

THE BASICS OF ZEN MEDITATION

Part 1. Introduction to Zen

Zen is a meditative practice that developed in India and China (where it is known as *Chan*) as part of the 2,500 year old tradition established by Siddhattha Gotama. He came to be known as the “Buddha”, which simply means “awakened”. He lived and died as a human, not as a god to be worshipped. *Chan* spread from China to Korea (as *Son*), Japan (as *Zen*) and Vietnam (as *Thien*). In the last 40 years or so it has taken root in many other countries.

While the Zen school accords with traditional Buddhist teachings in every way, it has a radical directness that challenges traditional spiritual orthodoxy.

Zen is a practice of transforming our mental processes by honouring the present. It is at home in the acts of changing a baby’s nappy, a staff meeting at work, stuck in traffic, or chopping vegetables for dinner, as it is in sitting on a remote mountain top.

“Have we ever known this Now? If you reply “yes”, you are ignorant about this Now (this Yourself), because this Now has never sprouted before! It has never happened, and never have we experienced it! This is totally new and once here in eternity.”
Hōgen Yamahata

Why meditate?

Meditation can, it seems, bring both physical and mental benefits to those who practise it regularly. These benefits, according to medical studies, range from improvements in concentration and reasoning power to improved immune system activity, and relief from conditions such as insomnia and blood pressure. Nevertheless, Zen practitioners still develop and suffer and die from serious illnesses. Meditation is not a means of attaining physical immortality or exempting oneself from the laws of nature.

We are what we think.
All that we are arises
with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we
make the world.
(from the *Dhammapada*,
translated by Thomas
Byrom)

The main reason why Zen practitioners meditate, however, is to see things as they are, and this includes ourselves. We are largely unaware of the link between our usual pattern of mental activity and the suffering that this causes to ourselves and others.

Consistent observation of the mind, during meditation and through the day, reveals that much of our time is spent grasping after certain things and circumstances, and rejecting others. We see that we spend a large amount of time and energy recycling past pleasures and grievances, or dwelling on how things could or should be better in “the future”, comparing things and people constantly and putting them into dualistic categories such as good and bad, desirable and undesirable, right and wrong, guilty and innocent, friend and enemy, and so on.

As we meditate, we begin to see more clearly our many prejudices and sticking points, and this leads us to try to refine our characters. Simple, honest non-verbal observation of our mental and emotional processes does produce a change in the way we approach situations and people that we meet. The eventual result is an approach to life that reflects attitudes of not rejecting or grasping, not twisting the truth, refraining from excessive satisfaction of appetites and not indulging in self-deception. This outlook manifests both on a personal level and on a larger societal level, and comes from insight rather than an exercise of will. Thus we become less inclined, for example, to steal from those around us, as well as from the natural environment. We are less inclined to escape from life through chemical or other drugs, or by turning a blind eye to the needs of others or to the ecological effects of our lives.

Continued practice of awareness over many years can bring experiences of deep insight which change our view of ourselves to the point that we can see that the self to which we have been dearly attached for our whole lives is nothing more than a self-made mirage. It is like peeling a banana tree. Layer after layer of mistaken thoughts are removed until not only do you not see a disguised and pretending self, but also you do not see even a naked self. You aim to discover your self, but end up discovering that there is nothing to discover.

In more concrete terms, practising meditation gradually reduces your wandering thoughts until you experience the state of “no-mind”. Then you will naturally realise that your life in the past was built on an accumulation of perplexed and mistaken notions that are not your true self. Your true self is one that is inalienable from all others. The objective existence of all events is all the various parts of the subjective existence of yourself. So you don’t have to seek for anything or to despise anything. That which is before you at each moment is what you have been looking for, and you can’t and don’t have to add anything to it for it to be perfect. Having reached this stage, the meditator becomes full of warm compassion towards all human and other beings. His or her character is radiant, open, as bright as the spring sunshine. Although externally emotions may appear for the sake of helping others, internally the meditator’s mind is constantly clear and calm like water in an autumn lake. Such a person can be called enlightened.

It is an essential teaching of Zen that the door of insight is open to all, male and female, old and young, wise and dull, strong and weak, people of all professions and trades and backgrounds, and of any religion and belief.

These words are however only a discussion of Zen, not Zen itself. Zen meditation requires your own determination and persistence to learn and to practise. Talking about Zen, without actually doing it, just adds confusing and useless knowledge to our already confused minds. Eating a picture of food won’t do you any good.

What are the basic concepts of Zen?

One basic concept is that concepts are only concepts, not reality. They are tools to help us overcome our habitual inability to see the reality of This, Now. Once used, they can be discarded.

Compassion – along with wisdom, one of the principal virtues for Zen practitioners. Based on enlightened experience of the oneness of all beings, it is more than just sentimental emotion, and naturally (without effort or pretense) extends itself without distinction to all life – enemies, strangers, animals, everything.

