



## ZEN MEDITATION EXERCISES

**T**he Buddha taught four postures to meditate in: sitting, walking, standing and lying down. In formal Zen meditation, sitting and walking are specially used.

### SITTING LIKE A MOUNTAIN

Sitting meditation is an art. In Zen practice, one might sit for long periods of time repeatedly. Great emphasis is laid on maintaining a good posture so the sitting is comfortable. Such a posture will help the mind to be clearer and the breathing to be smoother and healthier.

We can sit in different postures. Traditionally these are the full lotus posture and the half-lotus posture. In *A Generally Recommended Mode of Sitting Meditation*, Dogen wrote:

*Fukanzazengi*

Spread a thick sitting mat where you usually sit, and use a cushion on top of this. You may sit in the full-lotus posture, or in the half-lotus posture. For the full-lotus posture (Figure 1), first place the right foot on the left thigh, then the left foot on the right thigh. For the half-lotus posture (Figure 2), just place the left foot on the right thigh. Wear loose clothing and keep it orderly.



Next place the right hand on the left leg, and the left hand on the right hand, with palms facing upward. The two thumbs face each other and hold each other up.

Now sit upright with your body straight. Do not lean to the left or tilt to the right, bend forward or lean backward. Align the ears with the shoulders, and the nose with the navel. The tongue should rest on the upper palate, the teeth and lips should be closed. The eyes should always be open. The breathing should pass subtly through the nose.

Once the physical form is in order, exhale fully through the mouth once, sway left and right, then settle into sitting perfectly still.

Nowadays people also sit in quarter-lotus with the foot on the opposite calf, or in the Burmese style, or kneel on a cushion, or on a bench. One can also sit on a chair if one finds it difficult to sit on the floor. In the Burmese style (Figure 3), the left foot is not put on the right thigh but just in front of the right leg. Kneeling on a cushion (Figure 4), the legs are placed either side of the cushion; sometimes several cushions are used for that position. Kneeling on a bench (Figure 5), the legs are tucked under the bench; one might use a soft pad on the bench in order not to cut the circulation to the legs. Sitting in a chair (Figure 6), one sits with the back erect, half-way on the seat, trying not to lean against the back of the chair. One might put a cushion on the chair and sometimes a cushion under the feet. If one sits fully in a chair, with one's back touching the back of the chair, one must be very careful not to slouch and get into an unhealthy posture which would constrict the breathing and be harmful to the body.





1 Full-lotus: right foot on left thigh, left foot on right thigh.  
Right hand on left leg, left hand on right hand.



2 Half-lotus: left foot on right thigh. Right hand on left leg,  
left hand on right hand.



3 Burmese style: left foot against right lower leg on floor.  
Right hand on left leg, left hand on right hand.



4 Kneeling on a cushion: legs on floor either side of cushion.





5 Kneeling on a bench: legs tucked under bench.



6 Sitting on a chair: half-way on the seat if possible.



In all these postures, the traditional Zen way is to have the eyes half-closed to prevent drowsiness or agitation. The eyes are not fixed on anything but just gazing downwards at a forty-five degree angle. The back is straight but not rigidly so. The shoulders are comfortably low and the head rests lightly on the shoulders. The chin should be slightly drawn in. When sitting on the floor we are trying to form a triangle with the legs as the base and the head at the top so that we feel stable and grounded but relaxed at the same time.

