

## Chapter 2 First Lesson

There are many books in which you can find instructions that are very similar to what I am going to write in this first lesson. I will put my own personal spin on this lesson so I hope you find it interesting.

Find a quiet comfortable space to practice. The space can be anywhere but a lot of people like to set up a small “sacred” space in which they place some personal objects like an incense burner and a religious image or some flowers. As a beginner it is helpful to meditate in the same space every day. In time the space will become inviting and will help calm the mind. The space can be small, maybe just the corner of a room or along a wall. For years I sat in my office facing the wall with a small bowl filled with sand in which I burned incense. Facing the wall is typical in Soto Zen and it gave me a sense of privacy and I didn't have to look out at a busy room.

It is helpful to sit the same time or times every day. Any time you find to sit is fine but the best times to sit are in the morning before you begin any of your days activities or in the evening after all your days activities are finished. You don't want your mind pulled into the activities of the day. It still might happen but we do what we can so we don't promote a busy mind. One way to find time to sit (meditate) is to just get up earlier, maybe an extra ½ hour and meditate immediately or after a cup of tea or coffee. Meditation to some extent can replace sleep and it is a nice way to wake yourself up and then it will set your frame of mind for the whole day. I recommend that you sit about ½ hour or more twice a day. Sometimes it is recommended that you begin sitting such short times as 10min. but if this is something you really want, disciplining your self to sit 30 min without moving will happen quickly.

Now to find a way to sit that is comfortable and allows for the correct posture. The correct posture is to sit with a straight back and head erect. It is difficult to do this if you are sitting on the ground in what seems the most natural position with the legs crossed knees resting on the apposing foot. It will hurt before a ½ hour is up, and you have to strain to straighten the back. I sat this way for years. In order to straighten my back I often sat with my back against a wall then, After I did a weekend retreat and pushed through sitting this way, not at all comfortably, a friend who had training in Zen practice showed me various other ways to sit more comfortably. First get your ass up on a nice thick pillow. There are pillows designed for meditation. Then try sitting in one of the three lotus position. Full lotus: Lay one leg on the ground with the foot pulled in to you. Set the foot of the other leg on the thigh of the first leg sand then lift the foot of the first leg onto the thigh of the second leg. Knees will be on the ground and the legs will be locked together. **Full lotus is not comfortable for most people.** I do not recommend this position unless it is comfortable. But if it is comfortable it has certain advantages. It is extremely balanced. and it makes it easy to straighten the back with even a thin pillow. There is also a subtle energetic quality to sitting this way which promotes good meditation. If the lotus position is impossible or too painful then try the ½ lotus which is just to bring one foot onto the thigh of the apposing leg. Again if this is too difficult there is the ¼ lotus which is to just bring one foot onto the calf of the apposing leg. For years this was my favorite position. I have relatively short thick legs and found even the ½ lotus too painful. Then I broke one knee and when it healed I lost the flexibility for even the ¼ lotus. So now I sit in one of two positions common in SE Asia where I fold the legs one in front of the other or one on top of the other. Most importantly knees are on the ground forming a stable base, except for the last position where only one leg is on the ground but the knee is down. It is important that the back be straight and comfortable. The further from full lotus you sit the thicker the pillow will need to be to get a straight back. I sit on two pillows. In Japan there is another position commonly used for sitting on the ground. It is called seiza where you just sit back on your ankles except if you are going to sit this way for a long sit there is a short bench which lifts your rear end a bit.

If sitting on the ground doesn't work for you you can meditate sitting on a chair but don't slouch

and place your feet firmly on the ground. Sitting on a chair can work just fine. Several of my dedicated practitioner friends who's knees became too painful after sitting on the ground for many years now sit in a chair. I recommend sitting on the ground. It is more balanced and there is a subtle energetic quality to sitting on the ground that aids meditation but there is one advantage to sitting on a chair for meditation and it is that we often sit in chairs waiting for something and we can develop a habit of practicing meditation where ever we find ourselves sitting and waiting. Just a note, I have been emphasizing sitting with a straight back. Don't strain your back trying to straighten it. Yes, posture is important, I had a teacher who would say, "We align our body so we can align our mind," but more important than posture is what you do with that mind. Most important is to be balanced and relaxed.

What to do with the hands? This is the last detail for sitting form. There is no one hand position that is correct.. I usually rest my hands on my lap one hand grabbing the other. Some people rest the hands on the knees palm up forming a little circle with thumb and index finger. Each of these hand positions are called a mudra. There are a dozen or so mudras used by the different meditation schools. In Zen the usual mudra is formed by placing the left hand, palm up, on the palm of the right palm and then form a circle with the thumbs lightly touching. Most people rest this mudra in their lap. I find that if I lift this mudra off my lap and pay attention to holding the form of the mudra it can help support concentration and mindfulness. My problem with holding the mudra this way is that after a couple of sitting period my arms will ache.

