

Introductory Sitting Instructions Zen Center of Portland

Welcome to Zen Center of Portland

We are a non-profit religious organization affiliated with the Ordinary Mind Zen School, founded by Charlotte Joko Beck of Zen Center of San Diego. All people are welcome here. You can meditate/sit in any tradition or style you would like. The following information about sitting is from the perspective of the Ordinary Mind Zen School.

Why Practice?

Zen sitting practice offers us a means and opportunity to be more present in our lives. Being human we tend to get caught up in our thinking and projecting about the past and future. We spend much of our time judging, criticizing, and evaluating our lives and those of others. This leaves little time to actually experience life. Zen practice helps us develop the skill of turning away from our thinking and moving into experiencing our lives - it helps us to be present in our life, to experience this moment. Life right now is all we have. To try to make life different is to reject reality and to suffer. Zen practice helps us to be present in our life, first in the sitting hall, and then in all aspects of our life regardless of what we are doing.

Experience is What is Happening Right Now

Experiencing is not thinking about our self or our life but rather experiencing the direct, raw, lived, sensory/non-storied aspects of our life. Through this experiential practice we learn to tell the difference between thinking and being directly in the moment. Attending to the body, breath, and mental activity during sitting helps us develop this skill. For purposes of instruction it is helpful to divide our lived experience during sitting into the body, breath, and mind, even though in truth, they are three aspects of the one reality. Body, breath, and mind are three prominent aspects of our life, which in Zen practice we bring into an experiential awareness. Sitting still in a comfortable, quiet way and experiencing the body, breath, and mind can help us develop the skill to be fully present in our life.

Sitting Postures

Some options for sitting comfortably during meditation include full, half and $\frac{1}{4}$ lotus, Burmese, kneeling on a cushion or bench, or sitting in a chair. Two of the hand positions commonly used are hands on knees or left hand resting palm up on right hand with thumbs touching. It is helpful to keep a straight back and relaxed shoulders. Your head should be positioned as a natural extension of the spine, just "floating" on the top of your spine. Your eyes should remain open and cast down at a 45 degree angle.

The Body

Bring your attention to the sensations of your body - notice your knees on the cushion, your bottom on the cushion, feel your hands, chest, shoulders, head, and abdomen. Whatever sensations you find, allow them to be there. Try to have an overall sense of the body sitting there, be aware of the heaviness of the body, and the place where the body and the "outside" merge, such as the air or clothes on your skin, or the sensations of where your body meet the sitting cushions.

The Breath

Bring your attention to the sensations of breathing. Notice the breath going in and out of the nose, the sensations of the breath in the back of the throat, and the subtle rising and falling of the chest and abdomen. Don't try to control the breath or try to make it feel a particular way. Just allow the breath to breathe by itself. Follow closely behind it, noticing the various sensations and the changing nature of all the sensations. It is helpful to find a noticeable sensation in the breath that you can naturally and easily experience, such as the rising and falling of the chest or perhaps the breath going in and out of the nose. Bring your attention to that experience. Use that experience as the focal point or center of your experiential awareness, and as a place that you can return to if you get lost or confused in sitting. Now, at the same time that you experience the focal sensation of breath also try to notice one other point in the body, such as the hands, the buttocks, or the face (nose). Notice the breath moving in and out of the body with a continuous flow from inside to outside.

The Mind

There are two aspects to the mind: the *sensory mind* and *discursive thinking mind*. Sensory mind includes any sensations or experiences such as hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, body (somatosensory) feelings/sensations and anything non-verbal. Discursive thinking mind is the verbal, rational, cognitive, thinking, judging, self-reflecting mind. It also includes any of the narrative we have about our lives, anything we get caught up in as "me" or "my life". Try to notice what your discursive mind (what we call the "Me-mind") is saying to yourself. For instance you may be saying, "I can't do this practice it is too difficult." "I don't like this, I like that." It is easy to get caught up in this narrative way of being in your life, and not actually living it. When you get caught up in the discursive mind, notice you are thinking and gently bring your attention back to the center of your breath, notice the body and hear any sounds that are present.

Body, Breath and Mind Together as one

Try to experience three aspects at once.

1. Feeling bodily sensations (pick one: could be hands, face, or buttocks or knees on cushion)
2. Noticing an aspect of the breath (e.g. sensations of breath coming in and out of nose or rising and falling of the abdomen)
3. Listening to sounds.

Try to experience all three sensations (body, breath and hearing) at the same time. Try to experience these sensations exactly as they arise without trying to make them anything special or different than the way they are at that moment. This may be very difficult, and you may find you cannot pay attention to all three at once. Trying to pay attention to two or three things at once requires all of your attention. You may find that you are going from one bodily sensation to the other and then to the sounds. That is fine. The idea is to try to experience your life in the moment. Experiencing your body sensations, sounds, and breath most directly does this. Some people find paying attention to visual sensations easier than listening to sounds. These experiences are happening in the moment. Trying to focus on three experiences at once is not easy but trying to do so makes it difficult to be thinking about something other than what is happening in this moment. If you find it too frustrating to pay attention to three things at once, just try two: a breath sensation and sounds. If you find that two sensations are too frustrating, try one.

