

Introduction to Zazen— Body, Breath, Mind

Body

The important point is to position the base of the body so that it is stable and can be held still. The principle is that 3 points of contact make a stable position. The points of contact when sitting on the floor are the buttocks and the knees

Sit on the forward third of the cushion (zafu). The cushion elevates the buttocks so that your knees can meet the ground firmly

Legs can be in full lotus, half lotus or Burmese position

The Burmese position is most accessible for beginners, since it puts the least stress on the joints. In this position, the right foot is pulled close to the thigh, allowing the foot and calf to rest on the floor. The left foot is placed in front of the right calf so that both knees touch the mat.

The important point is to insure that the knees are solid on the ground in order to form a stable 3 point position. If the knees do not touch the ground, try a higher cushion or an additional support pillow under one knee. If this position cannot be held with both knees down, it is advisable to try a chair or seiza bench.

Note—Sitting can be done effectively in a chair. The choice depends upon the physical situation of each individual. The most important consideration is to sit in a stable position.

Kneeling--Seiza position can be done on a bench or a cushion positioned on its side with the feet sufficiently separated to form a solid base.

Chair—Sit on the forward third of the chair with the feet flat on the floor. The back is held erect as described below and is not supported by the back of the chair.

Spine is centered by swaying in gentle arcs of decreasing size. Straighten the spine from the small of the back (There will be a slight curve in the lower back.)

Head is aligned by pushing up toward the ceiling and relaxing. The base of the neck is in a line with the spine. Head is straight, with the tip of the nose centered over the navel and the ears parallel with the shoulders. The head is balanced on the upper vertebrae.

Chin is tucked in slightly.

Eyes are neither fully opened or fully closed, but lowered to a 45 degree angle and unfocused, directed toward at the floor, approximately 3 feet in front.

Mouth is closed. The tongue is placed gently against the roof of the mouth, just behind the front teeth.

Hands are in the mudra position. The favored hand, palm up, holds the other hand. The middle knuckles overlapping slightly and the thumb tips lightly touching, forming an oval. If this position cannot be held or does not feel comfortable, the hands may be placed on the thighs, at a comfortable distance.

This posture will allow you to hold the body still, without undue tension. It is essential to remain still during zazen.

Breath

Breathing is from the hara (2-3 finger widths below the naval) and is referred to as diaphragmatic breathing. Breathe through the nose unless congested. To check breathing, place your hands just below your rib cage on each side. During diaphragmatic breathing, you will feel the rib cage gently rise and fall with each breath. After this pattern has been established, return your hands to the mudra position.

Breathing is slow and rhythmic. A natural rhythm will be established. Typically, this may be ~4 inhalation/exhalation cycles/minute.

Mind

Put your full attention on the breath. Count inhalation (1), exhalation (2), inhalation (3) and continue through 10 and repeat the cycle.

As thoughts appear, acknowledge them and let them go, bring your attention back to the breath. Random thoughts are natural. If the thoughts develop into a train or story, your attention will go with it. As soon as you become aware of it, simply acknowledge the thought, let it go, and return your attention to the breath starting at 1. Continue this practice.

As you let go of the thought, do not judge the thought, your sitting, or anything else. Simply resume your attention on the breath.

Just practice.