Conditioned arising (also “interdependent co-arising”, “conditioned nexus”, “causal nexus”) – all psychological and physical phenomena that make up individual existences are interdependent and mutually condition each other. Conditioned arising is, along with the “no-self” doctrine, the core teaching of all Buddhist schools. Attainment of enlightenment depends on comprehending its function.

Emptiness – all things, including people, are regarded as not having an enduring essence, and are nothing more than mere appearances. Without emptiness, everything would be fixed and there would be no chance of change or development. Thus emptiness makes the existence of all phenomena possible. This concept of emptiness is however quite different from simple nihilism. It does not mean that things don’t exist, rather that they are nothing beside

appearances. Emptiness is often equated with the absolute in Zen writings, since it is without duality and empirical forms.

Cause and effect (*karma* in Sanskrit) – the workings of cause and effect are obvious to all of us in our daily lives, although the full scope of this function is as intricately wide and as enduring as the universe itself. Things are as they are because of the conditions that preceded them. Those conditions were caused by other contributing conditions, and so on. The notion of cause and effect is closely related to the teaching on conditioned arising. It is not based on ideas of punishment and reward, but rather on the natural and observable flow of thoughts, words and actions in the world, and how the combination of the manifold things that make up each mental moment produce the experience of the next mental moment. While the outcomes of our lives are not determined in advance, the way in which we respond to circumstances and make decisions is obviously influenced by the past events and experiences that shaped our mental outlook or programming. Further, each thought word and deed contributes to the overall makeup of the universe and their consequences can go on and be felt for a long time.

No-mind – pure immediacy in the fullness of things as they are, as experienced, for example, during *shikantaza*¹. This experience of “without thinking” is characterised by:

- **non-positional attitude:** neither affirming nor negating, consciousness is no longer an intentional vector proceeding from a subject to an object but is, rather, an open dynamic field in which objects present themselves;
- **no subject-object distinction:** the subject has disappeared;
- **immediacy:** without a subject standing back, the experience is of immediacy within the dynamic field of consciousness;
- **fullness:** because the object is not filtered through an intentional act, it presents itself in its fullness;
- **purity and simplicity:** the pure presence of things as they are.

No-mind does not mean no mindfulness, rather it means not being attached to or distracted by discursive thinking and ideas that cover up things as they are.

No-self – the doctrine that no self exists within a person in the sense of an unchanging, eternal, integral and independent substance. Insight consists in apprehending the impersonality of existence, recognising that existence is a flux of arising and passing away of physical and mental phenomena in which there is no constant individual self or ego.

Wisdom - a central notion of Zen referring to an immediately experienced inherent wisdom that cannot be conveyed by concepts or in intellectual terms. The definitive moment of wisdom is insight into emptiness, which is recognised through personal experience to be the true nature of reality. The realisation of wisdom is often acquainted with the realisation of enlightenment.

Do I have to be a Buddhist to do Zen?

No. People with no religion or who practise other religions can and do practise Zen. Nor do you have to follow a particular *guru* or ascribe to a particular set of beliefs or dogma. Zen is very inclusive and you will find no pressure on you to change your religious or spiritual beliefs. Zen is a way of refining your life by carefully and directly observing your own mind. Zen emphasises the responsibility of each of us for our own lives, and that the only true teacher is one's own experience.

¹ *Shikantaza* is a meditative practice referred to below.

Members of other religions and people without religion find they can use Buddhist methods in their own lives because Buddhist teachings are not about worshipping statues or unthinking acceptance of dogma, but simply trying to wake up to what is here, now.

Do not believe in anything just because:

- *it is accepted by many,*
- *it is written in books,*
- *it is spoken by teachers and elders,*
- *it is handed down in tradition.*

But if, after analysis, it is found to accord with reason, and to result in the common good, then accept it, and live up to it.

(Kalama Sutra)

Of course some Zen practitioners have committed to living their lives by Buddhist precepts or vows. These are rather like the Ten Commandments. You may see some meditators wearing a kind of bib around their neck. The bib (*rakusu* in Japanese) indicates that the person has taken precepts, and symbolises the patched robes worn by the original followers of Buddha who made their clothes from discarded rags.

Can I get enlightened by doing Zen?

Yes. But it is important to understand what enlightenment means. Enlightenment is seeing clearly what is here, now – nothing more than that – without all the glosses or filters that our habitual mental processes usually bring. This is such a simple thing that initially it leaves most people unconsciously expecting that there must be something more. But the experience of thousands of years indicates that there can be nothing more profound or fundamental than to experience the universe as it really is, right now, rather than what our grasping and rejecting thinking may lead us to hope or fear that it may be. Enlightenment is not about gaining something, but releasing our grip on our internal dialogues and “scripts”, our conceptualizing, our mental addictions and habits, our loves, our hates, our very idea of our self as separate from the rest of existence. Enlightenment does not mean that bad things don’t happen to you. Even if you realise enlightenment, your body and mind will eventually dissolve, and you still have to put out the garbage and wash the dishes in the meantime.

