Beginning and Ending a Round of Zazen

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Updated October 12, 2004

Before reading this set of instructions it is recommended that you visit White Wind Zen Community's Website to read "The Posture of Zazen"

I will include a description of the forms used at Dainen-ji along with some photographs. Please follow these as closely as possible. If you are sitting at home and do not have a zafu (cushion) or zabuton (mat), you can improvise with other cushions and perhaps a folded blanket. You can also sit on a chair or a stool if need be and there is a description of the forms used for this at the end of this document. It is important to make use of the forms particularly when sitting alone as they provide a degree of definition and formality to what we are doing when sitting.



This is a photograph of a posture in which we keep our hands, called "shashu". We would not, for example, walk through the monastery with our hands dangling at our sides; they would be in this posture while walking from one area to another or while standing and waiting.

To do this, form your right hand into a circle and tuck the left thumb into the circle. The knuckle of the right hand rests against the sternum (where the rib cage meets, at the bottom of it). The fingers of the left hand wrap around the right. Please note in the photograph above that the fingers of the left hand are touching one another, not splayed and that they align with the centre of the right wrist. The elbows are not held away from the body. Instead the weight of the arm is allowed to fall from the shoulder. Keeping one's hands in shashu is an aid to mindfulness as we can feel the movement of the breath with the rise and fall of the diaphragm under our hands and the posture of the body is aligned yet relaxed.



With your hands in shashu, approach your zabuton and stand next to the back corner of it, feet together as shown. Pause for a moment to feel the alignment of the body (nose over the navel, ears over the shoulders).



Step onto the back corner of your zabuton, feet together. Pause for a moment to feel the alignment of the bodymind.



Lower yourself into a kneeling posture on the zabuton, keeping your neck and back straight as you do so. The eyes should be slightly lowered. The above photographs are of the rear and front view of this posture.

Rear View

When you lower yourself into a kneeling posture, the whole body should fit on the zabuton. Please sit straight on the zabuton (as opposed to sitting at a strange angle). The big toe of the left foot should rest on top of the big toe of the right foot.

Front View

The hands are folded into a different mudra. This mudra is the opposite of shashu. To do this, form your left hand into a circle and tuck the right thumb into the circle.



This is a close up of that mudra: Please note that the wrists are rotated a little – away from the body – so that the right hand is actually beneath the left. If you were to look down you would see the fingernails of your left hand.

From this kneeling posture, you will need to “shimmy over” on the zabuton, lifting the zafu out of the way by transferring it to the other hand, as shown below. The zafu needs to be placed on the outside edge of the zabuton as you will be seated facing the wall.



When you place the zafu on the outside edge of the zabuton, it can extend over the edge of the zabuton a little (as shown). If you are fairly tall, you will probably need to do this to make space for your legs as you sit facing the wall. As a point of mindfulness, make sure that when you place the zafu flat on the zabuton, the cushion is centred and the strap is facing away from you.



Seat yourself facing the wall, with your knees approximately three inches from the lower baseboard, as shown. This is perhaps going to seem very close to the wall, but it is necessary. More explanation concerning the distance from the wall will be provided at another time.

Arrange yourself so that you are balanced and reasonably straight. This shouldn't take you more than 30 seconds or so because you don't need to fine tune your posture yet, that comes later. To begin with, just sit with your nose over your navel, ears over the shoulders, balanced as well as possible.

Hands

Once you have taken your seat, place your hands in the hokkai-join, or dharmadhatu-mudra, which means the "gesture of reality". To do this, place your right hand palm up in your lap. Then place the left hand, also palm up on top of the right. Your fingers should be together, touching, not splayed horizontally. Now look down. The middle knuckles of your index fingers should line up, one above the other, touching. The hands are flat to the ceiling, not angled toward or away from the body. Now touch your thumbs together. They should form a soft arc, as though you were holding an egg between the thumbs and the hand. The tips of the thumbs touch very, very lightly. So lightly that if you were holding a piece of paper between them and it were pulled out, your thumbs would not fly apart.

