

Taking the Path of Zen

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The Posture

I have heard that someone asked Sasaki Jōshū Roshi, “What of Zen is necessary to preserve?” He replied, “Posture and the breathing.” I think I might say simply, “Posture.”

Posture is the form of zazen. To avoid fatigue and to permit consciousness to settle, legs, seat, and spine should support the body. If strain is thrown on the muscles and tendons of the back and neck, it will be impossible to continue the practice beyond a short period.

We may take our model from the posture of a one-year-old baby. The child sits bolt upright, with spine curving forward slightly at the waist, rather than completely straight up-and-down. The belly sticks out in front, while the rear end sticks out behind. Sitting with the spine completely straight at this age would be impossible, as the muscles are still undevel-

oped—too weak to hold the body erect. Curved forward, the vertebrae are locked into their strongest position, and the child can forget about staying erect.

When you take your seat on your cushions, or on a chair if your legs don't bend easily, your spine should curve forward slightly at the waist like the baby's. Your belt should be loose, and your stomach be allowed to hang out naturally, while your posterior is thrust back for solid support. Katsuki Sekida, former resident advisor to the Diamond Sangha, once sent out New Year cards with the greeting, "Belly forward, buttocks back." This is how we should greet the New Year, or the new day.

If the spine is correctly positioned, then all else follows naturally. Head is up, perhaps bent forward very slightly. Chin is in, ears are on line with the shoulders, and shoulders are on line with the hips.

The Legs

Legs are a problem. Few people, even children, even in Japan, are flexible enough to sit easily in a lotus position without painful practice. Our tendons and muscles need stretching over many months before we can be comfortable. Yet, in the long run, sitting with one or both feet in the lap is far superior to sitting in any other position. In that way you are locked into your practice and your organs are completely at ease. Sitting in a chair, however, may be the only option for one suffering from injury or arthritis.

Certain exercises are helpful in stretching for the lotus positions. Begin by sitting on a rug or pad:

1. Bring heels of both feet to the crotch, and bend forward with your back straight and touch your face to the floor, placing your hands on the floor just above your head. Knees also should touch the floor in this exercise and if they do not, rock them gently up and down, stretching the ligaments.

2. Bring your feet together with your legs outstretched.

bend forward and touch your hands to the floor by your feet, keeping your back and legs straight; if possible, touch your face to your knees.

3. Extend your legs as far apart as possible. Bend forward with your back and legs straight and touch your face to the floor, placing your hands on the floor, either outstretched or just above your head.

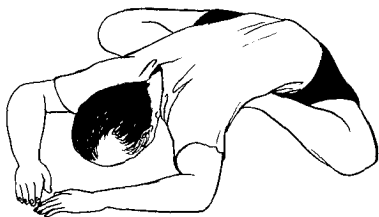
4. Double back one leg so that your foot is beside your seat, with your instep, shin, and knee resting on the rug or pad. Bend the other leg back in the same way. Now lie back on one elbow, then on both elbows, and finally lie back flat. At first you may have to lie back against a sofa cushion so that you are not completely flat, and perhaps have someone to help you. If you can manage to lie flat, raise your arms over your head until your hands touch the floor and then bring them to your side again.

Yasutani Roshi did these exercises every morning before breakfast, well into his eighties. It may take you some time to become flexible enough to do them even partially. Maintain the effort and your zazen will be less demanding physically.

These four exercises are the core of *Makkōhō*, a Japanese system of physical conditioning. Don't push yourself too hard or you may strain a muscle or pull a ligament. At the limit of each stretch, breathe in and out three or four times and try to relax.⁹

Cushions

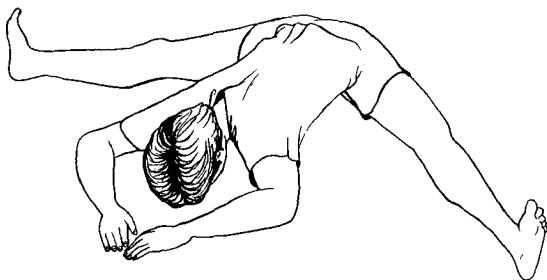
Correct zazen posture requires the use of a cushion and a pad. The pad is at least 28 inches square, stuffed with kapok or cotton batting so that it is about 1½ inches thick. The *zafu*, or cushion, completes the setup. It is spherical, stuffed with kapok; 12 inches or more in diameter, and it flattens out somewhat in use. Ordinary pillows may be substituted for it, but they are not as practical. Foam rubber is sometimes used to fill



Makkōhō Position 1



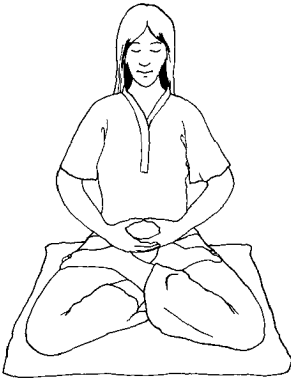
Makkōhō Position 2



Makkōhō Position 3



Makkōhō Position 4



Full Lotus



Half Lotus



Seiza



Burmese

the pad, but it makes an unsteady seat. It cannot be used for the zafu.

The zafu elevates your rear end. This makes for correct posture without straining. I have known yogis who could take the full lotus position standing on their heads, but few who could meditate for twenty-five minutes without a cushion.

Getting Seated

Bring the zafu to the back edge of the pad, sit on it, and rest both knees on the pad. For the lotus position, place your right foot on your left thigh, as high as possible, and then your left foot on your right thigh. The half lotus is simply the left foot on the right thigh, while the right foot is drawn up under the left thigh. The full lotus is the most secure way to sit. The half lotus is adequate; it will distort the body slightly, but not enough to matter. It is all right to place the right foot on the left thigh by way of compensating for a spinal deviation or as relief during sesshin.

