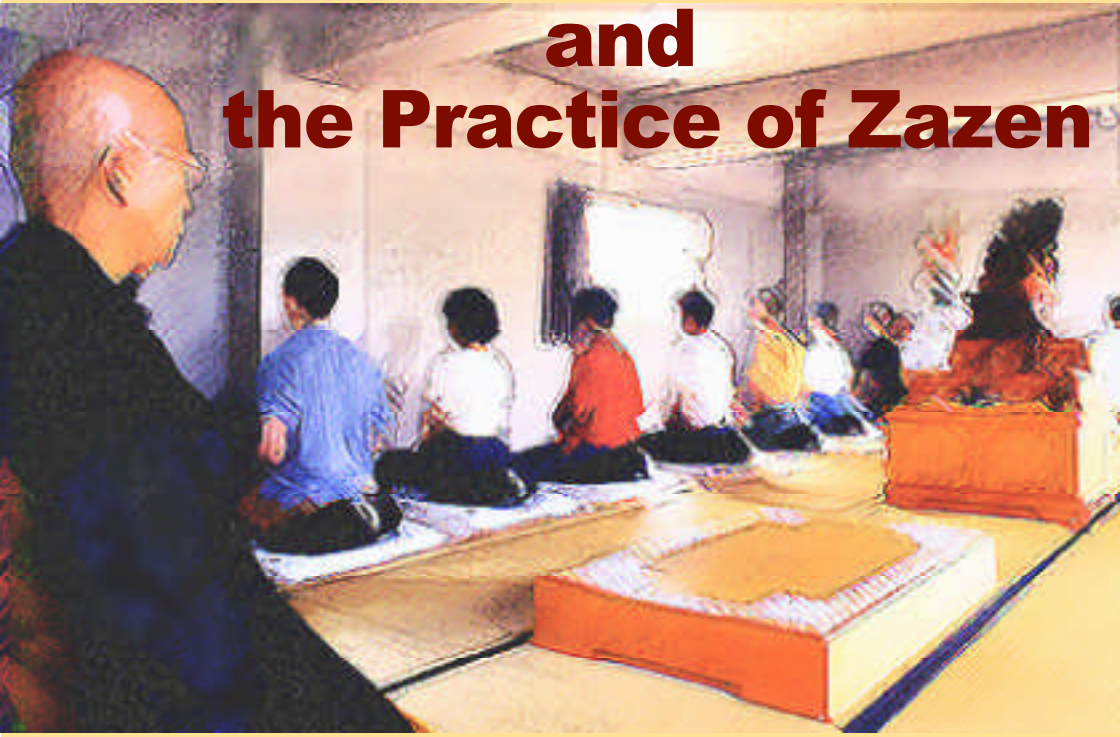
Introduction to Buddhism and the Practice of Zazen



The Teachings of Gudo Nishijima Roshi

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PUBLICATIONS

Gautama Buddha (463–383 B.C.)

Master Bodhidharma (470–543)

Master Dogen (1200–1253)

Master Kodo Sawaki (1880–1965)

Gudo Nishijima Roshi (1919–)

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Foreward

We are living in an age in which religion has lost its power, in an age where scientific belief reigns supreme. In this situation, the rational explanations that scientific research provide for the phenomena around us are convincing, and we can no longer feel satisfied with the spiritual explanations that had such a powerful role in the development of western civilization up to the eighteenth century.

Science has illuminated so many of the corners which were unknown to our ancestors that we have come to accept scientific explanations in preference to religious explanations.

But belief in science, that is materialism, cannot satisfy us as a full explanation of reality because it is a one-sided view. Science can explain how, but it cannot explain why. Science cannot provide us with an ethical or moral basis for living our daily lives.

In this situation many people feel a loss of direction. They cannot find a belief system to follow. Science does not satisfy their need for moral guidance. Traditional religions are not believable in the face of scientific discovery. They can see no pattern in the way that life unfolds, and things seem hopeless.

In Japan today, most people have no religion. This may seems strange to people of other countries but it is true. The national religion of "Tennosei" or Emperor worship, a religion which was part political manipulation and part fanaticism, perished with Japan's defeat in World War II, and since that time most Japanese have followed the path of materialism in their efforts to rebuild an abundant and comfortable society. This lack of religious belief is increasingly troubling the young people of Japan.

I was born in 1919, and I was also raised in a period where people lacked any strong religious convictions. I felt unfulfilled as a teenager, and was constantly struck by questions such as "What is truth?", "What is religion?", "What are we living for?"

I looked to Shintoism, then to Christianity and to Marxism in my search, but could not find the answers I wanted. I looked for idealistic answers and materialistic answers, but was unconvinced by either.

