

HOW TO SET UP A ZEN SITTING GROUP

by Andrew Scott & Paul Evans, Liverpool Zen Group

Introduction

This guide comes out of the experience of the Liverpool Zen Group which was formed over ten years ago by David Scott. For the first ten years the group met twice a month in David's flat, attended by a small group of regular practitioners and a succession of occasional visitors who would come for a while then go. Eventually the group grew too big for the flat and moved to the much larger city centre Dojo, meeting weekly. This quickly grew so that we now meet on two evenings and two early mornings each week. The group has grown in other ways too. More and more people are volunteering, indeed demanding to be involved. They have taken on service positions and roles in the group looking after publicity, web design, a library, membership, premises, services and form, induction of new members, and more... It feels like a sangha, a community now.

It is this experience that we want to share in the hope that we can assist you to set up a vibrant zen sitting group where you live. This guide is in two parts.

Part 1 covers the following topics:

Why do you want to start a sitting group?

When to meet

Where to meet - private home or public space?

What will you do in your sitting group?

What equipment do you need?

Does it have to be a 'zen' group?

What else can the group do?

How people can get involved - building a sangha

Getting help and advice

Part 2 is drawn from Zen Meditation in Plain English by John Daishin Buksbazen published by Wisdom Publications (ISBN 086171316 8). We highly recommend this book particularly for the section on Frequently Asked Questions which newcomers to zazen often pose.

We would value YOUR comments and feedback on this guide. Does this cover your questions? Please let us know. Contact us at:

Andrew Scott email andy.scott@liverpool-zen.org.uk

Paul Evans email paul.evans@liverpool-zen.org.uk

Gassho

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PART 1 Setting Up a Group

Why do you want to start a sitting group?

Is it to support your practice? Meet kindred spirits? Convert the heathen (joke)? How you answer this question will influence how you approach the rest of the questions below. Your reasons for starting a group may change with time - and it is worth continuing to review this.

When to meet

Whether evenings or weekends - regularity is important so that you and others can plan ahead. "The first Tuesday of the month" for example is clear to all. Beware Mondays, bank holidays can get in the way, and many groups try to avoid Fridays as this can interfere with people's weekend plans. Whatever you decide be realistic: Tenshin roshi says that for most people zen practice is a clear fourth - behind work, family and social life so bear this in mind.

Where to meet - private home or public space?

Lots of groups start by meeting in a private home: it is intimate, familiar, and cheaper. But it may also be small, cramped and it may feel too personal for first time visitors so that they don't return. Do you want strangers in your home? Where are the boundaries - are you then open to visits at other times? Do you want to be?

Public space is more open and neutral. It also requires more commitment and this too can be a spur for a group. Of course renting a room costs money, and it may mean having to transport mats and cushions etc. But it could also be seen as being less stingy with the dharma, making this more available and open.

What will you do in your sitting group?

Our suggestion is to keep it simple. An evening could consist of one or more periods of zazen (sitting meditation), interspersed with kinhin (walking meditation) if you have the space. Some groups like to begin with three bows and finish the meditation by chanting The Four Vows, before moving to a reading and discussion, and the tea & biscuits (very important!)

How long you sit for is a matter of discussion and agreement. Our well established group sits for 2 periods of 30 minutes with 10 minutes slow and fast kinhin in between, and we end with a 10 minute service. Sometimes we sit for three periods of 25 minutes, with kinhin. We are aware however that 25 -30 minutes is a real challenge for beginners. You may decide to sit for shorter periods at first, especially as you become established. We find it useful to signal the start and end of the meditation with a bell. Even if you have very limited space and there is no room for kinhin walking meditation, it is important to take a short break between sitting sessions and to stand and move around to ease

cramped joints and muscles. This is especially important for beginners- we don't want to put people off or make zen an exercise in endurance of pain. But to retain the focus this does need to be silent.

Opening the zazen with bows and closing with vows is a way of marking the 'specialness' of zazen and of focussing the mind and body on the practice. We are aware that bowing creates a lot of resistance for some people (which is in itself an interesting issue), and of course it is up to you how you close and open.

