

# Zen Bow Article:

## Nature of the Human Body

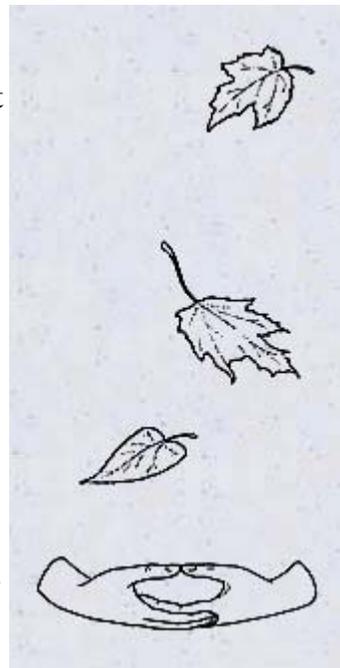
*An edited transcript of a teisho given by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede at the Rochester Zen Center on September 8, 1996.*

The teisho this morning will be on the human body. There are many directions from which to discuss the body - its pains, illnesses, and healing, its attachments, the body as "teacher" - but since we have only forty-five minutes, I will limit myself simply to the nature of the human body, as I understand it, and how it is understood in Zen Buddhism generally.

I think it's fair to say that most of the major religious traditions of the world teach, either explicitly or implicitly, a split between spirit and matter, between mind and body. And it's usually spirit that comes out on top. The Western tradition is to look upward toward God, or the *Logos*, and that view was largely unchallenged until this century when Freud and others pointed us back to our bodies, to our emotions. But as Americans we have always tended to be preoccupied with matters of the spirit.

This national trait was noted by de Tocqueville, and it was discussed at length more recently in the book *Understanding Europeans*. The author, Stuart Miller, emphasizes the non-material orientation of Americans, disputing the old cliché that we are the most materialistic country in the world. This fascinating book sketches some major features common to Western Europeans, and Miller, an American, does this by contrast with Americans. So it also offers many insights into the American character. "Americans," he insists, "believe in ideas, in the ideal, in the future, in progress, in making money, and in achievements of all sorts. But we do not truly believe in matter." It's true.

In another book, *Zen and the Bible*, the author, J.K. Kakowaki, points out that in the West people generally need to know the whys and the wherefores of something before they're willing to do it. But this is not traditionally so in Asia. In Japan, when an aspiring monk came into a Zen monastery he would often be told just to go sit.



He would know, having grown up in a Buddhist culture, that this meant sitting in an erect, stable posture with the legs crossed, and he would have the faith in the tradition to do that without needing to know why. An Asian would also perform the bowing and the rituals in the faith that understanding comes through physically doing them. It is my impression from traveling in Japan that the willingness of the Japanese to put the doing before the cerebral understanding is reflected in their postures, which tend to be more centered in the *hara* - the center of the body. It seems that among Westerners it is more common to put the head *ahead* of the rest of the body; to lead with the brain, the intellect.

One of the most compelling statements in support of the Zen emphasis on just *doing* comes from Heinrich Zimmer, a German Indologist. He said:

"Knowledge is the reward of action. . . . For it is by doing things that one becomes transformed. Executing a symbolical gesture, actually living through, to the very limit, a particular role, one comes to realize the truth inherent in the role. Suffering its consequences, one fathoms and exhausts its contents."

If we take "knowledge" to mean understanding, it would be hard to find a more potent recommendation for koan training, which requires one to present one's understanding before the teacher in the dokusan room. Usually this means to demonstrate physically, with one's body, through action. Or it may call for a verbal demonstration, in which one reveals the essential point of the koan in a non-explanatory, non-didactic way.

I had to learn the hard way, through my own koan training with Roshi, that no understanding is complete until integrated into the body. I remember certain koans I'd been grappling with through a number of dokusans. Then, in the exchange with Roshi in dokusan, I would suddenly get the point and say something expressing my understanding. Roshi undoubtedly saw the light bulb go on over my head, but he would then insist on my following through with a physical demonstration, as simple as it was. The first couple of times I'd get annoyed, because it was so obvious that I'd gotten the point and that he *knew* I'd gotten it. "Okay," I'd gripe, "you want me to get up and do it?" "YES!" After a while it sank in: it is by getting our bodies involved that we forge knowledge into wisdom.

