

About Meditation - by Diane Martin



A meditation group should meet once a week. The official 40 minute sit is one way, or for beginners, a 20 minute sit, followed by 10 minutes (kinhin) meditation, then followed by the remaining 20 minute sitting is helpful until people get their "sea legs".

There are five official postures possible:

- 1) full-lotus
- 2) half-lotus
- 3) Burmese-which is just having the legs folded on the floor in front of you
- 4) up on one's knees with the pillow put between the legs from behind
- 5) in a straight-back chair

If during a sitting folks need to change positions ,the etiquette is to bow to the wall, then change. It's certainly okay to change once, but that's why the 20 minute at a time is good because most people can do it right off. People need to try to attain stillness of body with silent breathing.

As a concentration aid, people can either count their breaths (on the exhale) to 10, or simply be-with the breath. One point of concentration in the ancient scriptures on breathing awareness is to put the mind on a point on the left nostril to be aware of the breath as it enters and leaves the body--a good non-dualistic

practice for distributing energy equipoised in the two worlds of inner and outer.

Walking meditation (kinhin) is done in an oval, the symbolism being a garland of mixed flowers or a necklace of mixed jewels -- a beautiful image that honors both togetherness and individuality. The hand mudra is left thumb down and covered tight by left hand fingers and then the whole fist gently covered from the front by the right hand. If you are looking at someone straight on doing this, all you see is the right hand cupping the left fist. The eyes are at about a 45 degree angle ahead on the floor and the gaze is a bit diffuse so as to take in the periphery (the evenness in in-between things central and things peripheral is also a general training principle in Zen). People walk in a slow cadence, keeping equal distance before and after oneself and the next person on the garland/necklace. The elbows are slightly out, (not too tight, not too loose), as they are in Zazen. The foot action is more slow heel-to-toe than normal walking so as to increase contact points of awareness with the floor.

The bell protocol in a Zen sitting is three bells to start (count 8 between) and one bell to close any sitting. If you are doing walking meditation in between, after the bell sway gently back and forth 2 or 3 times (to the left first so everyone doesn't collide at this point!) and swing the legs around to the front. After gaining composure, turn right and get on the knees and put the round pillow vertical and push it (like kneading bread) while turning it around. Then take two hands and brush off the bigger mat. All this is a bit of housekeeping to get the pillow ready (resume its shape) for the next sitting. When turning and kneading the pillow one should be on one's knees facing the wall.

After this everyone gets up (moving to right-clockwise) again with hands in the palms together "gassho" mudra of mutual respect when everyone is up, all should bow and then turn sideways to assume a position in the oval. Assume the right hand cupping left mudra now. Walking is 10 minutes then a bell to end. If you are the leader you either have to carry the bell in a pocket or break out of the oval after 10 minutes and return to your seat where the bell is. When the leader rings the bell all people stop and bow slightly from the waist and return to their seats, walking now rather sprightly. When at the seat one bows in "gassho" to the pillow, turns

around while standing to clockwise still in gassho and waits till all have assembled standing up facing each other (each after having bowed to the individual pillows). At this time everyone bows to each other and reaches back with the left hand to pull the round pillow from the center of the square mat to the outside edge (to make room for the legs to fold and face the wall). Sitters sit down turn clockwise and arrange themselves, all waiting for the 3-bell signal (from you) to start the meditation session again for another 20 minutes.

In terms of things to note about the Zazen posture itself:

- 1) one should sit *not* in the center, but on the front half of the round pillow - so that the legs will naturally fall forward
- 2) contrary to popular belief, the proper back position is sway or rounded back and not ram-rod
- 3) this "rounded" back pushes the chest and shoulders
- 4) the chin should be tucked in West-Point style and rest on even shoulders
- 5) the gaze is 45 degrees and slightly diffuse but open toward a blank wall
- 6) the hand mudra (called the cosmic or universal life mudra) is thumbs gently touching and right fingers cupping left fingers in an oval shape. This mudra stands for the principle of nonduality - the union of opposites
- 7) lastly, one can imagine a string from the top of one's head to the ceiling and sort of pull it up a bit, a general all settling together gesture that allows minor adjustments to fall into place at the end before the bell rings.

It is customary to have people bow in and bow out of whatever space you designate as your Zendo -sitting "tenemos". Again, one balances opposites. At the imagined threshold when entering the left foot steps over first and upon leaving the Zendo the right foot steps over the imaginary threshold. Going in to sit we use the palms-raised-together "gassho" mudra toward the Zendo (with left foot first) and upon leaving right foot first). These ritualistic body movements, as *you* know help proscribe the sacred space.

Zazen itself is based on a principle called "Shikantaza" which in Japanese means seamless, formless, goal-

less meditation. The instructions are to simply be-with, in an attitude of alertness and compassion, the rise and fall of one's inner states. The psyche should be allowed to resume its natural condition which is a unified field and is the same seamless medium at the heart of universal existence. In order to achieve this "goal-less goal" the conventional mind and its habits need to "drop off" thus revealing the naturally residential universal mind heart in all of us. In order to do this, besides being as aware as possible and as open as possible, we assume an equipoise while sitting of neither clinging nor pushing away from our states. This is the "Middle Way" as operating in Zazen.

Equipment:

- 1) One room dimmed of light
- 2) An altar with candle on right , flower or twig on left, altar cloth, some image or figure in center - these can change, incense in front of image.
- 3) 2 meditation cushions are traditional, one flat square and one, one high round one.
- 4) One nice sounding bell and wooden gong (preferably on a pillow).

For long term benefit, it is best to work with a Zen Teacher for on-going guidance during your sitting practice.