You Cannot Wash Off Blood With Blood: Entering the Mind Through the Body

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The old Zen saying, "You cannot wash off blood with blood," refers to the conviction that it is difficult to control thoughts with other thoughts. This saying implies that the way to control the mind is through the body. In Zen meditation (*zazen*), this is accomplished through the regulation of breathing and posture. The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between breathing, posture and concentration in one tradition of Zen. I will explore how this relationship may be relevant to the practice of psychotherapy and the healing arts, as well as its implications for future research in these fields.

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The old Zen saying that serves as the title of this article refers to the belief that it is difficult to control thoughts with other thoughts. The implication of this saying is that the way to control mental activity is through the body, specifically through the regulation of breathing and posture.[1] Another Zen saying, "Enter the mind through the body," makes the same point. This notion stands in contrast with much of the Western therapeutic tradition, which endeavors to influence mental events by means of thoughts. Cognitive therapy is a prime example. It is based on the premise that cognitive events are implicated in the development and continuation of psychological problems. According to this viewpoint, modification of dysfunctional cognitions can resolve these problems. There is a substantial amount of empirical evidence that supports these hypotheses. However, the Zen perspective implied in the aforementioned quote raises the following question: Are there underused physical dimensions–breathing and posture–that may be relevant to psychotherapy and medicine? The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between breathing, posture, and concentration in one Zen tradition. I will discuss how this relationship may be relevant to the practice of psychotherapy and the healing arts, as well as its implications for future research in these fields. Before proceeding, it is important to provide background on Zen, particularly in light of the current emphasis in the literature on mindfulness-based meditation.

Buddhism originated in India in the 6th century BCE and spread throughout Asia in the ensuing centuries. Mindfulness-based meditation is often associated with the oldest Buddhist traditions, especially Vipassana.[2,3] The Zen school began as a distinct sect in China in the 5th century CE and was transported to Japan in the 12th century. Although Zen was later eclipsed by other schools of Buddhism and Taoism in China, it remains to this day a vibrant cultural force in Japan. In the West, interest in Zen began to grow after the Second World War, particularly from writers such as D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. At the popular level, the Beat poets made "Zen" a household word in America.

Classical Buddhist teaching makes a distinction between mindfulness and concentration. This distinction is seen in the "eightfold path," a fundamental tenet of Buddhism. The seventh step on the path is referred to in Sanskrit as *samyak-smriti*, which is ordinarily translated into English as "right mindfulness," whereas the eighth step is called *samyak-samadhi*, which is usually rendered as "right concentration."[4] Accordingly, the distinction is often made between meditative practices that are mindfulness-based and those that are concentration-based,[5,6] although many traditions fall along the continuum between these 2 poles.[7] The practice of mindfulness has been described as "to perform consciously all activities, including every day, automatic activities such as breathing, walking, etc. and to assume to the attitude of 'pure observation', through which clear knowledge, i.e., clearly conscious thinking and acting is attained."[4] In contrast, concentration-based meditation has been described as "involving focusing on specific mental or sensory activity; a repeated sound, an imagined image, or specific bodily sensations such as the breath."[7]

The application of techniques derived from mindfulness-based meditation has been written about extensively in recent psychotherapy and medical literatures.[8-17] In contrast, the application of traditional concentration-based meditative techniques–especially those in the Zen tradition–have received far less attention. One possible exception is Transcendental Meditation, a concentration-based practice on which there is substantial research, particularly in the areas of behavioral medicine and substance abuse.[18-20] However, Transcendental Meditation differs substantially from the Zen practices described in the present article in that it does not emphasize the regulation of breathing and posture.

There seems to be a widespread misunderstanding in both the psychological and medical literatures that all Zen (if not all Buddhist meditation) is mindfulness-based. For example, Pagnoni et al[21] and Chiesa[22] describe Zen as a mindfulness practice. Both describe the meditative technique of *shikantaza* ("just

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sitting"), which Chiesa calls the "most advanced form of Zen meditation" (p. 586). This overlooks the fact that there are 2 existing major traditions of Zen: the Rinzai and the Soto Schools. The former tends to emphasize concentration, and the latter tends to emphasize mindfulness. Shikantaza, a mindfulness-based meditation, is not the primary meditative practice in the Rinzai tradition.

In the remainder of this article, I will describe a tradition within the Rinzai school that is concentration-based and that strongly emphasizes physicality, particularly the regulation of breathing and posture. Because there is variation within the Rinzai School, the techniques I will describe are not necessarily representative of the totality of Rinzai teaching. However, I will refer to them as "Rinzai" as a short-hand because there is no single term that describes this tradition. Because my experience is solely with one lineage of Rinai Zen, I am cautious about generalizing to other lines of Zen or of Buddhist practices in general.