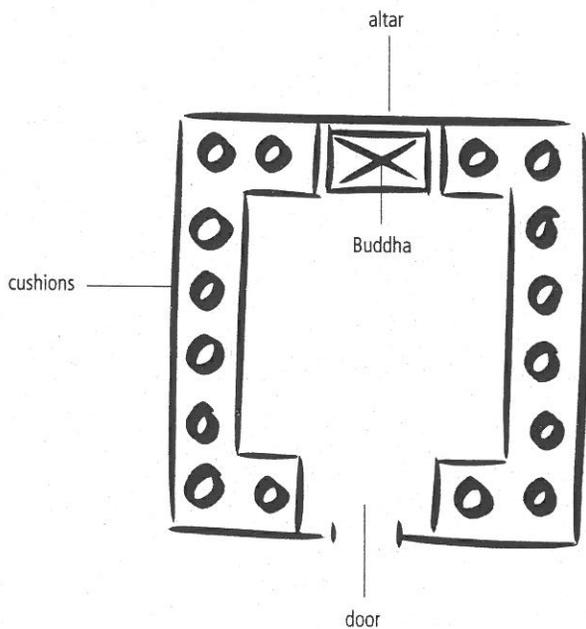
The hands are on each other, palm up as instructed by Dogen and the thumbs are lightly touching each other. The hands are in front of the navel, the arms slightly apart from the body, and sometimes it helps to place a small towel or a thin cushion on the legs on which the hands can more easily rest.

We breathe quietly through the nose. We do not control the breathing but let it flow naturally. We try not to breathe noisily. Often it is recommended to breathe with the lower abdomen. It is suggested that it helps to make the breathing deeper. In this system, when one inhales the lower abdomen fills up, when one exhales it becomes concave; one also needs to be able to relax the diaphragm.

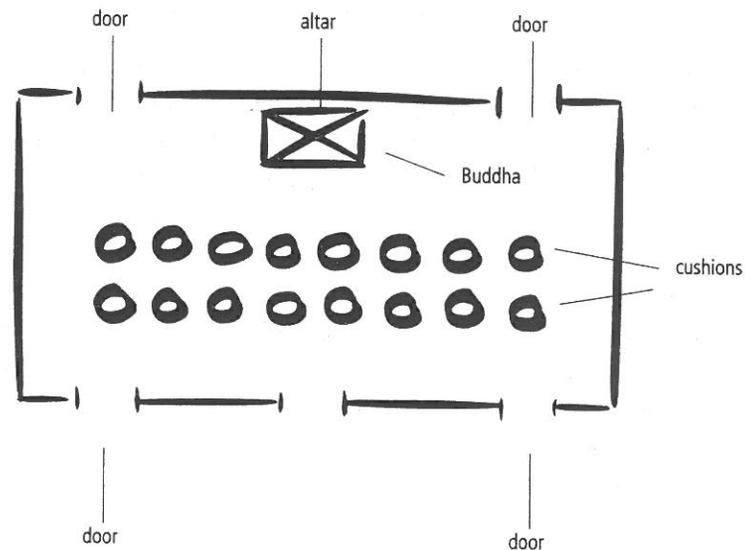
When sitting in half-lotus or the Burmese posture one does not need to always put the same leg on top or in the front. One can alternate the position of the right leg and the left leg. Generally, one sits on two cushions in the lotus, half-lotus or Burmese style: a rectangular flat pad or cushion (J: Zabuton) to make it more comfortable for the legs and a round cushion (J: Zafu) to get the right height for the bottom. Sometimes one might put some smaller cushions under the knees so one is more stable if both knees cannot rest on the Zabuton. In the kneeling postures one only uses the flat cushion (Zabuton).

