

## **Sitting with the Body** by Orit Sen-Gupta

*"To study the way with the body means to study the way with your own body. It is the study of the way using this lump of red flesh."*

(Moon in a Dewdrop, Dogen, North Point Press 1985)

When we encounter the meditator, silently sitting with a straight back and eyes focused inward, we are impressed by the stillness, and regard it as an expression of inner quiet. But this fantasy quickly fades when we ourselves attempt to sit, straight-backed and still, for even five minutes. We soon discover that it is not at all quiet. A parade of thoughts appear, and feeling comfortable is not particularly easy. It turns out that just sitting is an effort that entails both physical and emotional discomfort. Why, despite this, do we choose to sit in meditation, and what is the place of the body within this practice?

In this essay I will describe two Eastern traditions that place an emphasis on the body in the practice of meditation: the classical yogic tradition of Patanjali and his commentator Vyasa; and the Japanese tradition of Soto Zen, as expressed in the teachings of Dogen and his followers. Both methods prescribe a straightforward practice, with no need for prior knowledge or faith, and no promise of reward. These traditions connect to the physical body in a simple way and are based on unvarying practice that is neither sophisticated nor aspiring to great achievements, and therefore does not raise expectations of success or fear of failure. Such simple, focused practice, not directed towards gain is especially effective for people living in a modern society characterized by material and intellectual pursuit. Its effectiveness stems from the fact that the mind learns to observe and act in a way contrary to its usual patterns: Rather than racing to and fro, collecting and sorting thoughts and feelings, the mind learns restraint, while focusing on the body.

It is important to remember that meditation covers a broad range of techniques—techniques in which the body takes a lesser role. These methods, which will not be discussed here, include recitation of mantras, visualization, and cognitive meditation in which the practitioner focuses on a thought, emotion, or specific idea, such as compassion.

### **The Body in Meditation According to Patanjali and Vyasa**

Through adhering to the navel, knowledge of the organization of the body.

To the space of the throat, cessation of hunger and thirst.

To the light in the head, vision of those perfected.

To the heart, understanding of consciousness.

—Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Chapter III

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is a work of 185 short sentences (sutras), which shed light on the practice of yoga and its goals. The Sutras are one of the six darshanas that comprise classical Indian philosophy. Researchers estimate that the text was composed between 100 BCE to 100 CE, and that Vyasa wrote his essential commentary four or five hundred years later. The text details the practices of three methods of yoga, the third of which is ashtanga (eight limbs), a type of yoga comprised of eight levels or steps. The first five phases of ashtanga yoga include

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standards of behavior between oneself and others; rules for purification of the body and soul; physical practice, that is, postures and breathing exercises; and the practice of turning the senses inward.

At the outset of the third chapter, the Vibhuti-Pada, or Chapter of Powers, Patanjali describes three internal phases of ashtanga yoga—concentration, dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (a higher state of consciousness). Vyasa's commentary, as well as the Vibhuti-Pada text, serve to clarify the centrality of the body in a process that at first look seems to take place solely within the consciousness.

Here is a translation from Sanskrit of the first five sutras of the third chapter of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali:

1. Concentration is the binding of consciousness to a place.
2. Dhyana—when the idea or thought is directed there continually.
3. Samadhi is when the object alone shines forth as if [the consciousness] is empty of its own form.
4. These three together—samyama.
5. Through its mastery—all-encompassing wisdom glows.

Vyasa explains these first sutras, which describe concentration as the binding of the consciousness to a place, by focusing on specific parts of the body of the meditator. He does not indicate concentrating on abstract or quintessential ideas, and thus crowns the unadorned body as the focus of concentration.

