

Breathing in Syugyo: Toward a Better Way of Living

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1. Introduction

•Social change in Western Countries

In some Christian philosophical thinking, “dualism” exists as a prevalent system of thought-base in theological schemas, separating the spirit and the body. People believe that the God made the shape (body) of the human such that it resembles himself, imparted the soul (spirit) into that shape, and that is how humans became “alive” i.e., spiritually cognizant creatures as differentiated from animals. After death, the soul will be judged by God on Judgment Day, implying that the “you” you currently know will still exist by the mechanism of your eternal soul even though you will be physically dead. However, 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), famously asserted that “God is dead.” He also asserted that the spirit is an instrument for the body which takes the lead on ourselves¹⁾. According to him, our body and the spirit are not two different things, that is, every breath and movement we take does not come from our “spirit” but from the whole body, which knows everything including the things we can't figure out via our mind. In other words, the body and the spirit are unseparated.

•Influence of East -Asian Religious Practice

Nowadays, and especially since the 1970's, yoga and Eastern-style meditations have become well-known in Western countries. Differing from dualism, they pursue a higher state of the spirit through bodily practices. One of the methods for doing yoga is putting the body in certain, specific and physically tough positions, so people can actually focus on the pain, thereby getting rid of all distractions. While, in other ways such as Zen Buddhism and mindfulness, concentration is required on/within your mind instead of the body. No matter what kind of method is used, the purpose is to attain a calm and peaceful state through repeated practice.

•Mindfulness

Speaking of mindfulness, it is a kind of meditative practice used to train the body and spirit. While you are practicing it, you need to be aware of what you are doing, for example, what kind of position you are taking. And you also need to observe what you are feeling now, for example, whether you feeling sad or happy, whether you feel cold or warm, and so on. You are required to observe every aspect of your condition and focus your attention as much as possible on/in the present moment. You are not required to control your emotions, or judge anything, and you are recommended to simply feel it and accept it. Kabat-Zinn (1944–), the leading figure who brought the mindfulness to the Western world, founded Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic in 1979. Through clinical practice, the mindfulness-based therapy proved to be helpful to enhance relaxation and reduce stress and depression.

•Syugyo

In Eastern countries, we can find many traditional methods that are used to promote body and mind toward healthier states, other than yoga or mindfulness meditation. In Japanese, they are called “Syugyo.” This word has two meanings. One is “修行,” which is based on Buddhist thinking, and means to practice or try hard on learning something. Another one is “修業,” which means to learn something in order to become an expert in a professional way. In this essay, since I want to talk about the relations between the body and spirit through “practice,” the meaning of Syugyo is closer to the first definition which focuses on both the body and spirit.

2. Diversity of Syugyo

Generally speaking, Syugyo is seen not only in Japan but broadly within Asia. For example, in India, Yoga trains the body and the spirit, to achieve a peaceful sense of self. The concept is based on Buddhism and Hinduism. Yoga also contains a technique of meditation for observing breathing. All of the training and practice are aimed at connecting and uniting the body and the spirit as one.

In Japan, the typical and classic practice of Syugyo is Zen. Shunryu SUZUKI (1904–1971), one of well-known priests who introduced Zen meditation to Western society, explains the purpose of Zen as follows:

The innocence of the first inquiry—what am I? And the purpose of Zen is to notice yourself, to make you wonder and to answer that wondering with the deepest expression of your own nature.²⁾

Although it sounds abstract, Zen has concrete methods to help learners to find their true self, for instance, one is to observe one's own breath. Practicing the archery can be another method of practicing Zen meditation. In *Zen in the Art of Archery*³⁾, describing the relation between Zen and archery, the author Eugen Herrigel explains that one needs to learn how to take a breath, forgetting the target. Also, one needs to avoid wandering in the mind and concentrate in the given situation, getting rid of what bothers you mentally.

Sado (tea ceremony), another Japanese cultural practice, is also a kind of Syugyo. Sado: it is not only for making a great green tea, offering to the guests, it is also a development of Zen⁴⁾. After repeating the same recipe again and again, the body learns what to do in the next step, so you don't need to think a lot. The learner's body will realize every necessary step to serve tea for the guest thus liberating the mind to be "elsewhere."

