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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND NEUROBIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ZEN PRACTICE

PART TWO: ZAZEN AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

In this talk I am going to continue the exploration of the psychological and interpersonal-neurobiological aspects of Zen practice. Given the limitation of time, this will of necessity be a simplified account. In a way, I am basically providing a sketch of how I see our relationship to Zazen playing a similar function to our experience of an intimate relationship to potentiate our experience self. I will be mainly focusing on attachment theory today and the reciprocal organization of the cerebral hemispheres. This will help us to understanding how our experience of self is dependent upon the experience of safety, attunement and attention. As Daniel Siegel says in his book *The Mindful Brain*, mindfulness can be understood “as a form of healthy relationship with oneself” (p. xiii). I am interested in exploring how we can incorporate into our Zen practice an understanding of the relationship between the feeling of safety, the regulation and dysregulation of self-states and the capacity for experiencing a sense of self that has well-being, intimacy and vitality at its core, leading to a feeling of at-home-ness in the world.



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Contrary to stereotyped images, Zen is a communal practice. The image of the legendary figure of Bodhidharma sitting in a cave for 9 years facing the wall gives us a distorted picture. Zen is not the practice of reclusive self-absorption, rather, Zen stimulates the social engagement system – facilitating the experience safety, calmness, openness, compassion and intimacy. Zen monks traditionally slept in the same room together, ate the same food together, used the same bathroom together and worked together in close quarters under challenging environmental conditions. They needed to get along together! Similarly, in our Ordinary Mind Zen School lineage, we emphasise the importance of Zen practice in the context of love and work.

So, let's start by reflecting on the posture of the Buddha. Whether sitting or reclining, the Buddha is pictured as both calm and alert, with a smiling face. So, following the Buddha, we also take a posture that generates a feeling of calm alertness which opens the heart and communicates social engagement. The spine is upright if sitting, supported by a secure triangular base. If you sit using a chair and you wish to lean back against the chair, it is wise to invest in an ergonomically



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designed chair that supports the natural curvature of the spine. The belly is relaxed, the chest is open and our face is smiling. The posture itself communicates safety, ease, and joy not only to others, but most importantly to self. The posture is the foundation of the secure base provided by Zazen practice.

The secure base is a metaphor derived from the work of John Bowlby, the founder of attachment theory. Bowlby noticed the universality of attachment behaviour in birds, mammals, and humans, derived from the necessity to care for dependent offspring, unlike reptile and more primitive bird species. He developed an experiment known as the “strange situation” that led to the finding that children develop attachment behaviours and an attachment style. The primary caregiver provides the secure base for the child. When the child is in close proximity to the caregiver it feels safe. This feeling of safety allows the child to begin to explore its environment. However, at the sign of danger or if the child falls and hurts itself, it immediately seeks out the secure base. Then the cycle repeats itself, over and over. If this all goes well, and the caregiver provides reliability and attuned responsiveness, the child develops a secure attachment style and this is also internalised as a working model of



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relationships. However, if this does not work out that well, in other words, if the caregiver is unreliable, unresponsive, misattuned or unpredictable, the child develops an avoidant attachment style or an ambivalent/resistant style. Later research created a fourth style called disorganised/disorientated, where the caregiving was so chaotic and abusive, it was not possible to develop a consistent style of attachment. Fortunately, these styles are not set in concrete and later experiences of adult relationships can provide what is called in the literature “an earned” secure attachment. Later research, analysing the narratives of adults in response to questions about their relationship with their parents, generated a classification of adult attachment styles which closely replicated the childhood styles. Thus, secure became secure/autonomous; avoidant became known as dismissing; ambivalent or resistant became known as preoccupied; and disorganised/disoriented became known as unresolved/disorganised.

What I am suggesting in this talk, is that we can use attachment theory as a metaphor to understand our relationship with our Zazen practice. Therefore, it is my suggestion that our relationship with Zazen can also provide us with a



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complementary means of developing an internalised secure base. I also will maintain that this is something that needs to be earned (as in adult relationships) if we don't already have a secure attachment style or nurtured and deepened, if we do have a secure attachment style. So, what I want to do next is to give more examples of how imagining having an intimate relationship with Zazen can be illuminative of our practice.

First, we could say after we take up our seat and settle into our posture, we remember our intention to pay attention! I would suggest that attention is the key to creating our secure base in Zazen and finding our home in the world. Attention itself is transformative. From our attention flows a quality of feeling that we could describe as a form of tender loving care – the kind of tenderness that arises when nursing an infant. Interestingly, our ability to pay attention is crucial to our survival and has been refined and handed down to us through evolution.



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The work of Iain McGilchrist, a psychiatrist based in Oxford, has focused on the reciprocal organisation of the left and right cerebral hemispheres. In a nutshell, his research has shown how the left and the right hemispheres consistently differ in the nature of the attention each applies to the environment among reptiles, birds, mammals and humans. “This permits the simultaneous application of precisely focused, but narrow, attention, needed for grasping food or pray, with broad, open, and uncommitted attention, needed to watch out for predators and to interpret the intentions of conspecifics (p. 317)”. It is the left hemisphere that provides the focused attention and the right hemisphere that provides that open and expansive attention.

Interestingly, both these forms of attention can be held simultaneously and correspond to the two basic forms of Buddhist meditation: focused or single-pointed attention say on the abdomen and objectless meditation that is open and expansive. What is called Shamatha, or stilling the mind, is when we focus our attention on an object, such as the rising and falling of the breath at the abdomen and hold it there. When the mind wanders, we simply bring it back again. This generates a feeling of



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safety, calmness and stability thereby generating the sense of the secure base.

