

LOUISVILLE ZEN CENTER

INTRODUCTION TO ZEN MEDITATION HANDOUT

Finding a “good seat” for meditation may take some time and experimentation. Whether you sit in a chair or in the full lotus position, basic principles to bear in mind are:

- Stability
- Relaxation
- Alignment
- Alertness

Stability. In order to settle the mind, it’s important to settle the body. If your body is balanced with a low center of gravity, the natural result is stillness. In a chair, stability means sitting up straight, perhaps on the edge of the chair, and making sure your feet are both flat on the floor or a cushion, if you have shorter legs. On the floor, stability means aiming for a tripod effect, with your pelvic “sit bones” and your two knees forming the three points of contact.

Alignment. Sitting up straight, with the head and shoulders aligned properly with the pelvis, is especially difficult for those of us who are habitually hunched over tablets and phones. The best way to make sure you are sitting in good alignment is to ask one of the zendo monitors to check your posture, either before or during a sitting. (And don’t be surprised if a monitor, unasked, adjusts your posture during a sitting.)

Relaxation. Most Zen students are initially somewhat tense while sitting. The unusual posture, unfamiliar surroundings and rituals, the presence of other sitters, physical pain, and most of all, tormenting thoughts, can all contribute to tension. When you notice that you are tensing up, you can get relief quickly by exhaling, relaxing, and moving your attention down into your *tanden* which is a few inches below your navel. Pushing pain - either physical or mental - away only makes it worse: resistance breeds more tension, not less.

Alertness. In Zen meditation, the eyes are kept open. Allowing the light in helps promote alertness, and also makes your sitting meditation more like your everyday life. Once you’re in a comfortable seated posture, lower your gaze to the floor four or five feet in front of you, and then let your eyes go slightly out of focus so they can relax, too.

Sitting Postures. What we do with our bodies affects our minds, and what we do with our minds affects our bodies. For this reason, a strong emphasis is placed on finding a reasonably comfortable meditation posture. Here are illustrations of traditional postures for supporting the qualities of body and mind we cultivate in Zen. Illustrations by Richard Wehrman.

- Chair
- Burmese
- Half Lotus
- Seiza (kneeling)
- Quarter Lotus
- Full Lotus



Fig. 1. Side view of zazen in a straight-back chair, with cushion under buttocks and the feet resting firmly on the floor the width of the shoulders apart. The abdomen is relaxed and slightly protruded. Hands rest in the lap, close to the body, with thumbs touching lightly to make an oval.

The round cushion shown, called a *zafu* in Japan, is stuffed with kapok or another firm filling.

Note the sitter maintains an upright posture and does not lean back in the chair. People with shorter legs may wish to have a yoga block or firm cushion under their feet.



Fig. 2. Side view of the traditional Japanese sitting posture (*seiza*) with knees in line with one another and straddling a husk cushion inserted between the heels and buttocks to relieve pressure on heels. The hands may rest on the front of the husk cushion. For extra height, the husk cushion may be placed on top of a round cushion.

Another option is to use only a round cushion, either flat or on its edge.

The floor is covered with a mat, which cushions the knees. A folded blanket or yoga mat could be used for the same purpose.

Notice the ears in line with shoulders, and top of nose in line with navel. The chin is slightly drawn in. The buttocks are thrust out, with the spine erect.



Fig. 3. The so-called Burmese posture, with the legs uncrossed, the left or right foot in front and both knees touching mat.

To facilitate the knees resting on the mat it may be necessary to use a support cushion under the regular round one.



Fig. 4. The quarter-lotus, with the left foot resting over the calf of the right, both knees resting on the mat.

This posture may be reversed, with the right foot on top.

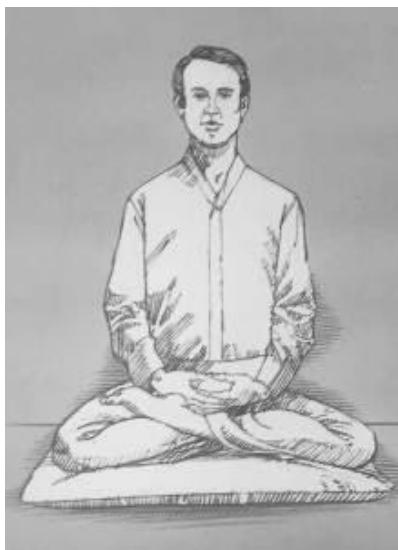


Fig. 5. The half-lotus posture, with left foot over right thigh and right foot under left thigh, both knees touching mat.

This posture may be reversed, with the right foot on top.



Fig. 6. Full-lotus posture, with right foot over left thigh and left foot over right thigh, both knees touching mat. This posture may be reversed.

Notice how the arms and the legs all come together, centering the body in the abdomen.



Fig. 7. Full lotus posture, side view. A single low cushion is preferable in this posture.

Breath Counting. Most Zen practitioners begin with a breath-counting practice. Once you are stable, aligned, and relaxed in your sitting posture, your eyes are lowered, and you can feel your center of gravity sinking into your abdomen, begin the count. Count “one” on your inhalation, “two” on your exhalation, “three” on your inhalation, and so forth up to the count of ten. At that point, begin again at “one.”

If your thoughts multiply and you lose count, take heart: you are human. Simply let go of the thoughts and begin again at “one.” If you find yourself counting “fifteen” ...“sixteen” ...simply return to “one.” Don’t get derailed by beating yourself up or evaluating your practice in any way. In fact, the very act of bringing yourself back to the count is at the heart of Zen. By doing this over and over, you are building up your “mind muscle” – the habit of returning to the present moment – which will enrich your life immeasurably.

When & How Long to Sit. The most fruitful time for people to sit is usually in the morning. You probably have more energy at that time of day, and sitting helps set the tone for your entire day. However, the best answer to this question is “every day.” Whenever you can make it work, depending on your schedule, is the right time to sit. Even if you can only spare five minutes a day, it is more important to be consistent on a day-to-day basis than to sit for hours at a time but only sporadically. In this way, zazen becomes not just a “special practice” but an integral part of your day-to-day life.

Walking Meditation. Kinhin is meditation in motion. It is performed by placing the left fist, with thumb inside, on the chest and covering it with the right palm while holding both elbows at right angles. The eyes rest on a point about two yards in front of the feet. Walk calmly and steadily while continuing breath-counting.

Sitting with Others. Most people find that sitting with others offers a number of benefits that are not available when we only sit on our own. As we sit together, we generate a group energy that helps each of us sit still for longer than we are able to do on our own and to concentrate more easily. We can also take advantage of the help and advice that more senior practitioners are able to offer. The more you participate in group sits, the more support you draw from others – and, just as important, the more you support others.

Continuing Meditation Instruction. For ongoing advice, encouragement, and inspiration, Louisville Zen Center offers different kinds of continuing meditation instruction - both group and individual sessions.

Becoming a Member. Zen practice has always been based on individual effort, and the mission of the Center is to help you in that effort. To learn about Louisville Zen Center membership, benefits, and how to become a member, check out louisvillezen.org/membership.html