Discomfort

If you have discomfort in the body while you are sitting, notice the sensations of that discomfort, and notice what your discursive/"me-mind" is saying about the discomfort such as "This is too difficult". Return again and again to the actual sensations that make up the discomfort. If you are able after a few minutes return to the breath and sounds. If the discomfort brings your attention back to it, it's ok, just try to experience the discomfort directly without the thinking or judging about it. If the thinking comes up, label the thought "Thought arising about the discomfort," and then return again to the bare sensations. If the discomfort becomes too much you can quietly and gently move.

The Discursive Mind

You will also notice that while you are trying to pay attention to your experience of just sitting (your body sensations, the sensations of breathing, and the experience of hearing), you may also have a lot of thoughts both about the experiences you are having or perhaps also about other things, people or times. For instance, you may be judging yourself for not being able to pay attention, or maybe you think this practice is not much, or too hard, or maybe you might think about something that happened or will happen. This thinking is very normal for us, we do it all the time but because we are sitting still we may start to notice it more. This kind of thinking is very prevalent in our normal lives though we may not notice how much attention and credence we give to it. We think this is "Me". This is who I am. Notice that it is only the "Me-mind" and may not be the truth, and certainly is not what is happening directly right in the moment.

In sitting practice we notice our self-centered thinking, label it as such, (e.g. Thought arising about 'such-and-such,") and then return to what we call the experiential way of being: the sensations and feelings of the body, breath, hearing and seeing. There is nothing wrong with thinking. It is a natural thing for the "Me-mind" to do, but we get into problems when we believe the self-centered stories it puts forth to be the truth. In Zen we want to clearly differentiate between practical thinking ("I need to get those things at the store."), self-centered "Me-mind" thinking ("She is so unfair [to me]; I'm not going to be nice to her anymore."), and experiential living. We want to be able to have practical thinking, not believe "Me-mind," self-centered thinking, and then turn away from the self-centered story when we get caught up in it, to live more and more in the present experiencing of life.

Labeling Thoughts

One way to work with the thoughts we have is to label them. This helps us to disidentify from them, to start to see them as just thoughts, not necessarily the truth. Labeling helps us to notice our thought patterns and that we take our thoughts for the truth, ("He can't be trusted because he hurt me"). It is a good idea to "label" you thoughts when you notice that you are just thinking ("Thought arising about such-and-such"). Make the label just a one or two word description of the thought, for instance "Thought arising about work," or "Thought arising about Mary," or "Thought arising about not doing this practice well." Labeling the thought helps you to step back from the actual thinking, to disengage from the thinking, to not take it for the truth, to see it as just thinking. It helps us to know that we have been thinking and gives us a little space to consider where next to bring our attention. When your mind wanders, bring your attention very gently back to the body, the breath, and sounds, like a butterfly gently coming back to light on the breath. You will do this over and over, bringing your attention to the moment, to the bodily sensations, the breath and the sounds, and labeling you thoughts when you become distracted or caught up in them.

When our discursive mind, the Me-mind starts to think and we get caught up in our thinking, our

judging, our criticism, our fear, our anger, and desire, we move out of the present moment into a story, a narrative, a movie-like thinking world that usually is set in the past or future. Over time we can notice that we are caught up in this thinking, narrative movie, and then we are able to more and more quickly return to the experiential life. We are also able to remain in the experiential world for longer periods without the Me-mind taking over. Over time we spend more and more time in the experiential realm and not so much in the thinking realm. In other words, we want to be living rather than thinking about our lives.

Emotions

Sometimes strong emotions come up in sitting as they do in life. It is helpful to label the thoughts that accompany the emotions, since our thoughts are the strongly held beliefs which lead to emotions. Often an internal story or movie (remembrance of the incident or projection of a scene in the future) will accompany the strongly believed emotional sensation. We might think something like, "She is treating me unfairly, I need to be angry and protect myself." You can note which bodily sensations arise with the strongly believed thought. Gently turn away from the believed thought/narrative/movie and with kindness try to experience the bare sensations of the tension (the tight stomach, the accelerated breath, etc.). Try to see the tension as just a sensation not the truth or something with meaning attached to it. It may be a very difficult sensation with which to be. You may not like the sensation, but it is just sensation not some truth. In working with emotions continue to identify the believed thoughts that accompany the strong emotions. Notice the thoughts, let them pass and then come back to the body, breath, and sounds. If the sensations seem too difficult or overwhelming, try to create some space/awareness or a holding container around the difficult sensation. Let the earth or your hands hold the difficult sensations, breathe gently into the raw core of the tension, and relax into the raw sensation. The old movie, narrative, Me-mind drama will disappear if you are able to stay with the raw sensations. The narrative may return in a short time and that is ok. Simply start the process over again.