Shamatha practice therefore creates the secure base. Once this stability has been established, we can then explore our body, mind and environment. This is known as Vipasyana. This is a kind of free-floating attention, like a bird our attention can move from one place to another, perch for a while, then move to another place. So we might perch for a while on the tension in our shoulders, then we might move to the sound of birds singing in the garden.

I would encourage you all to experiment with holding both these forms of attention at the same time. For example, the focus on the belly can act like an anchor that we return to or that we are constantly aware of and at the same time we allow our attention float freely.

Attention can only exist this moment. We can't be attention in the future or the past. Attention is always now. So, when we are paying attention we are awake to the present moment. When we are attending we are practicing being presence.



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The simple practice of on-going attention, noting the quality of tender loving care, is transformative. It transforms how we experience the world and at the same time it transforms how we experience self. It is simultaneously bi-directional. Zazen could be described as a practice which alleviates suffering by “transforming an individual’s relationship to BME phenomena and catalysing the emergence of eudaimonic well being” or what we would call self. We create our secure base in this moment and we make our home in this moment. Zazen becomes a trusted secure base.

The development of secure attachment in children is dependent on the ability of the parent to interpersonally attune to the shifting states experienced by the infant. The caregiver helps to regulate these states by their ability to attune and express this attunement through the face and voice. Thus, if the child is excited the caregiver can match the excitement and play via the voice and face; or if the child is crying the caregiver will change the modulation of the voice and the expression of the face to match the child. The caregiver knows when not to over-stimulate the child or



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understimulate the child. This basic form of co-regulation is the basis of the beginning of the child eventually being able to self-regulate.

In the same way, in our Zazen practice, we are learning to attune to and be with our shifting internal states. We get to know ourselves and regulate our own states through mindful attunement. Mindful awareness becomes, as Daniel Siegel says, “a form of intrapersonal attunement. In other words, being mindful is a way of becoming your own best friend” (p. xiv).

In the Buddhist tradition in general (not so much in Zen) you will also find many different practices based upon metta or loving kindness practice. In the contemporary mindfulness scene, there has also been an emergence of the science of self-compassion and self-compassion meditations. These practices are all designed to stimulate the social engagement system.



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So, in human attachment the caregiver is a secure base that allows the infant/child to explore the outer world. In the same way, our relationship to Zazen promotes the ability to explore our inner world and experience and tolerate and befriend difficult emotions without avoidance. This has therapeutic benefits.

I would also recommend building a sense of regularity and reliability in your sitting practice, which replicate the secure base. For example, sit at the same time, every day. Create a sense of familiarity in the place where you sit. Make an altar if you like, with a Buddha statue, candle, flowers, and incense. By this repetition, sitting at the same time in the same place every day, we are making our home and over time it begins to become our home. We feel a sense of connection, that we are returning home, remarkably similar to the familiar sense of connection we feel from being close to our caregiver as a child or our primary adult attachment figure. Once we have established this relationship it makes it easier to stop during the day, even for a few minutes, and connect with our secure base. However, it is not always going to be this easy. We can also resist making our home in this moment. So, we need to



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understand this resistance to surrendering to this moment. So, why do we resist?

Why do we not feel at home in our body, mind, and environment?

If we come to Zazen with a history of relational trauma and insecure forms of attachment, we are not always going to be able to find our secure base in Zazen so quickly. Like entering into an intimate relationship, we may be anxious, ambivalent or avoidant. We will experience resistance. If we push ourselves too hard too soon, we may even experience re-traumatisation. Not everyone is going to enjoy resting in body sensations – not everyone is going to experience feelings of tender loving care. It is not easy to sit still with others. We may find it extremely discomforting to sit with others in such close proximity. We may find it extremely difficult to be with our thoughts and feelings for half-an-hour, let alone a day or seven days!

I think resistance manifests in different ways depending on our personal trauma history. It can be triggered at any time by the unconscious traumatic memory system – by both internal and external cues. We may experience resistance to being with



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self-states we would rather avoid. Actually, facing the insubstantiality of the personal self can be quite scary. The self is constantly in flux. As we let go of our desire to control and join with the flow, we may experience positive states of well-being but we may also find ourselves in a state of panic holding on anxiously in fear of disappearing into a black hole! When we experience emptiness directly, seeing that we are literally no-thing, just the flow of impermanence and interdependence, it can feel very unsettling. This can especially be so, if we push ourselves too hard to begin with. That is why a gradual approach is to be preferred. Safety first, always! It takes a while for our personal self to meet and get to know our universal self, before the personal self and the universal self can meet and become one in the miracle of just this moment. Zazen is the gateway to this meeting in this moment.

We may therefore remind ourselves it is going to take some time to trust our relationship with Zazen – before we can give ourselves fully to Zazen, to surrender to this moment, we have to gain trust that this is going to be safe. In creating a secure base for ourselves in Zazen it is also important not to turn it into a kind of “I am a rock, I am an island” sense of self-reliance. That we don’t use Zazen to dissociate



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from the vulnerability we experience when we allow ourselves to be in love or to trust a relationship with a therapist or teacher. Hence, the importance of working with a teacher and sharing your experience. And there again, for people who have been hurt in relationships, it is not always going to be easy to establish an intimate relationship with a teacher, but that's another story.

To conclude, this practice does not assume we will naturally feel at home in Zazen. The first step is to create a home where we feel safe. The practice itself is the homemaking and attention is our core practice. Zazen is the Buddha in the trinity of the three refuges of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When we trust our relationship with Zazen, we are trusting that we ourselves are Buddha, we are allowing our personal self to ultimately be held by the universal self – and to realise the personal self is the universal self. As we surrender into the arms of the universal self, we can experience the deep safety and security – the safety and security that is born by finding our true home in this vast and impermanent universe.