In China, there have also been many kinds of Syugyo. For example, QI-gong believes that there is a subtle and invisible energy in the air called "Chi." By breathing in a proper manner, it is said that the energy goes into the body. And practicing certain postures and movements, the energy becomes well circulated in the body. And it also brings good health and reduces tension.

Another method, Tai-chi is based on the Chinese thinking of Yin Yang. It is believed that combination of Yin and Yang can make people healthier and stronger. In a well-known manual of Tai-Chi, it is written as follows:

To practice Taijiquan, you must clearly understand the natural principle of breathing, and you must not hold your breath.⁵⁾

Tai-chi is the whole body, and the whole body is Tai-chi.⁶⁾

Overviewing Eastern traditions of Syugyo, we notice that breathing is one of the commonly emphasized aspects of meditative bodily practices.

3. Body and Mind

In the 20th century, psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) developed the concept of body armor. Body armor is a pattern of muscle tensions that prevents patients from feeling negative emotions. If the patient couldn't deal with the stress or the depression or any kind of negative emotions in the right way, the psychological repression forms a pattern of muscle tensions as body armor, which defends the patient's mind from the "attack" of negative emotions

derived from the given situation. Although the body armor physically sustains the ego defense mechanism, ultimately it is not good for mental health. Because it usually suspends the body in a tough state, the breathing is also sustained at a shallow level. Based on this clinical observation, he developed a therapy to heal the patient through deeper breathing. He found that deep breathing was helpful to alleviate neurosis as well as to enhance mental stability.

Reich considered breathing as a tool to heal patients and help them back to a healthy and positive state. However, as he emphasized the importance of releasing the repressed emotions and memories, his goal in psychotherapy was to bring the patients back to the positive, energetic, and happy state. He focused on getting rid of the psychological/somatic repressions and achieving the “positive” state.

In contrast, Syugyo is not simply about being “happy” or “positive,” but it is more about the peaceful state of mind which one already has. Practicing and training one’s breathing serves to achieve this goal. While one can maintain well-trained breathing, one keeps the peaceful state of mind, in which one can deal with both positive and negative emotions in a proper manner without repressing them.

For example, in Buddhism, they think that knowing how to breathe is one of the most fundamental things, like a gateway, to the Buddhist universe. There are two different methods of breathing to practice Zen meditation. One is the intentional/voluntary method. The learner is required to focus on the breathing process itself, by counting the times of respirations. The other one is an unintentional/involuntary method. The learner is required to observe the breath, that is, observing how long it is and how strong it is. It is not required to change the process of breathing, but just letting it happen⁷⁾ in an observant state.

The point is that breathing does not only take the mind into a peaceful state, but the whole body and mind realizes the peaceful state through calm, but rhythmical movement. Without anger or any negative emotions, neither excited nor any positive emotions, but just in a stillness and peaceful state. In Zen term, this state is called “Ding.”⁸⁾

At the initial stage of training, one can achieve the peaceful state only during the practice itself. However, the more you have practiced, the more peaceful a state one can realize outside practice. One gets to know how to manage the mental states through the body—by breathing, and it is important because it means that one is getting closer to the Buddha⁹⁾. Not only in traditional Buddhist meditation, but also in sado, archery, and other types of Syugyo that we have referred to here, breathing has been regarded as a crucial factor for training and practicing.

So, we have found that in both Western and Eastern cultures there are methods that utilize the breath as a significant tool to achieve a “better” state of living. But the difference between West and East is that Reich took the breath as a method/therapy to help people face and release the repressed psychological problems and become happy again. In Eastern thinking, Syugyo, the emphasis is how to achieve the peaceful—not happy nor sad—state of mind, a state of mind acquired by adjusting the bodily process, especially that of breathing.

