

Instructions for ZAZEN

From

“THE PHILOSOPHY AND METHODS OF ZEN PRACTICE”

BY

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A. *Practical Instructions*

1. Select a quiet place

This is the traditional teaching. It means that we ourselves must manifest quietness. In that sense we can do zazen in a nightclub or in a restaurant.

2. Cushions

Select appropriate cushions needed to sit comfortably. When pressure is placed on them, the cushions should raise the buttocks to the height of one fist.

3. The Sitting Position.

Legs: The full lotus (*kekkaфуza* 結跏趺坐) is recommended. In this position one foot is placed on each thigh. There are two variations of this: *Kongojoza*, in which the right foot is placed on the left thigh. Today this is the most common posture in (Japanese) *zendos*; and *kichijoza*, in which the left foot is first placed on the right thigh. This was the leg position of the historical Buddha when he attained realization. This is also called the “celebratory position.” Both are equally acceptable, as one prefers. It is also acceptable to sit in half lotus (*hankafuza* 半跏趺坐), in which one foot is on the thigh and one is on the cushion.

Knees: Both knees must be down on the cushion.

Height: The way to determine the correct height of the cushions is to extend the arms forward toward the knees. If one’s hands extend beyond the knees such that they can comfortably grasp the knees fully, then the height is correct. The higher the cushions the shorter the length the arms can extend. People whose legs hurt often raise their buttocks so high that their hands can’t grasp their knees.

4. The Hand Position. Lay the back of the left hand, palm up, on the palm of the right. Bring the tips of the thumbs together.

Hands should be raised to the navel area. Once we are in the correct sitting position it will be awkward to place our hands on our thigh as is recommended in the ancient zazen manual, the *Zazengi*. This text was written 800 years ago and now is too simple for our age. Yet today in Japan we find that many people still hold their hands in their laps during formal sitting. If the hands are that low there is no space between the upper arms and the torso. Therefore the hands should be raised to the area of the navel. We can imagine having a jewel in our

hands that we are raising to the navel area. Holding the hands in this way produces a different *zazen* than holding the hands on the lap. It gives us a *zazen* full of energy, not weak, *zazen* that promotes mental quietness and not subjective thought. If we want to discover how to fully manifest ourselves we must keep the hands raised.

Hands should be deeply together, not barely together. The right hand should definitely support the left.

5. Balance. The *Zazengi* recommends that we lean to either side and backwards and forwards to find the position where the spine is straight.¹

The posture should be such that the tip of the nose is perpendicular to the navel. Then a triangle is formed with the navel at the apex of this triangle. Just as the tip of the nose and the navel are perpendicular so, too, should the ears and shoulders be in a line with each other.

The line of sight should follow the angle of the bridge of the nose and hit the floor at whatever angle that happens to be.

6. Breathing. Once the posture is settled and we can focus on breathing we begin exhaling. Exhale such that the exhalation arises out of the pit of the stomach or lower abdomen. There will be a definite sensation of energy arising from this area.

The lower abdomen should be quite relaxed and therefore full of energy. When we exhale we should be aware of this relaxed quality. With this exhalation we exhale all thoughts no matter how attractive or unattractive. If we do this properly our solar plexus will become still.

After we complete one exhalation with the lower abdomen relaxed and energized, we begin the inhalation without tensing this area. In the inhalation cycle we realize we are inhaling all air. In exhaling we should allow the abdomen to relax such that it falls out or forward. In inhaling the sternum should move up while the solar plexus moves out. Breathing in this fashion is totally silent and not audible to others. The solar plexus remains tranquil.

¹ *Fukan Zazengi* (普勸坐禪儀), "General Principles of Zazen," is an essay on the practice of *zazen* written by the 13th century Japanese monk Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253). Note Rōshi's rather ecumenical use of a Sōtō Zen source. For a translation and analysis of this important work, see Carl Bielefeldt, *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation*. University of California Press, 1990.

So in the inhalation cycle we realize that we inhale the entire universe. In the exhalation cycle we return the entire universe, exhaling everything without exception. This aware breathing is difficult to do in a standing position. However when sitting properly it is most easy to accomplish.

