

## Watch Your Eyes

~ Guy Mokuho Mercier



**“Don’t let your head fall forward.”** Godos often repeat this advice during zazen practice, but the people to whom it is directed do not always understand the appropriateness of the remark or why they are being corrected. It is impossible to see our own posture and therefore difficult to realise by ourselves what is wrong.

First let us recall that the position of the head depends essentially on the placement of the pelvis on the zafu and on the height of the zafu (see Bulletin No. 81: *“The Posture: A Question of Balance”*). But when the head falls forward, there is another reason which is difficult to discern and which can be very detrimental to the practitioner: the position of the eyes or the direction of the gaze during zazen.

What is taught is that the gaze simply rests on the floor, one meter in front of you, without fixing on anything. The problem may lie in the assessment of this distance, which varies according to the individuals and their height.. Some people actually calculate this meter very precisely from the centre of their zafu and force their eyes to fix on a point whose location is subjective and often too close to the knees. This generally corresponds to a wilful and perfectionist attitude.

Even minimal tension, when held by the eye muscles for a long time while looking at a point that is too close, can wind up creating fatigue or headaches in the forehead or temples. Those who practice this way also often tuck in their chin too much (figure 1) and sometimes even reverse the natural curve of the cervical vertebrae by over-tensing their neck.



Figure 1 :  
Gaze too close.  
the chin is tucked in too much.

But, most importantly, to escape this continuous tension from eye muscles fixed on a point that is too close, the body will correct itself by tilting the head forward to distribute or lessen the eye-strain (figure 2). This causes tension in the neck and the shoulders due to the elongation of the rear muscle groups, notably the cervical muscles, which counter the weight of the head falling forward. Over the long term, these tensions can become painful and will automatically reappear sporadically or spread throughout the dorsal muscular chain.

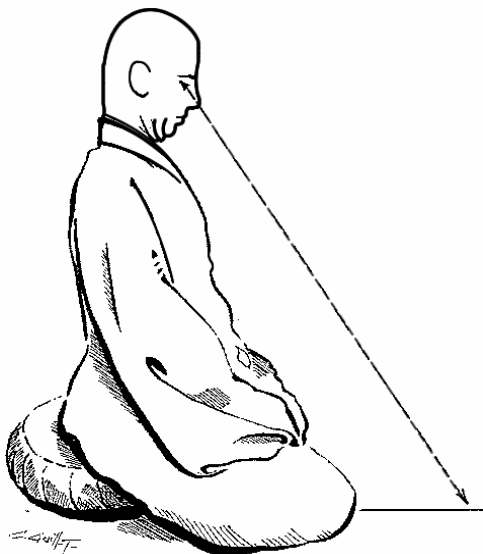


Figure 2 :  
Gaze is constrained downward:  
the head falls

Another possible consequence is blockage of the larynx due to excessive rigidity in the neck which can lead to difficulty breathing and sometimes to wheezing or noisy breathing. It is therefore very important that those who have teaching responsibilities be aware of the importance of this point, which may at first seem harmless, and correct this mistaken assessment by giving appropriate advice after zazen.

### How should we adjust our eyes and our gaze ?

The minimum distance at which the gaze is set depends on each practitioner’s height, his or her capacity to maintain a straight and relaxed spine, and of course the height of the zafu. The taller the person, the further this

“standard” distance of one meter from the knees should be increased. In the beginning of zazen, and sometimes even during, we look straight ahead at the wall, at eye-level. This horizontal position constitutes a natural reference for each person, since it is not necessary to make any effort to look at the horizon while keeping the head straight. Then we lower our eyes until we reach the position where we are beginning to make an effort. The correct placement of the lowered gaze is situated before the first small effort, that is, about one meter in front of the knees for shorter people, and one and a half meters (or more) for taller people.

Figure 3 shows the optimal space in which the eye muscles are not subjected to continuous tension.

However, everyone should evaluate this distance for themselves, keeping in mind that what is correct is the practice of a posture without tension. This means abandoning the personal will and/or the imaginary physical perceptions which are not in harmony with bodily, physiological reality.

Also, the head sometimes turns to one side or the other due to tension in the neck or shoulders. Aside from searching for the cause in a pelvis thrown off balance by difficulty in bending the legs, or by a zafu that is too small, or by shoulders that are too tense, this position can also stem from a difference in vision between the two eyes. Some people are not aware of this and their gaze swerves to the right or left of the posture's median axis, due to one eye's dominance over the other. Returning to centre is the Way taught by Buddha. Here again the role of the teacher is crucial, since he or she should point out and discuss this problem with practitioners and try to help them resolve it.

Eyes fill with tears from time to time. It's usually a good sign. The eyes are connected to the liver, and, as the energy circulates better during zazen, the organism purifies itself, tears flow and latent aggression or anger dissipates.

Other phenomena may occur, such as seeing spots, images forming on the ground and in the air, or blurred vision. You should not worry about these, since they disappear as quickly as they come, like thoughts themselves, or clouds in the sky.

The eye is the window through which the Buddha looks at the phenomenal world. The objects that we see, the sensations or emotions they give rise to, everything the eye perceives is exterior to our true nature, subject to the law of impermanence, and without substance. It is not necessary to grasp or reject whatever appears and passes in front of the window, since what is important for we who practice zazen is not what is seen, but “**who**” sees.

~ Guy Mokuho Mercier  
Illustrations : Christophe Guillet

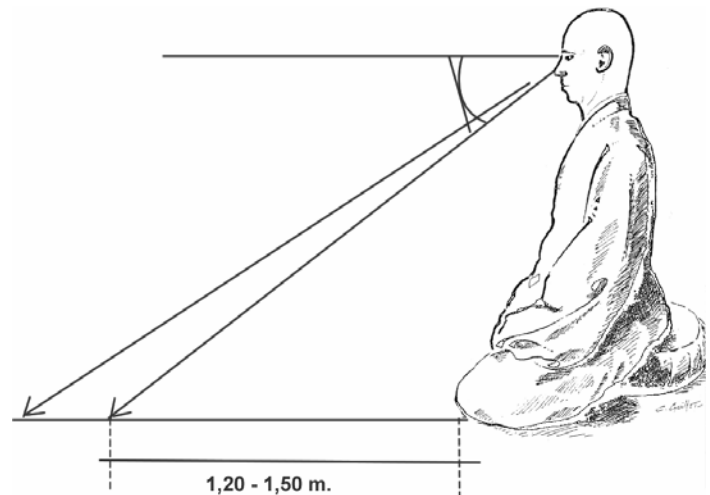


Figure 3  
Correct Position: the gaze is  
at a maximum angle of 40°  
from the horizontal.