

# Zen Meditation

For the regular practice of zazen, it is very helpful to set up a permanent spot for your practice. This should be in an area where you are unlikely to be disturbed for your periods of meditation. The mat and the cushion can remain in the same place. Perhaps you would like to set up an altar. Many people like to use a Buddha figure, perhaps a vase of flowers, or anything that you consider sacred.

## The Practice

When beginning the practice of zazen, it's very helpful to begin with a checklist. We want to make sure that we can maintain a comfortable and stable posture.

Before beginning the practice of zazen, be sure that you're wearing comfortable clothing, and arrange your cushion on the mat.

Arrange your legs, even for a lotus posture, half-lotus, quarter, Burmese, kneeling, or sitting in a chair.

We can begin by straightening the spine. A way to achieve this is to sway gently from side to side and then come back to a center point. Take a breath in, filling the chest with air, and pulling the spine straight. You'll notice that a straight spine actually curves in at the lower back. Please be sure not to slump or overarch forward. The head should be straight, not tipping from side to side, and also not leaning forward. The chin should be tucked in slightly.

A very common question that people have when beginning the practice of zazen or seated meditation is, "what do I do with the eyes?" in the practice of zazen we sit neither with eyes fully closed, which can tend to bring on a dreamy state, or to have them fully open, that's where we can be distracted by our environment. Experiment with having your eyes half-closed, cast downward at a forty-five degree angle. You can try to bring a soft focus into the eyes so you're not staring at anything in particular.

The mouth should be lightly closed. The tongue can rest against the back of the front teeth. This creates a slight vacuum, which really helps in not producing a lot of saliva while we're sitting.

This is the cosmic mudra. You can see the right hand is placed palm up, with left hand laid in the right palm. Thumbs are arched over and lightly touching. It's very important to make sure your body is arranged the way you want it to be for the whole period of zazen. Try not to move around unless you absolutely need to. If you do need to move do it quickly and quietly. It's better to maintain stillness throughout the period as much as possible.

When ending a period of zazen, please take care to be gentle with the body. You can begin by swaying lightly from side to side. Notice any "pins and needles" or dull aches or pain on the leg and then take extra care to move very slowly before standing.

## The Breath

How do we work with the breath during the practice of zazen? Well, we don't try and make the breath do anything in particular. The breath will naturally lengthen and soften during meditation. But as a guiding rule, we let the breath really do what it wants to do.

Beginners to zen practice and the practice of zazen often start with breathing practices to focus on during the sittings. The first of these practices, very common, is to count the breath.

How do we do that? Well, in counting the breath we do just that, but on the exhalation only. For example, we would inhale and then, inwardly, as we exhale we count the number 'one.' For the next inhalation and the next exhalation, we count the number 'two.' And so on—'three... four,' all the way to ten. When we get to 'ten,' we stop and come back to 'one.' If we find that perhaps we're on number 'twenty-five,' then don't worry, just come back to 'one.' Also if we forget what number that we are counting, we just begin again at 'one.'

For the practice of zazen, we usually breathe in and out through the nose. The only when this would change would be if our nose is blocked. If that should happen, then it's okay for a short period to just breathe through the mouth. If we have a cold or a runny nose, then it's fine to keep a tissue in your hand and just dab at your nose as needed.