

# Northwest Zen Community

## Soto Zen Instructions for the Zendo



## Liturgy & rituals

The Northwest Zen Community uses rituals that are traditional and passed down from a long lineage. They are designed to deepen our experience. As they originate from ancient China and Japan they may seem strange at first. However, they have their own beauty and wonder, and often express vividly what cannot be expressed in words. Our Zendo is arranged in the *Sodo* set up with the altar and Manjusri statue in the center of the hall.

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### Don't worry about making mistakes

Don't worry about getting it right. Just follow along and enjoy our practice of Zen. Some of the rituals will seem strange to you. This information will help answer some of your questions. As you continue your Zen training, you will find many opportunities to bring up questions about aspects of Zen ritual that you find puzzling. Follow along by watching experienced practitioners.

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### Zen Terms

**Zendo:** Place where the way of Zen is practiced

**Gassho:** Hands placed in a palm to palm position in front of the face; this is a practice of gratitude and respect.

**Shashu:** Hands placed at chest level, left hand in a fist against the chest and right hand wrapped over the left. This position is for standing and walking meditation – Kinhin.

**Monjin:** Bowing with hands in Gassho position.

**Itsu:** Light bow with hands in Shashu position.

**Manjusri:** Buddha associated with Wisdom

**Mudra:** Hand gesture/ position

**Kinhin:** Slow walking meditation; short half steps following the breath

**Dharma:** Teachings

**Sangha:** Community of Practitioners

**Zazen:** Zen Sitting meditation; just sitting

**Jikido:** Timekeeper - uses bell and clappers, and leads kinhin

**Kabano:** Assistant to Jikido

**Ino:** Ceremony Administrator

**Kokyo:** Chant Leader

**Chiden:** Caretaker of rituals and the altar

**Sesshin:** Meditation retreat lasting from one to several days

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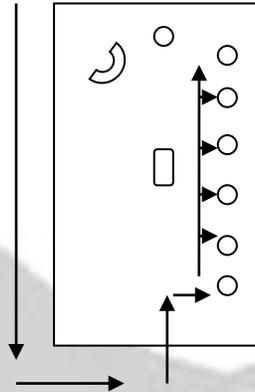
## Zendo

These are the rituals and procedures we generally practice in the Zendo or meditation hall. Although they will be correct at any Zendo, some Zendos will include other rituals.

***(Please try to arrive 10 – 15 minutes early to assist with preparing the Zendo with zafu set up, floor sweeping and altar arrangement).***

### Standing in the Zendo

When you are in the zendo, do not have your hands hanging at your sides. Hold your hands in the **Shashu** position with your left hand making a fist with thumb inside - place it against your chest, covered with your open right hand.



### 1. Entering the Zendo

**First;** bow at the entrance with hands in the **Shashu** position. (left hand in a fist held against the chest at heart level, and right hand over the top of the left).

Step into the zendo, starting with the right foot and walk to the opposite end of the zendo.

**Monjin / Gassho** (bow) in the **Shashu** position ... [This is our bow of gratitude to the Buddha - the enlightened mind that includes all beings.] ... and turn towards the cushion line. Walk towards the cushions and then follow the line up to the cushion you choose. Stop and turn *right* towards the cushions. Walk forward towards your cushion.

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### 3. Sitting

Before sitting down; **Monjin/gassho** (bow) to your cushion. This **Gassho** is done with your palms together at about eye level and a fist space in front of your face with elbows downward. This is your bow to the Dharma (teachings) in gratitude to all teachers past, present, and future.

Turn around (clockwise) and **Monjin/gassho** across the Zendo. This is to the Sangha: The community of practitioners past, present, and future.

**Sit** down and turn around clockwise to face the wall, in readiness for the beginning of the meditation bell.

Your posture is with a straight back; chin slightly tucked in, head balanced above body. You can sit in a full lotus position, half lotus, kneeling or in a chair with your left hand on top of your right palm and thumbs lightly touching. This hand position is called the Cosmic Mudra or **Hokkaijoin**. (*see additional instructions at end*)

During sitting, and in retreats, we practice silence - so that we can truly listen with our whole body and mind. But do not worry if you need to cough or sneeze or quietly change position...

### 4. Zazen: Seated meditation

**Starts** with **SHIJO** (3 rings of the bell) by the Jikido. We sit for 30 minutes.

**First sitting ends** with **KINHINSHO** (2 rings of the bell) if kinhin (walking meditation) is to follow and **CHHUKAI SHO** (one ring of the bell) if zazen is finished. Acknowledge this signal with a seated *monjin-gassho* (palms together) - then slowly stand up. **Be careful...** your legs may have fallen asleep, take your time.