Then I met Master Kodo Sawaki, a famous Buddhist master. I was struck forcibly by what he said. He said that both idealism and materialism were wrong. He said that both left and right were wrong. He said that the truth that Buddhism taught is the middle way between the two. He said that in order to find that middle way Buddhism urges us to practice Zazen. So I practiced Zazen and attended Master Kodo's lectures for some years. I also began to read the works of Master Dogen, the 13th century monk who was the founder of the Soto sect of Buddhism to which Master Kodo belonged. Among the many works of Master Dogen is a book called Shobogenzo—*The Right Dharma-Eye Treasury*. Shobogenzo is a very difficult book. When I read it for the first time I understood nothing. I was astonished to find a book written in my own language of which I could understand nothing. Of course I could read the characters, but I could catch hardly anything of the meaning. At the same time, I sensed that the book contained something valuable, and may be the source of Master Kodo's teachings that had struck me so forcibly.

From that time, I began to study Shobogenzo, and it took me about 35 years to come to a complete understanding of the book. During that time I translated it into modern Japanese and also

into English. As I slowly gained an understanding of what Master Dogen was saying in Shobogenzo, I was greatly surprised. Why? Because Shobogenzo explains a very philosophical and rational Buddhism—a Buddhism very different from the usual view of Buddhism. In Shobogenzo, the Buddhist world view is laid out very clearly, and the fundamental principles are expounded logically. If Shobogenzo is so clear and logical, you may be wondering why it took me so long to understand the book. The answer lies in the fact that the Buddhist world view is so radically different from our ordinary way of viewing the world. I will come back to this point later.

Master Dogen's main teaching in Shobogenzo is that Buddhism emanates from the practice of Zazen; Buddhism **IS** the practice of Zazen, and the practice of Zazen **IS** Buddhism. He quite naturally insists that where there is no practice of Zazen, there is no Buddhism. He says that true Buddhism, which was passed from Gautama Buddha down through many generations of buddhas to him, was passed down in this practice itself. I have been practicing Zazen for more than 60 years now, and I have come to believe wholeheartedly what Master Dogen says. This is why I want to spread his teachings throughout the world.

With this as my mission, I have been lecturing on Shobogenzo in Tokyo and abroad in order to pass the teachings of Buddhism to all those people in the world who are seeking the truth. This book is one outcome of my efforts.

This book, however, does not go too deeply into the philosophical side of Buddhism; it explains how you can practice Zazen. On the one hand a much larger book is needed to lay out the theories of Buddhism. And on the other hand, Zazen is the

essence of Buddhism. Although theories have intellectual appeal, the pulsing heart of Buddhism is in the act of Zazen itself.

Among the flood of English books on Buddhism, there are relatively few books that explain true Buddhism based on Master Dogen's teachings. I am happy if this book fulfills its purpose in introducing the essential Buddhist viewpoint to the world.

Gudo Wafu Nishijima

Tokyo 1999

Zazen and Buddhism

The word *zazen* is made up of the Japanese words *za*, to sit, and *zen*. The word *zen* comes from the Chinese word *ch'an* which in turn is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyana* meaning "meditation." Various forms of sitting meditation existed before the birth of Gautama Buddha. For instance, the meditation forms of Yoga and so on. In Buddhism we are interested in the practice which is sitting in the same position—in the same state of body and mind—as Gautama Buddha. In this posture we experience Dharma, the simple reality that is in front of us, just as it is, without any filtering by thoughts, hopes, intentions, ambitions, likes and dislikes.

The Buddhist Teachings

Although the simple act of sitting in Zazen seems almost too simple to be interesting, it is very important to notice that in our normal daily lives, we are always interpreting the world in front of us, and rarely just "being" in this world as it is. So sitting in the posture of Zazen is a way to experience simply "being" in the world, rather than the intention-laden attitude of "becoming" that forms such a large part of our everyday activities.

The Three Treasures

Buddhism traditionally reveres three "treasures": Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Buddha

Buddha refers to Gautama Buddha, the establisher of Buddhism.

He was born about 463 B.C. on the border between what is now Nepal and India, the son of a king of the Sakya clan. When he was 29 years old he left the palace in search of the meaning of life, and after several years, when he was 35 or 36, after adopting a simple method of physical practice that balanced his body and mind, he discovered what he had been searching for; he found that the world exists just at this time and in this place, and that the whole universe is splendid just as it is. For many years he taught his disciples about the simple practice and what it meant as the essential truth that all human beings should know. Gautama Buddha was not a god, but a man. And he taught that we can all return to our original state, which is serene and peaceful. His teachings are not spiritual, but essentially humanistic; with this simple practice we can all attain our perfection as human beings.