Of course, this doesn't have to be just through koan work. You know this phrase you see everywhere on *Nike* sporting goods and clothing, "Just do it." They really appropriated one of the most profound injunctions in the universe. Tengen-roshi, in Japan, had his own version. His English was very limited, but one thing he would often say as he padded through the zendo in Bukkoku-ji was "Only . . . doing! Only . . . doing!" In our doing it's not just the body, it's body-mind. The only true understanding is that which we can confirm in

the world of form, through the body. Anyone who's had the experience of trying to learn to play a musical piece, or master a golf stroke, knows that it's one thing to get it up in your head, even to be able to explain it, but another to actually do it. Only then have we "got it." This is also the point of koan training, and zazen generally. This is why we place so much emphasis on posture in Zen. We can read about Zen, about the Buddha's teaching; we can agree with it and feel inspired by it; but until we realize it - make it real - through the physical practice, we remain on the outside of it. In our sitting zazen, it takes time to find a posture that is comfortable, that feels settled. But once we do, in that posture we are actualizing the truth that Zen points to. When we are sitting properly - with a straight back, relaxed shoulders, everything above the navel relaxed, the abdomen relaxed, and yet the spine straight, stretching up, the limbs pulled in towards the center of the body, in whatever leg posture one can manage - when we are sitting this way, we are embodying the truth of Zen; we are embodying our essential nature.

We also express the truth of our nature through the rituals found in traditional Zen practice. Bowing, for many people when they come to Zen practice, feels artificial, awkward somehow. This discomfort may be the effect of previous religious conditioning, for example an unconscious Christian-instilled bias against worship of "graven images." Probably more often though, it just comes out of self-consciousness. One is thinking, "What am I doing bowing? What is the point of this? Why do I have to do this? Am I doing it right?" When we get beyond all that, when we have *done* it enough and made it our own, then it's a wonderful practice. A simple standing bow, with no thought in the mind, is the most wonderful affirmation of our Self-nature. It's not easy to bow with an empty mind, or to do anything with an empty mind. But when we reach that point of no-mindedness, we grasp the significance and the profundity of bowing, and really of any devotional practice.

"Knowledge is the reward of action." There is a story told by Martin Buber that relates to the transformative power of action. This is what he says:

"A story must be told in such a way that it constitutes help in itself. My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how his teacher used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he began to hop and dance to show how the master had done so. From that hour he was cured of his lameness."

It's ironic that Zen practice, as a *practice*, is meaningless apart from the body, because so much of Zen teaching focuses on Mind: Buddha Mind, True Mind, Original Mind. Again and again, the masters remind us, with and without words, that everything is this very Mind. In the *Kannon Gyo* we chant, "This moment arises from Mind/ This moment itself is Mind." This is Mind with a capital M. But the masters also refer to Mind as "The Body of Reality." The

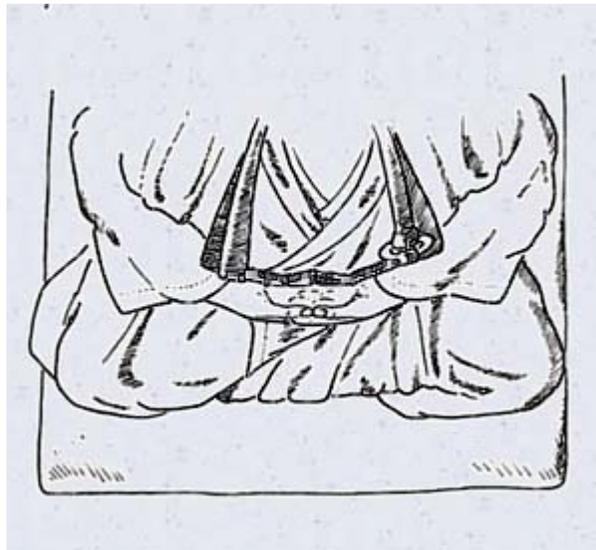
Buddha himself was pointing to this Body of Reality in terms of the physical body when he said:

"Verily, I declare unto you that within this very body, mortal though it be and only a fathom high, but conscious and endowed with mind, is the rising of the world, and the waxing thereof, and the waning thereof, and the way that leads to the passing away thereof."

This body, sitting on this mat right now, or on this chair - this is the Body of Reality.

In Buddhism we speak of three "bodies" or *kayas*: the Dharmakaya, the Nirmanakaya, and the Sambhogakaya. The Dharmakaya literally means the Body of Reality. This is Reality understood as devoid of self-substance - empty. Though without thing-ness, this Body pervades all things throughout the cosmos. In Zen Master Mumon's verse to Case 20 of the *Gateless Barrier*, he offers us a full view of Dharmakaya:

Lifting his leg, he kicks up the scented ocean,  
Lowering his head he looks down on the Four Dyana Heavens.  
His body is so big there's nowhere to put it.



As Nirmanakaya the Body is revealed in the absolute completeness of each and every single thing. Even as this physical body of ours is fundamentally insubstantial, it is an utterly unique and perfect manifestation of the Whole. A monk by the name of Etcho asked Zen master Hogen, "What is Buddha?" or, "What is ultimate truth?" Hogen replied, "You are Etcho!"

