

Basic Zen Meditation
by Norman Fischer

Basic Zen meditation is my own main spiritual practice. It is radically simple and easy to do. I have been doing it all of my life, and I recommend it to everyone. It makes no difference whether you are a Zen practitioner or ever intend to be one. Whether you are a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, or a secular humanist, this simple practice of sitting down and feeling the present moment of your living will have a powerfully positive impact on your life if you devote yourself to it. Twenty or thirty minutes a day, best in the morning, before your day has begun and mind's wheels have started turning quickly, will be enough. Less can also be okay.

The basic Zen meditation practice is called zazen (literally, "sitting meditation"). Probably most will be familiar with some version of it. It involves sitting up straight on a chair or a meditation cushion while paying attention to your breathing.

If you sit on a chair, it is best to keep your feet flat on the floor and to sit evenly on the seat without using the back of the chair for support, if this is possible for you. It is easier if the chair is not too soft. On a cushion (there are several types of meditation cushions available; a Zen meditation cushion is round and filled with buckwheat or kapok) you fold your legs in one of several positions: full or half lotus (one or both feet in your lap); Burmese (both feet flat on the mat or rug); or crossed ankles tailor style (though this is not quite as good because your knees tend to float in the air; having both knees on the mat is more stable). You could also set the cushion on end, tall-wise, and sit as if the cushion were a horse, with your legs to either side of it, knees and shins on the mat or rug. Or you could use one of the many meditation benches now on the market at yoga stores or online. The bench will enable you to sit stably with your legs tucked underneath the seat.

Once you have figured out (for now, anyway) the best way to work with your legs, sit up straight on your cushion or chair (unkinking and lengthening the spine is an important factor in promoting alert awareness; relaxing too much makes you sleepy). This puts you in a posture of full human dignity, and just sitting in this way will promote awareness and a sense of your own nobility.

I think of this sitting up straight as "allowing yourself to be lifted from within." The point is not to willfully impose a rigid posture but, rather, to allow your body to be uplifted, letting this natural opening occur. To help this along, gently rotate the pelvis forward (this works whether you are on a chair or a cushion), which will arch the small of the back slightly inward. Let the back of your head float up toward the sky, the shoulders square, the heart area open up. This should feel like a gentle lifting, not a martial rigor. Tuck your chin in a little, so your nose is not pointing at the clouds.

Once you have found a balanced, upright posture, begin to pay attention to how your body feels as it sits. First, feel the pressure of your rear end on the chair or cushion. Notice the feeling of being supported from below -- literally. The chair or cushion supports you, the floor supports it, and earth supports the floor; you are literally being supported by the earth when you sit. Now you can concretely feel that support and entirely release your weight to it. Your weight is actually the index of the earth's supporting you. In pure outer space you don't weigh anything.

Next feel other parts of your body sitting: notice your neck and head and facial muscles; notice your shoulders and arms, your hands, your spine, your chest, your heart area. For the classical Zen hand position (mudra), **place the back of the left hand in the palm of the right**, with the hands held in the lap, gently curved, thumb tips gently touching. The arms are loose at the sides, not rigid or tight. They form a kind of oval. Holding the hands and arms in this way gives an alert, gentle, balanced focus. Sitting with balance, awake and yet relaxed, is key.

Now begin to pay attention to your breathing as it rises and falls in your lower belly. There's no need to create a special breath. Just be attentive to whatever breath appears -- in, out, rising, falling. Usually just paying attention changes the breath slightly, making it a little slower and deeper. If it helps, you can count each breath on the exhale, lightly, from one to five, beginning again at one when you are done -- or when you lose count. If you don't want to count or if you get tired of it, you can just follow the breath as it comes in and goes out at the belly. If you get dreamy or lost, counting again will help.

Zazen is, fundamentally, sitting with the basic feeling of being alive. What is the basic feeling of being alive? Being conscious, embodied, and breathing. That is actually what it feels like to be alive. Every moment of your life, and all of your feelings, thoughts, and accomplishments, depend on this, but most of us hardly ever notice it. In zazen our task is just to be present with this and nothing else. Simply sitting aware of the feeling of being alive.

Of course, a lot of other things are going on when we sit in zazen. There are thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, complaints. None of this is a problem or a mistake. The important thing is simply to return to the primary commitment -- paying attention to the breath and the body -- as soon as we notice we have forgotten about it. It's good to notice what has drawn us away, to appreciate it, and to remember that it is just exactly what had to be happening in that moment. But in this moment we come back without further ado. No tears and recriminations. We just come back to the feeling of being alive in the body and the breath. And there we are.

While there is much written and discussed about Zen and Buddhist meditation, and there are many specific techniques beyond this simple practice, meditation more or less does come down to this very basic practice. Essentially, it is nothing more than

sitting with an honest awareness of the process of your life. While such awareness may seem exactly like the self-consciousness we usually feel in daily living, zazen practice will show us that it is in fact subtly but crucially different in that it is nonjudgmental and all-inclusive. This nonjudgmental and all-inclusive awareness, promoted and developed by meditation practice but more than meditation practice, will help us eventually understand and put into practice the wisdom and flexibility to deal with the events of our lives, and with others.

So this is the basic practice. We establish it always at the beginning and the end of our practice session. In the middle we might contemplate other things -- perhaps a slogan we want to be working on. But we always maintain the attitude of basic mindful presence and gentle focus, without pressing and without blame.

from Norman Fischer, *Training in Compassion: Zen Teachings on the Practice of Lojong*, 2013, Appendix 2.