4. Medical Evidence

Regarding the relationship between the body and breathing, modern medicine has also promoted research in the field of neurophysiology. Peripheral nervous systems are composed of two different systems. One is the somatic nervous system that corresponds to the sensory inputs from sense organs as well as to voluntary movements. The other one is the autonomic nervous system that mainly corresponds to internal organs. It unconsciously regulates our bodily functions such as digestion, heart rate, urinations, and so on. The important point is that breathing is an exceptional action that is influenced by both systems. It means that we can breathe consciously as well as unconsciously¹⁰⁾. On the one hand, we can control our breathing in an intentional way, but on the other hand, we can let the breathing

happen without awareness. Through the autonomic nervous system, breathing is closely connected to other psychosomatic functions such as heart-beat, interception, and emotion. So, when you have headache or you find your hands shaking or your breathing is different from the usual pace, it is possible that you are under stress or depressed without noticing it¹¹⁾. These kind of somatic changes derive from the autonomic nervous system that functions to connect our mind and body. Our body is much smarter than we think. Even though you do not consciously control your body, it keeps working 24 hours a day in an unconscious manner.

The problem is, if we can't figure out why the body is acting strange, it has a negative influence on both physical health and mental health because we have no idea about how to control it. Training our breathing can be a good solution for this. We can consciously control our breath through somatic nervous system, but this can affect our whole mind and body through autonomic nervous system. Emotions are the most changeable part of the mind, being particularly susceptible to being affected by regulatory breathing practices. This is the empirical support for Syugyo that emphasizes the importance of breathing to promote the healthy conditions of mind and body.

5. Conclusion

First, the purpose for Syugyo is to achieve a peaceful state of mind, especially through practicing and training breathing. Second, we can find breathing techniques in both Western and Eastern cultures. In the West, Reich emphasized a way to release muscle tensions and repressed emotions through deeper breathing. In the East, Syugho emphasized keeping the mind in a peaceful state so that one can be detached from negative emotions and prevent from repressing them. Third, we barely can find a study about breathing technique before the 19th century in the West. However, in Western cultures, we can find a profound description of breathing in the Holy Bible, which states:

And the Lord God formed the man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.¹²⁾

The body without the spirit is dead.¹³⁾

According to this, in the West, the breath is regarded as Spirit. And the Spirit is the source of life that maintains life in the human body—“the body without the spirit is dead.” This conception of breathing seems rather abstract. Breathing is used not only to make the body alive, but also symbolizes the spiritual essence that connects humans with God. In contrast, in the tradition of Syugho, breathing was regarded as something more practical. Breathing is a method used to achieve higher mental states (as well as bodily states), to keep our lives better and more valuable. In the Bible, the breath is the Spirit or the abstract source of life, but in Syugyo, breathing is a concrete way of living that realizes the ideal state of mind and body.

In our current globalized society, we are observing a curious social change. There are many people who are practicing mindfulness or other types of meditation in both Western and Eastern countries. As we saw already, breathing is a core technique in these methods. Breath and breathing could be an important key to consider the wellness of human beings beyond cultural differences or religious traditions.

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Notes

- 1) 身體與想像的辯證：以尼采《悲劇的誕生》為例 龔卓軍。
(http://www.itpark.com.tw/people/essays_data/162/1550)
- 2) *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, Shambhala (2011) p.177.
- 3) *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel, Vintage (1999).
- 4) *The Book of Tea* by Kakuzo Okakura, Dover Publications (1964).
- 5) *Tai Chi Boxing: 太极拳 (English Edition)* by ZHI SHI, Kindle(2018), p.763.
- 6) *Tai Chi Boxing: 太极拳 (English Edition)* by ZHI SHI, Kindle(2018), p.779.
- 7) 《觀呼吸》佛使比丘 泰文講述 鄭振煌中譯 大千出版 (2014).
- 8) Have 5 level, level 1 is "Ding." Level 5 is get out of Sansara (rebirth/cyclicality of all life, matter, existence).
- 9) Since Buddha lives in the Sukhavati (eastern paradise), a peaceful place, without any mind wandering or carnal desires.
- 10) *MIDFULNESS AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY* by Tim Stead, SPCK (2016), p.7.
- 11) 『情動と呼吸』帶間 良一、本間 生夫編集 朝倉書店(2016), p72.
- 12) HOLY BIBLE KING JAMES VERSION, Collins (1991), Genesis 2:7.
- 13) HOLY BIBLE KING JAMES VERSION, Collins (1991), Games 2:26.