses in conjunction with the stretch of ligaments, as balance extends through the body.

The next four applications Gautama took to be a mindfulness of mind:

Aware of mind I shall breathe in. Aware of mind I shall breathe out.

(One) makes up one's mind:

“Gladdening my mind I shall breathe in.
Gladdening my mind I shall breathe out.

Composing my mind I shall breathe in.
Composing my mind I shall breathe out.

Detaching my mind I shall breathe in. De-
taching my mind I shall breathe out. (1)

The final four applications of thought were, according to Gautama, a mindfulness of the state of mind:

(One) makes up one's mind:

Contemplating impermanence I shall
breathe in. Contemplating imperma-
nence I shall breathe out.

Contemplating dispassion I shall breathe in.
Contemplating dispassion I shall breathe
out.

Contemplating cessation I shall breathe in.
Contemplating cessation I shall breathe out.

Contemplating renunciation I shall breathe in. Contemplating renunciation I shall breathe out. (1)

When I reflect on impermanence, I generally think about death, but Gautama spoke more broadly about the impermanence of any notion of self, and about how grasping after any notion of self is identically suffering.

With regard to death, Gautama stated that those who correctly practice "mindfulness of death" apply his teachings "for the interval that it takes to swallow having chewed up one morsel of food", or "for the interval that it takes to breathe out after breathing in, or to breathe in after breathing out".

Contemplation on impermanence in any form engenders a dispassion toward "the pleasant, the painful, and the neither-pleasant-nor-painful" of feeling, giving rise to the second element of Gautama's "mindfulness of mental states".

I take the "cessation" of the third element to be the cessation of volitive action, the action invoked by determinate thought. There are other cessations Gautama cited, each in connection with a particular state of concentration, but they only have significance in the larger context of the cessation of volitive action.

The "renunciation" of the fourth element I would say refers to the abandonment of any notion of "I am the doer, mine is the doer" with regard to action of speech, body, or mind.

The sixteen elements of mindfulness that Gautama de-

scribed as his way of living were each to be applied or sustained in conjunction with an inhalation or an exhalation, but Gautama acknowledged that he found "the intent concentration on in-breathing and out-breathing", as he called the sixteen, particularly suited to the rainy season.

Gautama advised his followers to utilize the four applications of mindfulness, of which the sixteen were one instance, in order to be a lamp unto themselves:

Therefore... be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge unto yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to any one besides yourselves. And how... is (one) to be a lamp unto (oneself), a refuge unto (oneself), betaking (oneself) to no external refuge, holding fast to the Truth as a lamp, holding fast as a refuge to the Truth, looking not for refuge to any one besides (oneself)?

Herein, ... (one) continues, as to the body, so to look upon the body that (one) remains strenuous, self-possessed, and mindful, having overcome both the hankering and the dejection common in the world. As to feelings... mind... states of mind, (one) continues so to look upon each that (one) remains strenuous, self-possessed, and mindful, having overcome both the hankering and the dejection common in the world. (3)

In some of his lectures, Gautama went from the four initial or "material" concentrations to four "non-material" concentrations. The four further states, he said, marked

a transition from "equanimity with respect to the multiplicity of the senses" to "equanimity with respect to the uniformity of the senses".

The first of the further states was "the infinity of ether". Gautama identified the state with "the excellence of the heart's release" through the extension of "the mind of compassion". He described a particular method for the extension of the mind of compassion, a method that began with the extension of "the mind of friendliness":

[One] dwells, having suffused the first quarter [of the world] with friendliness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; just so above, below, across; [one] dwells having suffused the whole world everywhere, in every way, with a mind of friendliness that is far-reaching, wide-spread, immeasurable, without enmity, without malevolence. [One] dwells having suffused the first quarter with a mind of compassion... with a mind of sympathetic joy... with a mind of equanimity that is far-reaching, wide-spread, immeasurable, without enmity, without malevolence. (4)

The second of the further states ("the infinity of consciousness") Gautama identified with "the excellence of the heart's release" through the extension of "the mind of sympathetic joy", and the third ("the infinity of nothingness") he identified with "the excellence of the heart's release" through the extension of "the mind of equanimity".

The fourth of the further states Gautama described as "neither perception nor yet non-perception". He gave no specific instruction on the transition from the third state to the fourth, but equanimity with respect to the uniformity of the senses is still present in the fourth.

Gautama studied the third and fourth further states under two of the masters of his day (5). He remained unsatisfied, but by means of "a lack of desire", he arrived at "the stopping of perception and feeling" and the freedom and knowledge that "done is what was to be done, there is no more of being such or so" (6).

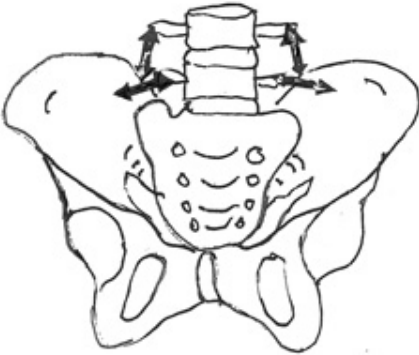
Gautama put forward that all of the concentrations are marked by happiness, and that even the transcendence of the concentrations is marked by happiness. He expected followers of other sects to be skeptical of the latter claim, and he advised his attendant Ananda what to say:

... the situation occurs, Ananda, when wanderers belonging to other sects may speak thus: 'The recluse (Gautama) speaks of the stopping of perceiving and feeling, and lays down that this belongs to happiness. Now what is this, now how is this?' Ananda, wanderers belonging to other sects who speak thus should be spoken to thus: 'Your reverences, (Gautama) does not lay down that it is only pleasant feeling that belongs to happiness; for, your reverences, the Tathagatha (the "Thus-Gone One", the Buddha) lays down that whenever, wherever, whatever happiness is found it belongs to happiness. (7)

