

How to sit and meditate well, 7 pieces of advice

Heard it before? Yeah... I'll do my best to at least rejuvenate a perspective or two. Some things may seem contradictory. They're not. To sit in meditation is not an amorphous block. There is a continuous flow. Many things are happening. So at different times, different pieces of advice may be appropriate. This is perfect. It helps keeping alive the beginner's mind: being always different, you never know what your next meditation will bring you. Of the pieces of advice I give here, four are mainly concerning the body, three concerning the mind. In swell body-mind-unity tradition, one can say they're all about the body-mind. It's good to read them this way.

≧ “ ” ≦

- 1) Many people have the impression that the purpose of sitting in Zen is to sit as motionless as possible, like some statue of a bodhisattva. But you are not a statue of a bodhisattva. Your body asks for motion and you should give it this motion, constantly. A very good way to accomplish this, is to make use as much as possible of your best ally in it: gravity. Take the moon as an example. It is continuously falling towards the earth. The reason it doesn't hit the ground is that it is also continuously being 'pulled away' by its own motion. Imagine that you too are falling to the ground, now in this part of your body, then in that part. But through this motion, always another part of your body is rising again. So there is never a complete static balance. At any specific moment there is an imbalance. But due to your motion (very slowly of course) there is balance in the imbalance. The result is a kind of solitary dance. Personally, I see in it a very, very slow kind of capoeira, the Brazilian fight-dance, which looks like a continuous falling, very dynamically and in principle never-ending. In order to do it well, the dancers too need to be in a kind of meditative state. The accompaniment by a special instrument (the 'berimbau') deeply enhances this. Capoeira has always been very much related to spirituality in Brazil. The purpose in our meditation is not to be consciously busy with this falling all the time of course. It should become an automatism. Actually it already is so by nature. The only thing you have to do is to let it happen. Please try it and you will experience how it helps you. I call this '**endless falling**'. Another good term would be '**balanced imbalance**'.

≧ “ ” ≦

- 2) The following is my personal opinion. Many times, I encounter it being discussed very differently. It's about breathing. Many books have been written about it. I've read a few and heard a lot about the subject. Nothing ever convinced me. I'm still stuck to the bare and naked breathing that comes like a god-sent to us and that we better use as spontaneously as possible. Are you an abdominal breather? Perfect! Are you a thoracic breather? Perfect! Is your breath as nervous and irregular and shallow as can be? Perfect! This is the breath that belongs to you right now. You shouldn't change it. Meaning: your breath is not like a knob of your enlightenment machine that you can just turn towards the right volume. It doesn't work like that. Instead, your breath is more like the flame of an oven. The knob is somewhere else. It is your whole personality, conscious and subconscious. If you only change something at the outlet, you don't change anything inside, nor the knobs. Yep, I know that changing the breathing in many cases also changes the inside. However one should never underestimate the placebo-effect. Is the breathwork doing this, or the expectation? This said, of course it's evident that the breath *can* be used in an important way. I see the breathing then as the road upon which one can walk. If the road is even, the walking can be a smooth, relaxed stroll. If

the road itself is 'nervous', the walking will suffer. Still, it's your road. Taking a different road will lead you away from yourself, away from your path, away from your goal. What you might do instead is something like the following: if your attention comes to your breathing and you notice it's gibberly nervous, you can invite it to calm down by taking three slow and relaxed breaths, then letting your breathing free again. The former is like an invitation: 'this is what I want'. The latter is like creating or using an emptiness inside which your breathing can find its own road. If the breathing reaches a nice equilibrium this way, it will be your own equilibrium. Your breathing will be the breathing of your body *and* your soul, which is as it should be. In emptiness, your breathing becomes empty of debris, empty of preconceived judgments, even empty of the breathing itself. I like to call this '**empty breathing**'.

≧ “ ” ≦

- 3) A dead spine is made of vertebrae. By contrast, the living spine is *not* made up of several parts. It is one functional whole. It is one organ and you better look at it that way (meaning that an ache somewhere at the lower part can have its cause at any level). And the spine is so beautiful, don't you agree? I just love the beautiful curvature of a spine (especially a woman's, but that may be because of some male prejudice, I guess...). Anyway, a spine is not meant to be as straight as possible. At the same time, it has to *reach* upwards as much as possible. There's a big difference in this but it's difficult to describe. In order to fully understand, one has to feel it while sitting. Or while standing up, for that matter, because this is something you can practice all day long. A visualization exercise is helpful: imagine an elastic cord coming from the vertex of your head, in alignment with your spine. Imagine this elastic cord reaching all the way to, well, very very high above. The cord itself weighs nothing. Now imagine yourself continuously and gently being pulled upwards... You can relax. Your body can relax. It's not going to fall down. You don't need any muscle tensions in order to sit straight. You are being helped very much. While 'hanging' on this cord, you can also feel for yourself how your spine can, by itself almost, find the optimal position of 'ascension'. It's like a fish evolving through the water, but upwards, up to the sky. It's kind of gothic in feeling (I mean: as in 'late medieval cathedral' of course). It's like a woman on high heels and who can *really* walk on them very well. It gives one the impression she's heading for ascension at any moment, yet she's grounded very well. It's like an Egyptian obelisk, which is of course made of stone and therefore completely vertical. I would say, the human obelisk is, precisely because of its curvatures, much more beautiful and even more 'truly vertical' than any stony obelisk. It's like an urge that has no frustration. It's like being here and now, ready for being always there. I call this '**ascension to Heaven**'.