## WALKING WITH AWARENESS

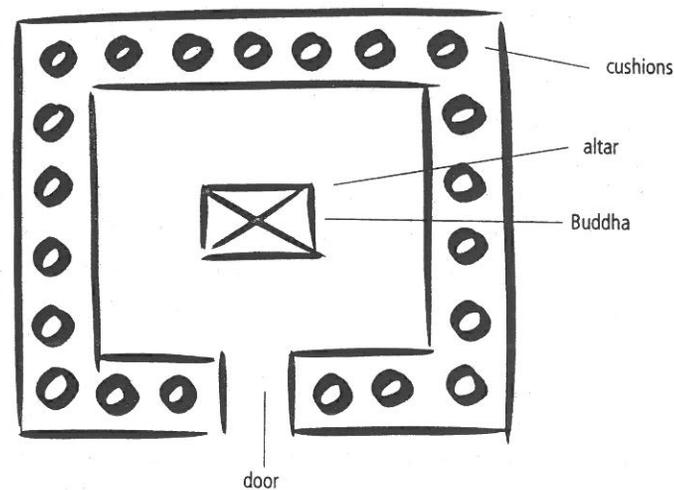
Between sessions of sitting meditation (Zazen) one does walking meditation (J: Kinhin). There are various styles and speeds. In China, one walks clockwise around the Buddha statue in the meditation hall or outside in a circle, slowly, or at a steady pace, or fast with the arms hanging alongside loosely. In Korea one walks inside the meditation hall anti-clockwise but on the outer rim of the cushions at an ordinary pace with the arms relaxed and loose. In China and Japan, the cushions are situated closer to the walls and in Korea they are laid in two lines more towards the middle of the room.



Japanese Zen hall



Korean Zen hall



Chinese Zen hall



In Japan, the walking is very formal and organized. You put the thumb of the left hand in the middle of the palm and make a fist around it. You place this fist in front of the chest. You cover the fist with your right hand. The elbows are kept away from the body and form a straight line with the forearms. In some places you may be told to turn the fist downward and rest the other hand on it. In other places you will be advised to place one hand on the other and just hold them to the chest. You are supposed to start walking with the right foot, then you advance by taking only half a step for each breath in and out. You are walking slowly and smoothly as if you were standing in one place.

Whatever the form of the walking meditation, one continues practising what one has been doing in the sitting posture: counting the breath, being aware or asking a question.

## COUNTING THE BREATH

Counting the breath is used mainly in Japan and in China in the Soto tradition. You count the breaths from one to ten. When you reach ten, you return to one and start counting again. If you lose count, you come back to one again. Sometimes you might count further than ten, again you come back to one and start again. You can count exhalations and inhalations separately or together.

After you have learnt to be concentrated by counting the breaths, you may be told to move on to just watching the breath without counting. There are two methods. The first one is to observe the breath just as it is without modifying it in any way. You just observe the breath coming in through the nostrils, moving down to the lungs and coming out again. The second method is to observe the breath while consciously modifying it. Generally this is associated with Tiantien (J: Tanden), breathing with the lower abdomen. You try to breathe in all the way to the

abdomen, then you might hold the breath very slightly for one or two seconds and then let it out again.

In the breath meditation, the breath becomes the object of concentration. Whenever you are distracted by thoughts, feelings, or sounds you try to come back as soon as possible to the breath. When counting the breath you realize quickly how distracted you can be. It is often difficult to count all the way to ten without thinking of something else. When you observe the breath, because you are very quiet, after a while the breath might become fainter. You should not stop concentrating then, but instead continue to observe gently but intently this subtle breath as there is no doubt that you continue to breathe no matter how faint it might be.

When first watching or counting the breath it might feel somewhat artificial and mechanical, because in paying attention to the breath you feel you are controlling it more. You need to relax and be confident, then you will become naturally attuned to the breath and become one with it. The question, 'who does it?' will no longer be important. In the end, the breath does itself.

## JUST SITTING

In the Chinese Tsaotung tradition it is called 'Silent Illumination'. We sit quietly in a good sitting posture and are aware of the whole world and the whole of ourself in this moment. And the quiet brightness of the mind appears naturally as we remain still with no object of concentration but the sitting itself. Master Sheng Yen advises:

You must be at a stage where there is no problem becoming settled, when you can sit with unbroken concentration, with almost no outside thoughts ... [Otherwise] It is hard to tell whether your



mind is 'bright and open' or just blank. You can be idling, having very subtle thoughts, and believe you are practising Silent Illumination. You can be silent without illuminating anything.

