

【Seated Zen Meditation (*Zazen*)】

The practice of *zazen*, or “seated meditation,” is fundamental to Zen Buddhism. The term “Zen” itself comes from a Sanskrit word (*dhyāna*) that is often translated as “contemplation” or “meditation.” Contrary to popular conception, *zazen* is not practiced solely for the sake of reaching enlightenment; for some schools, the purpose of meditation is to practice being fully present in each moment.

In Japanese temples and monasteries, *zazen* is usually conducted in a meditation hall as a group activity led by a head monk called the *jikijitsu*. Sessions begin and end with the ringing of a bell. One session lasts for “one stick” (*itchū*), the time it takes for a single stick of incense to burn—typically about 40 minutes.

Some aspects of *zazen* practice differ between the Rinzai and Sōtō schools of Zen. Rinzai practitioners sit around the perimeter of the hall, facing inward, and they focus their minds on a specific image or idea. Sōtō practitioners usually sit facing the walls, and they strive for a sense of conscious awareness from moment to moment without focusing on any particular object. This is called *shikantaza*, or “just sitting.” Chichibu’s Zen temples are of the Sōtō school and practice *shikantaza*.

Several temples on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage provide guided experiences of *zazen*, and Hōshōji (#32) offers instruction in English and Mandarin. After a brief explanation of how meditation is performed, visitors seat themselves on small cushions called *zafu*. There are several possible sitting positions, including half- and full-lotus, cross-legged, and sitting on the heels of the feet with legs folded underneath (*seiza*). The *seiza* posture forms a triangle between the hips, legs, and back, which relieves stress on the lower back, and is popular with Japanese beginners. Ultimately, it is important to choose a posture in which one can sit comfortably for the duration of the meditation session. Hands are typically held in the lap, with the fingers of the left hand resting in the palm of the right and the tips of the thumbs pointed toward one another to form a triangle. This triangle symbolizes the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddhist teachings), and the Sangha (Buddhist community).

During a meditation session, when everyone is properly seated, the priest will strike a bell three times to signal the start. Eyes are kept half-open, to block out external distractions while remaining awake, and one’s gaze should be fixed about 1 meter ahead on the wall or floor. The back should be held straight, but not rigid, and breathing should be light. Focusing on one’s breathing can help to clear the mind, but the ideal *shikantaza* is sitting in quiet self-awareness without focusing on any specific thing. The session is over when the priest strikes the bell again.

During the session, the priest leading the meditation may circulate with a flat wooden stick called a *kyōsaku*. Traditionally, this stick is used to strike meditators on the shoulders to call attention to poor posture, bring a wandering mind into the present, or even provide a flash of awareness that can aid in reaching enlightenment (*satori*). During the session, meditators can request the use of the *kyōsaku* by placing both palms together in a praying position and bowing. After the *kyōsaku* is administered, the meditator bows once more to express gratitude.

Reservations for *zazen* can be made by emailing or calling the temple. Same-day bookings are often possible, but visitors should confirm in advance. A ¥2,000 donation is requested for each participant, and visitors should wear clothing that will allow them to sit comfortably and modestly.