



HOW TO ZAZEN an introduction

Welcome again to Treeleaf Sangha.

Here are some basic instructions and pointers for sitting daily Zazen. After you read the following introduction to sitting Zazen, please then watch our special series of video **TALKS FOR BEGINNERS (we are all beginners!)**.

[A SERIES OF TALKS FOR NEW FOLKS \(LINK HERE\)](#)

There are about 24 short talks in that video series, and we ask that you look at those, **even if you have been practicing forever or are new to Zen Practice**. Please have a look to get a taste of the style of *Shikantaza* Zazen emphasized in our Sangha.

Preparing the environment

Select a room or place for sitting that is generally free of noise, disturbances and distraction. Although you will find, as you come to understand our Practice, that we can choose not to be annoyed by noise, disturbed by disturbances or distracted by distractions anywhere, and can even sit Zazen in a noisy and busy place ... for the beginner, it is best to sit in a quiet room which helps the mind settle a bit.



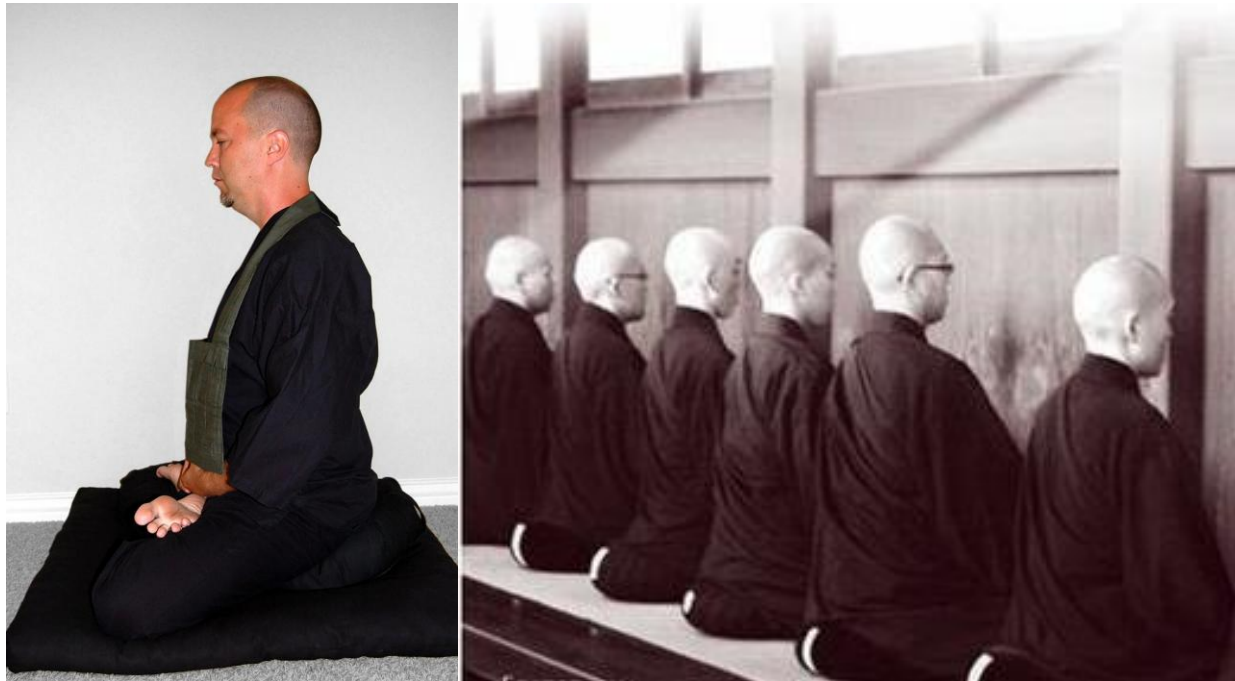


As seen in the photos above, position your *Zafu* (a round, firm cushion to sit on) and *Zabuton* (a cushioned mat) in front of a plain wall. Bow in *Gassho* (as shown above, a greeting with palms pressed together and elbows raised) toward your cushion, fluff and adjust the cushion so that the white tag will be facing away from you when sitting (see monks' picture below), then turn clockwise and bow again in *Gassho* toward the room. By the way, if you do not have a *Zafu* and *Zabuton* at first, it is fine to use folded firm blankets to sit on which raise the buttocks up about 15 cm (6 inches), and a flat blanket to cushion the legs below. It is best, however, not to use anything too hard (such as books) or too soft (such as pillows) to sit on.