Dharma

Dharma refers to both Gautama Buddha's teachings, and to the simple reality or truth that exists in front of us. Gautama Buddha taught that the real world in which we exist at this moment is not the same as our thoughts about it, and not the same as our perceptions of it. He said that the real world that he had awoken to was different from the abstract image of it that we all carry around and constantly refer to. And he called the real experience of "what is here and now" Dharma: reality or truth.

Sangha

Gautama Buddha organized his disciples into priests, nuns, laymen and laywomen, and this structure has been continued to the present day. We call it the Sangha. It is the Buddhist family.

Right Action

Buddhism affirms the central importance of morals and ethical behavior in all areas of life. However, its approach to moral behavior is very different from the teachings of other religions. Although Buddhism believes in right action, it insists that right action is not the same as our concept of right action; that moral action does not always match our conceived notions of morality. The reason is that Buddhism believes that only this place and this moment are real, and all else—past and future—are not real existence. It therefore follows that the only place where conduct can be right or wrong is here and now. So Buddhism emphasizes that right and wrong are concerned with the present moment, here and now. Acting morally means acting right at this very moment. Acting right at this moment is the only true morality. Of course we can discuss right and wrong as abstract concepts, but those abstractions are always divorced from the real situation in front of us now, and so they are partial and can never be a complete guide to our action in the present.

Cause and Effect

Buddhism says that cause and effect is absolute; that there is no area that is not governed by cause and effect. In this way, there is no conflict between Buddhist belief and the tenets of science. Buddhism affirms totally the basis on which science proceeds, and then goes further. It says that cause and effect operate in both the mental and physical domains. The simple insistence of the Buddha is probably the hardest of all to follow: Right conduct will bring happiness; wrong conduct will bring unhappiness.

Four World Views

Gautama Buddha taught that there are four fundamental viewpoints, and this same teaching was also elucidated by Nagarjuna in 2nd century India and by Dogen Zenji in 13th century Japan. Two of these viewpoints are basic to western civilization, but the other two viewpoints are unique to Buddhism. The first viewpoint is based on thought, and is usually known as idealism. It embraces the subjective view, and most branches of philosophy. The second viewpoint is based on matter, and is usually termed materialism. It includes all the sciences, and is an objective, physical view of the world. The third viewpoint is unique to Buddhism and it is based on action. The viewpoint of action has developed from the fact that when we are acting fully in the present moment, we are part of an unbroken "wholeness" that we call reality or Dharma. In the state of action, we do not form abstractions of what is in front of us, but simply act in the unbroken wholeness of the moment. The fourth viewpoint is not strictly a viewpoint at all, but refers to the experience of living in the real world itself. Just as the Universe contains all things and phenomena, living in the real world embraces all viewpoints.

The Philosophy of Action

The idealistic and materialist viewpoints, and the philosophies that have emerged from those viewpoints are familiar to us all, but a philosophy based on action needs some explanation, as it forms the heart of Buddhist philosophical teachings.

To construct a theory of the present, to understand how time works, and thus our existence itself, we have to say that we live

in a succession of moments, which we can imagine as progressing rather like the frames of a film. Each moment is complete in itself, but we think of existence here and now as being linked to past moments and headed towards future moments because this is the only way we can think about it. Actually, each moment is bound by the past and yet always free. This sounds like an unsolvable paradox if we think about it. But this is the real situation in which we live, moment by moment. This is something we confirm in our own existence, and especially in Zazen.

Action in the moment of the present is utterly free. This is the philosophy of action, the philosophy of the present moment. And to act fully in the present is to throw away idealistic thinking and materialistic perceptions.

This freedom in the moment presents us with a choice: to do right or to do wrong. The choice is not an intellectual choice—it is a choice in the moment of our action—a choice we make with our act itself. Master Dogen writes in Shobogenzo: "*Even though the many kinds of right are included in [the concept of] rightness, there has never been any kind of right that is realized beforehand and that then waits for someone to do it.*"

The philosophy of action points to the middle path between the over-confident optimism of the idealist and the deterministic pessimism of the materialist. In action we are both bound and free.

What do we experience in Zazen?

Zazen is the simplest form of action, and when we are practicing Zazen we do not intentionally think about anything or concentrate on our feelings and perceptions. We sit in a simple non-

discriminating state where our body-and-mind are balanced and undivided. However, in order to discuss the state in Zazen we cannot avoid making divisions and categorizations. In spite of these categorizations, the actual experience of Zazen remains a wholistic one.

