

Beginner's Course - 1B

Sitting Zen



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Lesson 1B: Sitting Instructions

Zazen (Just Sitting) is a particular kind of meditation, unique to Zen, that functions centrally as the very heart of the practice. In fact, Zen Buddhists are generally known as the "meditation Buddhists." Basically, Zen meditation is the inner discovery on the nature of self.

We tend to see body, breath, and mind separately, but in sitting zen they come together as one reality. The first thing to pay attention to is the position of the body in zazen. The body has a way of communicating outwardly to the world and inwardly to oneself. How you position your body has a lot to do with what happens with your mind and your breath. Throughout the years of the evolution of Buddhism, the most effective positioning of the body for the practice of sitting zen has been the pyramid structure of the seated Buddha. Sitting on the floor is recommended because it is very stable. We use a zafu – a small round cushion - to raise the behind just a little, so that the knees can touch the ground. With your bottom on the pillow and two knees touching the ground, you form a tripod base that gives three hundred and sixty-degree stability.



Illustration 1: Burmese Position

There are several different leg positions that are possible while seated this way. The first and simplest is the Burmese position, in which the legs are crossed and both feet rest flat on the floor. The knees should also rest on the floor, though sometimes it takes a bit of exercise to be able to get the legs to drop that far. After awhile the muscles will loosen up and the knees will begin to drop. To help that happen, sit on the front third of the zafu, shifting your body forward a little bit. By imagining the top of your head pushing upward to the ceiling and by stretching your body that way, get your spine straight - then just let the muscles go soft and relax. With the buttocks up on the zafu and your stomach pushing out a little, there will be a slight curve in the lower region of the back. In this position, it takes very little effort to keep the body upright.



Illustration 2: Half Lotus Position

Another position is the half lotus, where the left foot is placed up onto the right thigh and the right leg is tucked under. This position is slightly asymmetrical and sometimes the upper body needs to compensate in order to keep itself absolutely straight.



Illustration 3: Full Lotus Position

By far the most stable of all the positions is the full lotus, where each foot is placed up on the opposite thigh. This is perfectly symmetrical and very solid. Stability and efficiency are the important reasons sitting cross-legged on the floor works so well. There is absolutely no esoteric significance to the different positions. What is most important in zazen is what you do with your mind, not what you do with your feet or legs.



Illustration 4: Seiza Position

There is also the seiza position. You can sit seiza without a pillow, kneeling, with the buttocks resting on the upturned feet which form an anatomical cushion. Or you can use a pillow to keep the weight off your ankles. A third way of sitting seiza is to use the seiza bench. It keeps all the weight off your feet and helps to keep your spine straight.



Illustration 5: Chair Position

Finally, it's fine to sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor. You can use the cushion, or zafu, the same way you would use it on the floor - sitting on the forward third of it. Alternatively, you can place the zafu at the small of the back. It's very important to keep the spine straight with the lower part of the back curved. All of the aspects of the posture that are important when seated on the floor are just as important when sitting in a chair.

The importance of keeping the back straight is to allow the diaphragm to move freely. The breathing you will be doing in zazen becomes very, very deep. Your abdomen will rise and fall much the same way an infant's belly rises and falls. In general, as we mature, our breathing becomes restricted, and less and less complete. We tend to take shallow breaths in the upper part of the chest. Usually, we've got our belts on very tight or we wear tight clothing around the waist. As a result, deep, complete breathing rarely occurs. In zazen it is important to loosen up anything that is tight around the waist and to wear clothing that is non-binding. For instance, material should not gather behind the knees when you cross the legs, inhibiting circulation. Allow the diaphragm to move freely so that the breathing can be deep, easy, and natural. You don't have to control it. You don't have to make it happen. It will happen by itself if you assume the right posture and position your body properly.

Once you've positioned yourself, there are a few other things you can check on. The mouth is kept closed. Unless you have some kind of a nasal blockage, breathe through your nose. The tongue is pressed lightly against the upper palate. This reduces the need to salivate and swallow. The eyes are kept lowered, with your gaze resting on the ground about two or three feet in front of you. Your eyes will be mostly covered by your eyelids, which eliminates the necessity to blink repeatedly. The chin is slightly tucked in. Although sitting zen looks very disciplined, the muscles should be soft. There should be no tension in the body. It doesn't take strength to keep the body straight. The nose is centered in line with the navel, the upper torso leaning neither forward nor back.

