

Notes on Home Practice

Three articles by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei

Jump to:

- [The Environment of Your Sitting](#)
 - [Beginning a Sitting Round](#)
 - [Practice Materials and Ending A Sitting Round](#)
-

The Environment of Your Sitting

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A student recently asked if I could write something about the forms used for home practice. This is a big subject, so I will write about it in a series of three short articles, which I hope will clarify some misunderstandings.

When practicing alone, it is extremely important to maintain dignity in your sittings. If you are sitting first thing in the morning, please have a shower and dress in practice clothing to do your sitting rather than sitting in pajamas or a bathrobe or shorts. If these seem more comfortable, it is because you need practice clothing that is loose enough to allow you to sit comfortably. The clothing you use should be as presentable as the clothing you would wear to attend a sitting at the monastery and I have yet to see anyone appear wearing a bathrobe. If you are not dressing as you would if you were at a sitting in the monastery, you are being too casual about your sittings.

Although there is no one watching you to see what you do, you need to do no less than you would if you were attending a formal sitting along with the Teacher and 20 other students. So do not break your posture to scratch, don't sniff, don't do stretching exercises while sitting on your zafu, and don't cut your sitting round short. Time your round with a clock and stay in posture without any unnecessary movement for the full half hour.

When you finish sitting, end the round by bowing forward and exhaling. keeping your hands in the mudra. After that, take care of your cushion mindfully. The tendency, at the end of a sitting round is to continue to sit there, thinking about what will happen at work, what tasks need to be done, what one will have for breakfast and so on. Sometimes, without realizing it, we can shift into a different posture, perhaps with elbows on knees, chin cupped in hands to have a good think about things. This would be completely forgetting that the transition between practice and other activities should be very clear. You are sitting. Then you stop. You take care of things. Then take care of your zafu mindfully and tidy the space you have been sitting in. Place the clock where it will be ready for you for your next sitting round.

If you intend to do a round of kinhin, before starting another round of zazen, you can adjust this to the

amount of time you have. We normally do 12-minute kinhin rounds at Dainen-ji (which is how long it takes for one round around the Hatto), but if your schedule allows you only five minutes, then make full use of the time you have to continue your practice while walking. Kinhin is not a break from sitting, nor is it about stretching your legs. It isn't even about walking, though it does make use of the step. Kinhin is about seeing how our attention is. So the transition between sitting and kinhin should be made mindfully. If you are going to sit a half-hour round and wish to do a few minutes of kinhin, go back to your zafu and sit for a couple of minutes and end in a formal manner rather than just exiting the room in speeded-up kinhin.

I have also been asked about Butsudan (altars), robes, incense, candles, gongs, kaishaku, rupas (statuary), sho (calligraphies), chanting, and an assortment of other items associated with practice. In the next few issues of the Mirror, I will provide some information about all of these, as it will be useful for branch students, public students, and those who sit at home during the week

Beginning a Sitting Round

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(A student's question concerning home practice prompted me to write a series of short articles on the subject. This is the second in the series). This week, I will write a little about entering one's practice room and beginning a sitting.

Note that I referred to a home practice room as a "practice room" rather than a "Zendo". A Zendo is a practice space that has been formally empowered by a Teacher in a ceremony known as "Kaisan", or "Opening the Mountain". It is difficult to explain what "Kaisen" is, because one would need to have received a great deal of training to understand what actually takes place.

But let me put it this way: When you walk into the monastery, it feels very different from your own home. When you are in the monastery, the dining hall feels very different from the Shuryo (library). And the Shuryo feels entirely different from the Zendo. What is the difference? The difference is in the way the room has been designated for use, whether or not it has been empowered, and if so, how it is maintained thereafter. The Zendo and Hatto at Dainen-ji have a palpable quality that can be felt distinctly and clearly. This is not solely due to the placement of zabuton and zafu (cushions and mats), the Hoza (Teaching seat), the Butsudan (platform of Wakefulness) and so on throughout the room. It is due to the kaji (empowerment) Roshi exerted on these rooms before they were used, and is sharpened and refined by the practice of each of us. This is why it is appropriate to refer to one's home practice space as a "practice room" rather than a "Zendo".

Monks and senior students clean the Hatto and Zendo at Dainen-ji prior to every sitting during samu (caretaking practice). The Butsudan is cleaned, all of the objects standing on it are prepared, and a new stick of incense is laid out in preparation for the beginning of a sitting. All of the zafu and zabuton are wiped down with a soft cloth, the floors are washed with a solution of water and lavender oil, and surfaces are dusted.

