

SITTING MEDITATION GUIDE

Zen sitting meditation, “tọa thiền” (in Vietnamese), or Zazen (in Japanese), is the main practice in Zen Buddhism. During meditation, you sit quietly and pay attention to your body, breath, and mind. The goal is not to reach a special state or follow complicated steps, but simply to sit with awareness. Zen teaches us that when we sit in meditation, we can discover a sense of connection with ourselves and others, and realize that what we are looking for is already within us. Zen meditation is like passing through a doorway or threshold—it takes effort and commitment to sit, but it helps us find peace and clarity.

Sitting meditation is simple. You sit in a comfortable posture and focus on your breath. If you notice your mind wandering, gently return your attention to your breathing. Ancient Zen meditation guides are brief and straightforward: sit, pay attention, and relax into the practice. Over time, this helps you feel more natural and freer. The most important thing is to return home to yourself and find peace by just sitting.

I. PREPARING AND ENTERING MEDITATION

Creating Your Meditation Space

To establish a consistent zazen practice, it is helpful to set aside a dedicated space for meditation. This can be a whole room or simply a quiet corner. The area should be clean and free of clutter to promote a sense of calm and focus. Place a mat (zabuton / tọa cụ) on the floor—such as a folded blanket—and add another comfortable sitting cushion (zafu / bồ đoàn, usually round), or a small bench. If sitting on the floor is uncomfortable, a chair may be used instead.

Setting Your Intention

Wear loose, clean clothing for zazen. Before beginning your meditation, it is traditional to bow to an altar, offer a stick of incense, and bow again. As you stand before your seat, bow toward and away from your cushion, bench, or chair. These gestures help cultivate intention and respect for the practice. The incense is offered with the wish that the session benefits all beings in awakening, not just oneself. Bowing to and away from the cushion acknowledges respect for practice and for others who are practicing, whether present or not. This act of bowing, with the head lowered in a vulnerable position, gives the ego a chance to let go.

Settling Into Posture

The first step is to choose a sitting style that allows you to maintain a stable upright posture for the length of the meditation session.

The full lotus posture is the most stable but requires that your hips have been gradually stretched to become open and allow your legs to rotate without putting stress on your knees. Place your left leg on your right thigh and your right leg on your left thigh (or vice versa).

The half lotus posture is similar to the full lotus posture, except that only one leg is placed on the opposite thigh.

The Burmese posture is a flat sitting position with both lower legs remain on the mat. Both knees rest squarely on the mat with your tailbone directly above the center of your cushion. The cushion height creates a sloping surface that allows your spine to be vertical with a natural relaxed inward curvature in your lower back.

Sitting in the chair is also a viable meditation posture. Your feet should be firmly planted in the ground so that your body is supported at three points just like the cross legged postures.

Once seated—whether cross-legged, kneeling, or in a chair—settle into the zazen posture. Your hands rest on your lap at the level of the navel and in the cosmic mudra: your right hand gently holds the left (or vice versa), palms up, with thumbs barely touching to form a circle.

Your posture in sitting is vitally important. Sit on the forward third of your cushion or chair, so that your hips are higher than your knees and your belly is free to move in and out without stress on your lower back. Your ears are in line with your shoulders, your head balanced gently on your neck, your eyes are slightly open, gazing down about three feet in front of you. Your chin is pointing neither up nor down, but is slightly tucked in. Place your tongue just behind your teeth on the roof of your mouth. Your arms, shoulders, hands, and fingers should be relaxed, without tension or effort required to keep them in place. Sway from side to side until you find your center point. The tip of your nose, your navel, and the tips of your two thumbs should be vertically aligned along the center of your body. The muscles on your face should be allowed to relax, leaving an imperceptible smile.

Attending to the Breath

To start meditation, take three initial breaths by inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. The first breath should be deep, the second and third breaths should be subtler and more natural. After your first three breaths, return to breathe naturally and steadily through the nose. Breathing in, allow the breath to fully enter your body until your lower belly expands; then, breathing out, softly allow the breath to ease out through your nostrils. Notice how the breath seems to travel through the main avenues of your torso. Your belly should rise and fall naturally with each breath. Let the breath fill your lower abdomen as if it were a balloon.