### 5. Kinhin: Slow Walking meditation

Starts with the Jikido (timekeeper) striking the wood clappers twice. **Itsu** (bow in Shashu position) - and with your hands in the **Shashu** (left hand making a fist with thumb inside); line up facing away from the altar in a line with the others. Walk in a clockwise direction very slowly, paying attention to breathing and observing your steps. Do not follow too closely to the person in front of you. (*ONE BREATH – TAKE HALF STEP*)

The Jikido (timekeeper) signals the end of kinhin with one clap of the clappers – **Itsu** (shashu position) and slowly continue to walk around the Zendo back to your cushion. **Monjin-Gassho** to the cushion and straighten it out and brush it off for the next zazen session. Then walk to the end of the Zendo for a break. A Gassho is not needed at this point to leave the zazen area. The break lasts approximately 5 minutes.

Return to the Zendo area as you did originally, **Itsu-Shashu**, and return to your cushion. **Monjin-Gassho** (palm to palm) to your cushion, turn and **Monjin-Gassho** to the Sangha - and sit.

(Kinhin/break is the time for toilet stops, leaving early, or joining late. Just rejoin kinhin with a gassho. If you wear a Rakusu, take it off before going to the restroom.)

## 6. Finishing a round of Zazen

**Second** period of Zazen starts with **Shijo** (3 bell rings) and **Finishes** with **CHHUKAI SHO** (1 ring )- **Monjin** -gassho at the end of the bell sound.

## 7. Chanting

Chanting the sutras (ancient text) is an ancient tradition. When you chant, allow yourself to experience the chanting itself without grasping for the meaning of the words. Chant with your whole body and mind. A Sutra book or printouts of the chants will be provided.

When we chant the Four Great Vows, holding our hands in gassho, we join our ancestors in the Dharma.

(Please hold the sutra book at eye height with the thumbs and little finger inside the book.)

## 8. Final

After chanting, we receive a Dharma discussion from Kosho and then have tea and breakfast. Breakfast is announced by a series of clacks from two wood blocks.

Please help set up the area for breakfast and cleanup the Zendo after tea service.

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## Confused?

Don't worry - don't try and learn all this - come back when you need. Don't be afraid to ask.

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## Retreats

In Sesshin, and retreats, there are other rituals to do with meals, work practice, dokusan, etc. These will be explained at the beginning of a retreat.

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## **Additional notes about Zazen** (Settling into the posture)

Sit on it facing the wall. There are several positions for the legs. Sit with bare feet.

The cross legged positions provide greatest stability.

To sit in full lotus, place the right foot on the left thigh and then the left foot on the right thigh.

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To sit in half lotus place your left foot on your right thigh. Try to cross the legs firmly so that a stable tripod of support is provided by the knees and the base of the spine. The order of the crossing of the legs may be reversed.

It is also possible to simply sit on the floor with one foreleg in front of the other or kneeling using a bench or a cushion. To sit in a chair, place the feet flat on the floor and use a cushion to elevate the seat so that the upper thighs fall away from the body and follow the rest of the applicable instructions.

Rest the knees firmly on the floor, straighten the lower back, push the buttocks outward and the hips forward, and straighten your spine. Pull in your chin and extend the neck as though to support the ceiling. The ears and shoulders should be in the same plane with the nose directly above the navel. Straighten the back and relax shoulders, back, and abdomen without changing posture.

Keep the mouth closed placing the tongue with the tip just behind the front teeth and the rest of the tongue as close to the roof of the mouth as comfortable. Keep the eyes at least slightly open cast downward at a 45 degree angle without focusing on anything. If closed you may slip into drowsiness or daydreaming. You can open your eyes wide and look straight forward to combat drowsiness.

Rest the hands palm up on the knees and take 2 or 3 deep abdominal breaths. Exhale smoothly and slowly with the mouth slightly open by pulling in on the abdominal wall until all air has been expelled and inhale by closing the mouth and breathing naturally. Hands still on the knees sway the upper half of the body left to right a few times without moving the hips. Sway forward and back. These swayings are at first larger and then smaller enabling you to find the point of balance of your posture.

Finally, place your hands in Hokkaijoin (Cosmic Mudra, the oval shape against your abdomen described above under HAND POSITIONS).

## BREATH

Observe breathing during zazen, but do not try to manipulate the rhythm or depth of the breath. Breathe gently and silently through the nose without attempting to control or manipulate the breathing. Let the breath come and go naturally so that you forget all about it. Simply let long breaths be long and short ones short. On inhalation the abdomen expands naturally like a balloon inflating, while on exhalation simply let it deflate.

Soto Zen especially emphasizes just observing the breath as it is without trying to improve it in any way. Specifically, Dogen states that counting the breath and following it are not quite zazen and recommends avoiding their use. Some lineages (mostly Rinzai) recommend a long period of breath counting before simply practicing zazen, others (mostly Soto) do not.

## AWARENESS

Do not concentrate on any particular object or attempt to control thoughts, emotions, or any modification of consciousness. By simply maintaining proper posture and breathing the mind settles by itself without fabrication. When thoughts, feelings, etc. arise, do not get caught up by them or fight them. Simply permit any object of mind to come and go freely. The essential point is to always strive to wake up from distraction (thoughts, emotions,

images, etc.) or dullness and drowsiness. Letting go of any thought is itself thinking non thinking.

**NOTES:**