Zen is primarily an experiential practice and we would encourage groups to focus on zazen rather than discussion. But having said that readings can be a useful stimulus and aid. Newcomers also bring with them many questions about the practice, zen and buddhism; somehow these questions need to be fielded. This can be a challenge for groups - how do you do this without setting yourself up as a teacher?

Tea and biscuits are vital in our experience. It doesn't have to be a Japanese tea ceremony - 'English industrial' works just as well. Tea time is an informal end to the session, a chance to get to know other group members and ask for help or advice from more experienced members.

What equipment do you need?

The short answer is very little. The altar can be very simple: buddha figure, candle, flowers and incense, with a bell or gong for zazen. It is useful but not essential for everyone to have a zafu (cushion) and zabutan (mat). There is sometimes a view that to meditate it is essential to sit cross legged on a cushion. In Liverpool, only half the group sit this way, the rest use chairs or wooden sitting benches. The important thing is to be comfortable and to have a good posture.

Meditation supplies can be obtained from a various places and you should ideally seek a local supplier. Two web based suppliers of mats, cushions etc. are:

Blue Banyan: <http://www.bluebanyan.co.uk/>

Wild Mind: <http://secure.wildmind.org/store/customer/home.php>

Some groups make their own cushions and mats, seeing this not only as a way of saving money but as *samu*, a collective endeavour for the common good.

Does it have to be a 'zen' group?

Sometimes the question is asked: does it have to be a 'zen' group, can we not incorporate practices from other traditions in a general meditation group? In starting a group there is a temptation to mix and match and to create an all purpose group reflecting several styles and perhaps the backgrounds of different founding members. Our belief that this is less authentic and lacks the power that comes from a lineage, whether this lineage be zen or Tibetan.

Our suggestion is to be authentic: do zazen, and avoid mixing styles and teachings. In trying to please the many you can end up pleasing none. Zazen is a skill that requires practice and dedication.

What else can the group do?

There are several things that might develop from a local sitting group: joining in with sesshin (retreats) at Crosby, Chester, Beeley and Stonewater in the Lake District is an excellent way to strengthen practice. And for the adventurous visits to zen centres in USA (Salt Lake City, Zen Mountain Center), and Europe (Zen River) may also be possible. Locally it may be possible to link with other buddhist and interfaith groups, as well as seeking opportunities for community involvement with hospital visiting etc.

How people can get involved - building a sangha

There are clearly several jobs that are involved in establishing a group: finding premises, publicity, providing equipment, doing the tea and biscuits (and the washing up!), providing readings or material for discussion... It may start with one or two people but there are clearly many ways that more people can be involved and this is the basis of a sangha. It is this collective and social aspect of the practice which we have found to be so mutually supportive and enjoyable in Liverpool.

Experienced sitters have an important role in inspiring and guiding others and perhaps in providing readings for discussion. They can help with the important basics of good posture and sitting properly and comfortably on the cushion. Newcomers are important too! Their curiosity and enthusiasm is vital and stimulating.

However the group is formed and led there needs to be clarity about roles and responsibilities, about who leads the group and how decisions about direction are to be made.

Getting help

BOOKS: Zen Meditation in Plain English John Daishin Buksbazen
Wisdom Publications ISBN 086171316 8 This is a superb book for anyone beginning zen practice, or anyone in a position of guiding others who are beginning zen practice, written by a member of the White Plum tradition. Extracts from this book follow.

Elements of Zen David Scott & Tony Doubleday, Element Books ISBN 1 85230 235 6
This excellent book is out of print but we have seen available second-hand from Amazon. It contains some useful hints for beginners.

ADVICE: is available from Liverpool Zen Group - just contact us.

PART 2 Frequently Asked Questions

The following section is drawn from 'Zen Meditation in Plain English' by John Daishin Buksbazen, published by Wisdom Publications ISBN 086171316 8

We heartily recommend this book which we have found invaluable in helping to anticipate and answer the questions that beginners to zazen frequently ask.