Sit down and turn clockwise to face the wall.

Sit down and turn clockwise until you're facing the wall (Generally, in Soto Zen, we sit facing the wall, although some these days may sit facing into the room. Typically, facing the wall presents less sensory distraction for the beginner). Make sure you sit with your buttocks on the forward third of your cushion so your back is properly supported by the resulting wedge shape to the Zafu. (Make sure you tuck your zafu well under your buttocks at an angle, as shown in the picture below on the left).



What to do with your legs

Full Lotus is very difficult for many. Half Lotus, Burmese, and Seiza positions are perfectly acceptable. If necessary, you can sit on a Zazen bench or in a chair, although chair sitting is recommended only if one truly physically cannot sit in the other positions due to a serious health condition such as bad knees or a back injury.

To sit in **Full Lotus** (called *Kekkafuza*), as shown below, place your right foot on your left thigh, as high as possible, then place your left foot on your right thigh. (Or you can reverse the position of the left and right feet with each Zazen sitting)



To sit in the **Half Lotus** (called *Hankafuza*) as shown below, place your left foot on your right thigh, then the right foot is placed under the left thigh (or the reverse).



To sit in **Burmese Style**, simply place one foot in front of the other with ankles resting on the pad. Burmese style is recommended for beginners.



As you can see in the photos, it is best to have both of the knees resting flat, and not raised in the air. Until you can stretch into such a position, you may temporarily

place additional cushions or blankets under the knees as a support, or under the buttocks to raise them slightly in order to help the thighs slant down and establish a good position for your lower back.

As you move your limbs and place your legs in any of the above positions, it is always a good idea to do so on an 'out breath' when the diaphragm and chest are not inflated.

To sit **Seiza** with the *Zafu* cushion, the *Zafu* resting on its side is used as the primary support for the weight of the body, with the legs behind



One can also make or purchase a Seiza bench, such as this ...

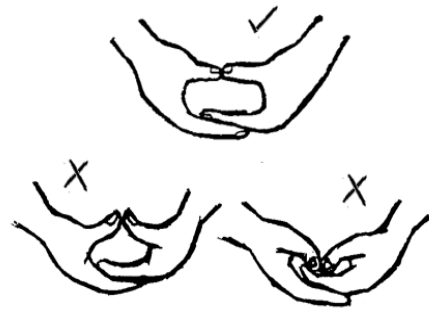


If truly needing to sit in a **chair**, you should sit on the front edge of the chair with your back straight, as shown below. The feet should rest flat on the floor and the legs should be held apart slightly. You should not lean against the back of the chair. However, if needed, a cushion can be placed at the back for extra support, or under the buttocks to raise them slightly in order to help the thighs slant down and establish a good position for your lower back.

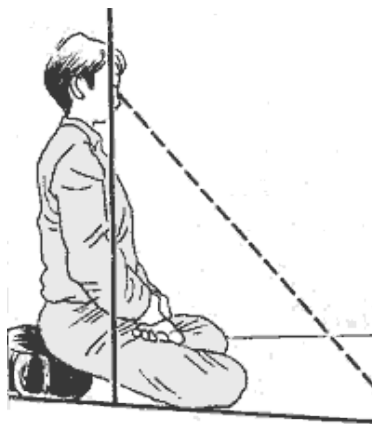


What to do with your hands and body

While sitting, place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm (facing upwards) on your right palm, thumb-tips lightly touching (This is our traditional hand position, although "lefties" may wish to reverse left and right). An open oval space should be maintained during Zazen. The small fingers should rest against the abdomen, a little below the navel (as seen in the earlier photos of Lotus Posture) and the arms should rest on the thighs. (Make sure your hands are not too loose or drooping, nor too tight, hardly any pressure between thumbs, hands relaxed. Ideally, they should sit on the cup formed by the two feet in Lotus, or if you sit Burmese or Seiza, you may use a folded towel to support them if needed.)