The mudra is important because it is very sensitive and becomes more and more sensitive over time. While we are sitting, all kinds of thoughts and feelings come up. We usually act out thoughts and feelings with the body. But when we are sitting we just allow the body to sit as body. For example, while we are sitting, some "sinking mind" might occur. It might take the form of fatigue or just dull thoughts, dull feelings. When that happens the thumbs will droop. And at a certain point you will notice that and it gives you an opportunity to

realign the mudra and release the state that is forming. Similarly, if there is a quality of aggression occurring while you are practising – trying to 'get it right' and so forth, the thumbs will push up like Mount Meru. Again, at a certain point you will notice that and you can realign the mudra and release the state before it takes over. The mudra shows us what we are doing long before we would ordinarily notice.

Now that you have your hands in the mudra, draw the blades of the hands back against the lower belly, the tanden. The tanden is an area of the belly about a hand's width below the navel and just above the pubic bone. If you were to tighten all of the muscles of your belly or hara, there would be an area you could not tighten. This is called the tanden.

The easiest way to support your wrists is to draw the hands back against the belly wall and then push down. If you do this, and providing you don't have really short arms, you will be able to nestle the wrists in the hollows that are formed by the muscles of the upper thighs, where they meet the torso. If you can do that, you won't have to hold your arms out from the body, the wrists are supported and the weight of the arms can just fall from the shoulders. With the wrists placed like this, the hands will come to rest against (or very close to) the area of the tanden. Don't worry about trying to get it "perfect". We just want to align things as closely as possible with the posture Roshi teaches and it takes some time and practice to learn how to do this.

Forms

Now you will need to practise some forms to begin a sitting round. You may wish to print this page off and keep it with you so that you can learn the forms. They're not actually all that complicated, but there is a fair bit of detail. The forms are important because they add some definition to what we are doing and if you make use of them you will be able to cut through the vagueness that can come up when beginning your sitting — that "Oh, so now what do I do?" This is what you do, what we all do, when we begin a sitting round.



With your hands remaining in the mudra, bow forward so that your forehead comes to within about two

inches of the wall, keeping your neck and back straight as you bow. As you bow forward, completely exhale, emptying the lungs of all of the stale air they contain. Do this audibly, through the mouth, so that you can both feel and hear it.



Now straighten and inhale. Straighten to what you think straight is, as though you had a plum line running down your spine, dropped from the ceiling. The inhalation should also be audible and taken through the mouth.

Now exhale through the mouth and as you do this feel the body and allow yourself to notice any areas of tension that might be here or there. You don't need to try to make them relax, because they will often release just with the noticing. When that occurs, the body will tend to move back perhaps 1/8th of an inch. We refer to this as "balance point." It is considered to be an optimal posture for sitting in zazen because it is very alert. If the body does not move back just that little bit, then ease it back about 1/8th of an inch to balance point. You should do this as you are exhaling.

Position of the Tongue and Teeth

Once you have completely exhaled, expelling even much of the air in your mouth, place the tip of the tongue against the hard palate behind your front teeth. Allow the rest of the tongue to drape over the roof of the mouth with your teeth touching lightly. This will help prevent an accumulation of saliva and so you will not have to continuously swallow while you are sitting. Keep your tongue in that position, teeth lightly touching throughout your half-hour sitting round. If you start to get lost in thought, your teeth will separate and your tongue will drop. It is very useful to notice this because it will show you that you have drifted and need to

come back to the practice.

Timing your Sitting Round

At this point, having established your posture, glance down at the clock to calculate your half hour sitting round. Sit for half an hour – not more and not less.

Anapanasati and Basic Mindfulness Practice

I have written about this in two parts. The first section goes into some detail about opening attention to the sensations of the body. This is actually done very quickly, but explaining anything in words requires going into detail and explaining it sequentially.

With those first three movements of breath (while doing the forms), you can begin to feel the breath, to practise “anapanasati” (a Pali word for “mindfulness of breath”). This is not a concentration exercise; it isn’t a matter of thinking about it. It’s a matter of feeling it. Our lungs would be like useless sacks if not for the rise and fall of the diaphragm. The diaphragm is a very large muscle and it is not difficult to feel the movement of it. If you have any doubt about that, place your hand on top of the diaphragm and feel the rise and fall of it. That is what you need to feel into, but of course without using your hand. You can also notice the rise and fall of the ribcage, how the bones move in the front, to the sides, and the back of the body.

We do not count the breath or use it for any sort of concentration exercise. We use it as a touchstone, a place from which to initiate our practice, a starting point. So notice what you can of the actual sensations and do this for a few breaths.