- 1) SN 54.1, © Pali Text Society vol V pp 275-276; masculine pronouns replaced, re-paragraphed.
- 2) MN 118, © Pali Text Society vol III p 124; parentheticals added; "breath-" per I. B. Horner's note, added.
- 3) DN 16, © Pali Text Society vol II p 108; Horner's "body, feelings, mind, and mental states" (e.g. MN 118) substituted for Rhys Davids' "body, feelings, moods, and ideas".
- 4) MN 7; © Pali Text Society vol I p 48.
- 5) MN 26, © Pali Text Society vol I pp 209-210.
- 6) MN 137, © Pali Text Society vol III p 269.
- 7) MN 59, © Pali Text Society vol II p 69.

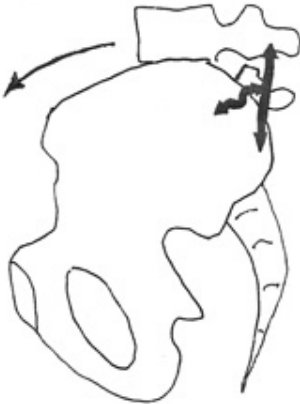
ILLUSTRATIONS

Ilio-Lumbar Ligaments

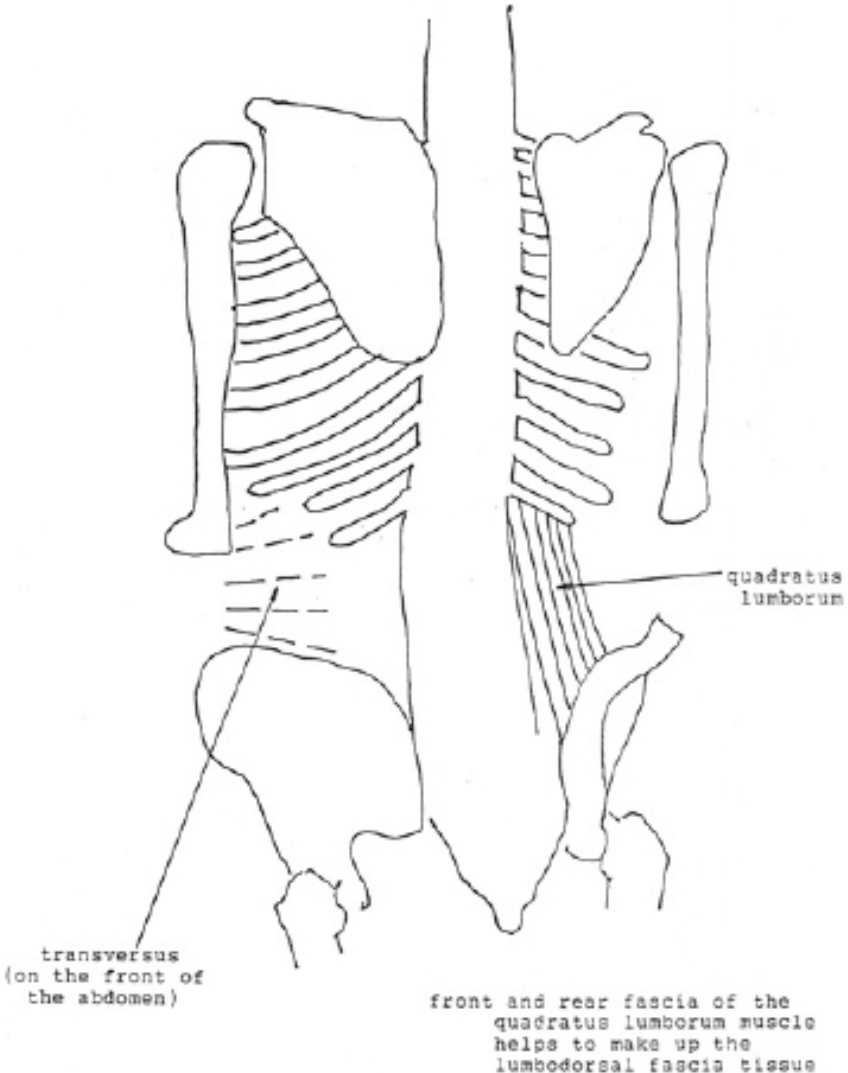


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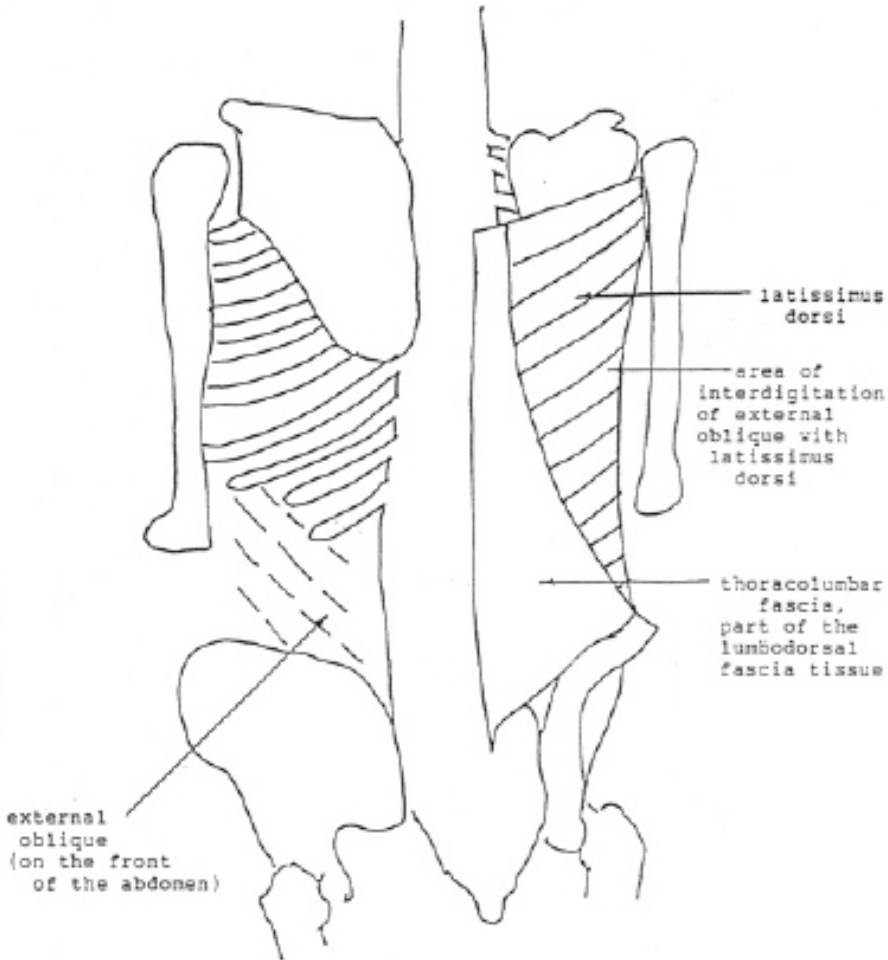
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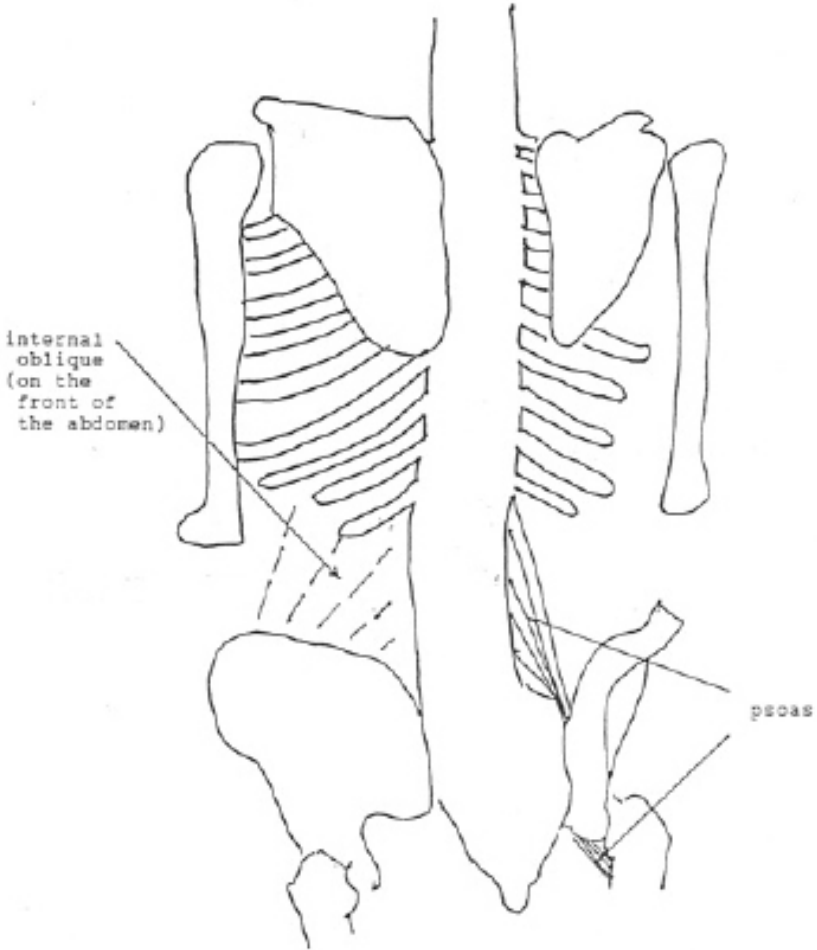
Transversus Abdominus



External Obliques

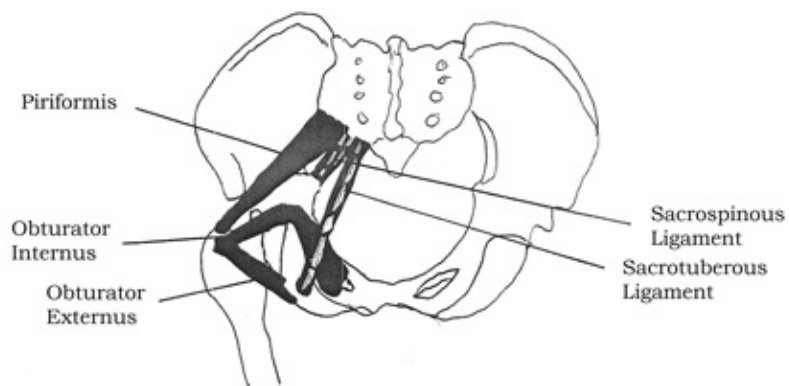
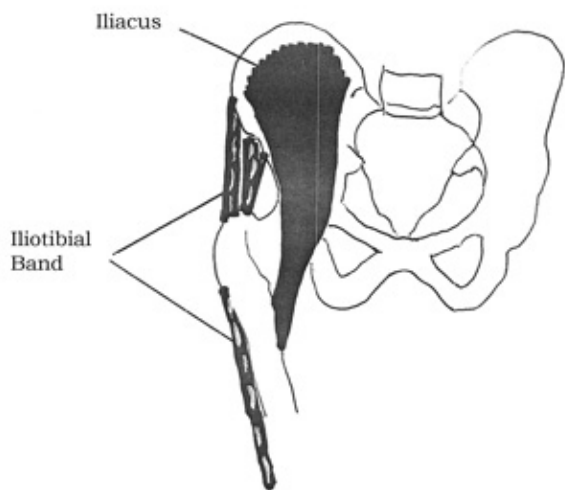


