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Sitting on the Earth

The type of sitting meditation described here is simply following the breath. This is meditation without a lot of moving parts. The only object it uses is breath itself.

Yet this is not the simplest form of meditation. There is a type of meditation that is even simpler. Known as *shikantaza* in Japanese (or, sometimes, “just sitting” in English), it is *so* simple that it’s best not to begin with it. Instead, we must first learn to calm our minds and to find some stability.

Simplicity is essential in meditation. But simple does not mean easy. It’s much easier to have a busy, distracted mind. It’s also much easier to take up a lot of complicated, detailed meditation techniques. Unfortunately, most of these techniques eventually get in our way. This is why very few of us wake up.

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Let’s begin by turning our attention to body, mind, and breath.

Sitting in meditation, we maintain a general awareness of these three. In this pared-down meditation, the object of our meditation—where we return our attention—is the breath.

We simply follow the breath. If our mind drifts from the breath, we just bring it back to awareness of the breath *without comment*. We keep aware of our posture, the sensations in our body, and the activities of our mind.

It’s quite possible to do this while staying aware of the breath—just as it’s possible to smell, taste, and feel the texture of food at the same time. In other words, you don’t have to drown out everything else to maintain awareness of the breath.

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Meditation is something you do. It’s not something you just read about or think about. It isn’t something you examine from the outside as a spectator. Meditation is something you participate in fully. There is no halfway, no semi-meditation, no “meditation lite.”

The ideal way to learn meditation is from a living teacher who has years of experience. A good living teacher can answer your questions about meditation and help you deal with problems that may arise in your practice. But the meditation instruction offered here is a reasonable place to start, especially if you can’t find a good live teacher.

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Some excellent times for meditation are in the early morning, when the day is still quiet, or the late evening, when the day is winding down. But if these times aren’t suitable for your daily schedule, find a regular time that fits with your circumstances and devote that time to meditation.

It’s best to be well rested so you’re not exhausted—but don’t skip your regular meditation session just because you’re tired. It’s best not to meditate on a very full or completely empty stomach—but again, don’t skip meditation just because you feel stuffed or hungry.

Always allow yourself enough time to get ready for the meditation. Do not rush, but do not dilly-dally, either.

Your clothes shouldn’t be too constricting. Ideally, they should be loose, neatly arranged, and clean. To the degree possible, don’t wear clothes

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you have just slept or worked in. Do not wear shoes while you meditate.

Find a place that is quiet and free from a lot of distractions. The room should be comfortable—neither hot and stuffy, nor cold and drafty. It also shouldn't be too bright or too dark. It's best if your place of meditation is clean and neatly arranged.

Stability in your meditation posture is very important. Though there are other postures that I will describe in a moment, the most stable postures are on the floor sitting with your legs crossed. So let us begin there.

At the site of your regular sitting, set out a thick mat on the floor and place a cushion above it. Sit on the front part of your cushion, with much of the cushion sticking out behind you. This will allow your knees to come down to the mat, which is imperative. You need stability in your posture, and you will not get that if your knees are floating above the mat. If you can't get both of your knees down to the mat, you can place a low cushion beneath the one you're sitting on, or tuck a low cushion under your floating knee to give it support. If you can't get either of your knees to the mat, you may consider kneeling on the cushion or sitting in a chair. I'll say more on these options shortly.

Sitting on the front part of the cushion also allows you to tilt your hips forward slightly. This corrects your spine allowing you to maintain the natural lumbar curve in your back that you have when you stand or walk. This posture will now give good support to your back and allow you to breathe properly.

In meditation, it's very important to keep your back straight. Imagine being suspended by the back of your head. Your chin will tuck in a little. Don't slouch; you won't be able to breathe deeply. Though slouching may seem more com-

fortable at first, your back will eventually give out. For the long run (and there's no point in taking up meditation unless it is for the long run), you need to sit with your back straight.

People commonly want to tuck their feet under their knees when they sit in a cross-legged position on the floor. This is not good; it reduces the stability you need in your meditation posture. It also pulls you into a more slouched position. Remember, unless you're sitting in a chair, it's essential that your knees remain on the mat.