We can describe four aspects in the practice of Zazen. They are: 1) Different from thinking; 2) Making the body right; 3) Oneness of body-and-mind; and 4) Oneness with the Universe.

1. Different from Thinking

The state in Zazen is without intention and is different from thinking. This statement sounds strange as we normally believe that we are always thinking. We avoid intentionally following a train of thought during Zazen by concentrating on maintaining the posture. Of course spontaneous thoughts and images arise in our consciousness during Zazen, but they are not important. When we notice that we are thinking about something, we should simply stop. If we correct our posture, the thought or perception will disappear and our consciousness will slowly become clear and we will feel peaceful. In this peaceful and balanced state, we are in the state that is "different from thinking."

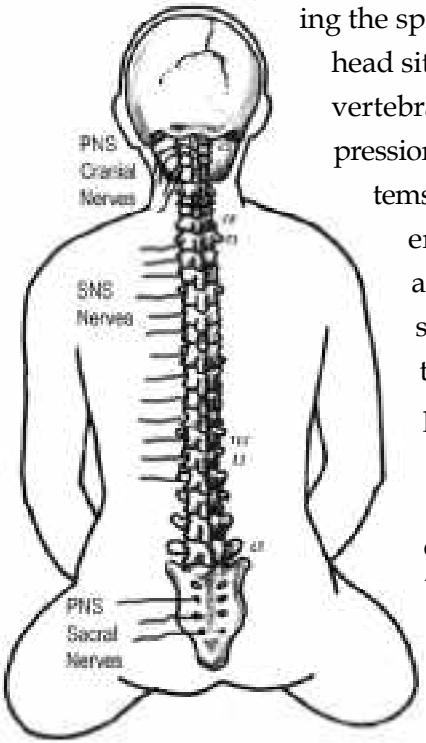
However, if we intentionally try to attain the state that is different from thinking, we can never do so. When our consciousness is full of thoughts and feelings during Zazen, we should leave our state as it is. Our worries will bubble to the surface and evaporate into the universe! In this way, by concentrating on the posture, we will return naturally to our original state during our practice.

2. Making the Body Right—a Balanced Autonomic Nervous System

In Zazen we sit on a cushion on the floor with both legs crossed, and with our lower spine, upper spine, and head held straight vertically. Keeping the spine straight has a direct and immediate effect on the autonomic nervous system that controls many of our body's functions. Its effects include control of heart rate and force of contraction, constriction and dilatation of blood vessels, contraction and relaxation of smooth muscle in various organs, the ability to focus the eyes and the size of the pupils, and the secretion of hormones from various glands directly into the blood stream.

The autonomic nervous system is composed of two subsystems: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. When the sympathetic nervous system is stimulated, our heart rate increases, arteries and veins constrict, the lungs relax, and our pupils dilate; in short, we become tense and alert. When the parasympathetic nervous system is stimulated, the opposite happens; our heart rate decreases, arteries and veins dilate, the lungs contract, and the pupils constrict. You can see that the two systems prepare the body for an active or passive response—sometimes known as the "fight or flight" syndrome. When the effect of the two systems on the organs is in balance, we are neither ready to fight, nor ready to run away; we are in a normal state.

The parasympathetic nerves emerge from the spinal chord at the base of the spine (the second, third and fourth sacral vertebrae) and through the cranial vertebrae in the neck, whereas the sympathetic nerves emerge from the spinal chord through the middle vertebrae in the back (the T1 to L2 vertebrae). Keep-



ing the spine normally upright, with the head sitting squarely on the top of the vertebral column minimizes the compression of the nerves of these two systems at the points where the nerves emerge through the vertebrae, and ensures an uninterrupted supply of blood, allowing them to function normally. When the parasympathetic and sympathetic systems are both working normally, they function in opposition to give us a state of balance of body-and-mind; not too tense, and not too relaxed, not overly optimistic or pessimistic; not too aggressive and not too passive. It is this physical state of balance in the autonomic nervous system that give rise to what we call a balanced body-and-mind.

In addition to this, sitting in the upright posture, where the force of gravity acts down through the spine onto the pelvis, is a position in which our body's reflexes can work efficiently to integrate the functioning of the whole body.

3. Oneness of Body and Mind in the Present Moment

Usually we think there is something that is called "mind" and something else called "body" and that the two are separate, although they have a great effect on each other. In Buddhism we believe that body and mind are two sides of one entity, which

we call "myself," but that we actually cannot fully grasp. We believe that every mental phenomenon has a physical side, and every physical phenomenon has a mental side. We do not believe in the independent existence of something called "mind" that is separate from the physical body, brain, nervous system, and so on. When we sit in Zazen, because we do not concentrate on thoughts, or perceptions, our body-and-mind exist undivided in the present moment. When our mind is in the ordinary state and our autonomic nervous system is balanced, we are in the "balanced state of body-and-mind."

