

The Posture: A Question of Balance

~ *Guy Mokuho Mercier*

Correcting the essential

The morphological reality of the zazen posture is sometimes misperceived by practitioners, both newcomers and elders. When it is not understood, taught and practiced correctly, difficulties may arise which make practice itself difficult, or even impossible.

During introductions to zazen or during zazen itself, the advice given by those who are responsible for teaching should be precise, clear and correct, because it is interpreted according to the idea each of us has of our own body, or distorted by our image of what we think is the correct posture. But, just as the eye cannot see itself, it is impossible to see one's own posture from the outside. Also, we cannot correct ourselves using an imaginary concept or model. The teacher's role is therefore of great importance.

The simplicity and truth of the posture resides in a clear perception of verticality and the physical mechanisms that come into play (figure 1). The desire to obtain or achieve a result, as well as bad comportment habits, are opposed

Zazen posture is a posture without tension, where everything is a question of balance. Balance, by nature, is unstable. It is *mujo*, impermanence, the ability to question ourselves at every instant by adjusting to the present moment. The lack of this search for balance fixes the posture in a physical rigidity which both creates and reflects a mental rigidity.

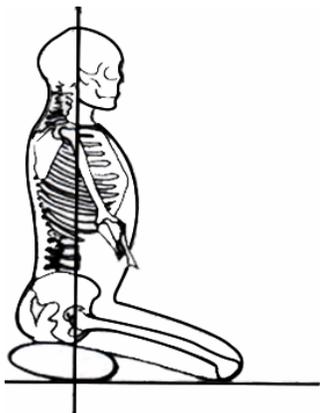


Figure 1

Despite the apparent contradiction, no effort is necessary to remain seated (or standing), since these positions correspond to a stable state of balance. Remaining immobile in this state means always paying attention to keeping the body in balance "*in the ten directions*" without dwelling in any of them. "*In total commitment*", says Master Dogen.

Shikantaza, "just sitting," does not require any anatomical knowledge, but should respect physical mechanics as they were fashioned by nature itself. In simply sitting, there is nothing to do other than remain in the body's normal condition, in a correct balance of tension and relaxation. Between doing and non-doing.

For many people, a better internal understanding of the body facilitates the practice of zazen. It is impossible to describe all the mechanisms involved in the simple sitting posture, but the reader can expand on the principles discussed here concerning the pelvis and the spinal column according to his or her needs.

The Pelvis

The basic postulate is “**The entire posture depends on the position of the pelvis,**” where the body’s centre of gravity is located. It is essential to understand that in a sitting position, the pelvis should allow an elevation of the entire spinal column *without tension*, which will automatically position the head correctly. This is why it is of utmost importance to have a zafu sufficiently high or thick, **adapted to each individual**. (Do not let a beginner practice without having gone over this point with him or her.)

The lower part of the pelvis, the ischia (sometimes called the “sitting-bones” or “sits-bones”), are in contact with the zafu. **The middle point between the two ischia** (with the anus behind and the sex organ in front) is the point of departure of the vertical axis from which the posture straightens and passes through the top of the head. It is also the summit of the triangle whose other two angles are the contact points of the two knees with the ground (Figure 2).

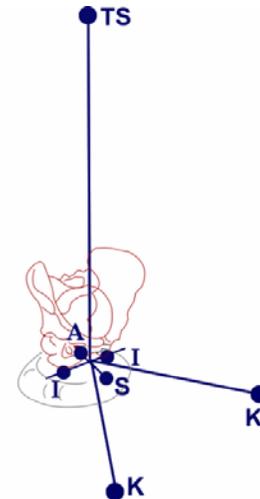


Figure 2: K= knees, I= ischia , TS = top of the skull, A= anus, S= sex organ

The pelvis is stabilised according to this triangle, and the vertical axis of the posture rises up from it. If for some reason the ischia move forwards or backwards from the balance point, either the back will round and the chin will jut forward; or the spine will be exaggeratedly straight (over-arching of the lumbar region), the ribcage blocked and the neck rigid. Remaining still for a long time in one or the other of these positions will eventually result in back pain.

Between these two states, there is the “middle posture”.

The principle of interdependence is the second postulate that applies to all elements of the skeleton and muscles. With the pelvis as the central point, it determines the play between balance, tension and relaxation that creates the posture.

The correct tension (or relaxation) in the spine, the correct position of the head, depend solely on the correct position of the pelvis (which, once again, depends greatly, though not exclusively, on the height of the zafu).