“Enlightenment has little to do with supernormal powers and supernatural feats, but rather with accessing our great transcendental wisdom awareness and employing our potential for great functioning in order to help others.”
Nan Huai-Chin

Meditation is like cleaning a very dirty window - the clarity of a practitioner’s insight most often opens up in stages – enlightenment usually comes in instalments.

The best advice is to just forget about enlightenment, and certainly don’t try to imagine what it might be like or how to get it. If you pursue enlightenment, it will be unattainable because you will have made the abandonment of concepts into another troublesome concept, another goal to be pursued. One of the central messages of Zen is that through a combination of firstly calming the mind’s normal frantic activity, and then gentle but sustained concentration on your particular meditation method, the true nature of your and the universe’s existence will naturally reveal itself.

How does enlightened consciousness differ from ordinary consciousness?

Fundamentally, our experience, as experienced, is not different from an enlightened person's. Where we differ is that we place a particular kind of conceptual overlay onto that experience and then proceed to make an emotional investment in that overlay, taking it to be "real" in and of itself rather than to be an "expression" of the "occasion", in which we think or talk about the given experience. In a sense, we have a double-layered description. First, there is the pre-reflective, not yet conceptualised, experience – what we all share, enlightened person and the rest of us alike. Second, there is the expression or characterisation of any experience within a particular situation or occasion. If the speaker (or thinker) brings no personal, egoistic delusions into this expression, the occasion speaks for itself, the total situation alone determines what is said or done. Thus, in the case of the enlightened person, what-is-said is simply what-is – "This, Now". In the case of the unenlightened person, however, the "what-is" includes his excess conceptual baggage with its affective components, the deluded ideas about the nature of "self", "thing", "time", and so on, that constitute the person's own particular distortion of what actually is.

If Zen is concerned about compassion, why just sit around meditating? Isn't this selfish? Why not do something to help others right now?

Meditation is ultimately to benefit others. It can help us become less self centred, for example in personal, business, societal and environmental matters. We cannot be as effective a vehicle of true selfless action while our ego-consciousness stands between us and the necessity of the moment before us.

Zen master Dōgen saw right moral action is seen as proceeding from wisdom and compassion which he regarded as "not-two". Thus he saw right moral action as proceeding from seeing things as they really are, which is manifest to us in moments of "without thinking". Wiping away our mistaken (inverted) thinking, realizing the truth, allows compassion to arise, unconditional and not seeking anything in return. If we can do this fully, our every act can be for the benefit of others.

"True emptiness has no religion, sect or any doctrine. As long as we hold on to concepts, even those about enlightenment, Buddha or the Open Way, we are still trapped in our consciousness and our real compassion cannot work. The real act of compassion comes from beyond our individual conscious mind. It cannot be generated or motivated by personal desires."

Hōgen Yamahata

But of course there is no need to wait till you're enlightened to start helping people.

If Zen opposes dualistic thinking, does that mean that good and evil don't exist? Can we do anything we like?

To the extent that it contains a philosophical system, Zen has, like most other philosophies, been used to rationalise and justify evil actions. The words and concepts of any philosophical or ethical system can be twisted to superficially justify almost any position. But Zen is not the conceptual or verbal framework that is used to explain it. It is the moment to moment state of the universe, right now. In absolute terms, this presence precedes, and does not require, concepts of good and evil. If one truly realises that the individual ego, or a tribe, or a

nation, or a species, is a changing and transitory fragment that cannot exist except in interdependence with the rest of the universe, then the idea of putting the interests of that fragment above the rest will be seen as pointless, and in the longer term impossible. From the absolute point of view, you and your neighbour are one, so harming or stealing from your neighbour accomplishes nothing for your true self. In fact such actions create consequences that serve to further blind you to your true nature.

Thus if “good” is seen as intentionally acting for the benefit of existence as a whole, and “bad” as intentionally placing the interests of an individual or group above others, then a truly realised person will be incapable of doing bad.

In Zen, right and wrong are neither moral judgements nor arbitrary standards imposed from outside. Through our own awareness, we discover what is beneficial (“right”) and what is unbeneficial (“wrong”).

The concepts of good and evil are useful guides to help us steer our way to realisation, but if things can be seen truly as they are, the concepts are no longer of any use. Put another way, viewed from an absolute perspective, good and evil don’t exist, but from a relative perspective they do. And while we function in relative existence, we must consider whether our thoughts, words and actions are really for the greater good.

“What is non-virtue, evil? You may find it hard to pin down a rule on non-virtue. Each and every person is in a different position. No two persons are ever operating from exactly the same standpoint. How can you say what is right and wrong, what is virtue and what is non-virtue? I can see that you may well struggle with this question. Shall I give you the most concise answer to your question, ‘What is non-virtue, what is evil?’?”