4. Oneness with the Universe

When we are practicing Zazen, not only can we say that body-and-mind are one; we are also sitting in the state where there is no distinction between ourselves and the external circumstances—the world around us. Most people have at some time experienced this simple feeling of oneness with everything, and in Zazen we can notice that it is not just a feeling, but the actual state of things in the present moment. When we are sitting in Zazen we are one with the Universe, and the state includes all things and phenomena. In that sense, although we are experiencing the state, we cannot grasp it intellectually. We cannot describe it completely. We call the state "ineffable," or "dharma," or "truth," or "reality." But even these words are inadequate to describe the simple and original state that we return to in Zazen.

What Do We Need To Practice Zazen?

Zazen needs the minimum of space; just enough space to sit with crossed legs. In Shobogenzo, Master Dogen describes the ideal

conditions for practicing Zazen:

"For sitting in Zazen a quiet place is good. Prepare a thick sitting mat. Do not allow wind and smoke to enter. Do not allow rain and dew to leak in. Set aside an area that can contain the body… The sitting place should be bright…"

Zafu—A Cushion for Zazen

The zafu is a round cushion that is used for Zazen. A medium-sized zafu is about 14 or 15 inches (38 cm) across, with a circumference of about 45 inches (115 cm), but you can choose the size of the zafu to suit yourself. The zafu is packed tight with kapok so that it will still hold a height of 4 or 5 inches (12 cm) when you are sitting on it; a soft zafu is not ideal. Of course it is possible to practice without a zafu, using a blanket folded several times, a rolled-up bedspread, or a couple of ordinary firm cushions placed one on top of the other.

Zabuton—A Mat for the Floor

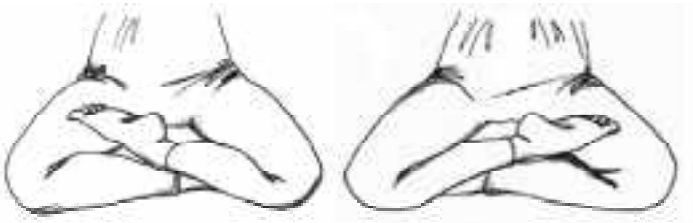
The floors in most western houses are hard, and so it is better to place your zafu in a room that is well-carpeted, or place a mat under the zafu. The Japanese-style mat or zabuton is about 2 feet square and loosely packed with cotton or kapok to give a cushion effect for the legs. When traveling, I sometime practice Zazen on the bed, provided it has a firm mattress, using a rolled-up blanket or pillows as a zafu.

How to Practice Zazen

Place the mat and zafu on the floor about 2.5 feet (90 cm) away from a plain wall. Traditionally we practice Zazen facing the wall, and there are two sitting styles; both of them are authentic methods. We will begin by describing the one easiest for most beginners: the half-lotus style.

Half-Lotus Posture

First, sit on the zafu with your buttocks resting on the center of it, facing the wall. Then bend one knee, bring the foot as close to the zafu as you comfortably can, and turn the knee outwards so

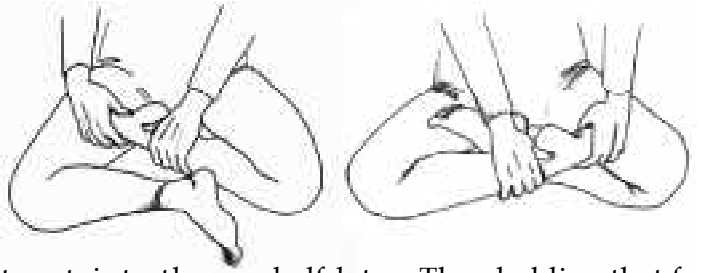


that its outer surface touches the mat. Next put the foot of your other leg on the opposite thigh.

Yes, of course it is rather difficult for beginners. So if it becomes too painful at first, you can change sides, placing the opposite foot on the thigh. As you practice regularly, your legs will become more flexible and this posture will become easier and more natural. If you feel that sitting in one position all the time is putting an unequal stress on your pelvis, you can change sides after a few months of practice.

Full-lotus posture

The lotus position is the standard advanced posture for Zazen.

