

# *Physical Postures for Meditation.*

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By expressing the mind of meditation with your body, you bring both body and mind together in their true unity. The mind needs to be bright and alert so you should sit up straight, but without tension. The spine should have a gentle forward curve in the lumbar region so the torso can be erect, but without strain. To become familiar with the correct position of the torso, stand up straight with your feet together and relax your shoulders and abdomen. Place your forearms in the small of your back and feel how it is possible in this position to relax and yet be standing up straight. There is stability and an immovable quality that has strength without force or hardness. Notice how your hips are rotated forwards in a way that keeps the small of your back curved inwards and allows your abdomen—when it is relaxed—to hang forward.

Next, sit on a chair, preferably a dining chair or piano stool with a flat or nearly flat seat. Arrange a flattish cushion towards the back of the seat and sit down so that the base of your spine is on the cushion. (Make sure the edge of the chair does not press into your thighs.) This, in effect, gives the chair a slight forward tilt which lets the hips rotate forwards as they did when you were standing up straight as described above; your spine will then naturally go into the correctly curved position. Place your forearms in the small of your back again to make sure it feels the same as it did when you were standing straight. Unless you have a back

problem that prevents you from sitting straight, do not use the back of the chair for support. Keep your feet and knees apart to give yourself a stable base.



*Meditation on a chair.*

Put your right hand on your lap with your left hand on top (or vice versa if you are left-handed) and put your thumbs together as shown in one of the photographs below. As the meditation period continues, if you become distracted your thumbs will often droop or lose contact with each other as fantasies occupy the mind. If this should happen, you can bring yourself back to the mind of meditation by simply correcting your hand position and posture.

Do not close your eyes as this encourages sleepiness and foggy states of mind; you should keep them open but lowered so that you are looking at a point on the floor or wall roughly three to six feet in front of you. Keep your eyes in focus, but do not pick on one little spot and stare at it. In a sense, you want to keep your eyes in focus but, at the same time, look within. In other words, do not get caught up in what is in front of you; allow your attention to be on the stillness. Blink naturally so that your eyes are under no strain. If you normally wear glasses, keep them on during meditation. Keep your mouth closed with your tongue touching the back of your top teeth; breathe quietly through your nose. Try to breathe naturally using both chest and abdomen so that the breath is deep and quiet, but not exaggerated. The essence of serene reflection meditation is that it is a natural activity that

should be done without strain. If you notice you are breathing particularly shallowly, as often happens during periods of anxiety, then deliberately breathe more fully for a minute or two, and then go back to just sitting still. You should not get caught up with physical sensations any more than with thoughts. Although there are physical characteristics of deep meditation, you do not want to try to imitate them—just concentrate on sitting still as outlined and your body will naturally express this stillness in a way that is right for you. Everyone's body is slightly different so please remember that what is described here is a blueprint, not an absolute standard.

Another position is the kneeling posture with a meditation bench. The bench has a forward-sloping seat that supports the buttocks and prevents the ankles from being crushed or the knees being strained. The legs of the bench should only be long enough to allow the ankles to fit underneath the seat. Too high a bench, or one with too steep an angle, exaggerates the curve of the lower back and causes pain. Some people find that their arms are not long enough to rest comfortably in their lap when using a bench, a problem that is easily solved by placing a small cushion under the hands.



*Meditation on a bench.*

For those who can manage it, the cross-legged postures also provide stable positions for meditation. However, enlightenment does not depend upon sitting cross-legged so do not force yourself into painful positions and end up

damaging your knees, hips or back. Approach these positions with care, only using them if they do not cause physical problems and remember that your body is the body of the Buddha and should be respected. All cross-legged positions require a meditation cushion; however, a folded blanket or pillow can be used to experiment with. Whatever you use should provide a firm base to support the tip of your spine about three to five inches off the floor. Only the tip of the spine should rest on the cushion; otherwise the cushion will press into the back of the thighs and cut off circulation.



*Meditation on a cushion.*



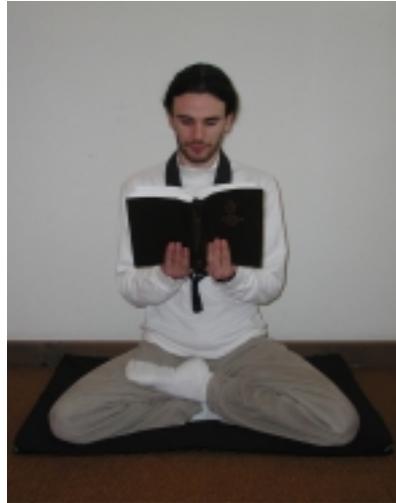
*Meditation in the Burmese position.*

For the Burmese position place one foot directly in front of you, the bottom of the foot touching the bottom of the opposite thigh and your other foot directly in front of the first. As with all cross-legged positions you will feel very unstable unless you have both knees on the ground, but it may take a little while for the sinews to stretch sufficiently to allow

