

FORMALITIES IN THE ZENDO (EVENING SITTING)

(Note: terms appearing in underlined italics are explained in the Glossary at the end)

When you come to orientation some of the basic formalities of the Zendo will be demonstrated. These formalities are intended to provide us with a uniform framework in which our sitting takes place. They should be understood as a support to practice, but also as practice itself. Continuous mindful observation of Zendo formalities is a natural extension of our sitting practice. These conventions should be practised over many years, but at first you should learn simply by following what others do.

Entering and Leaving the Zendo

Leave all personal items (shoes, keys, bags etc.) outside the Zendo. Always make a standing bow in gassho at the door of the Zendo on entering and leaving.

Moving around the Zendo

To reach your sitting place, walk along the **inner** edges of the mats (zabutons). If you need to cross the Zendo to the far row of sitting mats, stop and turn to face the altar, making a brief standing bow in gassho as you cross the room. If carrying cushions (zafus) or other items, you can bow with one hand in gassho or just bow without raising the hands. Otherwise, when moving around the Zendo for any reason, walk in kinhin mudra while inside the room.

Before Sitting in your Place

Approach your mat from *inside* the rows of mats, not from behind your mat. When you first arrive at your mat at the beginning of a sitting, carefully arrange your cushions, bench or chair, then make a standing bow in gassho to your sitting place. Turn 180 degrees clockwise (to the right) to face the centre of the room (back to sitting mat) and make a standing bow in gassho to the Zendo. Then sit. These two bows are made every time you approach your mat to sit (even if you have done so only minutes before but have had to briefly leave the Zendo for some reason).

Formal Greeting to Others

At the beginning of a sitting (for example at 6.30 pm on Sundays), if you are seated before your immediate neighbours arrive, be aware of their arrival. When each has arranged cushions and makes a standing bow to their sitting place, you should simultaneously make a sitting bow in gassho. If one or both your neighbours has arrived before you, they should similarly bow as you make your standing bow to your sitting place. These bows occur *only* at the beginning of a sitting block, *not* each period of sitting, and only once (if a neighbour leaves the Zendo and returns, do not bow in greeting again). If you are sitting facing the centre of the room at the beginning of a block, you should also greet the person immediately opposite you when that person makes a bow towards you before sitting. These bows are made *only before* the bells for the start of sitting. If someone enters late, greetings are not made.

Conventions of Sitting

Unless you are new to sitting, the conventions of sitting (*zazen*) require stillness and silence from the beginning of a period of sitting (marked by three bells) to its end (marked by two bells). When the bells sound for the end of a period, make a sitting bow in *gassho*. Such a bow is made whenever a period of *zazen* is terminated or interrupted (such as if you get up to go to interview).

Getting up to do Walking Practice (*kinhin*)

At the end of a period of sitting, two bells will sound. Carefully get up from your sitting place. Place your cushions or bench neatly in the middle of your mat or on your chair. Then make a standing bow to your place, turn to face the centre of the room, and stand waiting with hands in *gassho*. (Note: before you get up, make sure your legs are not asleep and are able to carry you. If necessary, remain sitting on your mat until it is safe for you to stand even if others have already commenced walking).

Walking Practice Procedure

On the *first* wooden clapper strike, bow with everyone and turn to your left, still in *gassho*. On the *second* clapper strike, place your hands in *kinhin mudra* and begin slow walking. Sometime later, on the *third* clapper strike, bring your feet together, and make a standing bow in *kinhin mudra*. Begin to walk quickly (in *kinhin mudra*). On the *fourth* clapper strike, raise your hands into *gassho* and follow the line until you return to your place. Make a bow to your mat, turn clockwise 180° to face the centre of the room, and stand waiting with hands in *gassho*. At the sound of the bell, bow with everyone in *gassho*, and then sit.

