

How to begin Zazen (sitting practice)

Zazen (which means “sitting Zen”) is the core practice of Zen and a foundation for our practice in daily life. In zazen, we learn what it means to be simply present, watchful and observant. We meet, and begin to work with, all those things that stand between us and present awareness, and we cultivate the capacity to live from our deep core wisdom and compassion. Although Zazen may resemble other forms of meditation practice, such as Mindfulness, Yoga, Vipassana etc., it also has some different and distinctive features and perspectives, particularly as your practice develops over time. The following guidelines address some basic foundations for Zen practice.

Zazen (the sitting practice of Zen) can be done in many different ways, but past teachers and practitioners have established some basic principles.

You can sit on a round sitting cushion, or on a chair, or on a kneeling bench. If sitting on the floor, arrange your legs in a position you can maintain for the time required. There are several cross-legged positions that may be used depending on age, flexibility and condition. These and other sitting positions are illustrated below.

When sitting in a cross-legged posture, be sure that your weight is distributed evenly on three points: both your knees, in contact with the ground (or supported by small knee cushions), and your buttocks elevated by a round cushion (you may need more than one firm cushion to achieve sufficient height). If sitting on a chair, separate your knees about the width of your shoulders, and place your feet flat on the floor or on a riser if needed. On a kneeling bench, sit with the legs of the bench astride your legs and with the buttocks on the sloping bench top.



Lotus



Half Lotus



Burmese



Zafu (pillow)



Seiza



Chair

Sit with straight posture but not rigidly. In Zen meditation, the back is usually unsupported - don't lean against a wall or chair back, although sometimes when sitting in a chair, a small cushion may be used to give lumbar support. Straighten and extend your spine, keeping it naturally upright, allowing your weight to fall into the lower body. Don't bend the chin down or up but keep the rear of the neck straight. Imagine drawing your chin slightly in as you simultaneously extend the back of the neck upwards. Imagine a straight vertical line running down from the top of your head, through the back of your neck and down your spine. When you first sit down, you can move your body gently from side to side, until you naturally come to a point of balance on your cushion or seat.

Direct the eyes (not the head) downwards about a metre in front of your body without dropping the head, and neither fully opened nor closed. Often in Zen meditation, we sit facing a wall so you might want to sit this way at home. In this way, the wall cuts off most of your vision.

Place your hands in your lap with your dominant hand palm-up and the other hand (also palm-up) cradled on top of it, thumb-tips lightly touching, forming an oval between the thumbs and the hands. This is the mudra of zazen. Place this mudra lightly against your abdomen below the navel or rest it in your lap if that is more comfortable. Try to hold this mudra with care, but don't strain.



The cardinal principles of practice are physical stillness and silence, and the continuous renewing of attention. Let your breath settle naturally. Don't try to control the breath and your breathing should not be audible. Just pay attention to however it is at the time – shallow, deep, fast, or slow.

A common beginning practice is called “counting the breaths”. Begin silently (in the mind) to count the inflow and outflow of the breath, 1 on the in-breath, 2 on the out-breath, etc. up to 10, then start over again. Give your continuous attention to the breath as it flows in and out, trying not to think. Getting to 10 is not the point; if you can't reach 10 (and this is unlikely at first) count as high as you can, even if it is only 3 or 4, and start over at 1. If you lose count or find you are thinking or daydreaming, start over again at 1. Try to do this in a really attentive way, not mechanically, until you become more comfortable with this practice. Remember the point is not to get to 10 but to practice continuous renewal of attention.

When you are counting, if you notice that you are no longer fully present and instead that you're thinking, label your most recent thought very briefly (for example, "Having a thought this is boring;" or "Having a thought I'm good at this;" or "Wondering about the time," etc.) and then return immediately to the breath and begin counting again at 1.

Alternatively, you can count in a variant manner – just counting in-breaths or just counting out-breaths while continuing to pay close attention to both the uncounted and counted parts of the breath. Eventually, you may find you can just "watch" or "observe" the breath without counting. This is harder at first since there is no number to hold onto, but it is an important step in practice. Don't jump around between methods of breath practice – try to stick with one regardless of the difficulty, until you feel ready to proceed to another. If you find your mind is very scattered, you can always return to breath counting as an anchor for your attention.

Although counting the breath is often a good tool for practice, for some people just watching or observing the breath without counting is more suitable. Do this with as much awareness as you can, noticing the feel of the breath, sensations in the body, and the tendency for thoughts and feelings to arise. Although we talk about this as "observing the breath" we soon find that we are observing a wider range of physical sensations in the body – physical expansion and contraction of chest or abdomen, muscular movement or tension, subtle sensations in the body, sometimes emotional reactions, etc. As we do this practice, we will still hear sounds in the environment (passing cars, wind, birds, distant conversation, etc) and feel the air around us (warm, cool, still, moving etc), but if you find yourself getting caught in thinking about these, label your thought and renew your attention. Don't exclude your sense experience but don't get caught in it either.

Be attentive to everything, the physical feel and sensations of the body, the sounds and smells around you, the feel of the air, the tendency to think. The purpose of zazen is not to cut yourself off from your environment, but to reside in it fully with collected awareness. Just try not to think about it, and if you do, label each thought and return to observing. Remember that a central principle of practice is cultivating the willingness to keep returning to the present bodily experience whenever you notice that thoughts have taken you away. Don't expect anything special and don't try to cultivate any special state or experience. All experiences are transitory, so learn to watch them as they come or go.

At the end of your sitting period, you may gently move your body from side to side a few times. Stretch out your legs and be sure they are not asleep before standing. If your legs have gone to sleep, stay on the ground even if others around you have risen, and remain there until you can rise safely.

Practice regularly for about 10-15 minutes a day at first and build up your time as you go along. When you can regularly sit for about 20 minutes or more with reasonable physical stillness, then you might like to consider coming to join a sitting of Ordinary Mind Zen Brisbane, preceded by a short orientation.

Please contact us if you have any questions: info@ordinarymind.org.au.