

MELBOURNE ZEN GROUP

ORIENTATION: FORM AND PRACTICE

The Melbourne Zen Group

The Melbourne Zen Group was initially founded in the evening of Tuesday 21 May, 1985. About seven people attended the first meeting and formed a regular group with the intention of offering mutual support in the practice of Zen Buddhist meditation for its members. The traditional May-time festival of Wesak has become the Group's official birthday. Wesak celebrates Shākyamuni Buddha's birthday and is timed to coincide with the full moon in May.

In the period since the Melbourne Zen Group was founded, the format of its meetings has undergone a number of changes (for the current weekly and monthly zazen schedule, see separate leaflet). Some of the changes reflected the growing association with the Diamond Sangha which has developed through the increasing number of members who have participated in retreats with teachers from that lineage.

Sanbō Kyōdan: Order of the Three Treasures

Each school of Zen Buddhism, and even different teachers within a lineage, tend to emphasise different facets of the path to realisation. This can lead to some significant variations in the techniques used in practice. The most obvious example is the Rinzai school's use of kōan practice which contrasts with the Sōtō school's greater emphasis on shikantaza ("just sitting"). For the most part though, the essentials of their respective teachings are fundamentally the same. Similarly, although they share a common basis, the ritualised practices of the different schools also tend to vary in style and emphasis.

On both an individual and a collective level, it is difficult to sustain or develop the practice of Zen without consciously choosing to ground one's practice in the forms of a particular teacher or school. The Melbourne Zen Group follows the practices of Robert Aitken Rōshi, an American based in Hawaii where he and his wife, Anne, founded the Diamond Sangha in about 1960. From the late 70s to late 80s, Aitken Rōshi regularly taught and led retreats in Australia. Due to old age and failing health, he can no longer do so. Subhana Barzagli and Susan Murphy in New South Wales are teachers in Aitken Rōshi's lineage, and visit Melbourne regularly.

Robert Aitken was authorised as a Rōshi (teacher), by Yamada Kōun Rōshi in December 1974. Both Aitken and Yamada are teachers in the Sanbō Kyōdan lineage. This sect is of relatively recent origins having been founded by Yasutani Haku'un Rōshi in the mid 1950s following the teachings and example of his teacher, Harada Dai'un Rōshi (1870–1961). Harada Rōshi was originally instructed in the Sōtō Zen tradition although he also received training for many years under notable Rinzai Zen teachers. As a result of his experience he synthesised elements of the Rinzai and Sōtō traditions within a primarily Sōtō form.

The Sanbō Kyōdan sect is also notable in that it is the only one which is universally composed of lay people. This also includes its teachers: Yamada Rōshi (who died in 1989) worked as a hospital administrator, and Aitken Rōshi's last position before his retirement was as an administrator with the East-West Center of the University of Hawaii.

Sanbō Kyōdan is translated from the Japanese as the Order of the Three Treasures. These treasures are the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. While these treasures have been chosen as the name for this sect they are also celebrated by every Buddhist as expressed in the *Ti Sarana Gamana*. The original Pali version of the *Ti Sarana* and its common English translation are:

Buddham saranam gacchāmi;	I take refuge in the Buddha;
Dhammam saranam gacchāmi;	I take refuge in the Dharma;
Sangham saranam gacchāmi.	I take refuge in the Sangha.

The essence of the verse is summarised by Aitken Rōshi in the following manner: ¹

“When I take refuge in the Buddha, I return to my source in modest, even humble awareness that I myself am the Buddha, and I find inspiration for my words and actions there. When I take refuge in the Dharma, I return to my source in awareness that my own voice, the voices of other people, of birds and all sounds are voices of the Dharma, teaching the supreme way. When I take refuge in the Sangha, I return to my source in awareness that my sisters and brothers, and all my fellow beings in mountains, valleys, plains, forests and seas form a harmonious, symbiotic organism.”

It is worth noting that each teacher puts his or her own stamp on the traditional forms. For both the teacher and his or her students, the formalised practices compose a part of the “skilful means” to assist the student to realise his or her own buddha nature. Consequently, it is likely that some of the forms passed down through the Zen tradition may be further modified under the influence of an increasing number of Western teachers.