Once you have established some mindfulness of the breath, please begin to open attention to basic mindfulness of bodily sensation. While still feeling the sensations of the breath, open attention to how the sensations at the tanden feel. It might feel light, it might feel heavy. It may even feel “blank”, but of course, if you are noticing that it feels “blank” that will be because you are feeling something – “blankness”. It will feel as it feels. What does it feel like?

Can you open attention to the sensations of the breath and the tanden simultaneously? Perhaps a little? Good. Things could always be clearer and they will become clearer with practice, so don’t get stuck. Keep going.

What about the sensations of the hands? What does the right hand feel like? The left? Are you noticing the differences in temperature between the right hand and the left? What does the whole mudra feel like? You may notice that at first a picture of your hands forms in your mind. That’s okay, but it’s not the same thing as feeling the hands. Only the hand can feel the hand. So practice feeling. Notice how attention seems to begin to open to the sensations that are present and then moves away from them? Not a problem. Just bring it back gently and continue. You’re seeing something about how attention moves and that is good.

Now feel the feet, opening attention to the detail of the sensations; and the knees; and the backside sitting on the zafu (cushion); the set of the spine and neck; the facial muscles.

This is going to seem a bit map-like at first. But this is because our attention is very fragmented and it is difficult for us to feel more than one thing at a time when we first begin practising. But as we continue,

attention will open further and further so that we can feel many sensations simultaneously and this is the point of feeling into the details of sensations – to eventually be able to feel the whole body sitting on the cushion.

Once you have established some degree of bodily sensation, you can begin to very deliberately open to the other sense fields. But as you open to the seeing and hearing, do this from a basis of bodily sensation.

Eye Gaze

You should be sitting with the eyes open the entire time. Begin with them slightly lowered, in a soft gaze. If you begin to get sleepy, raise them somewhat. Open to peripheral vision. You should be seeing some of the detail to your right, left, up and down simultaneously. Our eyes are round, but our habitual tendency is to narrow the eye gaze and focus attention on a point that is directly in front of us. There is a lot of tension around the eyes. This is especially true for people who do a lot of close work, i.e. working with computers. The way to release this tension is to practise opening to peripheral vision. As you are sitting you may notice that your attention wants to rivet on a paint fleck or a design in the plaster on the wall. If you notice that, open around it – open to peripheral vision.

Hearing

Now open to the hearing. What sounds do you hear? The sound of your own breathing, the sound of traffic, birds, a fan, your stomach gurgling? Open attention to the range of sounds you are hearing from inside the room you are sitting in as well as outside. You may find that attention moves towards certain sounds that you like and away from sounds that you dislike. But rather than picking and choosing the sounds we hear, when we are sitting we open to all of the sounds that present themselves within the field of hearing.

Feeling

What about the sensation of the air on your skin? Even sitting in a room, there are small breezes passing across the forehead. There are temperature variations felt in the tips of the ears, the end of the nose, on the palms and backs of the hands.

Sense of Smell and Taste

You can notice while sitting that there are all kinds of smells that can be noticed and that there is a taste in your mouth. There is no reason why you should not be noticing these details along with the sensations of the body, the seeing and hearing, unless attention is so consumed by something else that they are being screened out.

What to Do about Thoughts and Feelings

Well, actually, you don’t have to do anything about them. Trying to do something about them is the source of a lot of the difficulties we already experience, so don’t practise doing something about them. Instead, let them come up, but let them be just a movement, like the movement of clouds across the sky. Release them. You don’t need to move attention toward them or away from them. If you leave them alone, they’ll just float across your field of vision and (so to speak) out the other side. But, of course, that takes a bit of practice. Which is why anapanasati and basic mindfulness practice is so important. How else will we “stay in the

room", with what we are actually experiencing, if we do not allow ourselves to feel the body sitting on a zafu in a room where there is nothing going on? Our lives are not a thought or a feeling and do not occur within a thought or a feeling. Our lives are these sensations, colours, forms, sounds, smells, tastes.

