

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Za-Zen

Second Subtitle: Za-Zen

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[Japanese : za, to sit down (from Middle Chinese dzua) + zen, silent meditation]
zazen

Kodo Sawaki practicing zazen
Zazen is at the heart of Zen Buddhist practice, different from other meditation in that it uses no meditation object or concept to focus the mind. First still the mind. Then after years of practice to reach a state of pure awareness where the mind can realize its own Buddha nature.

In Zen Buddhism, sitting meditation or zazen (Japanese: 坐禅, "zazen" meaning "sitting meditation") is a meditative discipline practitioners perform to calm the mind and experience insight into the nature of existence. While the term originally referred to a specific posture, it is now commonly used to refer to practices in any posture, such as walking meditation.

During zazen, the hands are folded together into a simple mudra over the lap. The practitioner breathes from the hara (the center of gravity in the belly) and the eyes are neither fully open nor shut so that the practitioner is not distracted but at the same time is kept awake. (The latter practice has its origins in a superstition that practitioners close their eyes during meditation are said to be in the hungry ghost category. Keeping the eyes only half way closed keeps the practitioner from becoming distracted, but still allows light to come into the eyes to keep the practitioner alert.)

History and Tradition

Long periods of zazen, usually performed in groups at a zendo (meditation hall). The beginning of a zazen period is marked by ringing a bell three times (shijoshō), and the end of a round by ringing the bell once. Before and after sitting on the zafu, Zen practitioners perform a gasshō (bowing) to the Dharma, to the sangha, and to the teacher.

In Japan, seated zazen is traditionally performed on a mat called a zabuton. The common positions used to sit on the zafu are:

kekkaфуza (full-lotus)

hankaфуza (half-lotus)

Burmese (a cross-legged posture in which the ankles are placed together)
seiza (a kneeling posture using a bench or zafu)

In addition, it is not uncommon for modern practitioners to sit zazen in a chair with a support behind the lower back to help maintain the natural curve of the spine.

Misconceptions about Zazen

To many in the West, zazen is an almost completely unfamiliar practice, for many misconceptions to spring up. One common misconception is that the shutting out of all worldly stimuli in order to reach some special, superhuman state. For example, in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the character Li Mu Bai (played by Chow Yun Fat) describes reaching a state of enlightenment which is "pure light". While the zazen experience is inherently a personal one for the practitioner, and such phenomena are not at all out of the question, such a goal is not the goal of zazen.

However, to many who practice zazen there is a direct correlation between a focused state of mind and a relaxed body (Johannes Itten, *Elements of Color*). This is evident in martial art activities as well as Chinese, Japanese, and even Western calligraphy, for these are Fine Arts. In these arts the medium is unifying and "correct" therefore one has to begin with this "zanshin" state of being before one can create art, so that the work is executed with an almost certain action. This process is often one of many mistakes that have to constantly be corrected in detail." Meditation does not take on a dogmatic theological pantheon of worship, but instead a foundation of a rational and natural inquiry into the reality of nature. Enlightenment is a focused state of mind and a relaxed body that allows one to approximate nature. The arts in these cultures were often used as a way for perfecting oneself, not meant to inflate the ego as a desire for greatness in the particular field. Instead, it seems that they would use the practices to further their ability to discern certain truth about nature. It is important to note that Zazen holds meditation to be evident and this has an interesting correlation to Western philosophy's approach to truth, as stemmed from René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. It is a position in human culture, but it does not necessarily resolve the problems of Western philosophy, however the practice is a cogent one and not to be misunderstood. If Western philosophy, it is a critical discipline.