Your home practice area can be tended to in similar fashion, whether you have a Butsudan or not. Many students do not have one, and it is not essential to one's practice to have a formal Butsudan. We often mention to students beginning practice that we would rather they keep things very simple as we are more

concerned with clarifying their understanding of practice - what they are actually experiencing and how they practice with their experience - rather than concerning themselves with (as I sometimes say) "a lot of bells and whistles". Butsudans, rupas, gongs, kaishaku, incense - all of these need to be understood clearly to be used properly.

They are not "religious" objects, they are not "spiritual" or "inspirational" paraphernalia; they are intended to help us to recognize and open to the dimensionality, vividness, and exertion of the space of our own experiencing. So we would much rather that new students stay with a very simple format of practice and allow themselves to gradually come to understand how we use all of these objects in our practice before purchasing them.

In any event, whatever materials you are using for your practice, whether you are sitting in a beautiful room with shoji screens and wooden floors and so forth, or if you are sitting on two telephone books in your bedroom (I mention telephone books because I used them many years ago and they are better than couch cushions or pillows because they don't slide), the space should be prepared prior to each sitting. Do this and then take a little break between setting up your sitting area and beginning your practice to keep things clear for yourself.

If you are practicing as a general student, you should consult with a Dharma Teacher or practice advisor if you would like to add Great Bows or chanting to your daily sitting; associate students who are sitting once or more a week should not use chants or Great Bows during their practice periods; public students who have been given instruction in bowing and chanting practices and have consulted with a Dharma Teacher or practice advisor about these may use them, of course.

The "rule of thumb" is that if you have not consulted with a Dharma Teacher or a practice advisor about these, you should not be doing them. A standing bow at the doorway, or before a Butsudan, or while standing next to one's seat is appropriate. However, a note about standing bows - when you bow, please don't bow to your zafu. A bow is not directed to anyone or anything. A bow is an acknowledgement of the Space of practice, the Space in which we arise and which we arise as.

Once you have bowed and are ready to take your seat, approach the area and stand next to it with your feet together if possible. If you are using a zabuton (mat), step onto the back corner of it, again feet together, pause, and then lower yourself into a kneeling position. Pause with your hands on your lap, and then shift your weight onto the zafu or telephone books as the case may be. Arrange yourself, turn over the clock and calculate a half-hour sitting round.

Bow forward, keeping your head and neck straight while fully and audibly exhaling through the mouth. Straighten, audibly inhaling through the mouth.

Then notice any areas of tension that may be present. In the noticing of these, the body will often relax without your having to do anything and when it does, it will tend to move back just a hair - 1/8th of an inch. This we refer to as "balance point" - a very slightly dangerous posture, a little like sitting on the edge of a cliff, as you will keel over backwards if you fall asleep. If the body does not ease back just that little bit, then move back a little. As you are settling into balance point, exhale, emptying your lungs of air and much of the air from your mouth. Place the tip of the tongue against the hard palate just behind your front teeth and allow the rest of the tongue to drape across the palate. This will help prevent the accumulation of saliva so

that you will not have to continuously swallow while sitting. Then simply continue your practice. You have felt and heard three full breaths, so now simply continue to feel the breath together with the tanden.

If you use these forms for beginning your sitting, you will find that they will help in cutting through the potential for vagueness that can come up when one begins sitting, particularly when alone - that "Oh, so now what do I do?" You know what to do, because you are already doing it. Just pay attention. Once you have begun your sitting round, you should not move for the full half-hour. Essentially, what we do while practicing is practicing the posture. If you move, you will not be allowing the body to practice the posture.

If you do not already have a zafu and zabuton, I would recommend that you obtain them when you can. A zafu is designed for sitting and is the perfect tool for it because it is round, allowing more space for your feet. The zafu we use at Dainen-ji are filled with kapok, which if properly taken care of, will not bunch or lump. I know that a few people prefer to use zafu filled with fiberfill or buckwheat husks and that is fine, but I would not recommend either.

Zafu and zabuton can be purchased from many outlets. The one I frequently recommend is DharmaCrafts, which has an online catalogue and ordering service. We have found their zafu and zabuton to be of consistent quality. The URL for DharmaCrafts is <http://www.dharmacrafts.com>

Next week I will include some information concerning taking care of one's zafu and zabuton, and some information about Butsudans (altars), rupas (statuary) and sho (calligraphy).