In silent illumination, there is a gradual stilling of the mind and thoughts slowly become less powerful and more intermittent. They become as light as bubbles, and as insubstantial as froth as the brightness of the mind shines more fully. Hongzhi said:

Just expand and illuminate the original truth unconcerned by external conditions ... The deep source, transparent down to the bottom, can radiantly shine and can respond unencumbered to each speck of dust without becoming its partner ... Open-minded and bright without defilements, simply penetrate and drop off everything ... Immediately you can sparkle and respond to the world.

In the Japanese tradition, Dogen refers to the notion of Shikantaza, 'just sitting'. As Yasutani Roshi presents it:

Shikantaza is a practice in which the mind is intensely involved in just sitting ... The correct temper of mind therefore becomes doubly important. In Shikantaza, the mind must be unhurried yet at the same time firmly planted or massively composed, like Mount Fuji let us say. But it must also be alert, stretched, like a taut bowstring. So Shikantaza is a heightened state of concentrated awareness wherein one is neither tense nor hurried, and certainly never slack.

Shikantaza requires intense concentration. Sometimes one sees pictures of Zen monks sitting in the snow. They are not cold because of the heat generated by this intense concentration. Often it is recommended not to do Shikantaza for more than



thirty minutes at a time, as it is difficult for the body and the mind to keep up such a level of energy. Then one can do walking meditation for a little while and start again refreshed. At the beginning one might feel somewhat tense doing this practice, but after a while one can relax and rest in awareness without undue strain.

## WHAT IS THIS?

In Korea one generally practises the koan 'What is this?'. 'What is this?' comes from an encounter between the Sixth Patriarch Huineng and a young monk who became one of his foremost disciples, Huaijang.

Huaijang entered the room and bowed to Huineng. Huineng asked: 'Where do you come from?'

'I came from Mount Sung', replied Huaijang.

'What is this and how did it get here?' demanded Huineng.

Huaijang could not answer and remained speechless. He practised for many years until he understood. He went to see Huineng to tell him about his breakthrough.

Huineng asked: 'What is this?'

Huaijang replied: 'To say it is like something is not the point. But still it can be cultivated.'

*hwadu*  
The whole story is considered the koan and the question itself 'What is this?' the hwadu (C: huatou). One sits in meditation and asks again and again 'What is this? What is this?' What is it that moves, thinks, speaks? Even more before we think, move, speak, what is this? We are not asking about external objects: what is the carpet, the cup of tea, the sound of the bird? We turn the light back onto ourselves: what is this in this moment?



We have to be very careful, this is not an intellectual enquiry. We are not speculating with our mind. We are trying to become one with the question. The most important part of the question is not the meaning of the words themselves but the question mark. We are asking unconditionally 'What is this?' without looking for an answer, without expecting an answer. We are questioning for its own sake.

We are trying to develop a sensation of openness, of wonderment. As we throw out the question 'What is this?', we are opening ourselves to the mysterious nature of this moment. We are letting go of our need for knowledge and security. There is no place where we can rest. Our body and mind become a question.

In terms of concentration, we are returning to the question again and again. The question anchors us and brings us back to this moment. But we are not repeating the question like a mantra. These are not sacred words and it does not matter how many times we repeat them. What is important is that the questioning is alive, that the question is fresh each time we ask it. We are asking because we do not know. It is similar to when we lose some keys. We look and look and look and we have no idea where they are and we cannot find them anywhere. Whenever we think about the keys we experience a sensation of perplexity that is not intellectual, just a feeling of not-knowing.

There are several ways to ask the question. At the beginning especially we can connect the question with the breath. We breathe in, then as we breathe out, we ask 'What is this?'. Otherwise we can try to make the questioning like a circle, we ask gently but steadily, as soon as one 'What is this?' stops another 'What is this?' starts. Once our concentration is firmer, we can just ask the question from time to time and stay with the sensation of questioning it evokes. As soon as the sensation of questioning dissipates we raise the question again, using the words vividly.