As Master Dogen writes in *Fukanzazengi*, "Thus sit upright in correct bodily posture, neither inclining to the left nor to the right, neither leaning forward nor backward. Be sure your ears are on a plane with your shoulders and your nose is in line with your navel. Place your tongue against the front roof of your mouth, with teeth and lips both shut. Your eyes should always remain open [about half or one-third], looking generally downward, and you should breathe gently through your nose."

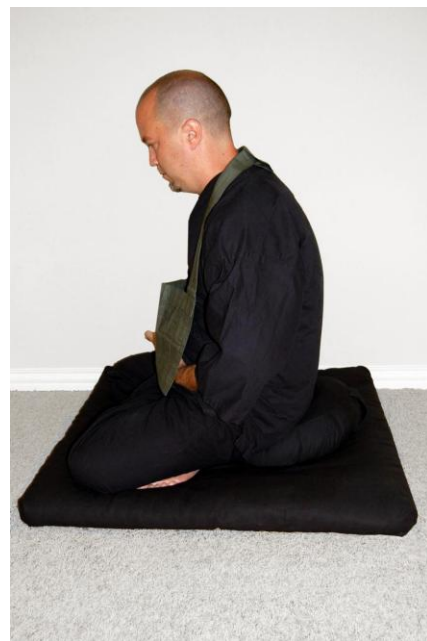


Look downward or at the wall in front of you at about 45 degree angle.

As Taigu will discuss in the **TALKS FOR BEGINNERS** videos linked above, although the back is straight and the chin is slightly tucked in, be sure not to sit too tense, stiff and rigidly like this ...



or too loosely or drooping ...



The purpose is simply to find a balanced, comfortable position whereby the posture and body can be put out of mind and one can sit easily for extended periods (where the body-mind can be at ease, balanced without rigidity or extra tension, allowing the body-mind to gently bloom and open up) To find that balanced, centered spot (which, as Taigu will discuss in our "Beginner's Videos", may change and adjust during the course of a sitting), sway back and forth, left and right, front and back a few times (it is important to **sway from left to right, front to back**, with hands on the knees or in the Zazen mudra, and gradually, after 3 to 10 times, come to stillness in the center, bow in a small Gassho and start sitting) ...



Take three deep breaths through the mouth, then try to breathe through the nose. Let the breath find its natural, relaxed rhythm and do not try to do anything extra with it. If you can, let the breaths rise and fall from the lower diaphragm, as if beginning just below the navel. Place the tongue on the roof of the mouth behind the teeth, lips closed (as this helps reduce excess swallowing) ...



Keep your mouth closed, placing your tongue against the roof of your mouth behind the teeth

... and Just Sit!

If a little pain or discomfort arises during Zazen, it is good to keep sitting and not yield too easily. Try not to focus attention on the pain, and just passively allow it to be. On the other hand, our Way is Moderation. If unbearable pain arises, or if you feel that you may harm the body, please offer Gassho, and adjust the legs and back to relieve the pain. Then Gassho, and resume sitting. You may also change positions, or move to Seiza or a Chair if truly needed. For further questions about sitting with chronic pain, please contact Teachers Jundo or Taigu.

What to do (and non-do) with the mind

Dogen wrote *"Think not-thinking. How do you think not-thinking? Non-thinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen."*

As you sit quietly, thoughts will naturally rise and fade away. We do not try to forcibly "silence the thoughts" in Shikantaza, but neither do we wish to become tangled and caught up in thoughts and grab onto them. It is more that we allow the thoughts that naturally drift into mind to naturally drift out of mind, much as clouds naturally drift in and out of a clear blue sky. In this way, return again and again to the open, clear blue sky between thoughts. We are not disturbed by the thoughts, and we do not actively chase them out, but neither do we welcome them, focus on them, play with them or stir them up. We allow them to pass, and return our focus once more to the quiet blue. We repeat this process whenever finding ourselves caught in thoughts, 10,000 times and 10,000 times again.