The next article in this series is entitled "Practice Materials, Ending A Sitting Round".

Practice Materials and Ending A Sitting Round

[Originally published in the eMirror, Volume 5, issue 11]

(A student's question concerning home practice prompted me to write a series of short articles on the subject. This is the third in the series).

Should one have a Butsudan (an altar), for home practice or does it really matter? Well, it depends on how you understand what a Butsudan is, what the objects on it are, and how you make use of them. At Dainen-ji, Butsudans and the objects placed on them reflect and exemplify the dignity and simplicity of our practice. Butsudans can be powerful reminders of the vast richness of Zen practice or they can be tawdry piles of inspirational knick-knacks. The more often that one sits, the more useful that a Butsudan can be to provide an orientation to the forms and to extend one's practice of mindfulness. If on the other hand you sit only once or a few times a week then it would probably be more of a distraction than anything else. So a Butsudan would be useful for monastics and formal students, general students, branch and public students who sit daily and have for some months. Associate and public students who sit only once or several times a week should work with more basic elements of their practice environment, such as taking care of the zafu and so on.

If you are going to create a Butsudan, please consult first with a Dharma Teacher or a practice advisor.

Please avoid elaborate, colourful objects. You can assemble a Butsudān from a small table covered with a black cloth, a small black incense bowl, and plain glass “votive light” holders. We do not use brass and gold-coloured objects on any of the formal Butsudān throughout the monastery. They are striking in their simplicity.

Rupas, as they are used in our practice, are not religious icons. The word is Sanskrit and simply means a “form”. They are simply a representation of someone sitting in an aligned posture, a reminder to us to practice the posture. The preference, therefore, is for rupas that express good posture and look human - look like you or I - rather than some of the oddly distorted statuary that seems to be popular. They also remind us of the Lineage, the people who have embodied and carried forwards this wonderful practice to us in this present day. The honshi or traditional representations of Awakening that are appropriate to our Lineage would be Sakyamuni Buddha or Mahāvairocana Buddha. Other figures that would be appropriate are Acala Vidyaraja (for monastics), or the bodhisattvas Samantabhadra, Manjusri, or Avalokitesvara. Somewhat less appropriate but often commonly available are forms of Amitabha Buddha. If students wish to use a rupa, they can request that the rupa be empowered by Rōshi. This is referred to as “Opening the Eyes” of the rupa. If you would like to make arrangements to have a rupa empowered, you could contact a Dharma Teacher or practice advisor about this.

Candles and incense are used as offerings: offering what we know into Knowing in itself.

We use candles on Butsudān because they evoke our sense of seeing. They also represent the flickering of mind - something that anyone who spends any time sitting on a zafu can attest to.

Incense is used to evoke our sense of smell, and also because it represents the truth of impermanence - it burns down and is gone. Incense bowls at Dainen-ji are usually small black bowls filled with rice or white sand or for more prominent Butsudān, incense ash. Periodically, these are strained through a mesh strainer to remove the ends of sticks that did not burn.

Before each sitting, the surface is smoothed with a small rake and the inside edge is wiped with a cloth. The incense used at Dainen-ji is Japanese incense rather than Indian incense because there is a vast difference between wood resin incense and the often very flowery Indian incense. The Shoyeido incense company has a Website that will give you a great deal of information about how good quality incense is made and they have an online ordering page. The URL for Shoyeido is: <http://www.shoyeido.com>

A sho is calligraphy, executed with brush and ink. Throughout the monastery there are sho mounted on the walls, almost all of which have been brushed by Rōshi and they have a profound impact on the environment of the monastery. Residents at Dainen-ji, monks and formal students, typically have a small Butsudān or a wall shelf that serves as one, usually with a small rupa, candles, an incense bowl, and perhaps some items specific to their practice. Mounted on the wall above these is an original sho designed by Rōshi for the space in which it is displayed. We consider these to be more important than the rupa, They are a strong, yet delicate, and very beautiful reminder of our practice. Students of Rōshi can request that he execute a sho for their home practice rooms. Anyone who would like more information about this can [write to me](#), as Rōshi would need photographs of the room it is to be placed in and would need to know certain other details (such as lighting) in order to create one.