Again another detail. Most people meditate with their eyes closed. In Zen we encourage people to sit with their eyes open. The reason is simple, closing the eyes promotes visual thoughts and dreaming and maybe even sleeping. Even having the eyes just slightly open without focusing on anything helps but I suggest actually focusing on something, maybe a spot on the floor about 8 feet in front or if you are facing a wall just look at something on the wall. I know this can be difficult with a flat wall painted one color. I went to a retreat where we all sat facing a flat white wall. My eyes actually cramped trying to focus on the wall. I sat for most of the retreat with my eyes closed. I had a friend who built a meditation space with textured walls with multiple layers of color that solved the problem. I am not totally against sitting with the eyes closed, I just don't recommend it. There are schools that sit with their eyes closed and they have usually have visualization techniques that help maintain concentration and awareness.

Now we come to the important part in this first lesson, what do we do with our minds. All meditation schools use some focus for awareness ( even the Just Sit practice of Soto Zen ). Most commonly that focus is the breath. I recommend the breath as the focus for beginners, but this is not just a beginners practice. I cannot over emphasize the importance of the breath in this practice. It can be used in many many ways. It can be the sole focus for meditation or it can be just part of the focus for meditation. In walking meditation or other forms of active meditation the activity can be synchronized with the breath. This first lesson is in the practice of counting breaths. One might think this is just a beginner's practice but I still use it after 45 years. It is not the only technique I use but I have had many deep experiences practicing this technique.

While breathing out slowly and evenly count each out breath to your self o---n---e, --- t---w---o,--- t---h---r---e---e, up to t---e---n. When you reach ten then start over with one again. You will quickly realize that this is actually a very difficult practice. It is a long time to hold your attention on your breath. Thoughts will quickly invade your practice and you will loose awareness of your breath and the count. This is expected and when it happens then just start over again at one. Why do we count and not just hold attention on the breath? Counting gives a marker making the practitioner aware that attention has strayed. Also the human mind is very powerful and we can be partially aware of our breath and be thinking at the same time so we make it more difficult by adding the count. I am going to make it even more difficult. I want you too feel your breath on the lower abdomen, a spot an inch or

two below your belly button. This spot is sometimes called the hara or tanden by us in the Zen schools. It is an important energetic center in the human body. By focusing attention on this spot it will help develop concentration and awareness.

Your breath should be long and slow and deep and relaxed not forced. The nature of the breath whether it is long or short deep or shallow fast or slow depends somewhat on our thought. With our thoughts going all the time our breath is typically short shallow and fast, maybe one breath every 1-2 seconds. This is not deep at all and actually we are not moving much new air into our lungs with each breath so we have to breath fast. Breathing this way we feel our breathing in our upper chest. But if our mind is relaxed our breathing becomes slower and deeper. We will feel our breath down in our abdomen and now each breath takes 4-5 seconds. If we have a moment of deep concentration we will see that our breath stops. We can use these phenomena in reverse to help control our mind. Most of us are familiar with the technique of taking a deep in breath to relax a bit when we are nervous or under stress. In meditation we focus not on the in breath but on the out breath. A long slow out breath will have the effect of calming the mind. So now when meditating slow your breath to 5 or 6 seconds or even more and breath out until the lungs are empty or nearly empty. Don't force it but as your mind calms you will find the out breath going deeper and deeper and when you have the lungs just about empty just give a little push. You will feel that last bit of breath down in the hara. And then when the air is all out there will be a moment when you will stop thinking. Then breath in naturally not fast or slow and don't breath extra air unless you feel you need it.

Don't worry not every breath will completely empty your lungs, not even most or any at first. Even a small thought might stop your breath short. It is a process and it will take time, not time measured in days, weeks or even months, but years We are cultivating equanimity not trying to win a race.

My last bit of instruction in this first lesson is to watch your mind and see how it works. Become an uninvolved observer of your own thoughts Notice how you almost never stop thinking. Notice the patterns. Notice that some thoughts are obsessions. Other thoughts repeat but in a less noticeable way. Notice how you think about your self, how you build your ego with your thoughts, or how you are filled with self doubts. Notice how you build a string of thoughts and loose awareness in your thoughts. Try not to think about your thoughts, just watch them. As your practice deepens thoughts will arise from deeper and deeper places in your subconscious or unconscious. You will remember events that you had not thought of in years. You might also remember some very painful events that had been repressed. Again, just watch these thoughts and just watch any emotions that arise. Try not to add thought to thought. Use your breath and the count to cut off your thoughts