Internal Obliques

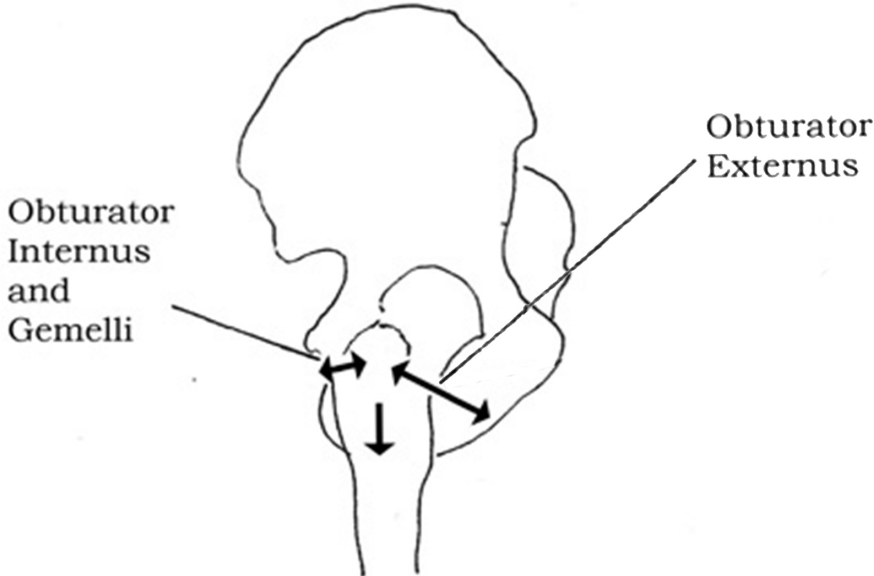


fascia of the psoas muscle blends with the fascia of the quadratus lumborum muscle