Then we have, as the third of the Three Kayas, the Sambhogakaya, which is reality understood as an infinitely complex web of interdependent relationships among phenomena that are fundamentally empty. We can understand our body in all three of these, singly, or together. We are empty;

we are at the same time a unique and complete expression of the Whole; and we are everything, even as we co-arise dependently. We are all-one - that is, alone - and we are interconnected. Nothing can exist apart from us.

Buddhism understands body and mind as two aspects of one reality; they co-arise, dependent upon each other. You can't say that mind comes from body any more than you can say that body comes from mind. The Buddha used the example of two sheaves of reeds leaning against each other; one supports the other, and neither can stand alone.

And how indispensable this body is. In a very real sense we support the heavens in our sitting; we join heaven and earth. The Buddha is often shown in the posture of touching the earth, an expression of our essential grounding in form. We can also see this in the story of the Buddha's life when, on the verge of death from his six years of asceticism, he accepts a bowl of rice gruel, offered to him by the maiden Sujata. This is a reminder that there is no need to deny the body in any absolute sense.

It is true that we can find, in Buddhist texts, an attitude of revulsion toward the body, and there are practices in which you reflect on the impurities of the body. But this is done, I feel, to balance the other far more common extreme, where the human form is cherished and glamorized, and we identify with it, becoming enslaved to its demands. But, ultimately, the body is seen as no less real than the mind - in fact, the opposite might be said, based on the texts. The Buddha, in the *Samyutta Nikaya Sutra*, says:

"The untaught manyfolk, brethren, might well be repelled by this body, child of the four great elements, might cease to fancy it and wish to be free from it, seeing its growth and decay. Yet the manyfolk are not repelled by consciousness; they cling to it thinking, 'This is mine. This I am. This is my spirit.' But the body persists for years - ten, thirty, fifty or a hundred years longer - whereas consciousness changes ceaselessly."

Through our almost incessant use of language, in speech and in thought, we tend to reinforce dualisms such as "matter versus energy," and "body versus mind." But through the direct experience of reality we come to see that this body itself is energy, contrary to the evidence of our senses. Rather than being static, our body is pure process. I'm reminded of the ginkgo tree. From a distance, it may appear motionless - rooted and with limbs unswaying. But a closer look will show it to be all shimmering motion, every single leaf rustling in a dance of evanescence.

This is the world of dynamic form known to the Hopi, who I'm told have no nouns in their language. Instead, things are seen more as the transitory phenomena that they are, and rendered in verb form. The apparent entity we

call a cactus, for example, is in the Hopi tongue "cactusing," a knife is "knifing." To put a Buddhist coloration to it, then, my body is just Mind "bodying." After cremation it will become Mind "ashing."

Just as the fundamental nature of body is impermanent and thus insubstantial, so can its emptiness be seen in spatial terms, as essentially inseparable from any other thing. Ultimately the boundaries of what we call "body" are not absolute, and from that perspective there is only this one Mind. To change linguistic conventions to reflect this unity, we could refer to my body as "where-I-am-Bodhin," and similarly this table would become "where-I-am-table," and a tree "where-I-am-tree." This change in terminology, as impossibly cumbersome as it is, would remind us of a unified relationship between self and other that is just as valid as the fragmented picture which our language suggests.

Body is the material aspect of mind, mind the immaterial aspect of body. In fact, our body may be seen as the condensation of our past thoughts, or more precisely, our thought-emotional habit tendencies. George Orwell said, "At the age of fifty, every man has the face he deserves." The way we use or misuse our mind can shape our physical appearance over time. But what has formed the face of a baby? Even a newborn is but a product of causes and conditions which precede even the earliest influences of parenting and socialization.

When all is said and done, we come back to the question "What is this body?" We can't simply say that it's "mine." To say that the body is mine implies that we have some kind of mastery over it. We do exercise some control over the body, or so it seems, but certainly there's much that we don't control. What are we controlling when we sleep? The body's processes, with all of their mysteries, hum along in beautiful homeostasis. So, we can't exactly call it "mine," something that I *have*; but neither can we say that it's "not mine." What is this entity that we label "body," which partakes of both control and yet, at the same time, is beyond our control? Whose body is this? When we deeply absorb ourselves in this question, we can't help but feel wonder. We can't help but wonder. And this attitude of wonder is the healthiest kind of attitude that we can bring to our life. This is especially so in states of illness. We are the body. We are more than the body. We are *less* than the body. Or, as it says in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, "Things are not what they appear to be, nor are they otherwise."

So, as long as we have these bodies, we need to respect them; we need to exercise, to walk, to watch our diet; we need to treat our bodies as the wonderful, mysterious entities - or apparent entities - that they are. We owe it to ourselves and to others, because it is only with this human form, in this world of form, that we can carry out our vows to liberate all beings.

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