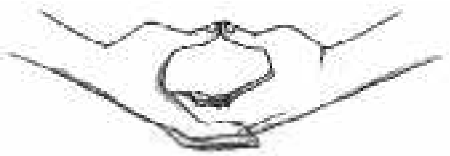


First, get into the half-lotus. Then holding that foot in place on your thigh, grip the opposite foot with your hand and lift it up onto the opposite thigh. Then your legs will be crossed with one foot on each thigh, and (hopefully) your knees will be resting on the mat.

This position will be uncomfortable and feel unnatural for most beginners, but with practice it will come to be quite comfortable. You will find it a lot easier to sit in this position after practicing the half-lotus for some time to loosen up your legs and ankles.

The Hands

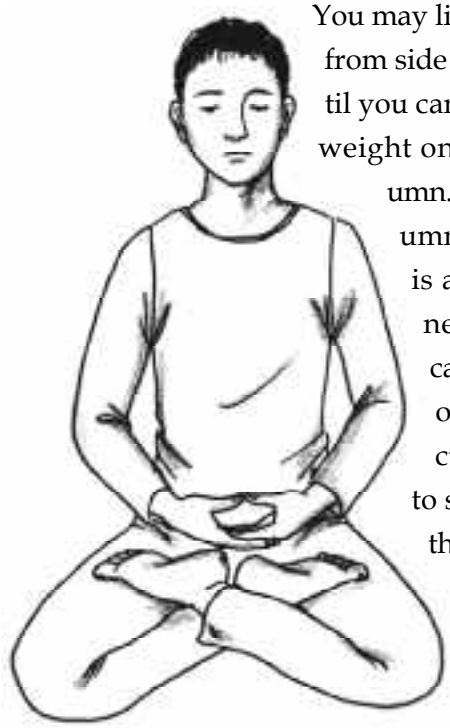
With your legs in the half- or full-lotus posture, place your hands in your lap. Place both hands facing up, with the fingers of the lower hand supporting the fingers of the upper hand. If your right foot is uppermost, then your left



hand should be the lower one, and vice versa. Curve your hands into an oval, so that your thumbs touch. Your thumbs should meet at approximately the height of your navel, and be resting lightly against your body. Hold your arms away from your sides a little, and allow your shoulders to relax.

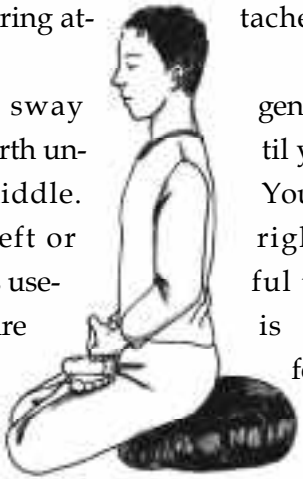
The Head and Neck

With your legs and arms positioned, stretch your back upwards.



You may like to rock your head slightly from side to side and front to back until you can feel it sitting under its own weight on the top of your spinal column. Imagine that your spinal column with your head on the top is a column of bricks that you need to keep balanced vertically to prevent them toppling over. The spine has a natural curvature and we should aim to stretch the spine upwards in this balanced posture without straining. To keep the back naturally straight and balanced vertically is the most important point in practicing Zazen. People get into the habit of sitting with their backs relaxed and rounded forward, but in Zazen we sit with the back straight. Holding the lower back straight sometimes takes some initial effort to overcome our daily habit, by pushing the buttocks out slightly and the stomach out forward. With the head

balanced on the top of the spinal column, pull the chin down and back slightly and stretch the neck upward as if being pulled up by a string attached to the crown of the head.



In this posture, sway gently from side to side and then back and forth until you find a position of balance in the middle. Your body should not be leaning to the left or right, backwards or forwards. At first it is useful to ask a friend to check that your posture is correct. This straightness may not feel familiar or comfortable at first, since we rarely sit up straight. This straightness is not rigidity, and it uses the body's natural balance to stay in the position.

To hold our spine naturally straight is the essence of Zazen. Keeping our spine straight allows us to enter a calm and balanced state of body-and-mind.

The Mouth

Close your mouth and your teeth. Breathe normally through your nose. Don't count your breaths. Let your tongue sit naturally behind your teeth.

The Eyes

Keep your eyes open naturally; you need neither open your eyes unusually wide, nor half close your eyes. Focus your eyes naturally on a spot on the wall about a yard or so in front of you, looking downwards at an angle of roughly 45 degrees; don't sit with your eyes unfocussed.

Beginning Zazen

Sitting in the balanced posture I have described, take in a deep breath and let it out. Then sway the upper body two or three times to the right and left like a metronome, coming to rest in the center. Then begin the practice.