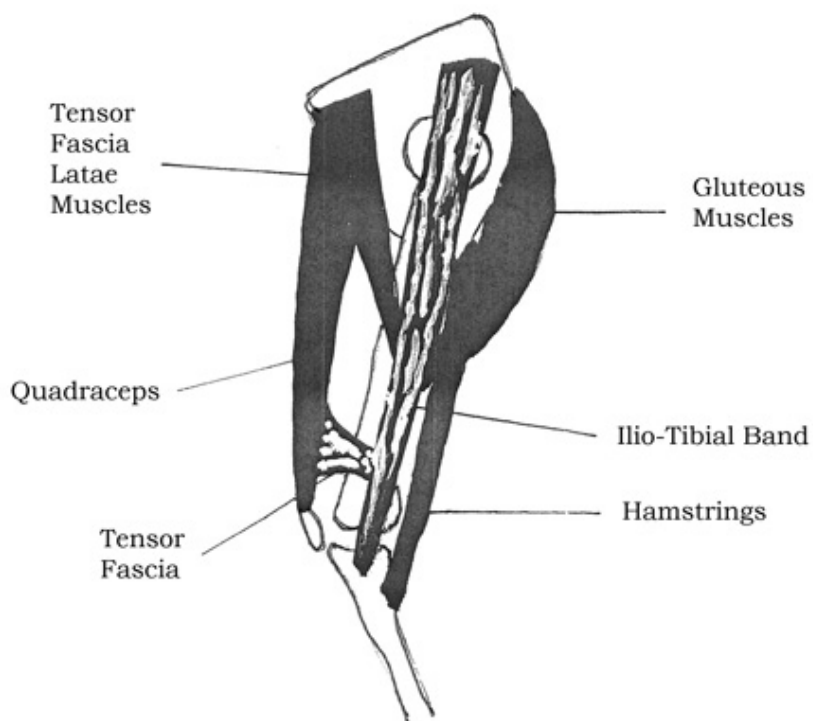
Obturator



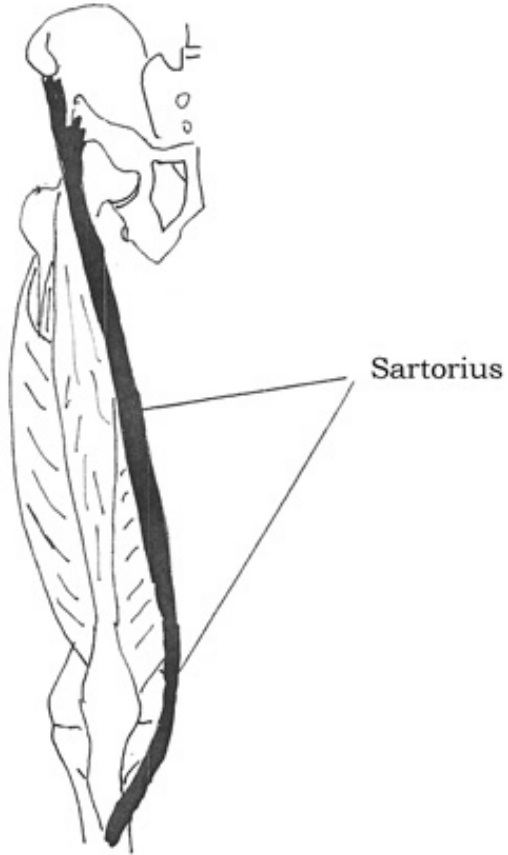
Obturator--Hip Extension



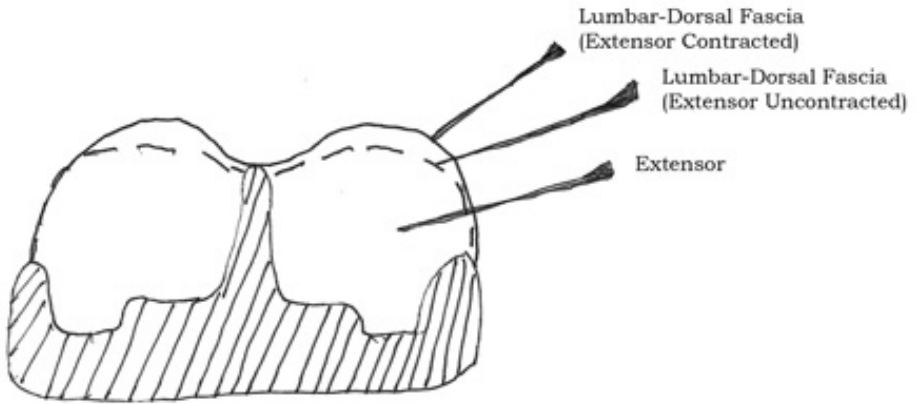
Ilio-Tibial Band Tensors



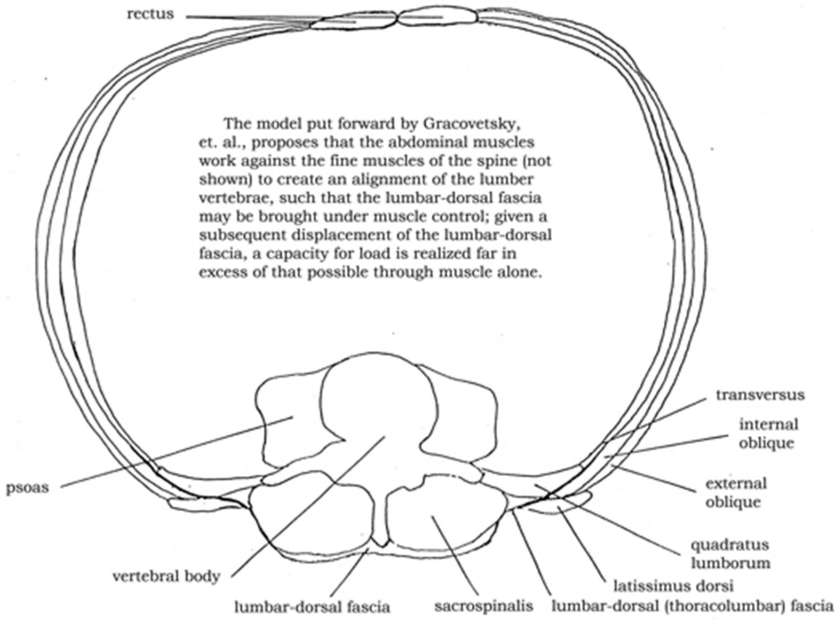
Sartorius Muscles



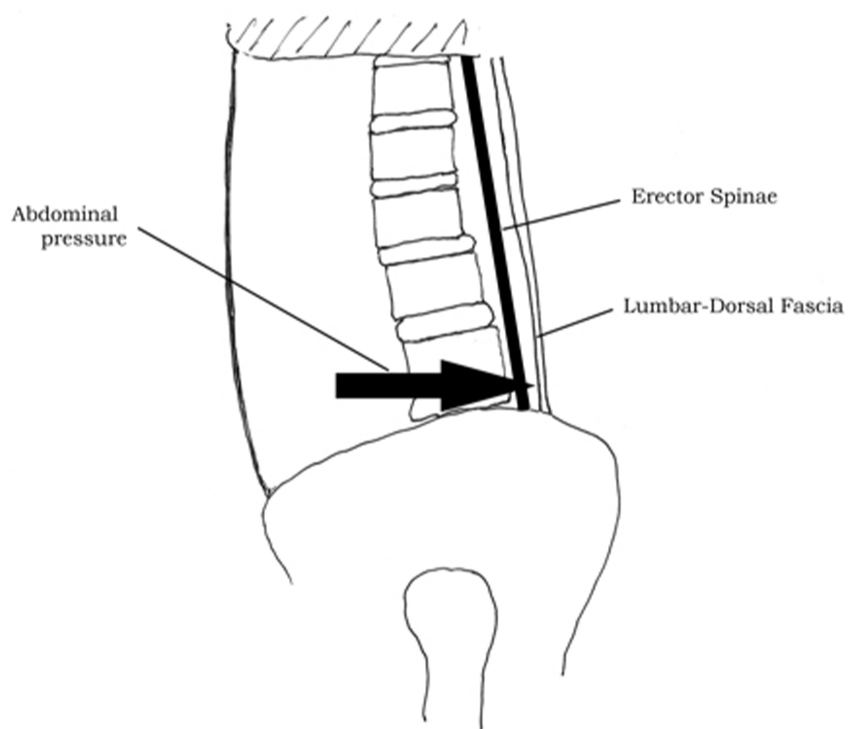