If you choose to sit cross-legged, you have three options: half-lotus posture, full-lotus posture, or Burmese posture.

Here's how to get into the half-lotus posture:

With your knees upon the mat, bring either your left or right heel in close to your cushion, leaving your foot directly upon the mat. Place your other foot on top of its opposite thigh. This gives you a good, stable posture.



Half-lotus posture,
front view



Half lotus-posture,
side view

An even more stable and balanced posture—although one requiring more flexibility—is the full-lotus posture. To sit in full-lotus posture, begin by placing your first foot on its opposite thigh instead of on the mat. Then place your other foot on top of its opposite thigh.

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Full-lotus posture,
front view

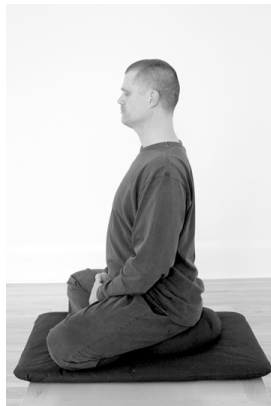


Full-lotus posture,
side view

If both of these lotus postures are too strenuous for you, you can sit in the Burmese posture. As in the half-lotus posture, bring one foot in close to the cushion, but then place the second foot on the mat in front of the first leg rather than on its opposite thigh. Make sure that both knees are supported, and not floating above the mat.



Burmese posture,
front view



Burmese posture,
side view

If the Burmese posture is still too strenuous for you, consider kneeling on the mat (*seiza* posture) with a cushion between your ankles. As in all floor-sitting postures, your knees will be touching the mat. If this is uncomfortable, try putting a

second cushion on top of the first, or consider using a kneeling bench (sometimes called a *seiza* bench). As with the cross-legged positions, be sure to maintain the lumbar curve in your spine, and keep your face vertical.



Kneeling (*seiza*) posture

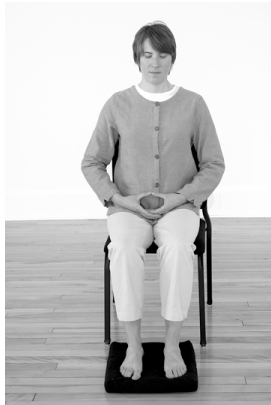
If all of the above postures are too strenuous for you, it's okay to sit in a chair. But not just any chair. Most chairs are sloped toward the back; unfortunately, this will cause some slouching and make it impossible for you to assume a posture that allows you to breathe properly. You need a chair that doesn't throw you toward the back. Thus you may need to get a special chair just for meditation.* (Sometimes people place books on the floor or on the chair seat to make adjustments, but this usually does not correct the slope of the chair seat, which is critical.)

If you choose to meditate in a chair, sit with your feet comfortably close together and flat on the floor. It's important to have your thighs nearly level with the floor—knees slightly lowered. This will maintain the lumbar curve in your spine, giving you good back support and allowing you to breathe properly. Do not lean against the back of

*For information on where you can find an ergonomically correct chair for meditation (pictured) go to www.dharmafield.org/meditationchair.htm.

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the chair; the base of your spine should either not touch the back of the chair or only rest very lightly against it. The upper part of your back should not touch the back of the chair at all.



Chair-sitting posture,
front view



Chair-sitting posture,
side view

I recommend placing your cushion, chair, or kneeling bench two to four feet from a blank wall of neutral color. Meditate facing the wall in order to limit visual distractions.



Allow your meditation to begin before you begin formal meditation. That is, even as you approach your place of meditation, settle your mind. Be aware of what you are about to do. Meditation doesn't magically begin the moment you sit down to face a wall, or the moment a bell sounds.

Instead, let your meditation begin even as you think to meditate. If you learn to practice meditation in this way, gradually you will learn to bring awareness to any activity the very moment you turn your mind to it.