Traditionally, when we meet to practice Zazen, we walk up to face the zafu and bows with joined hands to our own seat, and then turn clockwise to face outwards and bow to the other members in the room, before turning to the zafu once again and taking up the posture. Then a bell is struck three times as a signal that Zazen is beginning.

Some sects of Buddhism teach that we should practice abdominal breathing or deliberately count our breaths. Some also use koans, or Buddhist stories to meditate upon. But these techniques are not part of the authentic practice. With the eyes open naturally and the mouth closed naturally, we do not need to control our breathing, or concentrate on thinking or feeling. Sitting simply in the balanced posture is the beginning and end of Zazen. And it is this simple state, which we call "experiencing reality," or "experiencing the truth," that Buddhist masters used as the basis for their teachings.

Finishing Zazen

When you finish Zazen, just remain quiet and calm for a while. Don't be in a hurry to stand up. If your legs have gone to sleep, move them around until the feeling comes back and then stand up slowly. Traditionally, a bell is struck once when Zazen ends. After standing up, we straighten our clothing and, facing the zafu, bow once with joined hands, and turn to face outwards and bow again.

How to Practice Kinhin

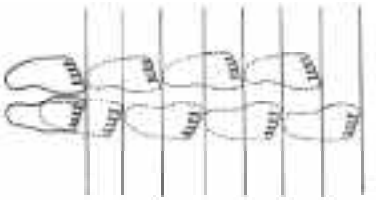
Kinhin is the slow, traditional way of walking to cure numbness of the legs or to shake off sleepiness, while still allowing us to retain the calm and peaceful state of Zazen. After finishing Zazen, bow to your own seat with joined hands, and then turn outwards and bow to the other members in the room.

The Hands

Make a fist with your left hand, with the thumb tucked inside, and place it against the solar plexus with the back of the hand up. Cover the left fist with the open right hand; then position your elbows so that your two arms are in a straight line.

Walking

Turn to the left to make a line with the other members. Moving off with your right foot, move it forward half the length of your left foot. Then move your left foot forward half the length of your right foot. Then repeat with the right, and so on. Time your slow walking so that one step corresponds roughly to one inhalation-exhalation. Walking in Kinhin is very slow and your posture is important; try to maintain the same state as during Zazen. Walk in a straight line, and when you meet a wall or obstacle, turn to the right at right angles and maintain your pace, again starting off from the right foot.



Posture

You should stand comfortably erect, as if you were suspended from a point at the crown of your head, with your vertebrae in alignment. The body should not lean either to the left or the right, nor be tilted forward or back. The spine should assume the minimal curve natural to the human body. The curve should not be accentuated by tilting the pelvis back or forward, nor holding the shoulders back or rounding them forward.

The Eyes

Do not look around while walking in Kinhin; focus your gaze naturally on an area about six feet in front of you.

Starting and Stopping Kinhin

Formally, at the end of Zazen, the bell is struck twice to signify the end of Zazen and the start of Kinhin. After walking in Kinhin for between 10 and 15 minutes, the bell is struck once. Stop walking and bow once. Then continue in the same direction and walk back to your zafu at normal speed. The bell is then struck three times to signify the start of the next Zazen.

Some Words About Zazen

When we sit in Zazen, we are sitting in the same state as Gautama Buddha, and this is true of beginners and experienced practitioners equally. In Shobogenzo, Master Dogen says "*…a beginner's*

pursuit of the truth is just the whole body of the original state of experience."

The most important thing of all is to practice Zazen every day. If there is an interval of only a few days between our practice, we lose our simple state of balance because of the hectic and stressful nature of modern life. Although some students of Buddhism practice Zazen rigorously for long periods by going to a temple, and that practice is of great value, the true meaning of Zazen emerges only from daily practice over a long period.

It is better, where possible, to practice Zazen early in the day, just after you get up—to set the tone for the day—but you need to find a routine that suits your own lifestyle and try to maintain it. If you practice Zazen for a short while before you go to bed, your sleep will be more comfortable, and you will awake more refreshed the next day. If you set yourself a simple routine of practicing first thing in the morning and last thing at night, you will be establishing the most important base of your life as a Buddhist. Where your routine does not allow this, do what you can and aim to maintain it. If you have children, your mornings may be busy, and you may have to wait before you can get some time to yourself. Aim where possible to practice twice a day, building up to a total of one hour per day. On Sundays or holidays, extra periods of practice will reinforce your state of balance and give you peace of mind through the week.

You will also benefit from maintaining the same naturally upright posture of Zazen during your daily life, especially when sitting for long periods at a desk during working hours or when watching television. Doing so will help you to maintain a light and alert state throughout the week.

