

Zazen

The Practice of *Just Sitting*

judgment, and intention—we figure that while our mind is wandering “we’re” not really there. The reality in which we aim to rest in zazen is untroubled by our thoughts. Through it all, we literally remain just sitting. The body is no less real than the mind. Uchiyama Roshi said zazen is “an effort to continuously aim at a correct sitting posture with flesh and bones and to totally leave everything to that.” No matter what our zazen experience is like, we *have* taken time to set aside all efforts and activities in order to be awake for our life just as it is. That can be the pivot point around which the rest of our life moves.

Letting Go Versus Directed Effort

Most forms of meditation involve directed effort: You have an intention, choose a meditative object, and bring your mind back to it over and over. In contrast, zazen is a “letting-go” practice—a choice, not a skill or discipline. Some people find it helpful to first calm their mind somewhat using a directed-effort practice like counting or following the breath, body scanning, or attending to sounds, and *then* settle into zazen. If you *don’t* find such methods helpful, then just do zazen wholeheartedly.

Deepening Your Zazen

The danger of a letting-go practice like shikantaza is getting complacent and dull. We think, “Just sitting—how hard can it be?” We conclude we’ve got it, and zazen begins to feel repetitive and rote.

Ideally, zazen is always fresh. We’ve never experienced this moment before. We’ve only begun to explore the capacity of our mind and heart. There is so much we do not yet see. If you knew your life was ending in a few hours, you wouldn’t spend the time daydreaming.

There are many ways to deepen our zazen without resorting to volitional effort to control our meditation. We can strive diligently to recall our deepest aspirations and be more wholehearted; to become more deeply embodied; and to cultivate faith that we’re supported by the universe. We can let go of volitional activity at more and more subtle levels, because even holding on to our views of the world is a volitional– if usually subconscious– activity.

Making Zazen Part of Your Life

Zazen is like exercise. It’s good for you, and even a little bit is better than nothing. An ideal zazen regimen is 30 minutes 4-6 days a week, but you should start wherever you can. Make it a part of your life and see what difference it makes—regardless of whether you enjoy it or think you’re doing it “right.” It can help immensely to sit with a group, or get personal guidance from a teacher about your zazen.

Over a lifetime of practice, we keep discovering what zazen really means. I hope you will come to love it as much as I do.

This Really *Is* Just Sitting

“Zazen” means “seated meditation.” The kind of zazen we do in Soto Zen is “shikantaza,” or *nothing but precisely sitting*. In a way, it doesn’t even make sense to call it “meditation.” When we’re doing it perfectly, we’re really just sitting there.

We give up all volitional activity except for the extremely simple act of physically sitting upright and still. This includes any effort to control the mind or attain any particular experience while sitting.

The Difficulty of Zazen

Such a simple practice presents surprising difficulties for us. We wonder what on earth we’re supposed to do, or achieve. It can’t be about just sitting there! Won’t we waste our time? How do we avoid letting habit energy fill our meditative experience with thinking?

Facing the difficulty of zazen with curiosity instead of anxiety *is* the practice. As we sit, we face the deepest spiritual questions of our lives: Who are we? What is our life about? What keeps us from being completely content? What makes us want to avoid this present moment, this life, being this person?

We don't analyze these questions while sitting, we become intimate with them by momentarily putting aside our attempts to figure anything out, fix anything, or distract ourselves. We come to realize that how we do zazen is how we do everything.