Compose your body before entering your place of meditation. Take a moment to stand still and center and balance your body. Place your feet about a fist apart at the heels. Straighten up your spine. Push the back of your head toward the ceiling until your face is vertical—facing neither downward toward the floor nor upward toward

the ceiling. Bring your chin in just a little. This will help you stay aware of your whole body.

Gently make a fist with your left hand, but enclose your thumb inside. (With your thumb inside your fist, you can be mindful of every part of your hand. Your fist closed around your thumb is also a reminder that it's impossible to hurt others without also hurting yourself.) Now enclose your left fist inside your right hand and bring your hands against your body just below your sternum. Your forearms should be parallel to the floor.



Detail of hand gesture while standing

Without tilting your head down, cast your gaze down to the floor at about a 45° angle as pictured below.



Standing posture

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From this stance, mindfully enter your place of meditation. Be aware of entering the room. *Know* what foot you use to enter the room. Neither rush nor dillydally. Walk to your sitting place mindfully—not slowly, but without haste.

When you arrive at your seat, acknowledge it, silently. (If you like, make the Indian gesture of bringing your palms together in front of you, all fingers vertical with their tips at the level of your nose, and make a slight bow.) Then sit down.

Settle into a steady, immobile, upright posture. Don't strain.

Take one or two deep, quiet breaths. Feel the stability of your posture as you settle into it.

To balance and stabilize your posture even further, place your hands on your knees. Breathe in, then lean deeply to your right as you breathe out, stretching out your left side. Breathe in again as you return to an upright posture. Then breathe out once more as you lean deeply to your left, stretching out your right side. Come back up to the center as you breathe in. Always keep your breath quiet. Repeat these movements two more times, leaning less with each sway.

As you lean from side to side, feel your center of gravity. Notice it as it passes through your middle. Feel your body settling on the mat as you return to a centered position.

Sit upright, steady and stable, leaning neither forward nor backward, neither left nor right. Take one or two more deep, quiet breaths.

Now, put your hands, open and palms up, in your lap in front of you. Touch the tip of your left index finger to the base of your right index finger just where it joins the palm. Using this as a reference point, lay the fingers of your left hand over the corresponding fingers of your right, palms facing upward.

Gently, bring your thumb tips together until they barely touch. Bring your hands in close to your body, so your thumbs are at or just below your navel. In this position, as you look down, your thumbs should appear above the middle finger of your left hand.

With this gesture you form an oval with your hands. This hand gesture (sometimes called the "universal *mudra*") is particularly sensitive to both your posture and your mind, so it will alert you when you have lost your concentration or your vertical posture. If you become agitated or caught up in thought, your thumb tips will tend to press together, forming a peak. If you become drowsy, your thumbs will likely fall and the oval shape will begin to collapse. If you notice either of these in meditation, simply return your hands to the shape of the oval.



Detail of hand gesture while seated

You will also not be able to keep this delicate oval shape in your hands if your posture is off. A mental scan of your hands will inform you of your posture in general.

Take a deep, quiet breath.

Now, without tilting your head forward, cast your gaze downward at a 45° angle. Your line of vision should strike the floor at about the same distance in front of you as your eyes are above the floor. If you are sitting facing a wall, your line of vision may intersect the wall.

Let your gaze fall in a general area. Do not fixate on any specific point. You should be able to see clearly while meditating. Because your gaze is downward, your eyes will appear to be half-closed, but keep them comfortably open. Just relax your eyelids and they will naturally settle into a half-open position.

Your eyes should always remain open during meditation. This is often difficult for people new to meditation to understand. But, remember, meditation is not about tuning out the world, but about awareness.

Close your mouth in a normal fashion. With your lips and teeth both shut, place your tongue against the roof of your mouth, with the tip of your tongue just behind your upper front teeth. (Your tongue will likely go here quite naturally, but in meditation, we keep it there. This keeps your mouth from filling with saliva, and it actually helps to settle your mind and enhance your concentration.) Breathe gently and quietly through your nose. (If you are congested, it's okay to breathe through your mouth.)

Place your mind on your breath. Be aware of breathing in as you breathe in. Be aware of breathing out as you breathe out. Don't force your breath in any way. As your mind and body settle, your breath will naturally deepen. Breathe with your diaphragm, so as you breathe in, your abdomen will swell out, and as you breathe out, your abdomen will move in.