Zazen

Zazen, that is Zen meditation or sitting Zen, is the fundamental practice of Zen Buddhism. Indeed, in one form or another, it is the fundamental practice of all Buddhist traditions. Zazen can be seen as a means to enlighten us to the truth of buddha nature. It is also an expression of oneness with, and individuality arising from, this fundamental nature.

Buddhism differs from most other contemplative traditions in that its aim is not to quiet all thoughts. Quietism can stifle our creativity as well as our individuality which is the source for our aspiration for enlightenment. Rather, the teachings of the Buddhist tradition emphasise mindful awareness which includes all of our experience. This is evident in Aitken Rōshi’s advice to practise with our ears open.

The physical immobility of the zazen posture precludes our habitual physical reactions to our desires and anxieties. Normally, the surface manifestations of these habitual processes occupy our whole mind and we assume them to be the whole of life or “reality”. Zazen loosens our attachment to these habitual processes by creating the space for us to see into their transient and insubstantial nature. The practice enables us to clearly and compassionately experience our own buddha nature which is indistinguishable from the buddha nature expressed in and through everything and everyone around us.

In more superficial psychological terms, the practice of zazen helps us to accept that we are fundamentally OK and complete just as we are in this moment as is everyone and everything around us. However, the lessening of judgemental attitudes about ourselves and others does not impair the capacity for critical thoughts and actions of a more constructive nature.

1. Robert Aitken, *Orientation to Jukai* (unpublished transcripts), Diamond Sangha, Hawaii, 1985, p.4.

Beginners to zazen are generally given the practice of breath counting. In essence, though, breath counting is essentially the same practice as any other practice a teacher may give to someone more experienced in zazen. Therefore, do not be concerned about the connotations we normally associate with the word “beginner” as breath counting is a full and complete practice in itself and of equal benefit to the mature Zen student.

The method of counting the breath is simply to be mindful of the body’s breathing while counting each exhalation from one to ten. Count one for the first exhalation, two for the second, three for the third exhalation and so on to ten, then start from one again. The point is not to go from one to ten, but to invest your attention in the count, so that you are breathing and counting just this “one”, just this “two”, just this “three”, at least until the next gripping thought erases the count from your mind.

Do not force the breathing. Zazen is not concerned with controlling the body or mind. Allow your breathing to follow its own rhythm. The only effort required in zazen is simply to return to the practice as soon as you become aware that you have been distracted. Therefore, when you become aware of having lost the count, start again from one.

The attention, or mindful awareness, of practice includes our thoughts, the sounds outside of us as well as our feelings which are all part of our physical experience. The process of breath counting grounds the thoughts and feelings within the physical experience of practice and enables them to be accepted more easily as parts of ourselves without our being consumed and determined by them. In the relatively early stages, though, it may appear that the mind has become even more unruly and judgemental than it was before taking up the practice. This is a fairly normal experience as zazen allows unconscious processes to emerge into conscious awareness.

We all inevitably become concerned about whether we are doing zazen the right way, particularly when “progress” seems slow or we go through periods where the mind is extremely unsettled. Gradually, though, the elements of practice fall into place and we become our practice both on and off our zazen cushions. We realise then, too, that we were never separate from our practice to begin with. The commitment to sit and to understand buddha nature, combined with the practice of returning to our breath-count following our mental excursions, begins a process where the practice ultimately takes care of itself. The unity of practice and enlightenment is expressed by Aitken Rōshi in this quote: ²

“... Zazen is not merely a means, any more than eating, sleeping, or hugging your children are means or method. Dōgen Kigen Zenji said, ‘Zazen is itself enlightenment’. This unity of ends and means, effect and cause, is the tao (way) of the Buddha, the practice of realization.”