To be most concise, most brief, non-virtue is self-cherishing. The big boss of evil is self-centredness. Fiercely clutching a false notion of self, freely brandishing the self in regard to time and place and circumstance, well, it should be quite clear how non-virtuous actions occur. Of course this applies even to those who are too conceited to acknowledge their own wrongdoing. ‘I, me, mine.’ If you are grasping this utterly false sense of self, no matter what you do, all of your actions are non-virtuous. Even if you are attempting to do good, if you thoroughly investigate, isn’t it clearly evident that the root of evil is self-cherishing? ‘Me first.’ You seek to have situations to suit your own convenience. This is getting right to the bottom of the matter, the question of non-virtue, and it is a very stern, bitter revelation.”

Harada Tangen Rōshi

“In genuine cultivation of practice, in the end there is just one road: carrying out vows. So what does it mean to carry out vows? It means to correct your own mental conduct. Our thinking, the process of arousing mind and setting thoughts in motion: this is behaviour that has not yet come forth. All conduct is the active expression of thoughts.

“On the Path of cultivation, you must know that everything starts with and ends with behaviour. The whole Path has to do with conduct and behaviour, the carrying out of vows. This is the highest truth and also the simplest truth: like a great circle, to do good and refrain from evil, is the very beginning and end of the path.”

Nan Huai-Chin

Part 2. The role of the Zen teacher

Zen teachers are experienced practitioners who share their insights with, and are willing to guide, less experienced practitioners. They are not necessarily faultless individuals, saints or gurus, and they are not objects of worship.

Some masters will have been given formal teaching approval by their own teachers, initially on a limited, and then on an unrestricted basis. Some may, and some may not, be regarded as “fully enlightened”. Their “degree of enlightenment” need not matter to the rest of us provided that the teacher can guide us to see things more clearly in our own lives. In the end it is each one of us as the practitioner who has to see our true nature. As your practice develops, you will find teachers everywhere in the form of your interactions with people, objects and circumstances that can help you see whether your thoughts, speech and actions come from your selfish interests or are for the larger good.

Master Yourself

Love yourself and be awake –

Today, tomorrow, always.

First establish yourself in the Way, then teach others,

And so defeat sorrow.

To straighten the crooked

You must first do a harder thing –

Straighten yourself.

You are your only master.

Who else?

Subdue yourself,

And discover your master.

(adapted from the *Dhammapada*, translated by Thomas Byrom)

Part 3. How to do Zen meditation

The three necessary elements of Zen meditation are posture, breathing and no-mind² meditation.

General instruction

The following instructions come from a text written Japanese Zen master Dōgen in the 13th Century:

Truth is perfect and complete in itself. It is not something newly discovered; it has always existed. Truth is not far away; it is ever present. It is not something to be attained since not one of your steps leads away from it.

Do not follow the ideas of others, but learn to listen to the wordless voice within yourself. Your body and mind will become clear and you will realise the unity of all things.

The slightest movement of your dualistic thinking process will prevent you from entering the palace of meditation and wisdom.

The practice of meditation is not a method for the attainment of realisation – it is enlightenment itself.

Your search among many books, word upon word, may lead you to the depths of intellectual knowledge. But to illuminate your true Self you must learn to withdraw, turning the light of your attention inwards.

When your ideas as to mind and body have dropped off naturally, the original truth will fully appear. Zen is simply the expression of truth; therefore longing and striving (for enlightenment) are not true attitudes of Zen.

To actualise this meditation you should practice with pure intention and firm determination.

- *Your meditation room should be clean and quiet.*
- *Eat and drink moderately.*
- *Let go of all associations, and put all affairs aside.*
- *Do not dwell in thoughts of good or bad, or be concerned with either right or wrong.*
- *Many thoughts will crowd into your mind - ignore them, letting them go.*
- *If they persist be aware of them with the awareness that does not think. In other words, think non-thinking³.*
- *Just relax and forget that you are meditating.*
- *Put aside the operation of your intellect, volition, and consciousness.*
- *Stop considering things with your memory, imagination and contemplation.*
- *Do not desire enlightenment since that thought will keep you confused.*

² Posture and breathing are both covered below. No-mind meditation has been mentioned above – see also *shikantaza* below.

³ In another text, *Bendōhō*, Master Dōgen wrote, “*Steady and immovable, settle into sitting and think of what is not thinking. How do you think of what is not thinking? Beyond-thinking.*” This beyond-thinking refers to a state of active awareness that includes both thinking and not thinking, but does not grasp, or get caught by, either thinking or not thinking. When we are sitting, we do not follow or get involved in our thoughts, nor do we stop them. We just let them come and go freely. We cannot call it simply thinking, because the thoughts are not pursued or grasped. We cannot call *zazen* not thinking either, because thoughts are coming and going like clouds in the sky. When we are sitting, our brain does not stop functioning, just as our stomach is always digesting. Sometimes our minds are busy; sometimes calm. Just sitting without worrying about the conditions of our mind is the most important point of *zazen*. When we sit in this way, we are one with Reality, which is ‘beyond-thinking’.