In Japan one generally starts the study of koans by investigating the koan 'Mu!'. When Master Chaochou was asked if a dog had Buddha-nature, he said: 'Wu!'. This 'Wu!' is pronounced 'Mu' in Korean and Japanese. Some people take this 'Mu' as just an exclamation and when practising do not translate it. So the practice is to repeat inwardly the word 'Mu'. This is often associated with breathing from below the abdomen (tanden breathing). One tries to locate the Mu in the abdomen and become one with it.

Others translate the word 'Wu!' as 'nothing', 'without', 'no'. Then one is perplexed by this answer of Chaochou. The Buddha said that all beings have the Buddha-nature. So why did Chaochou say no? What did he mean by it? What was his state of mind before he said it? Then the practice becomes the enquiry of 'What is Mu?'. One continuously asks about Mu. One is perplexed by this Mu, one does not understand it, one does not know. Mu becomes a barrier that one has to pierce through. One cannot let it rest. Mu becomes like a mosquito trying to pierce our skin, infuriating. Yasutani Roshi said:

Don't let go of Mu even for a moment while sitting, standing, walking, eating, working ... To become lax even for a second is to separate yourself from Mu. Even when you go to bed continue to absorb yourself in Mu and when you awaken, awaken with your mind focused on Mu. At every moment your entire attention must be concentrated on penetrating Mu ... You will become enlightened only after you have poured the whole force of your being into oneness with Mu ... Once you realize Mu, you know that nothing can be opposed to it, since everything is Mu ... In the intense asking, 'What is Mu?' you bring the reasoning mind to an impasse, void of every thought ... Trying to answer 'What is Mu?'

## OBSTACLES

There are many difficulties one might encounter as one goes on a Zen retreat, especially at the beginning. The first obstacle we are challenged by is pain. It is not only the physical pain of sitting in one posture for thirty minutes or so cross-legged, but also the mental pain of being still for a certain period of time. One is not used to this. The physical pain improves over time. One can also do some stretching exercises like yoga to help limbs become more supple. But it is much easier to sit if one's mind accepts and experiences that there is nothing else to do at that moment. Then one can rest in stillness and clarity.

It is important to remember that everyone is different in mind and in body. It might be easy for someone to sit in full-lotus and difficult for someone else to sit in the Burmese position even with many cushions. One of the rules should be that if the pain disappears as soon as one stands up and walks then it is negligible. However, if the pain in the knees or ankles continues for some time one needs to find a different posture and combination of cushions and stool or otherwise just use a chair.

Some teachers insist on traditional zazen in half-lotus at least, some think it is more important for the mind to be concentrated on the question than to spend most of our time worrying about the pain. It is important to notice that the way we feel about any pain can depend very much on what is going on with our mind. If we are totally engrossed in daydreams, we do not feel any twinges. If we are concentrated, we feel relaxed and solid in the posture. Sometimes being at one with the pain can make it dissolve. However, we are on the whole half-concentrated and half-distracted so then we notice pain strongly, start to identify with it and worry: is my knee going to fall off? Will I ever walk again?



## SLEEPINESS

Another obstacle is sleepiness or dullness of mind. As soon as we sit down we feel heavy and listless and start to nod. There, two things need to be considered. Did we work very hard before we came to the retreat? Are our body and mind excessively tired? Or is it that we feel fit and awake in other activities but when we sit we become very sleepy, yet as soon as the bell rings the end of the sitting we feel wide awake again. Then sleepiness arises out of escapism, not wanting to deal with ourselves and the intensity of the practice.

There are various remedies to this problem. The first one is to remind ourselves of our intention: Why did we come to this retreat? What inspired us to make that decision? Intention is a strong part of what will give impetus to our practice. The other thing we need to do is to observe our posture: as soon as we slouch, our mind will become dull. This is one of the reasons why so much emphasis is put on having a good posture in Zen. A straight, relaxed back will keep us fresh and alert. We might need to open our eyes wide for a few minutes to bring more light into our consciousness. If all else fails, we can remind ourselves that death is only one breath away. Would we be so sleepy if we reflected that we could die tonight or tomorrow?