Zazen Posture

The primary physical requirement for zazen is a naturally straight back. Legs, seat and spine should support the body without strain. Do not try to maintain an artificially rigid position or allow the body to slump as these affect the ability to maintain one’s concentration. The spine should be curved inward slightly at the waist and the buttocks should stick out behind to support the spine. The chest and abdomen should then feel relaxed and open so that the breath may flow freely through the body. Although this is a posture which comes naturally to very young children you may need to experiment with it on your cushion to find the appropriate balance. You may find it helpful to raise your zafu (round meditation cushion), by placing a folded blanket or another cushion under it. Sitting on the forward edge of your zafu also helps to support and maintain the appropriate posture. Quoting Aitken Rōshi: ³

2. Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, p.14.

3. Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, p.15.

“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 in line with the hips.”

Every other aspect of posture is subordinate to the maintenance of a correct spinal alignment. Apart from certain qualifications the position of the legs is not so important. The full lotus posture with the feet resting on the thighs is the ideal way to sit as it fosters a sense of security, stability and peace. One of the most inappropriate positions is the tailor-fashion of sitting where the feet are tucked under the thighs and the knees are raised in the air. This engenders physical insecurity and discomfort and makes maintenance of an erect posture quite difficult. In short, nearly any posture where the knees are resting on the ground and the legs are not crossed in a way that will quickly cut off the circulation is OK.

There are also alternative positions for people who find any sort of cross-legged position too difficult or desire some relief after several periods of sitting. One is the seiza (kneeling) position. The zafu can be used to support the spine by turning it on its edge so that it is placed under the buttocks and between the legs. If these positions are too difficult or painful to maintain then you may choose to use a chair.

It is important to try to sit as still as possible during zazen. Therefore, whichever position you adopt, give yourself a minute before beginning zazen to take a few deep breaths and settle into your posture.

Do not try to force your body into positions that it is not yet ready for. Treat yourself gently when assuming your position and when unfolding your legs at the end of a zazen period. Also, be careful if your feet or legs have fallen asleep, and do not try to stand or walk until sensation returns, as it could be easy to twist an ankle.

During zazen your eyes should be about two-thirds closed. This will happen naturally as you become more engaged in your practice. Having the eyes partly open helps to prevent falling asleep or drifting off into day-dreams, while also minimising visual distractions. After a while you will find that your eyes also naturally tend to go out of focus whenever you sit.

Place your hands in your lap in the zazen mudrā (hand position): your left hand should rest palm upward on the palm of your right hand and the thumbs should touch so that your hands form an oval shape. Your hands should rest in your lap, just touching the belly. The shoulders should be reasonably square so that the arms can hang freely without dragging down your shoulders.

It is recommended that you wear loose, comfortable clothing so that the breathing and circulation are not restricted. It is traditional to wear dark clothing, preferably black, but this is usually only requested for sesshins (meditation retreats).

Pain

The pain in the legs which often arises after sitting through a number of periods of zazen is traditionally referred to as “the taste of Zen”. As with any other element of Zen practice it can be viewed in several dimensions.

The first lesson is that while pain is an effect of physiological strain, the actual experience is largely influenced by the attitudes and mental state which filter our perception of the pain. As with any other form of suffering, the “pain” we experience with our legs is primarily the pain associated with the anxious desire to fight and escape it. Our egocentricity causes its own suffering in its attempts to escape and avoid all suffering. Fundamentally then, the acceptance of the physical experience of pain is interrelated with a lessening of the anxious self-judging which forms part of the ego’s defensiveness.

The second and associated lesson is that it is our own individual responsibility to decide if the pain is too great and that the position needs to be changed to relieve the pain. If possible, maintain your position until the end of the zazen period and continue with your practice while simply allowing yourself to experience the pain. You may find it helpful to deal with the distraction of the pain, or any other major distraction, by including it more directly into your practice by breathing into it for a while. However, if you do decide to change your position then move gradually and mindfully so as not to disturb other people sitting near you. If you need to make a major adjustment to your sitting position, then *gasshō* (that is, place your hands palm to palm), bow forward from the waist, and change your position. Continue with your practice while you are adjusting your position. To quote Aitken Rōshi again: ⁴

“One of the many *pāramitās*, or perfections, is the perfection of patience, or forbearance. All the *pāramitās* – relinquishment, wisdom and so on – are marks of the Buddha. Buddha nature breathes in and out, but it is always at rest. Rest is the essence of patience. Cultivate rest.”