Most vital, allow oneself to sit without engaging in many judgments of *right and wrong, good and bad* (e.g., *"Am I sitting well? Am I doing this right? Is this a bad experience?"*). Just let the experience be the experience, without judging it or trying to make it into something. It may sound counter-intuitive, but the best way to "get something" out of Zazen is by not trying to force it to give you something. The reason is that we spend all our days, morning to night, judging life and all we do, trying to make everything how we want as opposed to what is. Zazen is a period of freedom from all that judging and trying to change things!

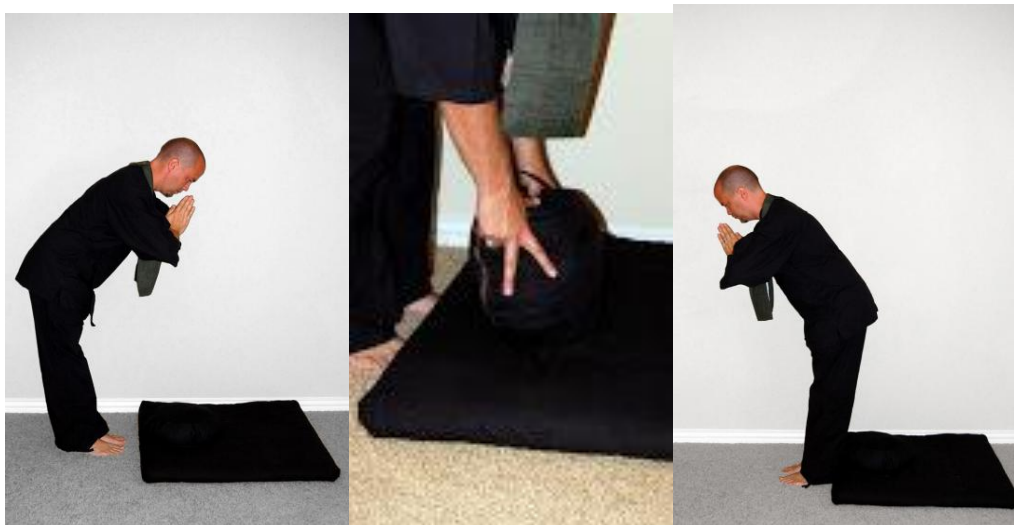
That is are usual way of sitting *Shikantaza* Zazen.

However, for those beginners who cannot settle down the rushing thoughts and emotions at all, or when the mind is *really, really, really* stirred up with tangled thoughts, wild emotions and confusion we can **count the breaths** for a period of time. For example, counting from 1 to 10 at the top of each inhalation, feeling the

breath enter and exit at the tip of the nostrils, then coming back to 1 and starting all over when we reach 10 (which we rarely do) or lose track. Or we can simply follow the breath without counting, for example, observing effortlessly as it enters and exits the nose. These are excellent practices, and will calm the mind. HOWEVER, for reasons we will discuss in our video series, we recommend such practices only as temporary measures for true beginners with no experience of how to let the mind calm at all, or others on those sometime days when the mind really, really, really is upset and disturbed.

Ending the sitting

When you arise from sitting, first sway back and forth a few times with hands resting on the knees, stand slowly and bow in *Gassho* toward your cushion. Get down, and with both hands, rotate and fluff your Zafu lightly to return it to its original shape, then place it back down (white tag facing toward you).



Stand again, turn clockwise, and *Gassho* again toward the room. You may now leave. For beginners, please sit **at least once per day sincerely and consistently, for 15 to 35 minutes**. Remember, however that “Zazen” can be found at any moment - take the balance of the cushion out into your life and into the world. Zazen never really ends.

