

## **THE ART OF ZAZEN**

I got an email recently from a journalist who was writing an article about Zazen. He asked a few questions about practicing Zazen and what people think about practicing Zazen in Japan. Here are the questions and answers:

### ***1. Is there a difference between choosing to sit in full-lotus posture, half-lotus posture, Burmese style posture or Seiza posture?***

A well-known thirteenth century Zen monk named Dogen wrote a text called *Fukanzazengi* which has instructions on how to practice Zazen. *Fukanzazengi* means "Universal Guide to Practicing Zazen". In *Fukanzazengi* Dogen recommends practicing Zazen in the half-lotus or full-lotus posture. So those two postures are generally regarded as the traditional styles for Zazen. When someone first starts to do Zazen it's easier to sit in half-lotus. After sitting in half-lotus for a few months or years our leg muscles will become looser and we can try sitting in full-lotus, even for just a few minutes. The main difference between the half-lotus and full-lotus postures is that both knees firmly touch the ground in full-lotus, which makes the posture more stable. Full-lotus is also the traditional posture that was practiced by Gautama Buddha in India long ago.

I don't have much experience with the Burmese style posture, but it may be a good posture for anyone who finds the half-lotus or full-lotus posture difficult. After getting used to the Burmese style, it might be worth trying the half-lotus or full-lotus posture.

I've never sat Seiza during Zazen. The only experience I have of sitting in Seiza for a long time was at a Japanese tea ceremony I went to once. I had to sit in the traditional Seiza style without a cushion for about 30 or 40 minutes. It cut off the blood circulation to my legs and I could hardly stand afterwards, which was a bit embarrassing until I noticed most of the other people could hardly stand either, so it was kind of funny. Using a zafu or some kind of bench with Seiza might solve that problem.

When I first started doing Zazen my legs used to be really stiff and it was hard for me to sit in any kind of posture. All I could manage was to sit cross-legged with my knees way up off the floor. After a while I started to sit in a kind of "quarter-lotus" with one foot on the calf of the other. After

doing that for a while I managed to sit in half-lotus. A few years later I started doing full-lotus for a few minutes at a time and gradually increased my legs got used to doing it.

## ***2. What is enjoyable about practicing Zazen?***

If you get into the habit of practicing regularly, it can be a nice and interesting thing to do. One enjoyable thing about practicing Zazen is that after a while we become more active life can become more interesting. It's sometimes said that Zazen helps us experience reality like it really is, warts and all. By practicing Zazen regularly we can notice that reality is different to the way we sometimes think it is. It's not such a big deal, but after doing it for a while it kind of grows on you. It also feels nice just to have the chance to practice Zazen sometimes.

## ***3. Why has it lost some of its popularity in modern-day Japan?***

Many people in modern-day Japan associate Zazen with physical pain or endurance. It's often portrayed as a kind of ascetic practice that people do to reach some kind of higher state. Many Japanese people seem to consider Zen temples as places where there's lots of hard discipline and discomfort and the monks might get hit with a stick or something. But that image seems to be changing nowadays. It seems like young Japanese people are becoming more interested in finding out about Buddhism.

## ***4. Anything you would like to add?***

I usually advise people to try doing Zazen at home a few times before they do it at a temple or with a group. That way they can check it out for themselves without too much pressure. It's actually a nice thing to do once you get into the habit. I find the hardest thing about Zazen is getting myself to sit down and actually do it.

Those were the four questions and answers:-)