

Zen Meditation Experience

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I. Introduction

Eura Kazunori Sensei was born before the Pacific War in Nagasaki city. After receiving his 4-dan in kendo, Eura Sensei decided to devote all his energies to Musō Shinden-ryū iaido. Currently, he holds the rank of Hanshi 8-dan, and is extremely active teaching and training in the Tokyo Metropolitan area and throughout Japan. The essay being presented in this issue of KW was originally written by Eura Sensei around 1997, three years after being promoted to 8-dan in iaido by the All Japan Kendo Federation. For the purpose of clarity, some excerpts of Eura Sensei's essay have been simplified or modified. In addition, terms that were deemed difficult to translate directly were expanded upon or accompanied by a footnote.

II. Zen Meditation Experience

In 1997, three years after being promoted to 8-dan in iaido, I had the opportunity to experience Zen meditation for the first time. The three days of consecutive Zen meditation training was an astonishing experience for me, and I still remember how, as I took my first step into the temple gate from the outside, I was overcome with a feeling of refreshment.

Let me begin by talking a little about Zazen, otherwise known as Zen meditation. Firstly, a key concept in Zen meditation is *shikantaza* (只管打座). *Shikantaza* is Zen meditation in which one focuses in a Zen position without actively seeking enlightenment. The second point to be familiar with is what is said to be the principal objective in practising Zen meditation i.e. to do it single-mindedly.

For newcomers to Zen, there are two kinds of positions in meditation; the lotus position called *kekka-buza*, and

the half-lotus position called *hanka-buza*. The main difference between the two positions is that in the case that your posture is poor, or that your legs are short and you cannot get in the lotus position, practitioners have the option of using the half-lotus position. Surprisingly, even the half-lotus position hurts, and you can feel the pain spreading to your lower legs, lower back and hips. Despite the pain, as time passes your legs weave together, and you begin to feel "Pain is inevitable. How much of this can I bear?" The pain exceeded my limitations in terms of physical ache and anguish.

To deal with the pain I matched my breathing to counting "One, two, three..." It resulted in a revelation of sorts. During the meditation, it occurred to me that long deep breaths are concomitant with a long life. Akin to the words of *Zhuangzi*,¹ "The breath of a true man is similar to a heel, the breath of the people looks like the throat." In simple terms, this proverb refers to a deep and complete breath that permeates the "true man" to the extremities of their body. There is a contrast with the breath of an ordinary person, which is generally shallow. Expressed differently, I believe that when you get angry, you breathe shallowly and from your shoulders. This led me to the common belief that those individuals known for their longevity are also known for not being short-tempered.

As 30 minutes passed, my thoughts began to shift in my mind. Things that I didn't generally think about in ordinary life, such as past slips of the tongue, blunders and numerous other desires started to surface. I also had another interesting experience. My entirety became like an ear with the outside world becoming filled with noises; the buzzing of mosquitoes; the snorting of people (sniffing); the grumbling of stomachs; and the sounds of the nearby monk's clothes.

I was surprised at the many different kinds of thoughts that passed by. It was as if a host of worldly thoughts were parading in my mind. I was left with the question of how to grab onto these thoughts, a stage of Zen meditation which is far from lucid. Unfortunately it did not come as I hoped. Upon engaging in Zen meditation it seemed like I ceased being selfish. However, after returning home, for ten days the stark reality of the experience became apparent.

When teaching iaido, I like to do so unobtrusively so that the practitioner can train or demonstrate *mushin* (state of no-mind). I believe that a perfectly focused practitioner reaches a state of *samadhi*² that is a coordinated consciousness or concentration that is best described as being in the *samadhi* rhythm. For me, there is no more beautiful movement than that of someone who has entered this state in their field. Disrupting this state through direct or disruptive teaching could be detrimental.

Those who are adept at a particular activity can easily enter a state of *samadhi* while a less experienced individual in the same field has much more difficulty, becoming easily distracted, and as a result losing their focus and concentration. Contemplation causes a change of consciousness. Unlike sleep, consciousness is active while resting and one attempts to inhale and react sensitively to the stimulus from outside.

You should not become merely accustomed to whatever you are doing; rather, brain activity must be prolonged and revitalised for as long as possible. This has facilitated my understanding of iaido in many respects. Reflecting on my experience, I remember as I entered the entrance to the Zen temple I could see the characters of 脚下照顧, pronounced *kyakka-shōkō*³ meaning “Reflect on yourself”. In essence, the metaphor of “If your feet are disturbed or unbalanced you will not be able to take the proper steps forward” is a Buddhist saying that can be interpreted as “If you have a confused or wavering spirit you will not be able to focus or reach the Zen ideal”. Perhaps a better interpretation is to “not forget to reflect”.

One should keep in mind that when performing Zen meditation, you shouldn't be seeing only the things that are in front of you. Zen includes being completely aware of “here and now” and “the past and the future”. This understanding in Zen can be freely applied to iaido. Iaido practitioners should never forget that, although imaginary, you are confronted with an opponent. When exploding into the technique, you make a cut applying the concept of *ki-ken-tai-itchi*, that is the cutting or

doing a technique with your *ki*, your sword and body unified. Your spirit doesn't waver, embodying *fudōshin*, the immovable mind. Whether your opponent is on your left, right, in front of you or behind you, it makes no difference.

In Zen meditation, as in iaido, we attempt to concentrate *ki* in the *tanden*, the position two finger widths below the navel. Zen can be linked to so many activities including the sword, Noh, *cha-no-yu*, kyudo, gardens, architecture etc...In fact Japanese life is not only completely Zen-like, but rather as one foreigner put it once, “Zen has merged into in our lives.”

In closing, it is easy to say something but exceedingly difficult to actually do it. I wonder if the philosophy of iaido embodies the expression *kyakka-shōkō*, a philosophy connoting clear understanding of what lies before you and around you. As an iaido practitioner and as a human being, it is a natural desire to try not to lose focus of one's path. By withstanding the tortuous pain that I experienced through my Zen meditation and desperation to remain focused, I became aware of a new kind of consciousness. I hope to get another chance to experience Zen.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Zhuangzi (Traditional: 莊子; Simplified: 庄子, Pinyin: Zhuāng Zǐ, Wade-Giles: Chuang Tzǐ, lit. "Master Zhuang") was an influential Chinese philosopher who lived around the 4th century BCE during the Warring States period, corresponding to the 'Hundred Schools of Thought' philosophical summit of Chinese thought. His name is sometimes spelled Chuang Tsu, Zhuang Tze, or Chuang Tse. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi> (Accessed April 5th, 2007)
- 2 Samadhi is a Hindu and Buddhist term that describes a non-dualistic state of consciousness in which the consciousness of the experiencing subject becomes one with the experienced object, and in which the mind becomes still (one-pointed or concentrated) though the person remains conscious. *Sahaj samadhi* is the effortless and continual state of perfection. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samadhi#_note.2 (Accessed April 2, 2007). Also see Diener Michael S., Erhard Franz-Karl and Fischer-Schreiber Ingrid, *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*.
- 3 *Kyakka Shōkō* - Reflect on yourself: Literally, shine the light where you stand; this relates to one's own preparation to train. Reflecting on oneself exposes one's character for assessment, helping one to focus on the path of self-improvement. Preparing yourself for training by observing simple practices (like removing one's shoes before entering the *dōjō*) and courtesies opens you up to learn in a more fulfilling manner. See page 10 of “The Philosophy of Shorinji Kempo, The founding of Shorinji Kempo” the August 2000 Shorinji Kempo Newsletter http://www.shorinjikempo.it/dati/wsko_news_2000-08.pdf (Accessed April 6th 2007).