Correcting the head without correcting the pelvis, or correcting the pelvis without looking at the height of the zafu, will not resolve the problem at its source. Before making any correction, you must **see** and understand the origin of what **seems** to be the error. Sometimes it is preferable not to correct, especially if you have only been practising for a short time. Sometimes errors are in the process of being readjusted thanks to a better understanding of verticality, and do not necessitate systematic intervention.

The Spine

The spine is a mobile, bony rod composed of seven cervical vertebrae, twelve thoracic vertebrae, five lumbar vertebrae, the sacrum (the centre bone of the pelvis) and the coccyx. Together these vertebrae make up a series of curves which vary from one individual to another and which are shaped by behaviour

Each vertebra is united to the adjoining one by three joint articulations

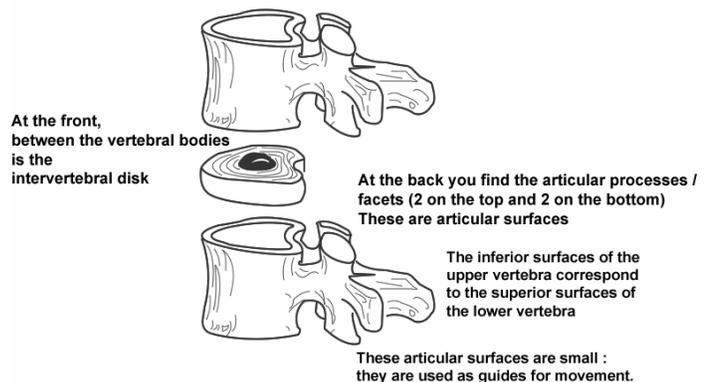


Figure 3

or habits. There are sometimes irreversible deformities which must be taken into account when correcting the posture.



Figure 4

In the optimal state, the vertebrae are stacked one atop the other like a pile of blocks. They are separated by an intervertebral disk equipped with a centre, the nucleus, a kind of marble filled with gelatinous liquid. Disk and nucleus form a shock-absorber designed to withstand the maximum pressure received by the vertebrae (Figure 3). The vertebrae are connected by continuous or discontinuous ligaments which stabilise the articulations. They have a passive role and are not extendable. The mobility of the vertebrae is ensured by a complex series of muscles in front of, behind and alongside them which control the bending, tensing or twisting of the spinal column (figure 4).

In the sitting position, when the pelvis is correctly placed on a sufficiently high zafu, the intervertebral muscles adjust according to the principle of least effort, between forward and backward, right and left, thus creating a position of balance without tension in which we actually let the spine relax towards the sky, vertically. The vertebrae are no longer compressed or needed for voluntary movements or positions, and the energy is distributed throughout the body by the spinal cord without remaining blocked at a level of tension.

For a normally constructed individual, no effort is required to keep the spine in its optimal position of balance. Only the slightest movements of the intervertebral muscles are needed to manage the balance without creating tension. You must not want the posture; you must abandon yourself to it.

Postures vary on both sides of the balanced position depending on the individual. The two extremes are rounded back and over-arching.

Rounded Back



There are numerous causes for a rounded back: the inability to tilt the pelvis forward due to overly rigid muscles, or legs which are stiff or muscle-bound, a mechanical problem, a zafu that is too thin. The body weight rests on the back of the ischia (see figure 5, ischia in position 1). The head, due to the interdependence of the vertebrae, falls forward. The neck alone supports the weight of the head, creating tension in the upper back. In this rounded posture, the ribcage is compressed, the breathing constricted.

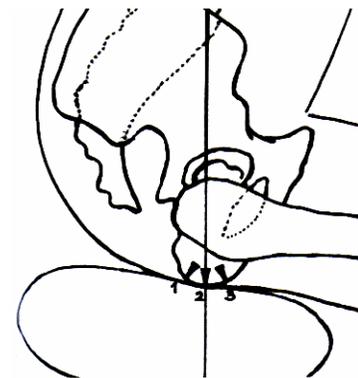


Figure 5

For the duration of the meditation, the vertebrae are held in a position which solicits the intervertebral muscles as much as the disks. An imbalance occurs between the muscles in front and in back, to the right and left. The ligaments and posterior muscles are placed in chronic tension. The intervertebral disk is pinched forward and gapes behind, compressing the nerve elements situated in the spinal cord (especially the sciatic nerve, whose roots are located at the lumbar level; figure 6). This set of chronic tensions can eventually provoke a local or general

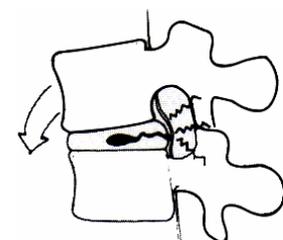


Figure 6

inflammation, a herniated disk or other problems that will sooner or later lead to a practice that is painful or even impossible.

