

## Zendo Forms

A part of zen practice in and around the spaces used for meditation, service, etc., is called “forms”. Think of a bundt cake: the form which the cake batter is poured into gives it shape, and it is that shape which defines the cake as a “bundt” cake. Just so, we “pour” our activity into the forms of our spaces. The shape they thus take is (in part) what defines these spaces as a zen center. Do not think of the forms as rules, however, but rather as customs.

In a nutshell, forms are “things we do, and the way we do things”.

It is most important to observe these forms in the time before and during zazen and other ceremonies. Outside of those times, it is okay to be a little less formal.

Here are our forms:

When entering the zendo, the first step is taken with the foot closest to the door hinge or outermost edge of the frame. For our main, sliding doors, this means we use the left foot when entering through the left door (most common), or the right foot if entering through the right door. After entering, take a step or two and then bow slightly toward the altar, with the hands in “gassho” (palms together, hands a couple inches in front of your chin, so you can just see over the tips of your fingers).

While walking in the zendo, hold your hands in “shashu” (left hand with the fingers closed around the thumb, right hand covering the left with the thumb on top, positioned at the sternum, with forearms parallel to the floor).

Walk to your seat along the perimeter of the space bound by the “tan” (raised platforms with the meditation cushions on them). Do not cross through the open space. Try to avoid crossing in front of the altar. If this is not expedient, then face the altar and bow in gassho as you move from one side to the other.

When you get to your seat, make sure the “zafu” (round cushion) is positioned toward the back of the “zabuton” (flat cushion), i.e., the side away from the wall. Make any other adjustments to the cushion(s) needed. Bow toward your seat in gassho. Then, turn to the right to face away from your seat (toward the room) and bow again in gassho. From here, sit back onto your cushion, and turn to the right to face the wall. Arrange your legs as needed, whether “Burmese” (one foot in front of the other), “quarter lotus” (one foot on the other leg’s calf, both knees supported on the zabuton), “half lotus” (one foot on the other leg’s thigh), or “full lotus” (both feet on the opposite leg’s thigh). If none of these work for your body, try “seiza” (kneeling posture) using the zafu rotated vertically or a kneeling bench. Sitting in a chair is also an option.

Regardless of specifics, the goal is to support a stable, fully upright posture: a natural S-curve to the spine, with the crown of the head pointing straight up, and the chin tucked slightly. Relax the head, neck and jaw. Let the tongue rest lightly on the roof of the mouth. The knees should be a little lower than the hips if sitting on a cushion, with the pelvis tipped forward. The ears, shoulders, and hips are all in the same plane. We will be sitting zazen for some time, so it is

desirable to put as little strain on the back muscles as possible. Once you have found a stable sitting posture, rock slightly left and right, forward and back, to really align yourself vertically and horizontally. Then, put your hands in the “cosmic mudra” (right palm facing upward, left hand placed in the right palm, also palm-up, with the middle knuckles of left and right fingers aligned, and thumb tips touching gently so as to form an oval shape). Hold the mudra near your navel. Try not to rest your hands on your legs too much.

In the morning, the priest will do a “jundo” or “kentan” (walking around the room to open the space for the day – a morning greeting). They will be walking with their hands in gassho; return this greeting by holding your hands in gassho as the priest walks behind you.

Do not close your eyes while sitting zazen. Keep them at least partially open. Gaze down at a 45° angle. Let your eyes unfocus from the wall and allow them to rest focused on a point far, far beyond the wall.

If someone approaches the seat to your left or right, bow in gassho at the same time they bow toward their seat. Do not bow when they bow facing away from their seat. It should be noted that this particular form only applies before zazen has formally begun (i.e., with three bells as the teacher takes their seat). If someone comes to their seat during the formal period of zazen, just hold your posture, including the cosmic mudra, while they bow and take their seat.

