

Zazen Posture Guidelines

Assuming a comfortable, stable body position that you can maintain for the duration of a sitting period will form a sound basis for your practice. Do not maintain a posture that causes intense pain.

1. Sit on the forward third of your zafu (small round cushion), using the cushion as a wedge. This will help relieve some strain on your back and allow you to sit with your torso centered.
2. Except when sitting in a chair, arrange your legs to make your body into a pyramid, with both knees and buttocks in contact with the cushions. Full lotus, half lotus, Burmese, and seiza (kneeling) positions are all equally acceptable. When sitting in a chair, use your back rather than the chair's back to support yourself (unless you have a back injury and need extra support). Sit far enough forward so you can place both of your feet flat on the floor. Your knees should be level with or lower than your hips. The Zen Mountain Monastery website has helpful pictures of the various postures – see <http://www.mro.org/zmm/teachings/meditation.php>. The Dharma Crafts website has helpful pictures of these positions with the use of support cushions – see <http://www.dharmacrafts.com/100xZA/2INFO01/meditation-technique-posture-photos.html>.
3. Place your shoulders slightly back, so that the rib cage opens. Then let your shoulders drop. Center your spine by swaying in decreasing arcs.
4. Straighten and align your spine by extending it from the tailbone to the top of your head. Your buttocks should protrude slightly back and your lower belly forward. Tuck your chin slightly and relax your weight. Imagine a string attached to the top of the back of your head, pulling your spine upwards toward the ceiling. Let your back be erect, but not rigid or tense.
5. Rest your head squarely on your spine, not tilted forward or to either side. Ears are parallel with the shoulders. The tip of the nose is centered over the navel. Let your spine, not your neck muscles, do all of the work of supporting your head.
6. Sit with your eyes neither fully opened nor fully closed, but lowered at a 45degree angle, and unfocused, gazing at the floor three to four feet in front of you. If you are sitting right next to the wall or screen, look “through” it to where the floor would be. Let your gaze originate from your mid-brain.
7. Lips are kept closed, with your teeth pressed lightly together. Place your tongue against the roof of the mouth, just behind the front teeth. Swallow any saliva and breathe out once through your mouth, creating a slight vacuum which will inhibit salivation. Begin breathing through your nose. Some find it helpful to invite a half-smile to the lips.
8. Hands are placed in the cosmic mudra right hand palm up with its blade against your lower belly, left hand also palm up, resting on the right hand, middle knuckles overlapping and the thumbs lightly touching at the tips. If you are left handed, then let the right hand rest on the top of the left. The mudra looks like an oval nestled against your lower abdomen.
9. Once you have found your posture, keep still throughout the period of zazen. Breathe and let your focus be on your breath at your hara point, in the very middle of your lower abdomen. Allow the breath its own rhythm (don't try to breathe a certain speed, but it's OK to slow down). Continue to focus awareness on the breath, returning to this again and again throughout the meditation period.

Thoughts, Feeling and Attitudes During Zazen

1. Many good ideas arise when meditating. This is one of the benefits of clearing the mind. During meditation, don't get carried away by ideas, good or bad. Simply see them and then return attention to breath.
2. When feelings arise, such as pain, discomfort, or even happy feelings, don't push them away, and don't get lost in them. Simply see the feelings and return to the breath.
3. Know that the point at which you realize that your attention has wandered from your breath is the very point of practice. Try not to get discouraged when you see a wandering mind. This realization is the beginning of waking up.
4. Be gentle with yourself. Return your focus to the breath with a gentle determination. Allow yourself to "make mistakes" again and again, and keep returning to awareness of the breath.
5. Practice loving-kindness towards yourself, especially if you feel that you "just can't do it." Remember the good within you. Remember that you are perfect and complete just as you are.

Kinhin (Walking Meditation)

For any type of walking meditation, walk with awareness of your breath as you step. In the zendo, we practice a formal, slow walking meditation as follows: As you inhale, raise the heel of your foot. When you reach the height of the inhalation, slowly bring your foot forward, taking a half step. As you touch the ball of your foot to the floor, begin to exhale. Then gently lower the rest of the foot.

Some of these instructions are derived from *The Eight Gates of Zen*, by John Daido Looi