≧ “ ” ≦

- 4) Let's take a look at muscles. Of course one has to avoid strong muscle contractions. But not *too* quickly. If you notice a strong contraction anywhere, don't *just* take it away. Don't just plainly relax that muscle. You might want to explore it a bit. Preferably not only with your conceptual mind of course. Since you are in a meditation mode already, or slipping into it more or less, you might just use this opportunity to get into it even more. That should be the direction of anything you do in meditation: towards meditation. Mind: it's a direction-less direction. So be gentle to yourself: when you sense some strong muscular contraction, please accept it, go around it, go through it, ask it to tell you why it is there, *without words*. Then feel when you can spontaneously let it disappear. The latter is not an easy thing to do. But when you feel it, you may simply enjoy the happening. Pain may disappear together with the contraction, or some time afterwards. Please be patient. You'll survive. Now let's turn to the small muscular contractions (SMC). Here, time is a really very critical ingredient. The body is

for many things dependent on a continuous flux of SMC. So be open to this. You're not a rock. You're a living, sentient being. In Zen we make a vow to help all sentient beings. You might just as well start with this one: yourself. So let life flow through you, also, and *especially* so when you are in a meditation position. 'Everything is permitted.' Whenever you feel like making SMC, please do. You don't disturb the others. You certainly also don't disturb your own meditation. Meditation is like a river. If you let yourself completely go along with it, you don't move. If you hold strong against the river, you move... in relation to the river itself. Stillness is the purpose, but it is a stillness *inside* movement. I said time is critical in SMC. When you have enduring SMC, you will get into trouble sooner or later. Physiologically, this is mainly because in that specific little region of your body, the blood circulation will become de-optimized. Lack of oxygen supply, lack of cleaning away of waste products. Not so good for the physical body. A problem is that such enduring SMC can be present while you're *not* conscious of them. So you have to get *before* them. I've learned that a lot of the difficulty in this has to do with holding back, not letting yourself completely go into the action, I mean: into the meditation. Abandonment. The ego sees its borders getting hazy and doesn't like it so much. Even so. Abandonment. You don't know exactly where the river is taking you. Even so. Abandonment. You're (inappropriately) afraid of the pain that letting-go may bring you. Even so. Abandonment. Imagine there is an adversary right before you. He may strike you at any time. Yet your muscles are relaxed. Therefore they can stay in this position, extremely attentive, for a long time. At the same time they are continuously on the verge of contracture. Therefore they can start any action, any time. You abandon yourself in this moment. Nothing else matters. Only this 'thing' which is at the same time attention and concentration, relaxation, and readiness to go for it. I call this **'the cushion kickbox'**.

≧ ′ ′ ≦

- 5) Am I sitting well? Am I doing my best? Am I sitting in optimal circumstances so as to hit the road straight towards enlightenment? Remember: life is short. So I should go for it now. Here and now. No time to waste! Make room! Make room! I'm in a hurry! ... This can go on and on, dear reader. I hope you get the point. There's a lot of 'I' in all this. And I mean: the hard one. The one that lives only beside other ones. Or even worse: the one that lives *against* other ones. Make room! Let me through! Get out of my way! I was here first! I, the one that will save all sentient beings... Hmm... Really? I don't think so. Of course, I *am exaggerating*. At least, I hope that no one sitting on a cushion has SUCH a big ego... The point is: in meditation, please just let things be. In order to remind you of this, maybe you can use the good old Beatles' song: "...in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom: LET IT BE." Let it be. Let it be. Let it be. Let it be. In Arab they have a nice expression that makes the same point: "insha'allah". Literally: "if God wants so". If used in a good way, this is not fatalism. It is 'acceptance': you accept things as they are, including the changes that may be appropriate to make, your own wishes about these changes, and others' wishes about it, all at the same time and grounded deeply. When people are sitting together, the nice thing that can happen is that the individuals are no longer each one just himself or herself, but there is a special *unity*. As Jesus Christ said: "where two of you are together, I am in your midst," he means precisely this. Meditation is about this. Jesus Christ (that is: if you are a Christian) *is* also this unity. It is each one's 'soul' (or whatever; since words are always limited, it's always OK) that has become so wide that others naturally fall into it. << Not me, not me and also not we as you and me. Not me, not me but You and Me and Me in You and You in Me. >> Take a needle. See its eye? It's so small that no ego can get through it. Yet it is the gate towards the state I just described. As long as you are looking at the needle from outside, it is your ego that is looking. Now keep the needle and forget the needle. You may find yourself again *inside* the eye. Isn't it a very, very big place to be in? There's even room for many more. What

happens outside the needle is still there and at the same time it has vanished. There's only this gate. And we're in it together as one. I call this **'sitting in the eye of the needle'**.