Should I try to make my mind blank?

A blank mind is not what sitting is about. To sit is to be at home, to be upright; it is to be intimate, relaxed, and yet alert. Without daydreaming, thinking, or blanking out, we count or watch our breath and allow experiences to pass unpursued and unavoids. Gradually, in sitting, a deeper and clearer awareness of who we are, of what our life is, becomes possible. The illusory gap between inner and outer worlds is (gradually or suddenly) seen for what it is, and in this way, we can be more fully in touch with our world and relate to it more compassionately and productively.

What do I do with my feelings/emotions?

When sitting, it's not at all unusual to become more aware of feelings and emotions that are normally just below the surface of your awareness, since when you sit, you tend to quiet down enough to notice more of your internal goings-on. This quieting down may initially allow those feelings to emerge, just as darkness allows the stars to "come out" at night. When this happens, just be aware of the experience, letting it come and go. Remember that feelings are neither good nor bad in themselves, but are just what's going on with you at a given moment. What matters is how you relate to what's going on. In general, if the experience is pleasant, don't try to prolong it, and if it's unpleasant, don't try to avoid or squelch :Just notice it. Then, gently continue sitting. This approach will ~ generally helpful in dealing with all the normal ups and downs : everyday life.

The same thoughts keep recurring. What does this mean?

Thoughts often recur as a result of certain recurrent or similar causes. When these causes change, the thoughts will change also. Meanwhile, the practice of sitting can gradually affect the ways in which we experience these recurring thoughts, allowing us to be less habituated, less caught up in them, and able to see them from a more compassionate and skilful perspective. If these thoughts are particularly disturbing, it is crucial that you check in with a teacher or therapist. If they are not, then just let them go.

I get sleepy during zazen. How can I stay awake?

First of all, make sure that you are getting sufficient sleep at night. If you are and still find sleepiness a problem during your sitting, it may be helpful to occasionally focus your attention at your hairline for a few breaths, then return to natural regular breathing. Opening your eyes wider for a time may also help. But sometimes, sleepiness just happens, and it's important not to get caught up in judgement or self-recrimination. However, if the sleepiness persists for a long time, it may be a sign that some emotional concerns need addressing more directly, and that the sleepiness is an unconscious attempt to keep them at bay. Here again is where you may find consulting with a qualified teacher or counsellor especially useful.

It's difficult for me to keep my eyes open. Can I close them?

Most folks find that closing the eyes tends to lead to either drowsiness or daydreaming, and so keeping the eyes slightly open helps them avoid this. Others, however, may find that the struggle to keep their eyes open is in itself a greater distraction. If you can keep your eyes slightly open while sitting, that's best. If not, and you can stay alert and focussed with them closed, then that's okay too. Or, if you're very drowsy, try opening your eyes very wide. Do what works best for you.

It's difficult for me to make time to sit daily. Any suggestions?

We may find it difficult to make time to exercise regularly, brush our teeth, or pay the bills. But when we really appreciate the need to do something, we make time for it. The "difficulty" we have making time for these things is a clue as to what importance we attach to them, what priority we give them. If you prioritise sitting highly enough, you'll find you have time to do it. If you get up twenty minutes earlier in the morning, you will have given yourself an extra twenty minutes to sit.

How do I stop my mind from jumping thought to thought?

Have you ever seen a young puppy being trained to "stay"? The trainer will gently but persistently repeat the command and perhaps press the puppy's hindquarters into a sitting position. A skilful trainer will not become angry or frustrated with the puppy, but will patiently and gently continue to train it. This is not a bad model for training the mind. The key ingredients are persistence, consistency, and gentleness.

I can't get my mind to quiet down. Should I just give up?

Not at all! If your mind is noisy, sit with it, hang out with your unquiet mind, make friends with it. Your job isn't to beat it into submission, but to bring body and mind together in a respectful and compassionate way. Perhaps the problem is a wish to control your mind before you've even gotten to know it. Try to relax into the unquiet and bear witness to it rather than fighting to change it.