Fascial Displacement--Sacrum



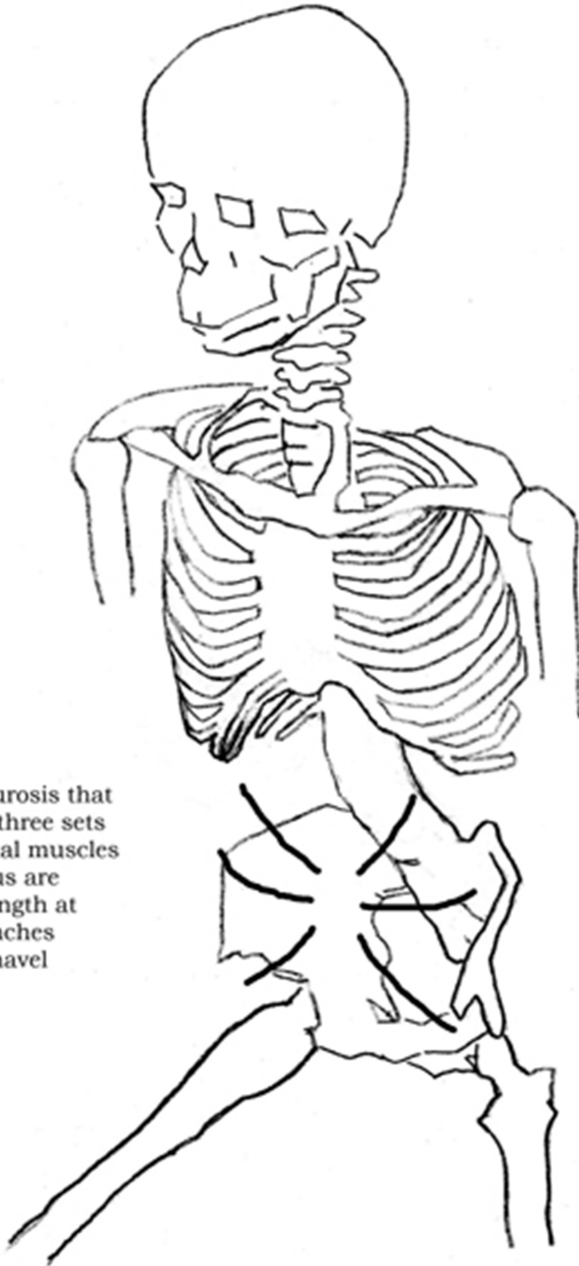
Abdominals



Facial Displacement--Lower Back



Anterior Origins



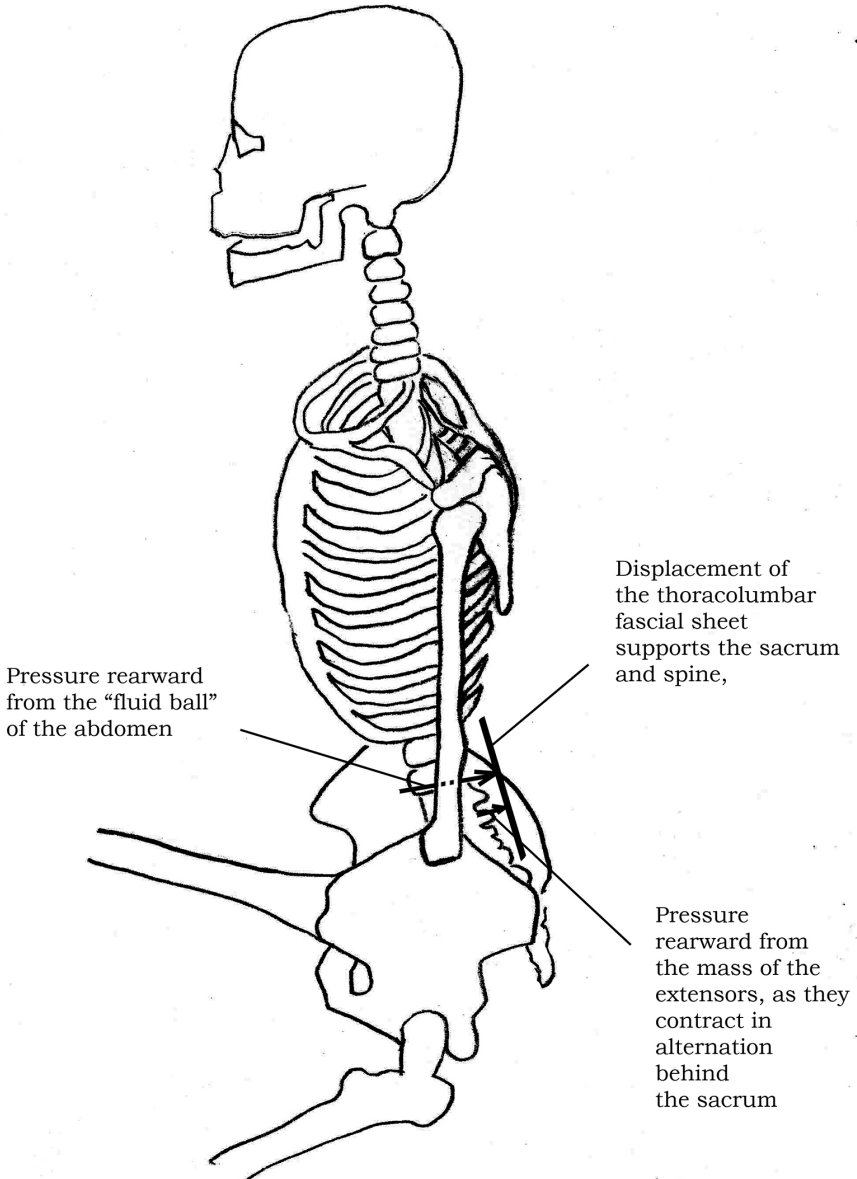
The aponeurosis that attach the three sets of abdominal muscles to the rectus are of equal length at a point 2 inches below the navel