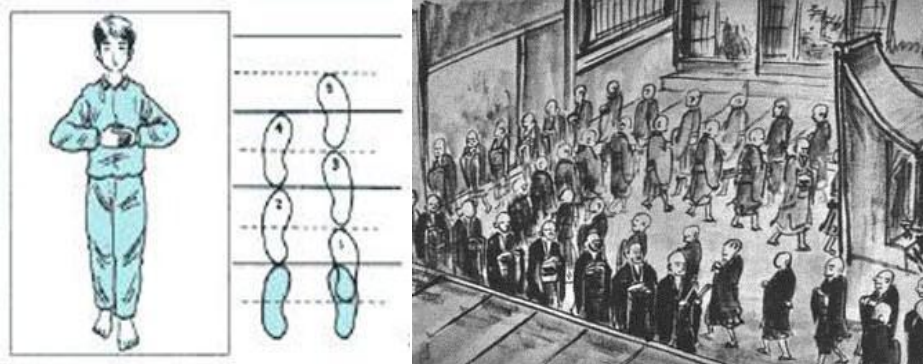


Kinhin: 'Walking Zazen'

You may wish to add 5 or 10 minutes of "Kinhin" (Walking Zazen) to your sitting, either after seated Zazen or between periods of Seated Zazen if sitting more than once. Kinhin is a continuation of seated Zazen into movement. To practice Kinhin, first take the fingers of your left hand and wrap them around the thumb, making a gentle fist. Place this against your abdomen, around the middle of the chest (as in the pictures below). The right hand is then placed over the left. Your forearms are parallel to the floor, and the elbows and upper arms are held sideways or gently rest against your sides.



This Kinhin *Mudra* (way of placing the hands) is called *Shashu*, and helps to maintain a settled and dignified demeanor while walking Kinhin. The back is straight (but not too rigid), the head is held upright, and the eyes are open (half or one-third) but lowered looking downward and ahead.



Kinhin can be done at any speed, but in Soto Zen a very slow pace is typical. You can of course walk your own pace when practicing alone, but if you are with a group you have to maintain about the same pace and spacing between people as everyone else. The basic form of practice is to take a half step at the top of each inhalation breath, walking around the edges of the room (although you will likely only move a few meters in the allotted time). The mind should be just as in seated Zazen, allowing thoughts to come and go without latching on or judging things. In fact, in this kind of walking ... unlike most of our walking in life ... we drop all thought of some "someplace to get" or finish line, and each step is Complete and Total Arrival of its own ...

... just this step, then this step, and this ...

Gassho, Jundo and Taigu for Treeleaf Sangha



ADDENDUM (FUKANZAZENGI):

In our Tradition, the best description of how to sit Zazen comes from Master Dogen, the Teacher who first brought the Soto Zen Lineage from China to Japan in the 13th Century. The following is his ...

FUKANZAZENGI

(The Standard for Sitting-Zen Recommended for Everyone)

Now, when we research it, the truth originally is all around: why rely upon practice and experience? The vehicle for the fundamental exists naturally: where is the need to expend effort? Furthermore, the whole body far transcends dust and dirt: who could believe in the means of sweeping and polishing? In general, we never depart from the place where we should be: of what use, then, are the tiptoes of training?

However, if there is a thousandth or a hundredth of a gap, heaven and earth are far apart, and if a trace of disagreement arises, we lose the mind in confusion. Even if, proud of our understanding and richly endowed with realizations, we obtain special states of insight, attain the truth, clarify the mind, manifest a zeal that pierces the sky, and ramble through those remote spheres that are entered with the head; we have almost completely lost the vigorous path of getting the body out.

Moreover, remembering the natural sage of Jetavana park, we can [still] see the traces of his six years of upright sitting. We can still hear rumours of the transmitter of the mind-seal at Shaolin, spending nine years facing the wall. The ancient saints were like that already: how could people today fail to practice wholeheartedly?

So cease the intellectual work of studying sayings and chasing words. Learn the backward step of turning light around and reflecting it. Body and mind naturally drop off, and the original face appears. If we want to attain the matter of the ineffable, we should urgently practice the matter of the ineffable.