Zen meditation is not physical culture, or learning step-by-step - nor is it a method to gain something material. It is nirvana itself. It is the actualisation of truth and wisdom.

In your meditation you yourself are the mirror reflecting the solution to your problems. The human mind has absolute freedom within its true nature. You can attain your freedom intuitively. Do not work for freedom, rather allow the practice itself to be liberation.

Life is short and no one knows what the next moment will bring. Open your mind while you have the opportunity, thereby gaining the treasures of wisdom, which you in turn can share abundantly with others, bringing them happiness.

The Methods of Zen Meditation

It cannot be emphasised too much that you should not be overly rigorous with the details of your meditation method. A particular meditation method is just one of many paths to understanding – a framework within which to silently explore the present moment.

Zen meditation methods are aimed at two things - first there is calming, then concentration. A mind unburdened with random thoughts develops a profound awareness about its own state.

First there is the need to quieten, or let go of, wandering thoughts. You need to develop the facility of gathering your attention so that you can better control your mind, to let your mind be calm and stable, so that it does not lead you off where you don't want to go. If you succeed in quietening the mind, it will no longer be wild and scattered. At that point pain, numbness and itching that arise during meditation will not bother you or draw your attention, and neither will passing moods, feelings or emotions.

Second, one develops the ability to concentrate, either on what exists right here and now (*shikantaza*), or on a meditation method such as a *kōan*. The fruit of this concentration is insight into your own mind, and thus all things.

The most commonly encountered methods are breath counting, following the breath, *kōans* and *shikantaza*.

Breath counting – Just mentally count each exhalation, from one to ten, and then start again at one. Do this for the whole sitting period. It sounds easy but that's all there is to it. Remember to stay focussed on the counting. When you become aware that you have become diverted by a distracting thought, just return to the counting, starting again at one. Invest yourself fully into experiencing each breath – just be “one”, “two”, “three”, and so on, without thinking about it. Don't expect anything, and don't become attached to any clear state you experience, nor reject any confused or drowsy state that may occur.

Following the breath – When concentration on breathing becomes such that awareness of the counting is clear and the count is not lost, the next step, a slightly more difficult type of *zazen*, involves following the inhalations and exhalations of the breath with the mind's eye only, again in natural rhythm.

Kōan (kung-an in Chinese) – a phrase from a teaching on realisation, an episode from the life of an ancient master, or any sort of incident, which points to the nature of ultimate reality can be a *kōan*. To people who don't understand the “logic” of *kōans*, many appear to be dialogues between extreme eccentrics, if not the insane. *Kōans* are not nonsensical riddles to be solved and discarded. Rather they are subtle teachings on one's own life.

An essential ingredient of a *kōan* is paradox, that is something that transcends the logical or conceptual. A *kōan* cannot be solved by reason, but only by accessing another level of comprehension that takes the student to a world beyond logical contradictions and dualistic modes of thought. The meanings of *kōans* can only be intuited by direct experience. Because they cannot be solved by discursive logic, *kōans* make clear to the student the limitations of thought. They challenge our limited, conditioned viewpoint, and refine our alignment with our deeper selves.

Students who have sufficiently settled the wandering nature of their minds may be given (or where no teacher is available) themselves select a *kōan* on which to meditate. The *kōan* may come from one of the classical Zen collections (e.g. “What is the sound of one hand?”), or it may be a more immediate case, based on the practitioner’s own situation, such as the question “Who am I?”.

Kōans are used as a meditation subject and are looked into unremittingly by practitioners during sitting meditation and whenever possible throughout the day. During intensive retreats the *kōan* is looked into constantly, in the same way a hen watches her eggs or a cat watches a mouse.

Shikantaza – Japanese for “just sitting”. This refers to alert non-reflective attention that neither pursues nor suppresses thoughts, sensations, etc., but rather gives alert detached attention to whatever arises in and vanishes from consciousness, whether inside your body or outside. It is full awareness that your body is sitting.

Zen master Dōgen regarded that “presence itself” is a itself a *kōan* which, when correctly grasped, indicates “things as they really are”. “Correctly grasping” this *kōan* proceeds from the prereflective experience manifested by “without-thinking”. A famous passage in Dōgen’s 13th Century Japanese *Genjōkōan* states:

To learn the truth is to learn ourselves. To learn ourselves is to forget ourselves. To forget ourselves is to be experienced by the myriad things. To be experienced by the myriad things is to let our own body-and-mind, and the body-and-mind of the external world, fall away. There is a state in which the traces of realisation are forgotten; and it manifests the traces of forgotten realisation for a long, long time

Being “experienced by the myriad things” expresses the mental activity of “without-thinking” wherein the personal self (and also “others”) is “forgotten”, because awareness of such distinctions is not present. No separate self is present to perceive “other” things. Rather, the Self is all these things, and vice versa, in THIS moment of perception. From “without-thinking” flows the only identifiable “reality”, namely the unceasing, ever-changing, impermanent unfolding of experience.