If you have a Butsudān or intend to set one up, you should bear in mind that it must be maintained properly

by cleaning it regularly, preferably daily. We normally place candles on the outside edges of the Butsudan, with the incense bowl centred between them. A stick of incense is laid in front of the bowl, running horizontally to the front edge of the Butsudan. The candles are lit after the Butsudan is cleaned in readiness to light the incense. If you do not have anywhere to store a lighter, you could place it at the back of the bowl, where it is least visible.

When you are ready to begin your sitting, you can do a standing bow before the Butsudan as an acknowledgment of the space in which you arise and which you arise as. Straighten then lower your self into seiza (a kneeling position) in front of the Butsudan. Do a seated bow and then pick up the incense and place it between the fingertips of your index fingers, the hands in gassho (hands held palm-to palm in whole bodily mindfulness). Bow with the incense stick and then light it by extending it toward the left-hand candle. Once lit, turn it in a small rapid circle with a slight flip of the wrist to extinguish the flame. (Blowing it out would be traditionally regarded as very brutish behaviour.) Then place it in the center of the incense bowl and do another seated bow. Stand, and do a standing bow before the Butsudan. Then take your seat.

Whenever moving about in a practice environment, always keep the hands in shashu (hands held before the chest at the diaphragm, the right hand folded into a fist, the left hand over the right with the thumb tucked into the space between the thumb and fingers of the right hand).

I mentioned last week that I would also write something about finishing a sitting round.

When you finish sitting, how you end your round, how you take care of your zafu or cushions, is very important. Practice is opening to the richness and vividness of our experiencing and everything we do in connection with it is important. This is why we need to maintain clear use of the forms in beginning our sitting, while we are sitting, and in how we end a sitting round and leave our practice area.

At Dainen-ji, we sit on zafu, which are round cushions filled with kapok and use a mat called a zabuton. When we finish a round, we bow forward, keeping our hands in the Dharmadhatu mudra, straighten, pause, and then move into a kneeling posture on the zabuton. Keeping the neck and back straight, we lift the zafu into a standing position by its strap, and then place one hand over the strap, the other on top at right angles, and push down, turning the zafu a quarter turn with each push, the last push brining us back to the strap.

This is done to aerate the kapok (a natural fiber) and restore the shape of the zafu. But it also acknowledges some other points:

- If we take care of the zafu, it will take care of us.
- We don't know when our last breath is going to be. It is entirely possible that we could die before we have a chance to sit again. So we shouldn't leave a mess for others to clean up. We clutter up our own lives and the lives of everyone around us with the messes we leave through not taking care of things.

Our practice of the forms in mindfully taking care of our sitting area acknowledges and addresses all of these points and readying one's seat for the next sitting is an act of compassion towards oneself. If you do not yet have a zafu or a zabuton, you can adapt the forms to whatever tools you use, by looking into what they need in order to be cared for properly.

Once you have taken care of your zafu, lift and place it on the floor next to the zabuton, allowing enough space to move your body off of the zabuton so that you are kneeling next to it, holding the zafu by the strap with the zafu held parallel to your "outer" thigh. Brush the zabuton lightly, removing any "bits" that might have fallen off of you, lint etc., and smoothing wrinkling of the fabric. You can't do this properly unless you are paying attention to what you are doing. And if you are paying attention, you will come face to face with that eternal question that comes up in Zen practice: "How much is enough?"

We bring all sorts of habitual patterns to our practice. So, for example, someone who has a tendency towards obsessiveness may find themselves doing micro-surgery to remove all of the bits of lint. That is not mindfulness; it is the acting out of a habit. Or, if the tendency is to be continually absent oneself from what is going on in this moment by becoming lost in thought about what may happen during the rest of the day, we may find ourselves banging and slapping the zabuton. In either case, we are not really paying attention to what we are doing, not looking into what is needed in this moment. So take the time to look into how you can take care of the practice materials you use. How you do this is an expression of how you understand your practice.

After taking care of the zafu, place it either flat or standing against a wall, centred on the zabuton, ready for your next sitting. If you use a clock, kaishaku, a gong, these should be placed in alignment with each other, rather than left haphazardly.

If you are using a Butsudan, then walk to it, do a standing bow before it, straighten and lower yourself into seiza. Blow out the candles by cupping your right hand around the backs of the candleholders. This is done to prevent hot wax from being blown onto the Butsudan. Then place your hands in gassho, stand, and do a final standing bow.

During retreats at Dainen-ji, retreatants will lay out a fresh stick of incense before leaving the room in readiness for their next sitting, so this is something you could also do at home.