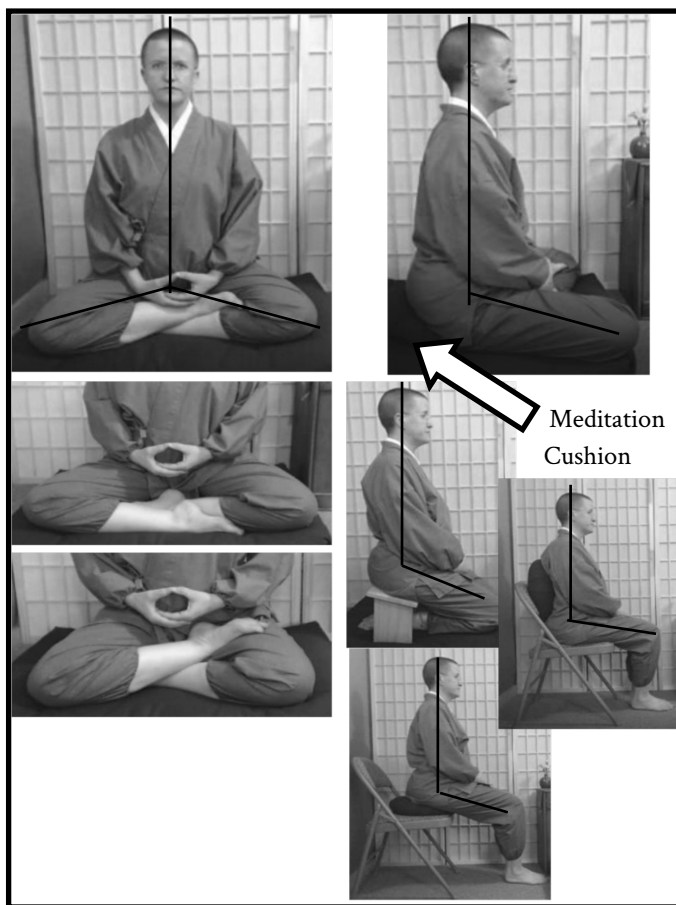
To some extent, we naturally knew how to *just sit* when we were little children. We knew how to just *be*—to sit in the sunshine and let time pass without a whole lot of self-referential evaluation and analysis. As adults, we postpone this kind of restful appreciation indefinitely, until *after* we achieve, fix, figure out, or improve. Zazen invites us to rest in the reality of our life *now*. We still take care of our lives, of course—and, ironically, taking time for zazen actually makes us more effective and compassionate when we do so.

Instructions for Sitting

Choose a place and time for sitting where you will face minimal distractions and won't be interrupted. Decide how long you'll sit and set a timer rather than watch the clock.

Your spine should be upright as if it's hanging from a string suspended from the ceiling. Avoid slouching or leaning. It helps if your knees are slightly lower than your hips. Ideally, you'll be comfortable enough that you can sit perfectly still, but not so comfortable you get drowsy.

Sit on a bench or chair if it's difficult to stay still while cross-legged on the floor; stillness is *much* more important than using a traditional posture.



Keep your eyes open, lids half-closed, so you stay grounded and alert. Let your gaze be soft rather than staring. Place your hands in a deliberate way; the traditional hand position for zazen is shown in the pictures. Breathe naturally.

The Problem of a Wandering Mind

Our primary concern, of course, is what to do about our wandering mind as we “just sit.” It seems pointless to surrender to habit energy and spend our meditation time planning, obsessing, or daydreaming. And yet the

instructions for zazen are to simply *let thoughts come and go without worrying about them*. We're asked *not* to make any volitional effort to control the mind or attain any particular experience while sitting.

What to do?! Zen master Keizan described zazen as “returning home and sitting in peace.” How do we experience that without trying to change the way our mind usually functions?

Zazen is about beating the mind at its own game. Rather than struggle with the mind directly—which for many of us simply agitates it even more—we dedicate ourselves to a practice that almost entirely takes the mind out of the equation: just sitting.

When we notice our mind has wandered, we let go of all volitional activity except for the incredibly simple act of physically sitting still and upright. We do this over and over and over, patiently, because zazen is a *practice*, not a result. The moment of noticing our mind has wandered is precious; if we surrender all of our self-centered concerns and just sit, it is an absolutely perfect moment of zazen. The more you notice your mind wandering, the more perfect moments of zazen you'll have!

Zazen as a Somatic Practice

Zazen is a somatic (embodied) practice. Why is it that when we realize our minds have wandered, we think, “I wasn't doing zazen just now”? We're so overidentified with our mental experience—including our self-consciousness,