## BUSY BODY, BUSY MIND

Another obstacle is restlessness in the body and in the mind. First we feel we cannot sit still, we have pain in the knee, we have an itch in the lower back, we move this way and that way, and things only improve for a few minutes. We nearly feel like we are sitting on an ant heap. It is very important then to just sit still and relax into the posture and not give in to impatience. We need to rest in the moment, in the meditation and stop fighting.



When we begin to sit in meditation we realize with horror that our mind seems never to be still. It is running here and there to this memory, that plan, images, worries, dreams, grievances, desire for food or sex. It is very hard to stop this continuous agitation. Sitting still helps. The purpose of concentration is to slow down this ever-frenetic process. As we come back again and again with steadiness and determination to the object of concentration, our thoughts become less busy, we start to see the patterns of mind that keep us from being present.

We notice the tendency we have to daydream. This generally starts with the words: 'if I had ...', 'if I was ...'. In the daydream we are the actor, director, screenwriter, producer. We have total control over this imagined reality and it is extremely pleasant. We can spend hours doing this, meditation passes very swiftly then, we do not even notice if we have pain in our legs.

We might have a tendency to ruminate over some pain or hurt we have suffered in the past. As we sit in meditation, we'll go over the story again and again until we have had enough of that painful reminiscence and then move the ruminations to the future and plot revenge, going over which scenario would bring the most revenge and satisfaction. This habit will certainly not lead to more wisdom and compassion.

On a silent retreat it is easy to fabricate stories out of nothing or very little. The teacher or another retreatant seems to look at you funny. You wonder what is wrong with you and spin a great story about that. Then you might decide that actually there must be something wrong with them to look at you like that and you spin another story. In actual fact they probably just had a twinge in the stomach or some dust in their eyes.

Sometimes we have a tendency to plan. We plan how we are going to meditate later; how much we will eat at lunchtime; what we will do at the end of the retreat when we are finally enlightened; what kind of pension we should get for our old



age. Or we judge fairly constantly: are we sitting well or not; is the teacher speaking well or not; is the person sitting next to you bowing properly. We have many such tendencies that we start to see more clearly as we meditate and as we concentrate we start to dissolve the power of these habits over our mind.

## EXPECTATIONS

The higher the expectations we have of what a retreat will do for us, the less likely it is to happen. It is important to be inspired in order to achieve something. However, the more set the goal and the time to achieve it, the more pressure we will put on ourselves. Zen is about openness, not-knowing, questioning, looking freshly at the world and ourselves. We cannot fix and solidify what is unpredictable. The ancient Zen masters had their own experiences which are unrepeatable because each person's practice and set of circumstances are different. We need to let go of our desires even towards awakening and special experiences. What will happen will happen; just be sincere, determined and open.

Sometimes we might experience special states when we meditate intensely. We might feel ourselves dissolving. We might be without any grasping for a few minutes, totally at one with the question or 'Mu!'. We might experience bliss or a total open heart and love. We have to be careful not to grasp at these experiences and want to replicate them exactly again and again. They come, they nourish us, they show us that we can be different from what we generally think we are. By grasping at them and fixing them we stop ourselves from opening to even better experiences that we might never have dreamt about.

We also have to be careful when we leave the retreat not to grasp at that either. Your daily life situation is very different from the circumstances of a retreat in silence, with the guidance



100 of a teacher, with a certain discipline, the support of the group and long periods in meditation. We can continue to meditate daily but in a way which fits our circumstances, a little at a time throughout the day whenever there is a gap and nothing is happening. It is useful to continue to meditate formally for ten to thirty minutes a day as regularly as we can manage with our schedule and family. It can also help to join a sitting group once a week or every month to give us support, so we do not feel alone in our Zen journey.