The hands are folded in the cosmic mudra. The dominant hand is held palm up holding the other hand, also palm up, so that the knuckles of both hands overlap. If you're right-handed, your right hand is holding the left hand; if you're left-handed, your left hand is holding the right hand. The thumbs are lightly touching, thus the hands form an oval, which can rest on the upturned soles of your feet if you're sitting full lotus. If you're sitting Burmese, the mudra can rest on your thighs. The cosmic mudra tends to turn your attention inward. There are many different ways of focusing the mind. There are visual images called mandalas that are used in some traditions as a point of concentration. There are mantras, or vocal images. There are different kinds of mudras used in various Eastern religions. In zazen, we focus on the breath. The breath is life. The word "spirit" means breath. The words "ki" in Japanese and "chi" in Chinese, meaning power or energy, both derive from breath. Breath is the vital force; it's the central activity of our bodies. Mind and breath are one reality: when your mind is agitated your breath is agitated; when you're nervous you breathe quickly and shallowly; when your mind is at rest the breath is deep, easy, and effortless.



*Illustration 6:
Breathing in Zazen*

Begin by adjusting your body moving slightly side to side or back and forth until you settle at your center of gravity. The hands are folded in the cosmic mudra, mouth is closed, tongue pressed on the upper palate. You're breathing through the nose and you become more aware of the breathing process.

We begin working on ourselves by counting the breath, counting each inhalation and exhalation as one with each breath, beginning with one and counting up to ten. When you get to ten, come back to one and start all over. The only agreement that you make with yourself in this process is that if your mind begins to wander - if you become aware that what you're doing is chasing thoughts - you will look at the thought, acknowledge it, and then deliberately and consciously let it go and begin the count again at one.

The counting is a feedback to help you know when your mind has drifted off. Each time you return to the breath you are empowering yourself with the ability to put your mind where you want it, when you want it there, for as long as you want it there. That simple fact is extremely important. This is the first practice in grounding your mind and taking control of it instead allowing it to overwhelm and control your awareness with incessant noise.

When you end the sitting, slowly jerk your muscle on the shoulders, move your arms a little before lifting them up. Rub your palms together to make some heat, then brush your face with the warm hands, massage it, then down the neck, shoulders, back. Repeat this rubbing of palms together to create heat in the palm as you rub your body to create circulation in your body again.

Slowly caress your legs and stretch them out. Massage your legs to allow circulation to flow again. Then massage your feet and the toes. It should feel a little numb after you sit for a while. Make sure you massage your legs and feet thoroughly to make sure that there are no more numbness in them and that your blood is well circulated before you stand up.

When you stand up, stretch your hip by swaying the top half of your body forward and back, side to side at the hip.

It is very important that you end your meditation session properly to make sure that there is no more numbness in any part of your body each time you stand up after your sitting meditation, this helps increase circulation and alleviate problems with your back and legs in the future as you continue to meditate regularly.

If you feel sleepy during your meditation, it means that you have not properly stretch your neck to increase circulation there before you begin your sitting. Stretch your neck and resume meditation. There are several reasons why you are sleepy during meditation. It could be that you didn't get enough sleep. Get enough sleep before you try it again. It could be that you have had a big meal before your sitting, this cause all your blood to flow to your digestive system and makes you sleepy. If your body has a cold or flu, it will be sleepy and achy. It is recommended that you pay attention

If you are fully taking care of your body but still experience sleepiness during your meditation, you can sit with 1/4 of your eyes open, just enough to let a little light in. Shutting your eyes totally can cause sleepiness for beginners. If you still feel sleepy, it is good to open your eyes real wide for a few seconds, stretch your neck a little then go back to your meditation.

The best time to do sitting meditation is early in the morning before breakfast and about 1 to 2 hours after dinner and before bedtime. Try to consistently have a meditation schedule each day. Set aside about 15 to 20 minutes in the beginning to sit during the week while in between classes. Only when you practice regularly can you gradually increase your sitting time to 30 minutes, an hour or even two hours. Only with regular practice can you benefit from meditation and the teachings of the Buddha.

When you've been practicing this counting process for a while, your awareness will sharpen. You'll begin to notice things that were always there but escaped your attention. Because of the preoccupation with the internal dialogue, you were too full to be able to see what was happening around you. The process of sitting meditation begins to open that up. When you can count for 15 minutes and half an hour without losing count and getting interrupted by being lost in thoughts, then you can begin to embrace Zen sitting meditation.

Eventually, you'll want to just follow the breath and abandon the counting altogether. Just be with the breath. Just be the breath. Let the breath breathe itself. That's the beginning of the falling away of body and mind. It takes some time and you shouldn't rush it; you shouldn't move too fast from counting every breath to counting every other breath and on to following the breath. The ability to concentrate and ground the mind is very important; it is that power of concentration that ultimately leads to what we call samadhi, or single-pointedness of mind. The counting of the breath and ability to follow the breath in full awake state without being lost in thoughts or a haze of half consciousness is the beginning of a sharp and keen concentration awareness state. It is very important that you master the counting of the breath and the following of the breath before embarking on further Zen practice.

In the process of working with the breath, the thoughts that come up, for the most part, will be just noise, just random thoughts. Sometimes, however, when you're in a crisis or involved in something important in your life, you'll find that the thought, when you let it go, will recur. You let it go again but it comes back, you let it go and it still comes back.