Kinhin

Kinhin is the ritualised walking meditation that takes place between periods of zazen. One possible translation is “*sūtra-walking*”: the *sūtra* that is walked rather than read aloud. Kinhin shows us that our everyday actions are themselves *sūtras*.

Each school of Zen maintains its own minor variation on the *mudrā* (hand position) for kinhin. The custom in the Diamond Sangha is to have the right hand clenched lightly about the thumb and placed near the solar plexus with the left hand covering it. The forearms are held parallel to the floor and kept, as far as is comfortable, in a straight line so that the elbows project a little. The hands should be held in this position whenever you move around the *dōjō* (meditation hall).

When the bell strikes twice to mark the end of the zazen period, *gasshō*, bow forward from the waist, swing round on your cushion in the direction of the altar, stand up carefully, and position your hands in kinhin *mudrā*. If your legs are asleep, it may be safer to take a few minutes to massage and stretch your legs rather than feel compelled to immediately stand for kinhin. When you can safely stand, wait at your place; you may choose to join the kinhin line as it passes you the second time around.

When the clappers sound for the start of kinhin, *gasshō*, bow forward from the waist, resume kinhin *mudrā*, turn to your left, and step out without delay. During kinhin, maintain an even distance behind the person in front of you so that everyone can maintain the same pace. For the same reason, do not close the gap if someone in front of you leaves the line. Continue with your breath counting during kinhin, and maintain the same mindfulness as during zazen, aware of each breath, of each step – it may be a useful practice to key your steps to your breaths.

If you need to go to the toilet or leave the *dōjō* for any reason, then leave during the kinhin period. You may leave as soon as the bell marks the end of the zazen period. Alternatively, you may leave during kinhin: when the kinhin line brings you close to the door, bow with *gasshō* and then leave the line.

If you wish to enter the *dōjō* while kinhin is in progress, wait outside the door of the *dōjō* until your position in the kinhin line approaches the door. *Gasshō* and bow into the *dōjō* from the doorway and join the line so that you are in position between the people who have been sitting on either side of you. You may also enter the *dōjō* at the conclusion of kinhin after the concluding bow when everyone begins to resume their positions on their cushions.

4. Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, p.50.

The approaching end of kinhin is signalled by wooden clappers. Continue walking at the same pace until you reach your cushion, then stop; on the silent signal, gasshō and bow to the group, turn in the direction of the altar, bow to your own place, and sit.

Ritual

Rituals serve a number of functions and work on several levels in the organisation of a group of people doing zazen together. For example, on the most superficial level rituals serve to organise the actions of individuals so that they can work together harmoniously. From the perspective of individual practice, one of the aims in the development of the traditional rituals and organisation is that participants can leave aside the usual concerns aroused in decision making. This leaves one free to become deeply involved and focussed in one's own practice. You don't need to be concerned with what comes next or in what way to do things, just simply follow the signals and actions of the leaders.

While many of the rituals have their own individual meanings they do share a common theme. The essential theme is the observance of respect and compassion for ourselves and our own efforts, as well as respect and compassion for the personalities and efforts of others. Sharing in the actions of the rituals helps to foster an atmosphere which supports and encourages us in our practice.

The specific rituals performed at our weekly meetings and monthly zazenkais (meditation intensives) are:

- gasshō and bow on entering and leaving the dōjō
- gasshō and bow to both sides of the room before sitting down
- the traditions for sitting in zazen and doing kinhin as explained
- sitting facing the wall (this, as with all else, is to reduce distraction and leave us free to concentrate on our practice; face into the group during the first period and closing chant; face the wall during other periods)
- chanting sūtras at the beginning and end of the meeting
- three full bows (down to the floor) at the beginning and end of the meeting.

The ritual which many people initially have the most difficulties with is the full bow where we bow to the floor and raise our hands a few inches with palms upwards. With this bow we pay respect to the person of Shākyamuni Buddha and his compassion in teaching the Dharma which guides our efforts. The full bow also represents the throwing away of all our egocentric concerns and preoccupations. With this "falling away" of body and mind all that remains is just the physical action of bowing with no thought of who is bowing or what is bowed to.