Breathe naturally. Don't think about it. The length of each breath may vary slightly; that's fine. Don't try to control your breath; just follow it. Allow your breath to settle deeply into your body.

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As you meditate, even for a short while, you will notice your mind wandering about. It picks up on sights, sounds, and smells in the environment and runs off in daydreams, thoughts, and analysis. It

jabbers to itself. Feelings and thoughts arise, one after the other. This is normal and natural.

When you notice that you have slipped off into thought and not been mindful of your breath, just come back to the breath. Do not judge or comment on the fact that your mind checked out. Just come back. There's no need to criticize your scattered mind. It's enough to just notice that you've drifted from the breath, and then to come back.

Most of us live out our lives without realizing just how scattered our minds actually are. As we go about our daily business, much of the time we're not *here*. This becomes starkly apparent when we sit down and try to follow our breath.

So don't be alarmed by the fact that your mind often wanders about when you sit in meditation. Everyone's does—at least at first. In fact, until they learn to be present, this is how almost everyone's mind operates virtually all the time.

Now that you've begun to notice how scattered your mind is, however, you can learn to come back. *You can't come back if you don't notice that you've run off.* So don't let your noticing interfere with your meditation.

Your mind wanders away, and you bring it back. It wanders away again, and you bring it back. In meditation, we do this repeatedly. Cultivating and maintaining this awareness *is* the practice of meditation.

With practice, over time, your trips away become shorter, less frequent, and not as absorbing. Gradually you learn to reside where you actually live—*here* and *now*.

In the beginning, if you have a lot of trouble maintaining concentration—that is, staying with the breath—try counting the breaths.

There are different ways to count the breath for various effects, but the simplest way is to silently

count "one" on the in-breath, "two" on the out-breath, "three" on the next in-breath, and "four" on the next out-breath. Count up to ten in this way, then start over again with one. If you lose track of your counting, simply begin again at one. Do this until your mind settles down and you can once again follow your breath without counting.

It's best to let go of counting the breath as soon as you feel you can do so—because, over time, even counting the breath can become a distraction from *here and now*.

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Suzuki Roshi, like any Zen teacher, encouraged his students not to change position while sitting. In the book, *To Shine One Corner of the World*, he said, "Don't move." But then he added, "When I say don't move, it doesn't mean you can't move."

This is excellent instruction. It allows us to function in a manner that is firm and yet not rigid.

The rule is "don't move." But by itself, this is extreme. Still, this isn't license to move. Don't move just for the sake of mere comfort, but if you're very uncomfortable, quickly and quietly adjust your posture. If you have to sneeze, cover it in the crook of your arm. When moving is unavoidable, don't try to avoid it. Otherwise, remain still.

Like two countervailing forces in dynamic balance, these counter instructions help to keep us from drifting off into the extremes of being either too rigid, or too lax. Neither should be forgotten nor indulged.

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When the meditation period has ended, place your hands on your knees. As you exhale, lean slightly and slowly to the right. On your next inhalation, return slowly to the upright position. As you next exhale, lean slightly to the left; return to the center on the in-breath. Keep your movements smooth and slow. Repeat these sways two more times, increasing the range of each one, until on your final sways you stretch out each side of your body. Keep your movements definite and graceful. Be mindful.

When you get up from sitting, move slowly and quietly, calmly and deliberately.

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One of the most common questions I hear is, "How long should I sit?" Sit for a least ten minutes but probably no more than forty minutes. What is far more important, however, is that you sit with regularity. Once a day, or three times a week are good places to start. I would not recommend that you sit any less frequently than that. You can always increase the length or frequency of your sittings later on. But you want to arrange a schedule that you can actually stick to. This is what is most important.

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Everything about this form of meditation has been cultivated and refined over many centuries to accomplish these two characteristics of mind: calmness and awareness. This upright posture of sitting firmly on the Earth is to remain alert without agitation, and to experience a mind that is both stable and aware.