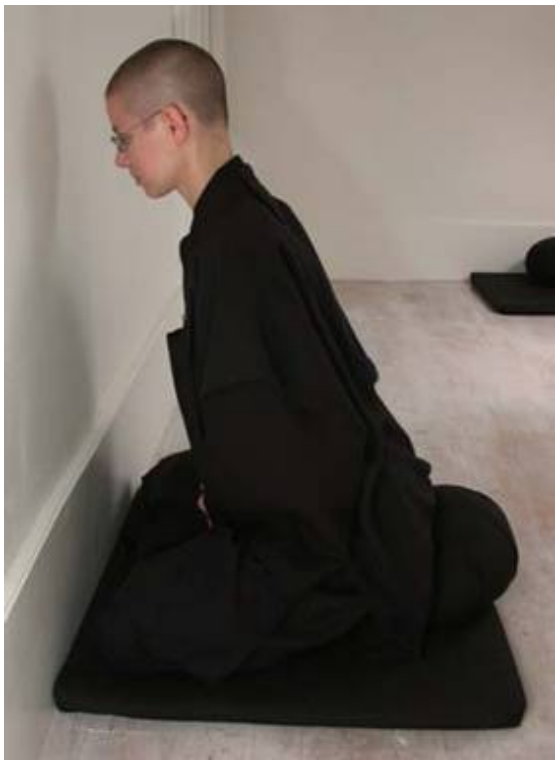
Detail Together With Open Attention

I included some detail above, concerning opening attention to the sensations of the body and the seeing and hearing. But in reading this, it can sometimes appear to students that this is sequential – first we do "this" and then we do "this" and then we do "this". In actual fact, what we need to do is practise opening to all of these details simultaneously. What I mean by that is that you should open attention to the sensations of the diaphragm, the tanden, the sensations of the rest of the body and the seeing and hearing in the same breath.

At first, you may find that attention shuttles from one thing to another, and if that is the case, it's not a problem. Just notice that and do your best to open to many details simultaneously. If you get lost in thought, or things start to seem complicated, come back to the breath as a place from which to reinitiate your practice. Use the noticing of anything at all that you seem to be focusing on as a reminder to reinitiate your practice. With some practice you will be able to be mindful of the whole body, but there will also be detail within over all mindfulness. Both are needed. An "over all mindfulness" without paying attention to detail will result in spacing out; attention to detail without opening to many details simultaneously will result in a focusing and congealing of attention. There is a balance of wide attention and attention to detail that we can only learn through doing the practice and doing our best to apply the instructions.

Ending Your Sitting Round

When the clock indicates that your sitting round is finished, bow forward exhaling audibly through the mouth.



Keep your hands in the mudra while doing this. Straighten, pause, and then move into a kneeling posture to tidy your cushions.





Pick up the zafu by the strap with your left hand and switch places with it by “shimmying over”, transferring it to your right hand as you do so, so that the zafu is between you and the wall, as pictured.



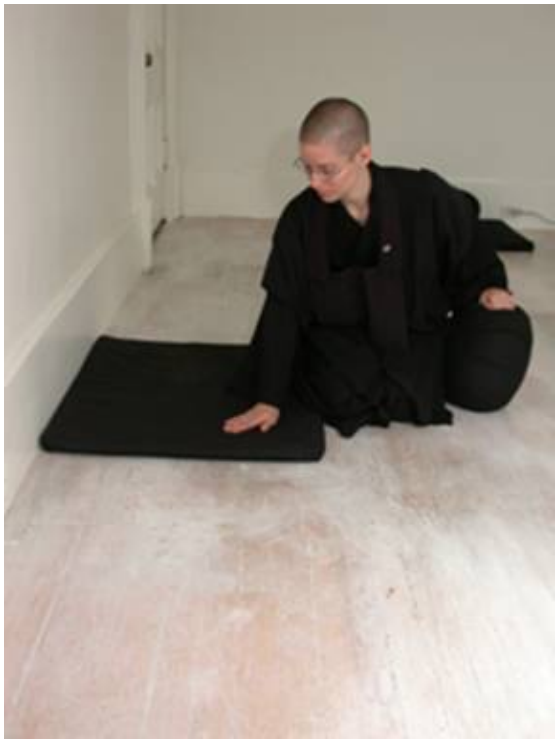
Stand it on its edge on the zabuton (or mat) – running parallel with the wall.
Place your right hand on top of the strap of the zafu. Place your left hand on top of the right hand, at right angles.