Vyasa mentions five points: the navel, heart, head, tip of the tongue, and tip of the nose (possibly referring to the top of the bridge of the nose or what is known as the third eye, as noted by Aurobindo in his translation of the Bhagavad Gita). Vyasa's reference to points that correspond to chakras—energy centers according to Indian system—precedes the later tantric paradigm of seven chakras aligned on a vertical axis at the center of the body from the tailbone to the top of the head. We can assume that if Vyasa selected these particular points on the body out of the thirty or more places and objects described in the Vibhuti-Pada and the Yoga Sutras, it is because he endowed them with special importance. He seems to have believed that at least one of these five points could fill our mind to such an extent that it would lead us to a heightened state of consciousness called samadhi—where the entire world, including our consciousness, would disappear. Not love, God, or soul would fill our mind in this way, but rather a point in the body. When consciousness continuously gazes on a point or an object undisturbed, without a glimmer of thought, such that only the object exists and the consciousness itself seemingly disappears, then the gaze of the meditator or the meditator himself reflects samadhi as described by the Yoga Sutras.

### **Samyama**

Staying fixed on one point is called samyama, which is comprised of three phases: concentration, meditation, and samadhi. In the state of samyama, the consciousness is bound—really glued—to the point of focus, which becomes essential. In classical yoga samyama is the binding of consciousness creating a quality of concentration that intensifies as it hones in on a specific point. Vyasa maintains that as samyama strengthens, understanding and clarity grow. Vijnana Bikshu, another important commentator on the Yoga Sutras, adds that this clarity is the ability to perceive

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subtle objects that are usually hidden, such as the buddhi or wisdom mind, and even the root of consciousness itself.

At first glance Vyasa's instruction to concentrate on a point on the body to the exclusion of all else may not seem to be part of a goalless practice of just sitting. But unlike chanting a mantra, imagining a deity, or scanning the body, the practice of samyama is quite impossible to do. It is less of a technique than a direction turning the mediator toward the possibility of something that arises spontaneously out of kind of alert waiting, just as in some living traditions of Raja yoga to which I have been exposed where the first five angas or limbs are practiced, and the three inner angas of dharana, dhyana, and samadhi are not practiced intentionally. The teaching is that by practicing non-hurting, speaking the truth, asana, pranayama, and withdrawing the senses, the three inner limbs occur spontaneously.

This interpretation correlates to my own experience, as well as to some of my students' experiences. Over the years I have found that quite a number of people who attempt meditation without verbal guidance spontaneously experience an energetic awakening and focus of their mind on one of the points mentioned in Vyasa's commentary. It turns out that the mind focuses on these points not necessarily from having been instructed to do so, or due to a belief that they will bring a calming or spiritual experience, but rather because these points veritably ask to be claimed and tug the consciousness towards them from inside. If the meditator is perceptive, and continues to direct the mind until it is bound to its point, he or she will have energetic experiences without intending or aspiring to do so. These experiences will have a clear sensory component such as a feeling of heat, burning, ingathering, or widening at the place of concentration. It is possible that memories, and pleasant or unpleasant images from the life of the meditator will flood the mind. The mind will not expel these images or be too busy with them, but rather will return again and again to the place of concentration.

### **Practice is Enlightenment**

Dogen (1200-1253) was a Japanese Zen monk who studied in China, and brought the Soto Zen (Chan in Chinese) tradition to Japan. The root of the word Chan is essentially dhyana, or meditation in Sanskrit. There are those who claim that the Chan tradition developed in China from a fruitful meeting between Buddhism from India and Daoism, the Chinese belief system that holds forth among other teachings that of spontaneity. Dogen was the son of a single mother, and after her death became a monk at the age of eight. After living and studying in monasteries in Japan, he traveled to China and studied in the great monasteries for two years. Only when he encountered Rujing, abbot of Mount Tiantong monastery, did he find a worthy teacher who spoke to his heart. Dogen became a close student of Rujing, who authorized him to teach, and after some time Dogen returned

to Japan to impart the way of his teacher. Dogen was a demanding teacher who specialized in Chinese Zen scripture, and was himself a talented writer of Zen philosophy and poetry. In the last decade of his life he taught at Eihei monastery in a mountainous area far from the capital of Kyoto, accompanied by a few students who carried on his path. Yet for hundreds of years after his death his teaching was almost forgotten until it was rediscovered and adopted by, among others, Western Zen students of our generation.