THE THREE PILLARS OF ZEN MEDITATION–BREATHING, POSTURE, AND CONCENTRATION

The fundamental practice in Zen is referred to in Japanese as *zazen* (坐 *za*, "seated"; 禅 "Zen") and is often translated as "Zen meditation." It is traditionally performed in a seated, cross-legged position. One way to view zazen is as the unification of 3 elements: concentration, breathing, and posture, which I will describe in the paragraphs to follow. I would like to stress, however, that Zen does not draw a distinction between mind and body–in fact, the nonduality of mind and body is a key philosophical tenet of the school. The separation of these 3 elements is for explanatory purposes only.

Concentration

In the Rinzai lineages, the basic practice for zazen is referred to as *sosoku*, which means "counting the breath." In sosoku, the practitioner is instructed to count his or her exhalations. The count is subvocalized–one number per exhalation–for the duration of the exhalation. If and when the practitioner reaches a count of 10 exhalations, or realizes that he or she has lost count, he or she is instructed to return to the count of one and start begin again. Most beginners are surprised at how easy it is to lose count, and advanced practitioners remain challenged by it.

To understand the nature of concentration in zazen, it is helpful to understand the concept of "*nen*" (念), a term that has no literal equivalent in English. It is perhaps best translated as "thought impulse." Nen can also be used to "denote a distinctive type of action of the mind."[23] Zen teachings make a distinction between 3 types, or–perhaps more accurately–3 levels of nen action.

The first nen refers to awareness without conscious reflection. It can be understood as pure awareness. Take, for example, the experience of hearing a bell. For a brief instant, one is simply aware of the sound as a pure sensory experience. The lack of reflection gives one a direct experience, unmediated by thought. In Zen terms, this experience is the "Absolute Now" and, more colloquially, can be described as "being in the moment."

Awareness (first nen activity) is usually immediately followed by reflection on the sensation. This reflection is referred to as a second nen action. In the case of the bell, one might wonder where it came from, or think about the quality of the sound, or wonder what it signifies. These initial associations to the sound typically set up a chain of further associations that take one further and further from the immediacy of the moment. To continue the example, the bell might bring to mind a dinner bell, resulting in thoughts of what to cook for dinner, what shopping has to be done first, and so on. The chain of associations can go on indefinitely. In Sekida's words, second nen action "reflects and illuminates upon the immediately preceding [first] nen but does not know anything about itself."[23] In other words, one might be reflecting on the meaning of the bell, but one remains unaware that he or she is doing so.

Third nen refers to awareness that one is engaging in second nen activity. Another way to describe it is the awareness that one's unreflective experience has been interrupted by unnecessary thought; it is the second nen "knowing about itself." Back to the example, one would become aware that he or she is reflecting on the bell. Thus, third nen action constitutes a metacognitive level in which one is aware of the fact that one is distracted. Although one could posit an infinite number of levels of nen, as will be seen below, from a Zen perspective, 3 levels will suffice.

The process of zazen can be viewed as a cycling through the 3 levels of nen actions. The state of focusing fully, without further reflection, on the count is a first nen activity. Any thoughts that distract the practitioner from full attention on the count lead to the realm of second nen activity. Although such a second nen interruption can be momentary, it is more likely to lead to a succession of associations, resulting in the practitioner losing the count altogether as he or she pursues association after association in what is often described colloquially as "runaway mind." However, at some point, the practitioner may come to the conscious realization that he or she has lost the count. This recognition is a third nen activity and provides a cue that the practitioner should bring his or her concentration back to the count. Third nen activity thus allows one to distance oneself from habitual patterns of association. This cycle of first nen (concentration on the count), second nen (distraction) and third nen (realization of being distracted and the subsequent refocus on the count) repeats continuously throughout a session of zazen. Although the duration of first nen (focusing on the count) tends to increase with experience in Zen practice, even seasoned practitioners go through the same cycle.

As concentration on the counts deepens, at some point the practitioner may enter *samadhi* and the count recedes from consciousness. Samadhi can be defined as a state of intense concentration in which one is undistracted by unnecessary thought. As my teacher put it, "in samadhi you see through your thoughts as if you were looking through a spinning propeller." In Zen terminology, one remains "unattached" to thoughts that arise as figures against a larger ground of awareness. At its highest levels, one loses the distinction between the subject and the object of concentration.

Samadhi differs from the conventional understanding of concentration. Concentration is usually associated with a narrowing of awareness to a specific focus, with a gating out of other sen-