In general, a quiet room is good for experiencing Zen balance, and food and drink are taken in moderation. Abandon all involvements. Give the myriad things a rest. Do not think of good and bad. Do not care about right and wrong. Stop the driving movement of mind, will, consciousness. Cease intellectual consideration through images, thoughts, and reflections. Do not aim to become a buddha. How could it be connected with sitting or lying down?

Usually on the place where we sit we spread a thick mat, on top of which we use a round cushion. Either sit in the full lotus posture or sit in the half lotus posture. To sit in the full lotus posture, first put the right foot on the left thigh, then put the left foot on the right thigh. To sit in the half lotus posture, just press the left foot onto the right thigh. Let clothing hang loosely and make it neat. Then place the right hand over the left foot, and place the left hand on the right palm. The thumbs meet and support each other.

Just sit upright, not leaning to the left, inclining to the right, slouching forward, or arching backward. It is vital that the ears vis-à-vis the shoulders, and the nose vis-à-vis the navel, are directed away from each other. Let the tongue spread against the roof of the mouth. Let the lips and teeth come together. The eyes should be kept open. Let the breath pass imperceptibly through the nose.

Having readied the posture, make one complete exhalation, and sway left and right. Sitting in balance in the mountain-still state, "Think the concrete state of not thinking." "How can the state of not thinking be thought?" "It is different from thinking." This is the secret of sitting-Zen.

What is called sitting-Zen is not learning Zen meditation. It is just a peaceful and effortless gate to reality. It is practice-and-experience which perfectly realizes the Buddha's enlightenment. The Universe is realized, untouched by restrictions or hindrances. To grasp this meaning is to be like a dragon that has found water, or like a tiger before a mountain stronghold. Remember, true reality is naturally manifesting itself before us, and gloom and distraction vanish at a stroke.

If we rise from sitting, we should move the body slowly. Rise with calm confidence. We should not be hurried or violent.

We see in the past that those who transcended the ordinary and transcended the sacred, and those who died while sitting or died while standing, relied totally on this power. Moreover, changing of the moment through the action of a finger, a pole, a needle, or a wooden clapper; and exact experience of the state through the manifestation of a whisk, a fist, a staff, or a shout, can never be understood by thinking and discrimination. How could they be known through mystical powers or practice and experience? They may be dignified behaviour beyond sound and form. How could they be anything other than a criterion that precedes knowing and seeing?

Therefore, we do not discuss intelligence as superior and stupidity as inferior. Let us not choose between clever persons and dimwits. If we make effort devotedly, that is just wholehearted pursuit of the truth. Practice-and-experience is naturally untainted. The direction of effort becomes more balanced and constant.

Broadly then, in this world and in other worlds, in India and in China, all similarly maintain the Buddha-posture, and solely indulge in the fundamental custom: we simply devote ourselves to sitting, and are caught by the still state.

Although there are myriad distinctions and thousands of differences, we should just pursue the truth through Zen balance. Why should we abandon our own sitting platform, to come and go without purpose through the dusty borders of foreign lands?

If we misplace one step we pass over the moment of the present. We have already received the essential pivot which is the human body: let us not pass time in vain. We are maintaining and relying upon the pivotal essence which is the Buddha's truth: who could

wish idly to enjoy sparks [that fly] from flint? What is more, the body is like a dewdrop on a blade of grass. Life passes like a flash of lightning. Suddenly it is gone. In an instant it is lost.

I beseech you, noble friends in learning through experience, do not grow used to images and doubt the real dragon. Apply yourself to the path which is directly indicated and straightforward. Revere people who are beyond study and free of the intention to achieve. Accord with the enlightened state of the buddhas. Be a rightful heir to the balanced state of the ancestors. If you practice the ineffable for a long time, you will be ineffable. The treasure-house will open naturally, and you will receive and use it as you like.

Master Dogen's *Fukan-zazengi rufu-bon*

Trans. Gudo Nishijima & Chodo Cross. New Year 2003.