Posterior Origins

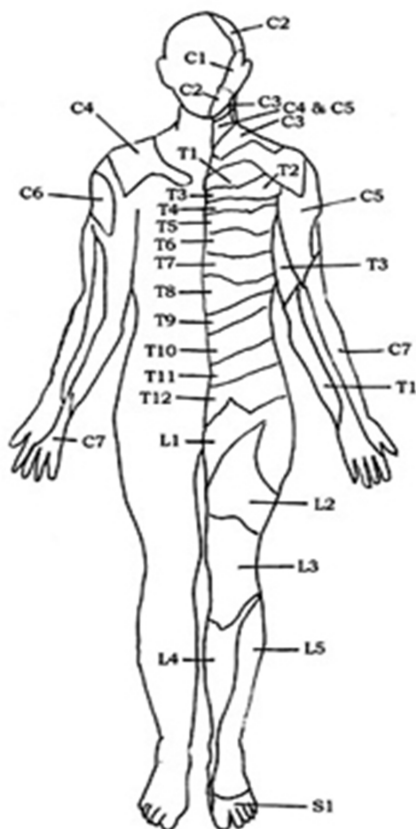


The latissimus dorsi,
transversus abdominis,
and gluteous muscles
all attach to the
fascial sheet behind
the sacrum

Fascial Displacement



Dermatomes



Dermatomes

Sensation in the areas mapped above depends on the free passage of nerves from the indicated vertebrae to the surface of the skin.

Cervical Vertebrae C1-C7
Thoracic Vertebrae T1-T12
Lumbar Vertebrae L1-L5
Sacral Vertebrae S1-S5

INDEX

Index

- Abdomen: 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 46, 69, 70, 84, 89, 99, 112, 123, 132
- Abdominals: 39, 70, 85, 86, 112, 158
- Aggivessana: 128
- Alan Watts: 95
- Alexander Technique: 45
- Ananda: 143
- Arahants: 109
- Attainment: 55, 67, 72, 92, 111
- Awareness: 17, 18, 21, 35, 36, 41, 42, 43, 49, 54, 59, 65, 66, 69, 81, 131, 138
- Backward step: 59
- Balance: 35, 49, 50, 66, 67, 69, 83, 84, 85, 90, 99, 123, 130, 139
- Baoche, Zen master: 77
- Bartilink, D.L.: 39, 40, 43, 45
- Bath-ball: 65, 66, 108
- Blanke, and Mohr: 36n, 43n
- Blue Cliff Record: 49, 50n, 73n, 93n
- Buddha: xiv, 14, 41, 76, 111, 143
- Buddha-Way: 71
- Cailliet, Dr. Rene: 85
- Calm: 35, 36, 67, 69, 83, 90, 129, 133, 134, 137, 139
- Center of gravity: 40, 41, 99, 100, 107
- Cessation: 31, 50, 64, 68, 128, 133, 139, 140
- Cheng Man Ch'ing: 111, 132, 133
- Ch'i: 131, 132, 133
- Chin: 133
- Cleary, J.C., Thomas: 32n, 50n, 73n, 93n, 103n
- Cloth ("white cloth"): 71, 72, 114
- Compassion: 76, 77, 142
- Cross-legged: 84, 86, 91, 105
- Death: 31, 140
- Dermatones: 163, 81
- Determinate thought: 127, 128, 129, 140

Diaphragm: 39, 40, 128
Dispassion: 91, 139, 140
Dogen, Eihei: 43, 59, 60, 71, 75, 77, 97, 98, 101
Ease: 40, 55, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 83, 89, 90, 100, 101, 107, 108, 109, 110, 112, 114, 131, 138
Embodied self-Location: 81, 82, 98, 101
“Embracing Mind”: 29, 32n, 78n
Enlightenment: 111, 134
Equanimity: 76, 109, 142
Erector muscles (of the spine): 85, 86
Ether, Plane of Infinite Ether: 76, 77, 142
Extensor muscles: 85, 86, 87, 112, 113, 133, 157, 162
Falling asleep: 17, 18, 22, 25, 43, 108, 134
Farfan, H.F.: 85, 86
Fascia: 69, 85, 86, 87, 89, 112, 114, 132, 133, 153, 157, 158, 161, 162
Fascial displacement: 157, 158, 162
Feldenkrais, Moshe: 40, 41, 42, 43, 96, 98, 99, 100, 107
Feeling and perceiving: 64, 128, 129
Feelings: xiv, 89, 90, 91, 100, 101, 107, 138, 141
“Fluid ball”: 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 46, 84, 99
Franz, Koun: 81, 82
Friendliness, mind of: 76, 142
“Fukan zazengi”: 61n
Fuxi: 121, 123
Gaitonde, Mohan: 61n, 93n
“Genjo Koan”: 60, 75, 97, 98, 101
Gracovetsky: 85, 158
Gravity: 40, 41, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 90, 99, 100, 101, 107, 112
Habit, habits: 35, 40, 99, 102, 124, 128
Half-lotus: 45
Haramitsu, Hida: 68, 69, 99, 100
“Hardcore Zen”: 46n
Happiness: 143
Heautoscopy: 36n, 43n
Hip extension: 154
Horner, I.B.: 138
Hsiang Lin: 87