II. DEEPENING & MAINTAINING MEDITATION

Zazen is simple. During your zazen session, focus on counting your breath, maintaining your posture, and remaining still. Notice any urges to move—such as scratching your nose or tugging your ear—which are often ways to avoid bodily sensations. Instead of acting on these impulses, observe them and gently return your attention to the breath. Over time, you will see how these urges fade and are replaced by others, reflecting the second noble truth: the cause of suffering is

craving. Thoughts, impulses, and sensations will come and go, yet you continue to sit. Avoid telling yourself stories or using distractions to escape the present moment. These are ways of separating from your deepest intention and your zazen. When you sit for zazen, simply sit. That is enough. Gradually, the mental chatter recedes, and your body, breath, and mind become unified.

There are three ways for beginners to deepen and maintain their meditation.

1. **Counting the Breaths:** As you relax into the breath, you can begin silently counting each full cycle of breath, noting “one” on the out-breath, “two” on the next out-breath, and so on up to “ten.” When you reach “ten,” begin again with “one.” When you realize that you have stopped counting, and are caught up in thinking, simply take another breath and go back to “one.” The counting serves to diminish coarse wandering thoughts. Concentrate on posture and breath counting, which cultivates samadhi—a unified mind. The practice is not about reaching “ten” in breath counting, but about training the body and mind. Allow your body, breath, and mind to settle without judging your performance or seeking results.
2. **Observing the Breaths:** As wandering thoughts diminish and you can follow your breath without losing count, you can progress to simply observing your breath. Observe your breath by feeling exactly where the air flows into and out of your body. Observe the abdomen and lungs expanding and contracting. During this observation, you should be clearly aware that your life depends totally on each new breath. Just as the breath is impermanent, so our life is also impermanent. As wandering thoughts become more subtle and less able to distract your concentration, you can progress to the third stage.
3. **Awareness of thoughts:** In this stage, serenity is attained without focusing on the breath. At the moment a thought arises, you become immediately aware of it, but do not follow it. When a thought naturally subsides on its own when you leave it alone, your mind becomes pure. As you continue this method of practice, thoughts will arise less and less. You become aware without being distracted, without the concern for the passage of time. What remains is pure awareness. Over time with regular and steady practice, you would be able to distinguish the “false” thoughts (or illusory mind) from the pure awareness, which is the true mind.

III. ENDING MEDITATION

When the bell rings to indicate the ending of the meditation session, you intentionally take three breaths by inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. The first breath should be subtle, the second and the third breaths grow deeper and deeper. Then, you put your palms together at the chest center and dedicate the merit of your meditation practice to anyone you have in mind or to all sentient beings. Then, follow the **Releasing Exercise Technique**.

IV. RELEASING EXERCISE

1. Squeeze your fingers in a fist and open-close release five times.
2. Push down firmly on your lap three times, straightening your spine.
3. Move your shoulders up and down five times, each shoulder separately.
4. Gently move your head up and down five cycles.
5. Gently turn your head from right to left, and vice versa, five times.
6. Rub your palms together to generate heat, then place your hands over your eyes, pause for a few second. Be aware of the touch and the pleasant feelings that arise throughout this massage. Now, massage your eyes either inwardly, outwardly, or circular motions 10 times.
7. Rub your face in an upwardly circulating movement 10 times.
8. Rub your head from the front to the back 10 times.
9. Rub your ears 10 times, then pull your ears lobes 10 times in circular motions.
10. Rub the back of your neck 10 times.
11. Rub your front throat 10 times.
12. Use your left hand to massage the whole right arm 10 times. Repeat on opposite arm.
13. Place your right hand on your left shoulder, and your left hand under your right armpit. Massage up and down 10 times, then stretch and breathe out strongly. Repeat for opposite hands.
14. Place right hand on the upper chest and left hand on the mid-back spine. Massage in a circular motion clockwise 10 times. Repeat this step with right hand moves down to the mid-abdomen, and then finally to the lower abdomen.
15. Bring both hands to the back, rub your back from the top to bottom 10 times.
16. Using your palms rub your kidney and waist area 10 times.
17. Rub your upper and inner thighs toward the knees 10 times.
18. Straighten out your left leg and rub your left knee 10 times.
19. Massage the lower left leg from knee to ankle 10 times.
20. Bring up your left foot & rub it 10 times, remember to rub the sole of your foot.
21. Hold your left toes, rotate them gently 5 times. Now rotate in the reverse direction 5 times.
22. Straighten out your right leg and repeat similar steps 18-21.
23. Take out your cushion, straighten out both legs and bend forward to touch your toes 5 times.
24. Sit back upright in a relaxed and stable position. Adjust your clothing and wait for the bell rings to signal everyone stand up getting ready for chanting.
25. Get up and adjust your cushions and other items neatly. Bow to your cushion, turn and bow to the Sangha. Then, stand in a relaxed and stable position, facing the altar and chant together.