There are two other possibilities. One is the Burmese style, in which one leg is placed in front of the other, so that both ankles are resting on the pad. This position is not quite as steady as half lotus, but it is easier on the knees. As you get used to it, you may be able to start taking up half lotus for brief intervals at first, and then for longer periods.

The other option is the *seiza* position, which is something like kneeling, except that your rear end is supported by a zafu. Some people turn the zafu on edge before sitting on it. This keeps the legs closer together and is more comfortable. Your weight rests on your seat, knees, shins, and ankles. Like the Burmese position, *seiza* is not as secure as half lotus, but it may be used as a kind of intermediate practice while the legs are becoming more flexible through daily stretching exercises. It is also useful as a relief during sesshin.

The one most desperately uncomfortable position is the

conventional cross-legged, or tailor-fashion of sitting. Both feet are under the thighs. The back is rounded; the belly is drawn in. The shin of one leg rests on the ankle of the other, and severe pain is inevitable. The lungs must labor to draw in their air and other organs seem cramped as well. Sitting in this way is probably not conducive to good health or to good practice.

The incomplete half lotus, in which the upper foot rests on the calf of the other leg, rather than upon the thigh, also may be painful after a while, not in the legs, but in the back. Somehow, it is difficult to be fully erect in this position, and one must strain in the effort.

All these suggestions about leg positions should be taken as guidelines, not as rules. Do the best you can, and no more will be asked. One of our members at the Maui Zendo did a full seven-day sesshin flat on her back. She had ruptured a disk, and could not even sit up without assistance. Daitō Kokushi, great master of early Japanese Zen, had a withered leg and could not sit in any of the conventional ways.

Hakuin Zenji's idealized portrait of Daito Kokushi shows him seated with a suspicious bump under his robe where his feet would be. I am not sure whether or not this represents his lame leg. In any case, it is said that he was only able to bring that leg to its correct place on his thigh at the end of his life.

"All my life I have been obeying you," he said to his leg. "Now you obey me!" With a mighty heave, he brought his leg into position, breaking it, and dying in the same moment.

I recommend against such drastic practice, at least until you are ready to die. The full lotus position is the most secure way to sit, but it is also the one most likely to injure the overeager beginner. Your legs should be fairly flexible before you attempt it, and even then, don't sit in that way for long periods until you are fairly comfortable. You may "pop your knee," and this may result in permanent damage.



Shakyamuni Buddha seated in a chair.



Daitō Kokushi, a portrait by
Hakuin Ekaku Zenji.

A yoga teacher advised me that people should be careful to support their knees with their hands when placing their legs in position for zazen, and when unfolding them at the end of a period. This is cogent advice. The knees are comparatively weak joints.

Eyes and Hands

Your eyes should be about two-thirds closed, cast down, looking at a point about three feet ahead of you. It should be remembered that if your eyes are closed, you may become dreamy; if your eyes are wide open, you will be too easily distracted. Also, don't try to keep your eyes focused. After a while you will find that they naturally go out of focus whenever you sit.

Place your hands in your lap in the meditation *mudrā*. Your left hand should rest, palm upward, on the palm of your right hand, and your thumbs should touch, forming an oval. (It is said, technically, that it is the tips of your thumbnails that should touch.) Your hands should rest in your lap, just touching your belly, and your elbows should project a little. Some Zen teachers suggest that you imagine you are holding a precious jewel in your hands; others suggest that you place your attention there. In any case, the hand position is critically important, for it reflects the condition of your mind. If your mind is taut, your thumbs will hold the oval; if your mind becomes dull or strays into fantasy, your thumbs will tend to collapse. (Note that in the Rinzai School, the hands are merely clasped together, with the right hand holding the left thumb.)

Beginning Your Practice

When you sit down, place your feet in position, lean far forward, thrust your posterior back, and sit up. Next, take a deep silent breath and hold it. Then exhale slowly and silently, all

the way out, and hold it. Breathe in deeply again and hold it, and all the way out once more. You may do this through the mouth, but note that at all other times you should breathe through the nose. These two deep inhalations and exhalations help to cut the continuity of your mental activity and to quiet the mind for zazen.

Now rock from side to side, widely at first, then in decreasing arcs. Lean forward and back in the same way, and you will find that you are well settled and ready to begin your breath counting. Follow the instructions I gave you earlier. Count "one" for the inhalation, "two" for the exhalation, and so on up to "ten," and repeat.

More on Breath Counting

You will find breath counting to be a useful means throughout your life of Zen training. Whatever your practice becomes later on, you should count your breaths from "one" to "ten," one or two sequences, at the start of each new period of zazen. It will help you to settle down, and will serve to remind you that you are not just sitting there, but sitting with a particular practice.

At best, you become one with your object in zazen, so if you merely sit with a focus, you tend to close off your potential. You and your object remain two things. Become each point, each number, in the sequence of counting. You and the count and the breath are all of a piece in *this* moment. Invest yourself in each number. There is only "one" in the whole universe, only "two" in the whole universe, just that single point. Everything else is dark.

At first, as a beginner, you will be conscious of each step in the procedure, but eventually you will become the procedure itself. The practice will do the practice. It takes time, and for months, perhaps, you will seem to spend your time dreaming

rather than counting. This is normal. Your brain secretes thoughts as your stomach secretes pepsin. Don't condemn yourself for this normal condition.

Breath counting is only one of many devices you can use in your practice. Later I will discuss some others with you in detail.