Humbleone: 21, 22, 23, 24
Liolumbar ligaments: 87, 88, 89, 148
Infinity of ether: 142
Infinity of nothingness: 142
Impermanence: 139, 140
Indahl, A.: 121, 123
Insomnia: 25
Jaw: 49, 87, 89
Jhana: 63
Just sitting: 53, 97, 102
Kapleau, Philip: 96
Kinhin: 45
Klein: 30
Kobun Chino Otogawa: 29, 31, 32, 75, 78, 114
Lamay, C.: 85, 86, 93n
Lamy-Farfan model: 85
“Ligamento-muscular reflex”: 121, 123
Lotus posture: 43
Lower back: 43, 89, 123, 159
Lumbar intervertebral discs: 43n, 93n
Lumbar spine: 87
Lumbodorsal fascia (also see thoracolumbar fascia): 85, 86
Maya Otogawa: 32
Mayu (Zen master Baoche): 77
Meditation: xiii, 22, 29, 35, 59, 66, 67, 82, 99, 105, 109, 133
Mudra: xi, 45
Multiplicity (of the senses): 142
Navy Seals: 30
Neither perception nor yet non-perception: 142
Neuroscience: 81
Nisargadatta, Shri: 59, 81
Nuchal fascia: 87, 112
“Old nervous system”: 41, 42, 43, 99, 107
Omori Sogen: 66, 68, 99, 132
One-pointedness (of mind): 63, 64, 82, 83, 100, 101, 106, 107, 108, 109, 130, 134
Otogawa, Kobun Chino: 29, 31, 32, 75, 78, 114
Otolithic (sense): 41, 43
Out-of-body experience: 35, 36, 42

Panic: 29, 30, 31, 32, 35
Panic attack, panic disorder: 29, 30
Paraspinal muscles: 122
Pearls (stringing): 112
Pelvis: 69, 87, 89, 99, 112, 122
Perceiving and feeling: 64, 128, 129
Perception: 128, 129, 142, 143
Piti: 63, 66
Posture: 35, 39, 40, 43, 66, 82, 84, 86, 91, 96, 97, 101, 111, 116, 121, 122, 133
Proprioception, proprioceptive (sense): 35, 41, 43, 138
Pureness of mind: 55, 90, 106, 114, 131
Reciprocal innervation: 122
Rectus (muscle): 39
Refuge: xiv, 141
Relaxation: 30, 31, 32, 35, 132, 133, 134
Renunciation: 140
Rinzai Zen: xiii, 66
“Rinzai Zen Discussion”, Facebook group: xiii
Sacroiliac joint: 122
Sacroiliac ligaments: 89
Sacrospinous ligaments: 88, 89, 153
Sacrotuberous ligament: 87, 88, 89
Sacrum: 45, 69, 72, 85, 86, 87, 89, 112, 114, 121, 122, 131, 132, 133, 157
Satipatthana: 83
Scott Alexander: 29
Self-location: 81, 82, 98, 101
Self-surrender: 64, 82, 100, 106, 138, 139
Senses: 31, 32, 35, 36, 41, 43, 66, 67, 76, 77, 83, 138, 142
Shallow water blackout: 31, 54, 97
Shikantaza: 53, 105, 106
“Shinchan Ohara”: 46n
“Shobogenzo-zuimonki”: 73n
Shunryu Suzuki: 53, 56, 95, 97, 102, 105, 110
“Sitting precariously”: 35, 111
Sleep: 17, 21, 22, 25, 30, 108
“Somatic cavity”: 39, 84
Soto school: 43, 97

Spine: 39, 42, 43, 45, 54, 69, 70, 72, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 99,
112, 114, 123, 132
“Stringing pearls”: 112
Suffocation alarm: 30
Suffocation response: 30, 35, 36
Sukha: 66
“Survey-sign”: 72
Suzuki, Shunryu: 53, 56, 95, 97, 102, 105, 110
Sympathetic joy: 76, 142
Tai Chi: 111, 131, 133
Tanahashi, Kazuaki: 61n, 78n, 103n
“Tensed somatic cavity”: 39, 84
“The great death”: 31
Theravadin stages: 53
Thoracolumbar fascia (also see lumbardorsal fascia): 86, 87,
89, 112, 113, 114, 162
“Three Pillars of Zen”: 96
T’ing chin: 133
Transverse muscles: 158
“True nature”: 56
Truth (as a lamp): xiv, 141
“Turtle-nose snake”: 49, 114
Uniformity (of the senses): 142
Upledger, John E.: 122
Vestibular (organs): 41, 43
Volition: 64, 68, 102, 124, 127, 134
Waking up: 17, 18, 22, 25
Warner, Brad: 46n
Water-lilies: 69, 70, 109
White cloth: 72, 114
Woodward: 138
Wu Tsu: 49, 50
Yuanwu: 31, 49, 69, 87, 91, 95, 102, 114
Zazen: 31, 32, 43, 45, 54, 75, 76, 96, 102



MARK FOOTE WROTE TO A FRIEND RECENTLY:

My life has been 50 years trying to figure out how the zazen that gets up and walks around fits into a normal life, and likewise trying to figure out how zazen sits zazen so I can sit as long as I feel I need to sit without wrecking my knees.

FROM “A NATURAL MINDFULNESS”:

Many people in the Buddhist community take enlightenment to be the goal of Buddhist practice. I would say that when a person consciously experiences automatic movement in the activity of the body in inhalation and exhalation, finding a way of life that allows for such experience in the natural course of things becomes the more pressing concern. Gautama taught such a way of living, although I don't believe that such a way of living is unique to Buddhism.

(“Appendix--A Way of Living”)

A NATURAL MINDFULNESS

Mark Foote bridges ancient wisdom and modern science in this remarkable exploration of seated meditation. Drawing on Gautama Buddha's original teachings, Zen masters from Dogen to Shunryu Suzuki, and contemporary research in biomechanics and neuroscience, Foote reveals how natural, automatic movement in the body emerges when we surrender volition and allow consciousness to find its own place.

For practitioners seeking to understand the relationship between body and mind in meditation, "A Natural Mindfulness" is an invaluable guide.