≧ “ ” ≦

- 6) Thoughts come and go. Of course, you've already noticed that, no? Well then, surprise! It's wrong. Tell me: where do they come from? Where do they go to? The truth is: thoughts do not come and go. They emerge and dissolve. In a way, this is the same thing. In another way, it's quite different. Clouds do not come out of the sea. Clouds do not fall on the ground. Water vapour comes out of the sea. Rain falls down on the ground. Clouds emerge and dissolve in the sky. Clouds are the sky. The sky is the clouds, whether they are there or not. Functionally speaking, the clouds are there even if they are not. Likewise, your thoughts are there even if they are not. And if they are not there, they are nowhere... except there. Being there (even while not), your thoughts influence each other in very many ways. OK. Now comes the tricky part ☺. Meditation (even 'absolute or negative samadhi' for the professionals) is not about thoughts not being there. They are there all right, whether you like it or not. Meditation is about how thoughts, being there, can influence each other MUCH more than is normally the case. By 'more', I do not mean something like: 'at more occasions that happen one after the other', but: 'at one moment, in many more ways, in many parts, sub-parts, sub-sub-subparts, and so on towards in the end, in their no-parts.' The next moment: again. The next moment: again. A myriad of things going on in your mind at the same time, a myriad of connections, old ones, new ones, patterns long forgotten, patterns newly made. Patterns that cannot be seen or thought of in other ways (which is what makes people speak of 'the inner eye'). Very broad patterns. And change. All together, therefore: 'in parallel'. Consciousness cannot handle this of course. It can only take 7 things at any one time. Therefore it's not, and cannot be, a conscious way of thinking, though consciously you can be aware of its effects even while it's happening. This is the no-thinking of Zen. This is emptiness that is emptiness, yet form. It is form that is form, yet emptiness... Wow... Did you follow? Then you see that in this there is no dying. No dualism. No time. No clinging. No hate. No frustration. Love, yes. Thinking too is there all right if you want, but it's of a very different nature from what you consciously know. OK. Now comes the *really* tricky part ☺. It's about Buddhism: I think that what has been meant from the beginning with 'getting reborn' is a happening not at/after the end of one's life, but at any specific moment: the getting out of no-thinking towards normal-thinking, being as a whole the way that normal-thinking proceeds. This way, when you get into meditation, or no-thinking, and *stay* there (remember: there is no time), you escape the circle of rebirth... But let me not annoy you any longer with this part. I just wanted to say why I call this **'escaping the wheel of samsara'**.

≧ “ ” ≦

- 7) Unless you're a Buddha (or a woman, since women apparently can do well several things at the same time) you can't make conceptual choices during meditation. If you make a choice ('shall I not think about this?', 'shall I sit still or run away?') it means that you're not meditating. It's as simple as that. Moreover, by making a choice (which is in the deeper layer a whole process of decision making of course), you are going even further away from meditation. Even more moreover than this, 'making a choice' is a very weird happening if you really go into it. Science (namely the domain called 'cognitive science') is only skimming this. Where does any choice come from? From 'me' or 'you'? Think again. Who is 'me' or 'you'? Are these persons egos? Or total beings? Is the ego able to make choices at all? Or does it only think it does, begin trapped in the illusion of itself? The entrapment of course is also there because of... some choice? Then who made this one? Ignoring all this, the ego likes to 'make choices',

even if it's the choice to not-make-choices, because it lives in the choice-making illusion. This gives the ego the impression to 'be there', to be singularly important, at the detriment of meditation. So it's far better to make the decision 'before'. A good way to do this is to use the rituals that accompany formal ways of meditation. Zen, which I know best, is of course a very good example. The bowing, the vowing of hands and other mudras, the sutra chants, the position of the whole body while sitting... All these can be used as direct and deep communications to the 'deeper self'. As such, they can be used in 2 different ways, and to me the difference is of utmost importance: 1) in order to control the deeper self or 2) as an invitation. The first has the following effect upon you: to be thrown like a stone using a catapult. You get somewhere. The second is: to grow wings and to fly to wherever you want to. By the way, saying 'thank you' is a good invitation too. We vow our hands after each meditation, meaning that we have the intention to bring together 'left' and 'right', 'dualism' and 'non-dualism', or whatever your words may be. This hand-vowing moment is also a good occasion to say 'thanks'... After a good meditation, you say 'thanks'. After a 'bad' meditation, you say 'thanks', also. It's the same. A 'bad' meditation together with a very good 'thanks' will equally well let you grow wings that you can use in the future. Since it's a bit more difficult to say a very good 'thanks' in this case, it might even help you more. Of course, what is a very good 'thanks'? I would say: practice it! More or less poetically stated: put your heart on a little plate. Put the plate before you on the ground. Say: "this is my heart which I give to you as a gift for what just happened. Do with it what you want." For a catholic, the 'you' is 'You' of course. For a Buddhist, it is what the Buddha symbolizes. So you give yourself to yourself in the deepest sense. That's it. The rest will take its course. I call this '**no escape. The final frontier**'.

≧ “ ≦

So.

I hope you didn't learn anything new from this. It means you are already sitting and meditating really very well.

Congrats!

≧ “ ≦