THE DAILY PRACTICE

Establishing Consistency in Zazen

A recommended starting period for zazen is 20–30 minutes. You may discover that you prefer more or less time, and that is perfectly acceptable. Maintaining a consistent practice is the main priority. The goal is not to reach a particular state of mind or destination. Each day's zazen will vary, much like daily life itself. Through daily meditation, you cultivate steadiness—whether you feel alert, sleepy, or focused, you simply practice each day, embracing both the highs and lows.

When you lose focus or make mistakes—and it happens to everyone—just acknowledge it and return to your cushion. During sitting, you may notice your mind wandering. In those moments, take a deep breath and recognize that your awareness has returned to the present. As an old meditation manual says, once you become aware of a thought, it vanishes. When you are caught up in thinking about something, you are lost in it. But when you notice your thinking, you move into a state of awareness. The original thought disappears, leaving only awareness or a new thought arising from that awareness. Daily practice gradually increases your ability to remain in that space of pure awareness, free from any specific object—simply breathing and being present. This is what it means to be naturally unified.

The Role of Form in Practice

Zazen is a structured practice that allows us to encounter the boundless emptiness of no form. One of life's paradoxes is that the structure we create gives us the freedom to move beyond it. Form organizes and directs our energies, but we can carry it lightly, appreciating its benefits. This subtle discipline—settling, unifying, and letting things be—is known as the dharma gate of peace and joy.

Supporting Practices: The Home Altar

Alongside zazen and bowing, other aspects of Zen practice support your path. Setting up a home altar encourages respect and devotion. Placing something on an altar is a gesture of esteem. In Zen monasteries, the altar in the Meditation Hall traditionally features a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, who represents Awakening, or Manjushri, the bodhisattva of transcendent wisdom, who wields a sword to cut away delusions and clear the mind. By placing such an image on your altar, you express a resolve to confront delusions, ignorance, greed, and anger, aspiring to clarity.

When setting up your home altar, select a statue or image of any Buddha or bodhisattva that inspires you to embody qualities like wisdom, compassion, and peace. You can also light incense to symbolize awakening and life's impermanence, place a vase of flowers or a single bloom to reflect fleeting beauty, offer water representing nourishment and purification, and add a candle to illuminate the outer revered space as well as your inner sacred mind.

THE PRECEPTS & SITTING WITH OTHERS

Embracing the Five Main Precepts

Ultimately, the heart of this practice reveals our interdependence and interconnectedness with all beings. As part of this journey, we take up the Five Main Precepts, also known as the Five Mindfulness Trainings. These include: (1) Not to kill – Reverence for life, (2) Not to steal – Respect for others’ property, (3) Not to engage in sexual misconduct – Responsible sexual conduct, (4) Not to use false speech – Truthful and kind speech, and (5) Not to use intoxicants – Mindful consumption. These precepts are not strict commandments, but guiding principles that foster a life rooted in freedom and service. The precepts invite ongoing study and reflection throughout one’s life. In certain Zen traditions, they are woven into formal koan study, each precept explored from many angles. Rather than simply following them, strive to internalize and embody these principles—much as you “become” your zazen practice.

The Importance of Practicing with Others

While these guidelines help lay the foundation for your daily practice, it is important to remember that Zen is not meant to be practiced alone. Engaging in sitting meditation, study, work, and conversation with others is essential to the Zen path. Whenever possible, seek out opportunities to sit, study, and practice with others—whether at a Zen meditation center or in a group setting. Sharing practice in community deepens your experience and supports your ongoing growth.