To **correct** a rounded back, you must intervene **only** at the pelvis, pushing it forward by exerting pressure on the sacrum. Another way to help, if possible, is to raise the pelvis using a higher *safu*, and to free it up from the constraint of the legs by allowing the person to temporarily use a support under one or both knees. Other means may be used, since each posture is different.

Over-arching



Over Arching

Over-arching implies a lack of understanding of the idea of balance and relaxation, and a fear of abandoning oneself. The practitioner who forces him or herself in this way has the desire to do well and achieve the right posture, to obtain something. The pelvis is tilted too far forward (figure 5: exaggerated forward tilt, ischia in position 3). An exaggerated arch will stretch the lumbar muscles like cords, also stretching the anterior ligaments, squeezing the intervertebral disks backwards and making them gape in front (figure 7). Consequently, the ribcage will be blocked as when we stand at “attention” in the military, braking the natural movement of the breath. The head will naturally fall backwards and the chin forwards.

To correct this overly tense posture, the ideal is to move the pelvis backwards, but this is not easy to do during *zazen*. An easier method is to place your hand on the sternum, encouraging a release of tension in the thorax, thereby relaxing the lumbar arch. Such a correction is sometimes difficult to receive, because the person receiving it has the impression that we are encouraging him to adopt a position that is too relaxed or limp – in other words, in a new frame of reference that he does not recognise.

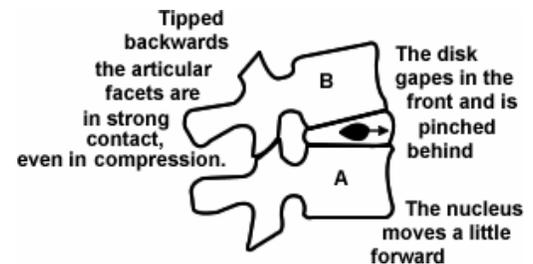


Figure 7

A correction is better accepted when it is discussed after *zazen*. We can use the *kyosaku* against the back (placed from the coccyx to the back of the head) and ask the practitioner to relax into the stick by letting go of the tension in the lumbar region and relaxing the ribcage. If necessary, you should show the person his error by taking up his posture yourself, so that he can see it from the outside. And don't forget to change the height of the *zafu* (lower it).

Impossible to Conclude Simply

In regular practice, each practitioner encounters difficulties that are specific to him or her. There is no standard correction. Corrections should be made or suggested by teachers in a spirit of compassion, delicacy, and true understanding of the workings of the body. All things being interdependent, each correction has a repercussion elsewhere. You must therefore act at the root and not create new difficulties through lack of judgement. If you don't know where the error comes from, it is better not to make a correction. If you don't understand a correction, don't hesitate to ask the person responsible.

The origin of most errors lies in the pelvis, the centre of the posture. From a good position of the pelvis, the rest follows, even little by little. We can even rectify deformities far-removed from the spine with patience and solid faith.

As for the position of the legs, the details are too lengthy to discuss here. There is the lotus, half-lotus, and quarter-lotus. This represents a real difficulty for many people at the beginning of the practice. The important thing is to do whatever is necessary so that the

back remains straight without effort. Those who have problems with their legs should understand the mechanisms in play; the muscular rigidity of the legs and hips; and the role that work habits, diet, behaviour and sports activities play. Study, be patient and observe, learning to see the body from the source of consciousness and not from the limited perception of an ego that struggles and suffers. Likewise, someone who wants to correct themselves should not fight against their errors or deviations, neglect them, or want to dominate them by force. On the contrary, they should seek to use them to direct their own correction. Sometimes making a mistake allows for better understanding. We create the posture anew with each zazen, remaining attentive to what happens in the body, trying to understand the dynamic from the inside. Throughout the practice, we must constantly question ourselves, accept being disturbed, study ourselves. Master Deshimaru called this "staying fresh, not being like flat beer".

The body in itself is not so important; it is ephemeral by nature and subject to the laws of impermanence. But the Buddha uses it to appear in this world. This is why this temporary lodging should be cared for, respected and used to practice the Way. It is in the posture that we each see our own mind and that our original truth is revealed.

Body and mind, when they are in unity, are eternity in a simple posture, in a single instant.