Can I get "addicted" to sitting?

In a way, zazen is the opposite of addiction: it is the way of freedom from clinging, the freedom to experience each moment unvarnished and complete in itself. But if you try to use sitting to numb out, create blissful states, or avoid yourself, then that can become a problematic kind of addiction. Numbness or even bliss is not what sitting is about. But sitting can also become a "positive addiction," like regular exercise or any other good habit. When you deeply realize that your sitting is not just a technique for altering your consciousness. that it actually is you living your life in its most essential and intimate immediacy, then the addiction question no longer applies.

Sometimes when I am sitting, I feel like I am floating up and down. Is that normal?

Such experiences are not uncommon when we begin to sit. They are not particularly significant, and are neither "supposed to happen" nor "not supposed to happen." They only become significant if you let them interfere with your practice. Otherwise, they're like clouds in the sky. After you've been sitting awhile, they'll tend to fade away. Again, the basic rule about all experiences during sitting is: if you like it, don't run after it, and if you don't like it, don't run away from it.

I like to meditate while I'm running. Is that okay?

Many runners find running similar to meditative states. That's fine as long as you watch where you're going and don't hurt yourself. But you should also be aware that in running you generate certain chemicals called endorphins, which stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain, giving rise to the "runner's high," a kind of blissful state. This pleasant state should not be confused with sitting practice. When you run, just run; when you sit, just sit.

Can I shift around during sitting if my legs hurt?

If you're uncomfortable, try letting the discomfort be, without immediately moving away from it. If it becomes too painful, of course, you may simply have to adjust your posture. If you are careful to establish the proper posture when you first take your seat, you are unlikely to have to move much, if at all. And finally, know your capabilities realistically and work gently to increase them. Stretching exercises like those in Appendix I may greatly enhance your flexibility and thus your comfort in zazen.

My feet fall asleep when I sit, and when I stand up I fall down. Is this normal?

Feet and legs falling asleep is quite normal. Just don't be in too big a hurry to stand up after sitting, and massage the soles of your feet with your knuckles to restore circulation before you stand. And if you have some physical condition that makes it inadvisable to sit on a zafu or a bench, use a chair. But be assured: no one has ever suffered lasting damage because their legs fell asleep during zazen!

Is zazen a religion?

No, zazen is a practice that may be done within the context of any religious tradition or without any religious reference at all. There are, for example, Roman Catholic priests and nuns, as well as Jews and rabbis, who practice or even teach zazen. There are also atheists, agnostics, and many secular practitioners doing so. Zazen is not predicated upon any belief system, but is both an expression of and a way of deepening one's own appreciation of life.

What's the story with bowing?

At some practice centers, people do prostrations or bows before or after sitting or liturgy. Bowing is a way we use the whole body to express deep respect and appreciation for our teachers, ourselves, our fellow beings, and all reality. It is also a way of unifying our body and mind and of putting in perspective our relationship to all that exists, from the greatest to the most minute. To the degree that bowing is unfamiliar, it may initially seem artificial or exotic, perhaps even giving rise to some sense of resentment or resistance. That's understandable. But if such feelings persist, perhaps we are seeing the degree to which we cling to a narrow worldview. Basically, however, bowing can be a quite wonderful portal to our development as practitioners and as people. But ultimately, just as with sitting and any other activity: When bowing, just bow.

Some centers have chanting and ritual. Why?

If you are curious about bowing or chanting, you may find it interesting to try doing it, just for the experience. And if you find that either practice bothers you, it may be even more interesting to be with your opinions and emotional responses to such practices. Ultimately, of course, if you don't want to bow or chant, that's up to you. Don't let it get in the way of sitting.

I just want to learn to relax. Will sitting help?

At the most basic levels of Zen practice, sitting and breathing quietly while quieting the mind can be deeply relaxing, as well as enhancing clarity of thought and the ability to concentrate. There is much more to sitting than this, but if this is your interest, then by all means sit.

End