The regular practice of Zazen is the most important factor in Buddhist life. To continue the practice may sometimes prove difficult, especially when we are very busy. But paradoxically it is at these times that Zazen will bring us the greatest benefit. Rather than dropping the practice, try to practice even for just a short time to maintain your routine, coming back to your original practice period when your life is less busy. Even a few minutes sitting in the Zazen posture has great benefit.

Freedom in Action

Gautama Buddha's most basic teaching was "Don't do wrong, do right." The important thing here is our conduct. He explained that right conduct is always a balance between two factors: activity and passivity, optimism and pessimism, tension and relaxation, and he explained that we can attain this balanced conduct, not by intentionally endeavoring to correct our wrong actions, but by practicing Zazen. The practice returns us to the simple peaceful balance that we often enjoyed as children, where we are fully involved in the present, and unclouded by intellectual judgments of right and wrong. In Buddhism, to do right is simple action, not the result of thinking.

People who are drawn to practice Zazen are sometimes rather serious, conscientious people, who are not interested in the trivial matters of life, and who find it easy to become concerned with what is right and wrong, good and bad. However, we should endeavor to keep this reflective or judgmental attitude to life under control. In Fukan-zazengi—*A Guide To The Practice of Zazen*, Master Dogen says "*Cast aside all involvements. Give the myriad things a rest. Do not think of good and bad. Do not consider right and*

wrong. Stop the driving movement of mind, will, consciousness." As Buddhists we rely wholly on Zazen. When we are in the balanced state of body-and-mind, our actions at the moment of the present are balanced.

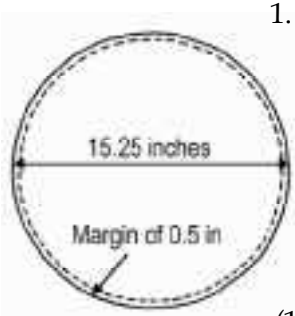
Zazen Is Not an Ascetic Practice

Some people look upon Zazen as a kind of ascetic practice leading to some special "enlightened" state. They practice when they should be sleeping, when they should be eating, and try to make conditions severe for themselves in the practice. It is very clear that Gautama Buddha himself rejected ascetic practices, and Buddhism has never been asceticism. In Fukan-zazengi, Master Dogen advises "*take food and drink in moderation,*" and "*to be warm in winter and cool in summer is the way.*" Zazen is not intended to be excruciatingly painful. Although there may be pain sometimes as our body adjusts to the posture, we can never return to the simple natural state that is our original character by forcing ourselves to perform extreme acts of devotion.

How to Make a Zafu

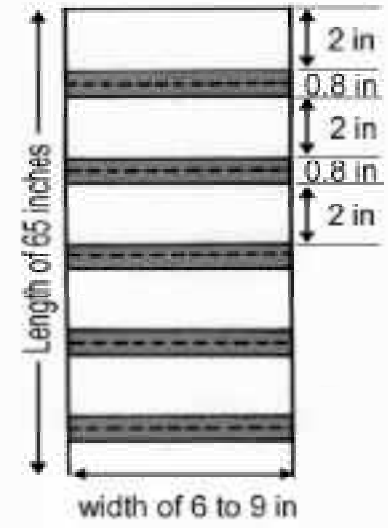
You will need:

- non-slippery black cloth (such as velveteen)
- about 2 lbs (1 kilo) of kapok, or an equivalent stuffing if kapok is unavailable
- strong black thread
- sewing needle and pins



1. Cut two circles of cloth that are 15¼" (38 cm) in diameter.

2. Cut a strip of cloth 65" (165 cm) in length. The width of the cloth will determine the height of the finished zafu, which depends on the length of the user's thigh, and can vary from 6" to 9" (15 to 23 cm). (If your piece of cloth is small, sew together several smaller strips to make the long strip.)



3. Gather both edges of the long strip of cloth into folds each about ¾" wide, and about 2" apart. The folds should overlap the good side of the cloth. Leave a 3" flap of cloth with no folds at the end of the strip.
4. Pin each fold in place (or sew with big stitches that you take out later—this is basting).
5. Pin or baste the long strip to the two circles, leaving ½" of cloth as a margin. The good side of the cloth faces inward, and the folds face outward. Leave the part with no folds loose—it forms a flap on the completed zafu.
6. Sew the long strip and the circles together. (If you basted the pieces together, remove the basting threads afterwards.)
7. Turn the zafu right side out.
8. Use the gap in the side of the zafu to stuff it very tightly with kapok and then tuck the flap inside. The zafu must retain its shape and thickness even when you sit on it. Thump the zafu to distribute the kapok evenly.