Try to maintain stillness in your sitting. If it becomes necessary to make an adjustment, first bow very, very slightly with your hands in gassho by way of apology to your neighbors, then make the adjustment discreetly but efficiently. If your neighbor bows to make an adjustment, do not return the bow.

At the end of the period, the “doan” (person who rings the bells) will signal with the small bell. Two rings means the next thing is “kinhin” (walking meditation). One ring means anything else. Everyone bows while seated in gassho. If it is the first period of the day, we will all do the “robe chant”, even if you have not received a buddha robe. Then, turn on your seat to the right and stand up. If the next thing is service, a dharma talk, a break, tea, etc., fluff and brush off your cushions, arranging the zafu in the center of the zabuton, then turn to the right to face the room. If the next thing is kinhin, do not make any adjustments to your cushions – just face the room. Hold your hands in shashu. The doan will give a signal with “kaishaku” (wooden clackers), and everyone bows together in gassho.

To start kinhin, turn to the left one quarter with your hands in shashu. It is possible some adjustment to even out the spacing may be necessary; observe the others in the room and position yourself accordingly. If you need to use the washroom, this is the time to do so.

Kinhin goes slowly at first. The “ideal” form is to begin a step on an inhale, then finish it, placing the foot halfway in front of your other foot and shifting your weight to it, on an exhale. Because of differences in balance, breathing, foot size, etc., it may be best not to follow this form exactly. Observe the others in the room surreptitiously and make any adjustments needed, if this is expedient. But in general, just focus on your breathing and walking.

During kinhin, we circumambulate the room. Do not bow to the altar when walking in front of it. About three-quarters of the way through the period of kinhin, the doan will give a signal with the clackers. Pause briefly and bow with everyone in shashu, then walk at a normal pace. When kinhin is almost over, the doan will signal again with the clackers. Put your hands in gassho, but do not stop walking until you return to your seat. Turn to the right so you are facing the room. The doan will signal one last time with the clackers, at which point everyone bows together in gassho. If the next thing is zazen, take your seat as before. Otherwise, find your place accordingly.

For service, we arrange our zafu and zabuton on the floor (mostly). When moving your cushions, use both hands. Do not push them with your feet. Orient yourself to face in the direction of the altar, just not necessarily directly at it, standing just behind your zabuton. The assembly is oriented and lined up in rows. This will make more sense in person. Place your zafu in a corner of the zabuton to give yourself space for making full bows/prostrations. If you are not comfortable doing any bows, you do not have to do them. If your physical situation does not allow it, doing a half bow at the waist is perfectly fine.

When making a full bow (prostration), start with hands in gassho. When the bell sounds, bow at the waist. Then, continue down to kneel on your zabuton. Take your hands out of gassho (if needed, use them to help you get all the way down) and place your forehead and back of your hands on the mat. Lift your hands up until they are level with your ears. When you hear the bell “clunked”, then lower them back down. This is done deliberately – neither slow nor fast. Then, stand back up.

After the first round of bowing, the priest offers incense. When they are walking back to the foot of their bowing mat, two small bells will signal the assembly to kneel in seiza (if necessary, with your cushion between your feet). Chant books will be passed out. Set your chant book down on the zabuton, rather than the floor, when you are not using it.

When holding the chant book, use both hands. Place the three middle fingers of each hand outside and your thumb and pinky inside. While chanting, “chant with your ears” – listen attentively to the rest of the assembly and let your chanting harmonize naturally with everyone else.

General etiquette: muffle coughs or sneezes in the crook of your elbow/arm as you are able. Turn cell phones to “do not disturb” or “airplane mode” and do not check them while in the zendo. Wear clothing which is dark in tone and which covers shoulders and knees. Do not wear excessive fragrance or jewelry which makes noise. Do not bring articles such as water bottles into the zendo. If water is needed, quietly go to the kitchen to get it, usually during kinhin. Walk mindfully whenever you are in the zendo. When exiting, use the foot closest to the outside or hinge, like you do when entering, but do not stop to bow.