Leaving the Zendo

If you need to leave the Zendo during walking, you may do this at any time after the second clapper strike. Walk to the Zendo door (bowing to the altar if crossing the Zendo), bow at the door and step outside. On returning, bow at the Zendo door, wait just inside the room until your original position in the line is passing, then quickly bow and slip back into the line without delaying.

Practice Conversations (also called *Daisan* or Interviews)

On an interview night, an announcement will be made before the first bells are rung. If you wish to go to interview, please raise your hand and hold it up until the zendo leader says, "thank you". The zendo leader will send you to interview at the appropriate time, or take you if it's your first time. Leave your cushions neatly on your mat. Bow to your sitting place and then proceed to the interview room. At the room, step into the open doorway and bow, close the door behind you. Bow to the altar (if any). Sit on the chair provided and make a sitting bow together with the teacher. The interview will then proceed. At the conclusion of the interview, the reverse procedure is followed: a sitting bow together with the teacher, a standing bow to the altar; open the door and bow inwards; and return directly to the zendo. On re-entering the zendo and sitting down, make all the usual bows (at the door, to the altar if crossing the room, to your sitting place, and to the Zendo). Zoom interviews are conducted more simply, with opening and closing bows only.

Close of Evening

At the end of the last period of the night, a short closing service is conducted including recitation or chanting of texts and the reading of a Dedication in which we offer the benefit of our sitting and our efforts to the welfare of others. A copy of texts will be provided so you can join in. We conclude with 3 deep bows followed by a standing bow to the altar and a bow to others in the Zendo. If you aren't familiar with the service and the bows, just follow what others do and learn by example. At first it is fine to make standing bows until you learn how to make a full bow.

Conclusion

We simply do our best to follow the procedures, noting when we mess up, and not getting too hung up on the rules. Making mistakes and not knowing what to do next are natural parts of practice. Just watch, observe, copy and refine over time. If in doubt about anything, ask one of the leaders or the teacher after sitting.

Glossary of Terms

- block of sitting Weekly sittings consist of one block of sitting, made up of several periods of sitting separated by kinhin. A period of sitting is usually about 30 minutes and a period of kinhin is usually about 10 minutes. At sesshin, there are usually four blocks of sitting in the day: early morning, morning, afternoon, and evening. At a Silent Practice Day, there are usually two blocks of sitting, morning and afternoon.
- deep bow a full bow to the floor; beginning from standing gassho, make a bow from the waist and descend to the floor with the feet together; the hands may be used to brace on the floor if needed; when the knees touch the floor and as the body bends down and the forehead touches the ground, the arms are placed parallel to the body in contact with the floor with palms up. Simultaneously raise the hands palm upwards to ear level and lower them to the floor; rise from the ground with the hands joining again in gassho as soon as possible. If a full bow to the floor is not possible for you, substitute a standing bow.
- gassho the palms of the hands are joined together with the top of the fingers at about the level of the nose and about six inches from the face; the elbows should be slightly raised. All bows (standing, sitting and deep) are made from this position.
- Kinhin and its mudra Kinhin is the practice of walking meditation; a mudra is a formal position of the hands. In kinhin mudra, the left hand forms a relaxed fist against the lower chest with the back of the fist facing out; the palm of the right hand is placed over back of the left hand; the elbows are slightly raised. In walking, attention is given to the movement of the feet and the sensation of lifting, moving and placing each foot. Slow kinhin involves very small steps taken with

care and deliberation. In kinhin, you should measure your pace to that of others, not lagging or moving too far ahead. Keep your head upright (not bent down) but keep your gaze angled down.

period of sitting

see block of sitting.

sesshin

a formal practice retreat of several days' duration.

zabuton

flat padded mats on which we place our cushions for sitting.

zafu

round black cushions used in sitting. Other ways of sitting are also possible, including on a wooden bench or a chair.

zazen

the sitting practice of Zen; meditation; also the extension of this into daily living.

zendo

the room in which group sitting practice (zazen) takes place.