What about when thoughts arise?

When thoughts arise in your mind, do not give energy to them by becoming caught up by them or struggling with them; neither pursue or try to escape from them. Just leave them alone, allowing them to come up and go away freely. The most essential thing in doing *zazen* is to be aware of, and thus awaken from, distractive thinking or drowsy dullness, and, moment by moment, to return to your method (e.g. right posture, counting the breath or your *kōan*).

Meditation posture



Seated Zen meditation (*zazen* in Japanese) can be performed in a number of positions, either on a cushion on the floor, or on a chair. If you can learn how to sit on a cushion (*zafu* in Japanese) in the lotus position, this would be the preferable way. But if this is difficult, you can try a number of other alternatives described below, all of which allow correct spinal posture and abdominal breathing.

Posture of the trunk Assuming you are using the full lotus or half lotus position, rest both



knees on the floor, straighten the lower part of your back, push your buttocks outward and hips forward, and straighten your spine. Pull in your chin, and extend your neck as though piercing the ceiling. Your ears should be in line parallel to your shoulders, and your nose should be in line with your navel. After straightening your back, relax your shoulders, back, and abdomen without changing your posture. Sit upright, leaning neither

to the left nor right, neither forward nor backward. Your spine should now have its natural curve and be free of tension.

The hands Place your right hand palm-up on your left foot, and your left hand palm-up on your right palm. The tips of your thumbs should be lightly touching each other. Place the tips of your thumbs in front of your navel, and your arms slightly apart from your body.

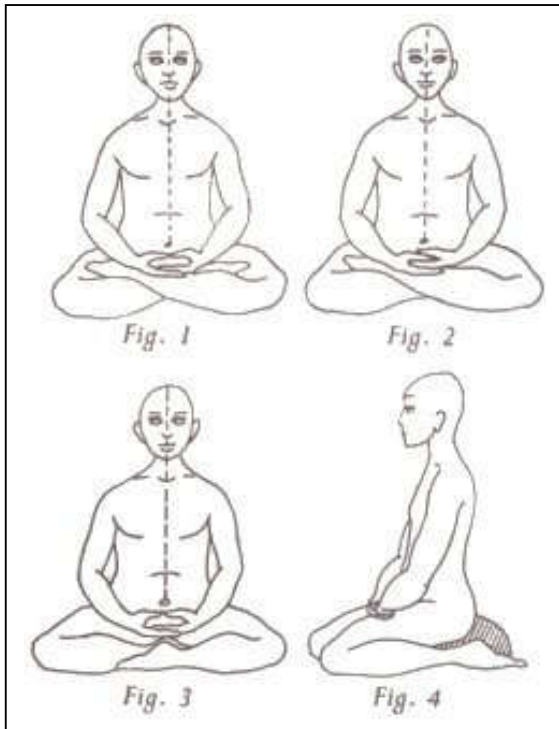


The mouth Keep the mouth closed, placing your tongue against the roof of your mouth, leaving no air space.



Your eyes Keep your eyes slightly open. Cast them downwards at about a 45° angle. Without focusing on any particular thing, let everything have its place in your field of vision. If your eyes are closed, you may more easily drift off into drowsiness or daydreaming.

Common Sitting Postures



Figures 1 to 4 in the adjacent diagram show different postures for sitting on a cushion on the floor. Figure 1 shows the full lotus position, which has been explained above. The half lotus posture in figure 2 is the same as the full lotus, except that one leg is left on the floor, with the foot under, or next to, the upper thigh of the other leg. The so-called Burmese posture is shown in figure 3, with both legs lying on the floor.

Figure 4 shows a kneeling position that can use a cushion for support, or a low meditation stool.

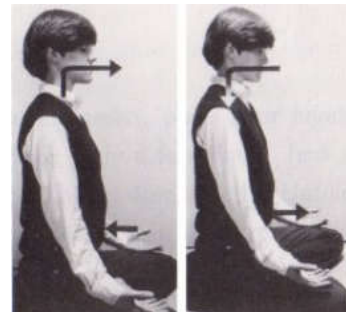
If sitting on the floor proves to be difficult, use a meditation cushion on a chair in the way shown here. It's important to keep the spine erect and to avoid either slouching that can cause drowsiness or strain that can cause discomfort and distraction.



Abdominal breathing

During *zazen*, breathe quietly through your nose. As you relax, proper posture will allow you to naturally start abdominal breathing. This occurs when your abdomen moves outwards to inhale and inwards to exhale, rather than breathing with the chest. Abdominal breathing in turn promotes further relaxed awareness.

Do not try to control your breathing. Let it come and go so naturally that you forget you are breathing (unless your practice is counting the breaths). Let long breaths be long, and short breaths be short. Do not make noise by breathing heavily.