Now if we sit and breathe in this manner, in a short time, 4 or 5 cycles, we will find a deep sense of unification or tranquility. Those who find that this is not true must not be breathing properly. Such people will find that their own thoughts will prevent them from fully realizing this breathing cycle.

For example, if we are feeling disturbed by the sound of a bird, then we should merely inhale in such a way as to accept the song and exhale such that we give back the song to the bird. In other words, we should breathe in harmony with the bird. Or if a car passes, we should be sitting in such a way that the sound doesn't bother us, in such a way that we are with the sound as soon as it appears. As one's practice deepens, no matter what happens, be it a bird, a car, whatever, it is no longer a disturbance.

So on the one hand *zazen* is self realization. It is realization that there is no separation, that we are completely united at all times, that we are completely dissolved into everything. If in our sitting we feel that this or that is a disturbance, in truth the disturbing factor is the [ego-]self.

The significance of this form of breathing

When we are breathing in this manner the sensation in our *zazen* becomes one of relaxation and well-being. When we relax fully, in the exhalation cycle, we exhale everything completely. We see that through our very exhalation we are completely embraced by everything. Being embraced in this way, we no longer exist [as separate selves] since we are embraced by the totality of everything. But, on the other hand, because of this embrace, we continue to exist, but exist as embraced by everything.

In the inhalation cycle we inhale such that everything is taken into our own being. The inhalation cycle is where the apparently objective world is totally negated and taken into our own being. In the exhalation cycle we negate our subjectivity and therefore affirm the objective world. This is absolute negation of our individuality. In the inhalation cycle we absolutely affirm our subjectivity.

If you think while you breathe, you should have these pure thought patterns, these thoughts that conform to reality.

7. Facial Position. In order to keep saliva from becoming a problem we must hold the tongue against the upper teeth. The saliva won't build up if we fill the mouth with the tongue. If we do this, the mouth will sag at the corners and the nostrils will flare. This sagging of the mouth and flaring of the nostrils is a vital point of our form of sitting.

In the spring both stallions and mares flare their nostrils. We should flare our nostrils completely in this same manner. If one is conversing with a lover and neither flares the nostrils then this love is not real.

So our sitting should be full of life, full of energy. Therefore the nostrils should be fully flared and the corners of the mouth should fall. The lower abdomen should fall forward, relaxed, and energize the hands. The energy in the hand position is such that it energizes the toes.

The eyes should be half open such that we can, in fact, see. In photos of Zen monks it may appear as if the eyes are closed but if we are sitting properly, the eyes are open. If the eyes are half open and we are sitting as described above, we will realize what it is to be in union with whatever arises. It is better not to have the eyes wide open because people often experience tiredness because too much light is let in.

So what we are developing or maturing (with *zazen* practice) is insight. On the one hand, although (*zazen*) is the activity of self-negation, we can nevertheless realize what this activity really is and therefore develop insight into the activity of self-affirmation. For example, when we truly hear a car (through self-negation) (and then) think "That's a car" (self-affirmation), then we begin to see with clarity this activity of affirmation. But what is often called meditation is developing a subjective sense of well-being without developing insight into self-affirmation and self-negation.

No Zazen With the Eyes Closed?: Even though certain manuals do recommend doing *zazen* with the eyes closed, this is dead person Zen. If we close the eyes while sitting, subjective feelings of contentment and well-being arise. But these are merely within the realm of subjectivity.

If we ask students who have practiced with their eyes closed to answer a *kōan*, they are unable to do so. Unless we penetrate the *kōan* with the eyes open we haven't penetrated it at all. The eyes-closed style of *zazen* is individualistic and subjective and doesn't lead to a passionate concern for others.

The reason our practice *zazen* style (sitting facing the center of the *zendo*) arose was so that the *keisaku* carrier could see if students had their eyes open.

If we sit with the eyes closed, though we may have many attractive thoughts, ultimately it is not useful. When we sit with eyes open we may still have various thoughts but they have a tendency to dissipate more rapidly. Examine it in yourselves.

In America sitting with the eyes closed is quite popular. But when people who sit in this manner are called upon to verbalize their realization, they cannot. This is not proper Zen.