Press down firmly, once.
Turn the zafu a quarter-turn clockwise.
Press down firmly, once.
Turn the zafu a second quarter-turn clockwise.
Press firmly, once.
Turn the zafu a third quarter-turn clockwise.
Press down firmly, once.
That will bring you more or less back to the strap.

These four presses evenly spaced will aerate the kapok in the zafu and are sufficient to restore its shape. If we do this after each sitting round it will extend the life of the zafu. Plus, if we take care of the cushion, it will take care of us.

Having done this, you will now need to take care of your zabuton.

Lift the zafu by its strap with your right hand and transfer it to your left as you pass it over your legs to place it on the floor next to your zabuton, leaving enough space between the zafu and the zabuton that you can ‘shimmy’ over to position yourself on the floor between the zafu and the outside edge of the zabuton. Ease yourself off the zabuton and into a kneeling posture on the floor still facing in the same direction (right shoulder closest to the wall). With your left hand you holding the zafu by its strap, it is resting on its edge on the floor and positioned such that it is next to and parallel with your left thigh.



Lightly brush the zabuton with your hand, to remove any “bits” (lint, dust etc) of you that might have fallen off you while you were sitting and to straighten the fabric. While you are doing this, feel the hand as you move it across the fabric, gently sweeping the surface of the zabuton with the palm of your hand a few times to freshen it. Don’t forget what you are doing, become distracted, and slap or bang the mat, and please don’t do microsurgery on it, removing every last speck of dust. We need to do these forms as though we were doing them in a practice room filled with other students and with Teachers. Even when we are alone, everything that we do matters.

Once you have finished brushing down the zabuton, place the zafu along the back edge leaning up against the wall, centered and strap-side up, ready for when you come back.
If the configuration of the room is such that you can’t rest it against the wall, then lay it down along the back edge of the zabuton, next to the wall, centered and with the strap facing away from you.
Leaving the zafu in that position ties in with the forms we use for taking our seat when we come back.

Students often ask where they can purchase a zafu. White Wind Zen Community does not make or sell zafu. Instead, we order them from a company in the United States called Dharma Crafts, which we have found to be very reliable. They make zafu of consistent quality and they have a Website with an online ordering service. If you decide to purchase a zafu, please order one filled with kapok, which as I mentioned above is silky to the touch and will not lump or bunch. Some companies fill them with fiberfill, a synthetic material used to stuff toys and other items. Fiberfill is not appropriate for zafu as it collapses over time. Zafu are also sold filled with buckwheat husks. Buckwheat husks are noisy (everytime you move they rustle) and they will disintegrate over time resulting in your zafu throwing off small clouds of dust when handled. Zafu are also available in a range of colours and prints, some of them quite gaudy. To align with the simplicity of our practice we suggest that you order a black zafu as black is less distracting.

If you need to sit on a chair or a stool, you can use the following forms:

Once you take your seat facing the wall, calculate the time when the sitting round should end. Or set a timer. Your feet should be shoulder-width apart and your hands in the mudra. When you are ready to begin do the forms:

Bow forward from the hip and exhale through the mouth, audibly.

Straighten to what you think “straight” is, and as you straighten, inhale through the mouth, audibly. Sit nose over the navel, ears over the shoulders and tuck your chin in. Don’t let your head jut forward.

Settle into balance point (a hair back from what you think ‘straight’ is) and exhale audibly, through the mouth.

Once you have settled into balance point, begin breathing through the nose and place the tip of your tongue against the hard palate behind your upper front teeth. Your teeth should be lightly in contact with each other (at least a molar or two at the back).

Now stay like that for the next 30 minutes. Don’t fidget or change posture.

At the end of the round, bow forward and exhale, then stand up, brush your seat off if it needs it and turn the chair to face into the room in its original position. Place your hands in shashu to walk away or to begin a kinhin round.

A Note About “Zazen”

How people describe what they are doing while sitting can vary. Some people might describe it as “meditation”, but this is not really accurate and carries many associations with commonly-used meditative techniques that are quite different from that taught by Roshi’s Lineage. So instead of referring to it as “meditation” we call it “sitting”. This derives from the meaning of the word “zazen”:

Za” means “sitting”
“Zen” means “practice”.
“Zazen” = “sitting practice”

For the sake of clarity, we simply describe what we do as “sitting” or “sitting in zazen” and if used as a noun, “a sitting”, a “sitting round”, or a “round of zazen”.