Part 4. A Zen Meditation Meeting

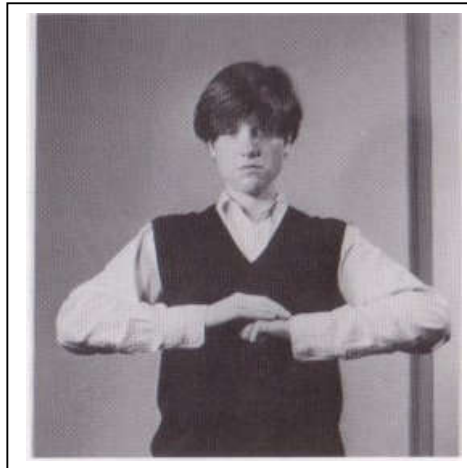
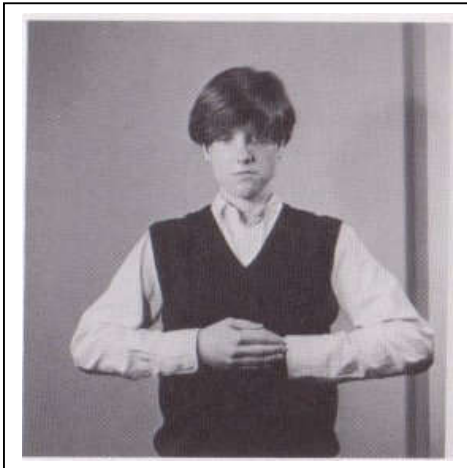
To foster an environment conducive to silent meditation and to allow gatherings to function smoothly, certain standard ways of doing things have developed over many hundreds of years. While small differences occur from place to place, these practices are more or less the same everywhere Zen is practised. These practices deal with the non-verbal communication of the stages of the meeting and ways of moving around during the meeting, in particular entering and leaving the place of meditation and commencing and finishing sitting periods. They also help create an environment conducive to relaxed awareness.

When entering a meditation room in which sitting is under way, it is customary to bow to remind oneself of the enlightened Mind (using the *gasshō* method outlined below), but this is optional if you do not wish to bow, as are most of the formalities. Then walk to your seat. At your seat, bow in *gasshō* to your seat (to remind yourself of the Way of practice), and turn clockwise. Then bow in *gasshō* to the opposite side of the hall (out of respect for the community of practitioners). Sit down on your cushion or seat. Usually we will do seated meditation facing the wall. When the bell sounds for walking meditation, bow in *gasshō*, turn clockwise on your cushion, unfold your legs and stand up facing towards the centre of the room, with hands held in the *shashu* (or, in some schools, *isshu*) position. When the signal to commence walking meditation is given, turn to your left and follow the instructions below.



Gasshō: Hold the hands and fingers of both hands together. Your arms should be slightly away from your chest, your elbows should extend outward from your sides in a straight line parallel to the floor. The tips of the fingers should be at about the same level as your nose. Because both hands (duality) are joined together, it expresses the “One Mind”.

When sitting is finished and there is no walking meditation, do the same thing and stand facing inwards with hands held in *shashu* (or *isshu*). You’ll usually be told what to do.



Shashu: Put the thumb of your left hand in the middle of the palm and make a fist around it. Place the fist in front of your chest. Cover the fist with the right hand. Keep your elbows away from your body forming a straight line with both forearms. If you turn the fist downwards, this is called *isshu*. At Open Way sittings, we use *shashu*.

What if I make a mistake?

Mistakes in procedures often happen and don't matter. You should not be embarrassed by them or dwell on them. Let them go. Just carry on. If in doubt about what to do, just follow what others are doing.

What should I wear?

Wear loose clothing suited to sitting in a cross-legged posture. Avoid strong perfumes, aftershaves and the like as they won't necessarily appeal to everyone present, and can create discomfort to some people. You should also try to avoid eating a large meal before you sit, as the extra food in your stomach can inhibit abdominal breathing, and also make you drowsy.

Am I allowed to move? What if I want to cough or sneeze?

Seated meditation is not an exercise in self-torture or a test of how tough you are. If you experience discomfort, then you should adjust your sitting position, but try to do so as slowly and quietly as you can so as not to disturb your own concentration on your method, or the concentration of those around you. Let your action of moving be part of your meditation.

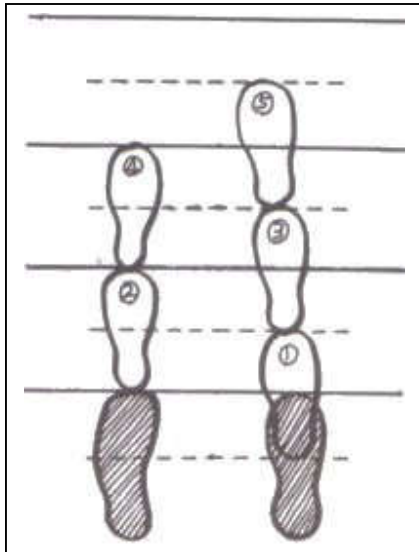
Before moving position, it can sometimes be helpful to consider the sensations that you are experiencing. By looking closely at what we might ordinarily regard as "pain", we can sometimes see that, in the stillness of the meditation room, we are magnifying the significance of the sensation. We can see this sometimes when, in the middle of "pain" (for example a burning need to scratch an itch) a noise or something happens outside, and we suddenly have forgotten the pain and become absorbed in this new intrigue.