Dogen interpreted Buddhist texts for his students in new, refreshing ways. He wrote long essays that are literary, philosophical, and spiritual gems. Although he was without doubt a great scholar,

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his main teaching was not scholarly. Like his teacher Rujing, Dogen believed that the only way to solve the “great issue” was with practice. Practice for him was seated meditation, or as it is called in Zen discourse, shikan-taza, or “just sitting.” Dogen was skeptical of mantra recitation, repeating the name of Buddha, and the method of koans— the paradoxical Zen riddles such as “what is the sound of one hand clapping?”—because he believed that these practices were not efficient. His key statement, “practice is enlightenment,” clarifies his belief that the way and the goal are one, and that the idea of gaining something through meditation is empty of meaning.

One of Dogen’s envoys in modern Japan was Sawaki Roshi. Sawaki believed that meditation is the key to understanding Buddhism. In the book *Living and Dying in Zazen*, American Zen practitioner and student of Uchiyama Roshi (a principal student of Sawaki Roshi) Arthur Braverman recounts that Sawaki was greatly influenced by the following passage from Dogen:

*“...the practice of prolonged austerities is not difficult, but to harmonize bodily activities is most difficult.*

*Do you think the crushing of bones is of value? Although many endured such practice, few of them attained dharma. Do you think people practicing austerities are to be respected? Although there have been many, few if them have realized the way, for they still have difficulty in harmonizing the mind.*

*Brilliance is not primary, understanding is not primary, conscious endeavor is not primary, introspection is not primary. Without using any of these, harmonize body-and-mind and enter the Buddha way.”*

Moon in a Dew Drop, p. 38-39

When he first read those sentences, Sawaki Roshi felt embarrassed and humbled. He suddenly understood that his austere and demanding practices, and his Buddhist studies, had emerged from his competitive nature and had not helped him to understand or live Zen.

### **No Gain**

Like Dogen, Sawaki Roshi also feared that contemplation of koans and textual studies could turn Zen into intellectual pursuit, and thus believed more and more in “just sitting,” with no expectation of gain, completely giving up the wish for enlightenment or knowledge. With this belief Sawaki sat in a small, isolated monastery alone from morning to night for three years. In this way his belief in pure sitting with no goal or result deepened. He recounted a visit from university students who asked him why he practiced zazen (sitting meditation). His answer that there is no benefit in zazen, and that he simply does it, surprised them. Later on they returned and requested to join him, in this practice that is of no benefit.

What is the place of the body in meditation without a purpose, where consciousness gains clarity from just sitting? Sawaki’s principal student, Uchiyama Roshi, explains that the basis for quiet clarity is created in trusting the posture of sitting, without searching for solutions for everything. We simply sit, without the goal of fulfilling some fantasy of enlightenment or self-improvement.

Uchiyama warns against overdoing practice for the sake of the enlightenment fantasy, and at the same time warns against dozing off or daydreaming. A lack of focus and dullness can cast a shadow on our mind and deplete our vitality. Therefore, when they appear, we must wake up and return to sitting. For him, those are the only actions required for simply sitting. This practice is itself

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enlightenment, quotes Uchiyama from Dogen, and adds his own interesting note: a complete practice of that enlightenment is to continue practicing consistently.