The particular meanings provide a religious point to the performance of rituals. As with zazen, though, our attention is invested in the mindful awareness of the activity itself. Aitken Rōshi expresses it in this way: ⁵

"Thus in the ritual of the dōjō, in the same atmosphere of devotion that is the environment of zazen, the signals of bells and clappers, the order of eating a meal, the sūtras and the bows, all encourage the experience of falling away. Without any preoccupation with meaning, you may, as have some students that I know, find the sūtras reciting themselves. Just reciting, the self is truly forgotten, and your perspective on the world is turned around 180 degrees."

⁵. Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, p.30.

Sūtras

Reciting sūtras is intrinsically no different from zazen: it could indeed be called “chanting meditation”, just as kinhin is “walking meditation”.

Everything that was said about rituals applies equally to the chanting of sūtras. They have a particular significance as the words or writings of Shākyamuni and his successors. As such, they express in one form or another the enlightenment experience and contain guidance for us in our practice.

Some of the sūtras are recited in English and occasionally some phrases may spark a resonance which enriches one’s understanding. While we are chanting, though, our primary focus is in the activity of chanting. Consequently, it is not so important whether the words are recited in English or not. Even contemporary Japanese need to translate the sūtras from the medieval Sino-Japanese form in which they have been passed down to the modern day before they can be properly understood. Our sūtra books contain the English translations of the Japanese verses and it is advisable to read them at some stage.

In order to take care of the sūtra books and to symbolically hold our hands in gasshō, we hold the sūtra books at eye level—which helps to maintain a straight back, thus allowing the chest and abdomen to be open and relaxed—with the thumbs and little fingers on the inside and the other three fingers on the outside of the book.

Sūtras should be chanted or read with the group as one voice, and to do so it helps if we chant with our ears even more than with our voice; in other words, forget yourself by merging with all others, focusing on each syllable just as you focus on each breath in zazen.

Leaders

In the organisation of zazen with a group, particularly in sesshins (meditation retreats), a number of leadership roles are allocated. The main dōjō roles are the Tantō, Inō, Jikijitsu and Jisha.

Stating their roles broadly, the Tantō is the Rōshi’s representative in the dōjō and is responsible for its overall organisation. The Inō leads the dōjō in the rituals, most notably in sūtra chanting. The Jikijitsu is responsible for keeping times and also sets the pace followed by the dōjō members during kinhin. The Jisha’s role during sesshin is that of personal assistant to the Rōshi, as well as organising the line of people wishing to see the Rōshi for dokusan (private interviews).

For the simpler organisation of weekly meetings and monthly zazenkais (meditation intensives), the Melbourne Zen Group uses only two leaders. The roles of Tantō and Inō are combined in one person. The Jikijitsu’s role is also retained whereas the function of Jisha is dispensed with.

Sangha

In Zen, the Sangha includes the kinship of all beings and all things of all universes. The first of the Great Vows expresses our unity with this total Sangha. It also commits us to realising the innate compassion which arises when we understand this identification with the Sangha.

On a more pragmatic scale, we view the members of the Zen Group as a Sangha. The Zen Group Sangha supports and enriches our practice which is also expressed through our personalities in our interactions with the world outside the zendō. The Melbourne Zen Group attempts to follow the essence of the model of the Hawaiian based Diamond Sangha of Aitken Rōshi. This model is the “Net of Indra—each knot is

an individual person, altogether his or her own jewel and not like any other. At the same time, each is a reflection of every other jewel.”⁶ One of the major implications of this model is the perception that we are fundamentally equal in buddha nature and that this can be most appropriately expressed in a democratic organisation.

The Melbourne Zen Group has experimented with a number of means in trying to reach a balance between the fostering of a democratic structure and atmosphere with the practicalities of effective organisation. Another obvious limitation is that everyone’s participation is necessarily voluntary and part-time and subject to the constraints imposed by other commitments. The process of experimentation and refinement will undoubtedly continue as long as the Group exists.

