

Zazen, A Better Way of Experiencing Pain
- a talk by Gudo Wafu Nishijima -
Montpellier, November 2002

1. Buddhist thinking method (The Four Noble Truths, or Three Philosophies and One Reality)

(1) Idealistic philosophy (Idealism)

Almost all people have confidence in their mind, and so people usually think that what they think is true.

(2) Materialistic philosophy (Materialism)

However, after experiencing the world a little more we usually find another viewpoint, which is that what is reliable is not what we think, but what we perceive. Then we revere the external world, and become diligent in studying scientific knowledge.

(3) Philosophy of action

But when we consider the two philosophies of idealism and materialism, we find that they are completely different. So if we believe in idealism it is difficult for us to accept materialism, and if we believe in materialism it is impossible for us to accept idealism.

The establisher of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, also worried very much about this contradictory situation between the two fundamental philosophies of idealism and materialism. And after his enormous efforts in pursuing the truth he found the important fact that he was not living in what he thought and he was not living in what he perceived, but he was just living in this world and acting at each present moment.

He found action in his life, and such fundamental experience of action was the starting point of his Buddhist philosophy.

(4) One Reality

However, those three philosophies are just philosophies, and they are not reality itself. Therefore he practiced Zazen diligently, and he found reality itself in his practice of Zazen.

When thinking about things on the basis of Buddhism, the fundamental thinking method of Buddhism outlined above is very important in understanding the Buddhist viewpoint.

2. Pain as a fact

According to the Buddhist thinking method, we can also find four kinds of pain as facts.

(1) Denial of pain

Idealistic people often think that we need not worry about pain at all, because we can overcome pain by encouraging our spiritual condition. But, actually, those idealistic efforts usually fail, because pain is just a fact, and so even though people want to forget pain, pain attacks them very severely. Therefore an idealistic viewpoint of pain is usually useless when faced with concrete facts.

(2) Worrying about pain

Materialistic people usually have the opposite attitude to idealistic people. They

worry about pain much more than the facts themselves, and so their pain is not only the pain as a fact, but also their emotional worry about pain which causes them much more severe pain than the real fact.

(3) Meeting pain as it is

In the Buddhist viewpoint we do not try to deny pain, but at the same time we do not exaggerate pain emotionally. We accept pain as it is. The existence of pain can not be denied, but it is not necessary for us to promote pain emotionally.

And the Buddhist practice of Zazen exists to enable us to realize such a condition. Zazen is a kind of action, and when we are practicing Zazen our autonomic nervous system becomes balanced. In other words, when we are practicing Zazen the two parts of our autonomic nervous system, i.e., the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system, tend to become equal to each other. In that situation we can have a state in which we feel that our spiritual efforts are not necessary, but at the same time our emotional exaggeration of the fear of pain does not occur.

(4) Relying upon daily practice

However, it is very difficult for us to keep our autonomic nervous system balanced. Therefore Buddhists practice Zazen everyday. Because the balance of the autonomic nervous system is not just a concept or not just perception. Rather, balance of the autonomic nervous system is just a state, or a real fact, and so it is necessary for us to do some action to realize it. And Gautama Buddha recommended us to practice Zazen everyday to maintain that balanced state. By relying upon the daily practice of Zazen we can always keep the balanced state, and then we can keep an attitude to accept pain as it is, without spiritual efforts or emotional exaggeration.

3. Zazen and the 20th Century

Of course, when Gautama Buddha was alive there was no scientific knowledge like we have in the 21st century. Therefore it was impossible for human beings to know any scientific explanations for Zazen until the last century or so. But, fortunately, in the 20th century scientific research developed enormously and many very important advances occurred in the areas of psychology and physiology. Therefore I think it is very a happy situation for us to now be able to find some scientific explanations of Zazen on the basis of psychology and physiology.

(1) The theory of unconsciousness

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) established a theory about unconsciousness, and I have found his theory very useful in understanding the meaning of Zazen on the basis of modern psychology. This is because we sometimes find theories in Buddhism that seem to be a little mystical and difficult to understand on the basis of reasonable consideration. For example, Buddhism reveres the human intuitive ability very much, and calls it '*prajna*.' In Sanskrit, '*pra*' means 'before', and '*jna*' means knowledge or consideration. Therefore '*prajna*' means 'before consideration', and it suggests the human intuitive ability to grasp reality directly before consideration. I think that in European civilization human intuitive ability is not so revered, and that intellectual ability is revered much more than our intuitive ability. But in Buddhism we revere intuitive ability much more than intellectual consideration. Before noticing the theory of the unconsciousness, I couldn't

understand why Buddhism reveres intuitive ability so much. But after studying Freudian ideas about the unconsciousness, I could understand that when our autonomic nervous system is balanced the suppressed ideas we have in our body and mind evaporate, and intuitive true decisions emerge.

(2) The autonomic nervous system

Modern physiology has developed the theory of the autonomic nervous system very much. And if we rely upon the theory of the autonomic nervous system, I think it is possible for us to understand the very complicated situations of modern human societies on the basis of human mental and physical conditions. I think we can understand such problems on the basis of a difference in the physical conditions of idealistic people and materialistic people, and on the basis of balance of the autonomic nervous system.

I have a rather too brave hypothesis that people who have a stronger sympathetic nervous system are prone to be idealistic, and people who have a stronger parasympathetic nervous system are prone to be materialistic. Of course, this is only my personal supposition so far, but I've utilized this hypothesis for many years and haven't yet found any fact to cause me to change it.

(3) The balance of the autonomic nervous system

An American psychiatrist called Karl Menninger wrote a book in which he explained the relationship between 'Love and Hate', in which he insisted that hate and love should be balanced. And when I read that theory I noticed that the Middle Way that Gautama Buddha proclaimed is exactly related with the state of balance between the sympathetic nervous system and parasympathetic nervous system. We can interpret that when our sympathetic nervous system is stronger than our parasympathetic nervous system, we are prone to have a hateful tendency, and that when our parasympathetic nervous system is stronger than our sympathetic nervous system, we are prone to love easily. In his theory Karl Menninger seems to be insisting that a state of hate is not always natural and a state of love is not always natural. And he also seems to insist that extreme hate is not so healthy, and extreme love is not so healthy. Therefore I think that reverence of the balanced state of the autonomic nervous system, where we are not prone to hate too much or love too much, may be the fundamental basis of Buddhist theory, and that such a theory of balance has enormous power to solve almost all human personal and social problems in the world today.

(4) Postural reflex

Several years ago I read a book entitled "A Teacher's Window into the Child's Mind" by Sally Goddard, who is an American teacher and psychiatrist. She quotes P. MacLean's opinion that between birth and 15 months of age a human baby experiences three levels of development, that is, 'reptilian brain', 'mammalian brain', and 'rational, logical, linguistic and altruistic human being'. And she says that if a baby receives some kind of unfortunate influence during this developing process, it is usually difficult for the baby to avoid the effects of such unfortunate influence throughout its life. She explains that if we want to help a baby recover from such kind of unfortunate influence, the only way to do so may be by relying upon postural reflexes. And when I read her descriptions, I noticed that the reason why Gautama Buddha recommended us to practice Zazen may be related with this theory. When we are keeping our spine straight vertically we can get rid of

unfortunate influences which we have received from miscellaneous circumstances in our life. Zazen is just a practice to get the regular postural reflexes, and by such mental and physical efforts, we save ourselves.

4. The ultimate method to overcome pain
 - (1) Don't have intention to overcome pain.
 - (2) Don't fear pain emotionally.
 - (3) Accept pain as it is.
 - (4) Just endure pain at the present moment.

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