The Zen monk Joko, also a practitioner in Sawaki's lineage, often speaks of the connection between consciousness and posture. He claims that there is a direct correlation between the action of thinking and the slackening of posture, with slackening being an expression of not being entirely present. In that people are thinking beings, it is impossible to stop thought. According to Joko, the way to deal with our countless thoughts and their distracting nature is to see their expression in our bodies and to deal with them there. Therefore maintaining one's posture is critical: thoughts appear again and again, and with each thought the neck, back, or another part of the body sags, and again we must correct the posture. As sagging posture signals that we are not entirely present, a way towards awareness and presence is through maintaining one's posture. It does not matter what comes up during sitting—fantasies, fears, random thoughts, ecstasy, feelings of connectedness and unity—we maintain the posture. Then the practice of meditation becomes a vigilant physical and mental effort to maintain posture. Both in the manifold view of our reality and in the deep, captivating view of our internal world, we want to stay straight and present.

Dogen explains: "It is very difficult to understand what sitting is, but it is surely not connected to doing." He adds, "Allow all relationships to fall, and put aside all tasks; do not think about what is good and what is bad, do not try to judge right and wrong. Do not attempt to control your vision, your awareness. And do not try to understand your feelings, thoughts, or opinions. Try to free yourself from the idea of being aware."

Indeed, it is difficult to grasp what "sitting" is. From the words of Dogen it becomes clear that there is a quality of consciousness that we cannot control, a quality that does not arise from conscious awareness. If we remain long enough with the body, if we remain with the posture, sitting will reveal itself, the body will reveal its true form.

## **Staying with the Body**

The goal of Buddhism is to free oneself from suffering and to achieve enlightenment; the goal of classical yoga is to weaken the mechanism of suffering of the consciousness and to become free. When Vyasa chooses to focus on the body as a path to the intangible, and Dogen chooses to speak about practice without gain there is a subversive tension that may be inevitable in light of the paradox in which those who walk the path find themselves: The yearning for and working towards enlightenment refines our selfish desires by redirecting them toward a spiritual goal, yet they continue to trail us. Oftentimes, rather than overcoming these desires, we reframe them in sophisticated ways, remaining agitated inside, yet covering up with guises of calm, gentleness, and kindness. Thus, giving up all wanting—including wanting enlightenment and freedom—and just sitting without any expectation and without attempting to control consciousness, is a practice that may be impossible to do but possible to allow.

Both the concept of samyama described in the third chapter of the Yoga Sutras and that of the Zen practice of just sitting offer meditation in which the consciousness focuses on the body and not on its contents. Nevertheless, a different experience develops with each method of practice. In meditation on specific points in the body, the intense focus of the consciousness on an energetic center in the body such as the heart or the third eye creates a powerfully uplifting experience. When consciousness widens, the meditator finds him- or herself beyond the mundanity of everyday life, beyond worries, and even beyond likes and loves. Nevertheless, due to a disregard for, or a lack of interest in reality, the moments of greater consciousness have no connection to the "I" of the meditator, or to the way in which that "I" meets the world and behaves. Therefore, when we emerge from this kind of sitting into everyday life, we remain unchanged. Whereas in the Soto

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Zen method, the body is an anchor, and maintaining its posture is the way in which the consciousness stabilizes and stays awake and present in the reality of the current moment. In this way, practice creates balance, quiet, and equanimity that differs in its quality from the powerfully uplifting and inspirational experience of classical yogic meditation.

People who are interested in meditation will be attracted to uplifting experiences or to equanimity, according to their basic nature and needs. I have found that over many years my consciousness or my practice tended spontaneously towards focusing on certain places in the body. In this way I experienced something of the uplifting power of that practice. Nevertheless, the dimension of stability in everyday life was missing. With the years, as this direction became more important in my life as a mother and teacher, the need for focusing on posture and watching the entire body became central to my sitting.

While there are many good ways to meditate, it is important for me to emphasize that, in our times, the practice of focusing on the body is particularly relevant. The abundance of information and knowledge sent our way, and the demand that we endlessly process it in order to succeed in this world, has become a heavy burden. Binding the consciousness to

the body without a goal is refreshing. It offers shelter from the tumult of our overloaded consciousness, mercilessly driven by the plenty around it. It is so simple to stay with the posture or focus on a place within the body. There is no mystery, no promise of gain or deep expansive thought. It is a relief.