The Melbourne Zen Group became a legal entity with a formal constitution in January 1993. An Annual General Meeting is held in July each year, during which a committee is established. The AGM also reviews the current activities of the Group and makes broad decisions about future activities, although it is generally left to the committee to finalise and implement the details. The committee has responsibility for organising and planning the Group’s activities between AGMs. Most of the committee’s decisions will involve some discussion with other members of the Group although this generally tends to be on an informal level. The exception arises when it becomes necessary to make major decisions which have implications for the broad direction of the Group. In these cases a formal General Meeting may be arranged.

Often, when their time permits, people stay for a cup of tea and a chat after some weekly sittings and after the monthly zazenkai. This informal chat does provide a space to discuss issues related to one’s own practice or to the format or organisation of the Group’s sittings and other activities.

Details of all these and other activities are provided in the Group’s newsletter which is posted to all members each month.

A Final Note

The third truth in Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths is the cessation of suffering. The do’s-and-don’ts contained in these orientation notes are intended as tested and practical advice to help you with your practice. However, to use them as self-judgemental measures of your effort, and fundamentally of your worth, is only to unnecessarily add to your suffering. Although you do need to try to maintain the appropriate posture and to keep returning to the breath counting, these will develop more easily with a relaxed state of mind. It may take some time, though, before you find the balance between a relaxed and open mindfulness on the one hand, and either tense or idle sitting on the other. Your practice will definitely be assisted by sitting as regularly as possible and it is more beneficial to sit for ten minutes a day than for two hours once a week.

While most people go through broadly common experiences in the course of practice, each person’s practice is unique. You can’t do more than your best in your own way. With a little patience you will find the practice unfolding for you despite the apparent ups and downs.

Please enjoy your breathing.

6. Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, p.73.

Gasshō

Melbourne Zen Group, 1989
Revised 2006

Useful References

Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1982

This book should be at the top of your shopping list the next time you buy any books about Zen. It succinctly weaves the philosophy of Zen, including its ethical ramifications, with clear instructions and advice on how to do the practice. The book makes clear that the philosophy and the practice are fundamentally not separate.

Robert Aitken, *Encouraging Words: Zen Buddhist teachings for Western students*, Pantheon Books, New York and San Francisco, 1993

Includes a useful glossary, annotated bibliography, and the full text of sūtras, rituals and chants as used by the Diamond Sangha.

Shunryō Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, John Weatherhill Inc., New York & Tokyo, 1970

Suzuki's book is very inspiring and has become a classic in the Zen literature. It is written from a more Sōtō perspective and unites the philosophy with the “being”, or mind, of Zen practice. However, unlike Aitken Rōshi's book, it does not cover the physical technique, or “doing”, of practice.

Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Anchor Books, New York, Revised edition 1980 (First published 1965)

The Three Pillars is a much more discursive book than Aitken's. It also describes the techniques of practice although it is not as succinct or clear in showing the interpenetration of philosophy and practice and barely addresses the ethical implications which practice holds for daily life. It is a larger book and is, in its own way, very informative. *The Three Pillars* contains accounts of the experiences of a number of Zen students including, in some cases, their enlightenment experiences which can be very encouraging.

Stephen Levine, *A Gradual Awakening*, Century Hutchinson Ltd, Great Britain, 1980

Levine has written his book from within the Vipassanā tradition of Buddhist meditation. It is a very helpful book in its explanation of the developmental process of Buddhist meditation which is barely touched on in the Zen literature. This book also contains descriptions of techniques which may, at times, help in dealing with troublesome mental states arising from zazen.

Charlotte Joko Beck, *Everyday Zen: Love and Work*, Harper & Rowe, San Francisco, 1989

Explores the reality of Zen in the problems of daily living—love, relationships, work, fear, ambition, suffering. She reminds us vividly that practice and enlightenment are here under our noses.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1987

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen master, offers practical guidelines to the practice of mindfulness—of being awake and fully aware. “There is only one important time, and that is now.”

Note: The two books by Robert Aitken are available for purchase at Tuesday night Zen Group meetings at Kagyu E-Vam Buddhist Institute.