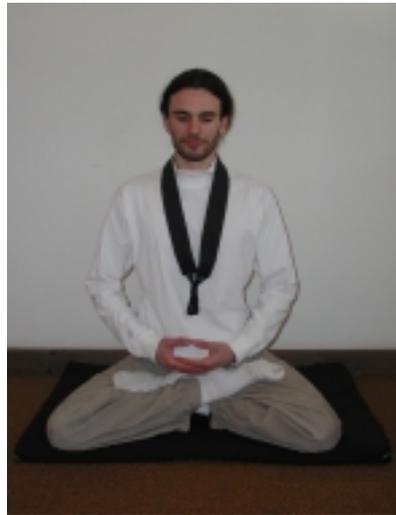
this to happen. Go carefully and do not force your knees down. This is probably the easiest cross-legged position to

get into but it may require some muscular effort to hold the back in the correct position. For those with long legs this position can cause strain on the knees, so use with care.

To sit in the half-lotus position, place one foot in front of you, the bottom of the foot touching the bottom of the opposite thigh and the other foot on the opposite thigh. In the full-lotus position each foot is placed on the opposite thigh. All cross-legged positions cause a slight twist in the spine so it is very important to alternate which leg you have in front to avoid back trouble that otherwise could develop in the future. Most people find it takes a few months before they can sit cross-legged comfortably and without pain for a full meditation period of thirty minutes. At the outset, gradually ease yourself into the position shown and sit for a short time. If you want to try sitting cross-legged, it is essential to get your posture checked at a meditation group meeting, or at one of our priorities or retreats before too long.



*Trainee in the half-lotus position holding a Scripture book.*



*Meditation in the full-lotus position.*

When more than one period of seated meditation (which should not be more than forty-five minutes), are scheduled, they are alternated with periods of walking meditation. Each forty-five minute period of seated meditation is followed ideally by a fifteen-minute period of walking meditation: sitting without such movement for longer periods can cause serious physical injury to the feet, knees, hips and back. This is true for all of the postures described above. Walking meditation also helps us to appreciate that meditation is not dependent on physical



*Walking meditation.*

immobility: it can be a bridge between formal meditation and meditation within the activities of daily life. It can also be usefully practised if sleepiness becomes a persistent problem.

Get up slowly and gently and commence to do your kinhin. Kinhin [*walking meditation*] is done by making a fist of the left hand, with the thumb inside, and covering it with the right hand; it should not be held tightly against the chest wall but in an oval position. The arms, being held loosely, form an oval at the level of the chest with the elbows extended. The body must always be erect with the eyes again still in their naturally lowered position, not closed nor looking too far ahead of the feet.... Beginning with the left foot, walk calmly and slowly, with great dignity; do not walk absent-mindedly; a step of not more than six

inches at a time should be taken. Walk first on the heel and then along the side of the foot ending upon the toes so that the foot digs itself into the ground as it were. This is done for five to ten minutes after each period of thirty or forty minutes sitting. Remember that this is moving Zazen; it is not done [*merely*] for the purpose of stretching the legs as some people think.<sup>1</sup>

In exactly the same way as when sitting, you just sit, so when walking, just walk. If the mind wanders off, then patiently bring it back to just walking. In this way, mind and body become one and we are able to realise our true nature.

Meditation can also be done whilst lying down, although this position should only be used when illness or disability prevents one from sitting up. The best position is to lie flat on your back with feet together and hands clasped at the chest in the same position as described for walking meditation, except that the hands are allowed to rest against the chest. Some people find it helpful to slowly move their feet to help keep awake, and others find it necessary to have their knees slightly raised. Keep your eyes open in a position that corresponds to a downward gaze if you were sitting up.

Once the sitting practice is over, you then get up and attend to whatever needs to be done, doing it with the mind of meditation. If your mind wanders off, you quietly bring it back to the job in hand so that work becomes meditation in exactly the same way as sitting becomes meditation. It is easiest to learn how to make work into meditation with simple, manual activities like walking up and down stairs, washing up, using the lavatory, cleaning the house, etc. Whenever fantasy takes over, recognise what is happening, let go of it, and come back to what you are doing. In time you become a lot more concentrated and this has many beneficial side-effects as you learn to bring the mind of

meditation into all activities of life. In the end, meditation truly becomes a twenty-four-hour-a-day activity.

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*Note.*

1. Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen is Eternal Life*, 4th ed. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999), pp. 34–35.

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*Purify your own heart and  
penetrate the depths of your-  
self through meditation.  
Then you will see all things  
clearly, obscured by nothing.  
Therefore we say that there  
is no mountain barrier and  
no river separation. The  
bright light penetrates every  
corner of the world.*

*Great Master  
Wanshi Shokaku.*

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