If you have to cough or sneeze, this can't be helped, but please consider those around you by covering your mouth or nose and, in doing so, by moving as slowly and deliberately as you can. If you experience uncontrollable coughing, for example, it may be best to slowly get up and sit outside until it passes.

Sleepiness

If you become very drowsy or sleepy while meditating, it can help to open your eyes widely while quietly and slowly taking a single deep breath, lifting your shoulders and expanding your chest while inhaling.

Walking Meditation (*kinhin* in Japanese)



Periods of sitting meditation are usually punctuated with walking meditation for about five minutes. While doing walking meditation, continue your meditation practice.

Walk clockwise around the room holding your hands in *shashu* or *issu* position. From the waist up, your spinal posture should be the same as in seated meditation. Take the first step with your right foot. Advance by taking only half a step for each full breath (one exhalation and inhalation). Walk slowly and smoothly as if you were standing in one place. Do not drag your feet or make noise.

Walk straight ahead and when turning always turn to the right. When you finish walking meditation (usually signalled by a leader with a clap or hitting two blocks of wood together), stop and bow. Then

walk, with your hands in *gasshō* position, at a normal pace around the room until you return to your seat.

Do not attempt to stand or start walking meditation if your feet or legs have fallen asleep. Just remain on your seat or cushion until the sensation returns to your limbs and you can move without risk of falling over. Then join the walking meditation line.

Part 5. Attention in daily life

Zen practice really should not be separated from living, and living at all times can be one's meditation practice. If you can avoid being captured by wandering thoughts that are unrelated to what you are doing at a particular moment (for example, now, reading these words), and be completely clear about what you are doing at that moment, you will experience peace, tranquility, openness and brightness. When mastered, there will be very little disturbance to one's emotions in carrying your daily activities. Even if your emotions are disturbed, you can easily return to clarity about what you are doing.

*Do not pursue the past.
Do not lose yourself in the future.
The past no longer is.
The future has yet to come. Looking at life deeply as it is
In the very here and now,
The practitioner dwells in stability and freedom.*
(adapted from the **Bhaddekaratta Sutta**, translated by **Thich Nhat Hanh**)

*My Teacher once said to me,
- become one with the knot itself, til it dissolves away.
- sweep the garden.
- any size.*
Gary Snyder

The opportunity to discover reality is not later, when things improve or when your current problems have been sorted out. Your current circumstances, including your problems, are the material for awakening to the reality of This, Now. If you are experiencing a problem, that also is This/Now. Go

into the knot, see it clearly. If you are experiencing ease, that also is This/Now, but don't try to hold on to it, as the next moment will have its own characteristics.

One of the things that is realized when you see the nature of the self is that what you do and what happens to you are the same thing. Realizing that you do not exist separately from everything else, you realize responsibility: you are responsible for everything you experience. You can no longer say, "He made me angry." How could he make you angry? Only you can make you angry. That understanding changes your way of relating to the world and your way of looking at stress. You see that stress is created in your mental processing of your experiences. It usually has to do with separation. Whenever a threat, barrier or obstacle pops up, our immediate reaction is to pull back, to prepare mentally or physically to fight or run. If you become the barrier – become the fear, the pain, the anger – by experiencing it fully without judging or avoiding or running away, and then let it go, there is no barrier. Actually there is no way to pull away from it; you cannot run away. There is nowhere to run to, nothing to run from: it is *you*.
John Daido Looi

And finally - What is THIS? Do you know this NOW?

Although we have never experienced this moment, we assume that we know all about it – this is the greatest hindrance to living the enlightened life, because the enlightened life is This, Now. Now is always here and unknown – the unpredictable meeting that is Life. Moment by moment, each one is a unique, unrepeatable, once-occurring chance to discover Now.

The only necessary thing for us to do, outweighing all other priorities, is to clearly realise that we do not know what is before us right now, This. Here is the core message of Zen, which is the source of all the psychological, spiritual and ethical teachings than have been offered over thousands of years.

Without indulging in your good circumstances, or hating or rejecting your bad circumstances, just meet Now as it happens, be This, no matter what it is. Not only is there no time like the present, there is no time but the present.

Further Reading

Much of the material in this introduction to Zen meditation was shamelessly plundered from the following works. Please look into them for a more detailed understanding.

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- Zen/Chan Writings - <http://hjem.get2net.dk/civet-cat/zen-writings.htm>
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Notes