

Sitting Meditation

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Fundamental Meditation Course. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

When we start practicing meditation, we should practice in all postures in all our daily activities. Such as when we walk, stand, sit or lie down. This is called practicing meditation in the four postures.

Therefore, sitting meditation is not the only technique that we will practice. However when we start our meditation practice, it is desirable that we set a routine of having a sitting meditation session in the morning and in the evening, even if these sessions may last only 15 minutes at the beginning.

Implements for sitting meditation

A meditation cushion is a useful implement that helps us maintain a good sitting posture. We need to choose the right cushion as later on, we will need to be able to sit for an hour or one and a half hours without experiencing sore legs. The cushion should help us achieve a comfortable posture. In particular, our thighs should not be pressed too hard against the cushion thus preventing good blood circulation.

A good meditation cushion should suit the person's morphology. Someone with long legs should use a higher cushion. The height of the cushion should be such that our knees touch the floor when we sit at the edge of the cushion. It is desirable to use a small cushion or a folded towel as hand rest.

The purpose of the meditation cushion is to keep our back straight, while spreading the weight of the body over a triangle formed by the base of our spine and our two knees. The aim is to achieve a stable sitting posture so that when we have purged our mind of all thoughts and entered samādhi, we need not be concerned with keeping our body and spine straight. This is achieved by us having already a straight posture at the beginning of the sitting meditation session which would be continued when we enter samādhi.

A sitting meditation mat is a small square mat that we sit on. If the floor of room where we practice is covered by carpet, we would not need a sitting mat; however we would need one if the floor is covered in timber or tiles. If we don't have a sitting mat, we can use a folded towel instead.

Sitting meditation posture

The sitting meditation posture is as follows:

- our two knees touch the floor, and if they don't we need to have something to put between them and the floor;
- our spine is straight, we can check by mentally checking that our ears are above our shoulders;
- our head is straight, we can check by mentally checking that the tip of our nose is aligned with our navel;
- our two arms drop naturally alongside the body;
- one hand is placed on top of the other, the two thumbs are touching, we may use a small cushion to support the hands;
- we have our gaze pointed down to a spot about two to three hand-spans in front of us, and not pointed straight ahead; and
- we sit relaxed and comfortable.

The sitting posture that we can see in the statues of Buddha is called the full-lotus position. This posture is difficult to achieve but it is the best because it keeps our body stable, as our legs are locked together, and therefore we do not risk having the body unsteady when we enter samādhi.

A more common posture is the half-lotus position. It consists of having one leg over the other. If we experience sore legs when we sit in the half-lotus position for a while, we may use what is called the Burman-style half-lotus position where one leg is placed in front of the other, thus alleviating the soreness caused by having one leg pressed onto the other.

Those who have knee or leg problems that prevent them from sitting comfortably on the floor can sit on a chair instead. When you sit on a chair, you also need to have your back straight, your head straight, your two feet lying on the ground, and your arms, hands and gaze positioned as in the normal sitting meditation posture. You need to choose a chair's height so that your thigh and lower leg form a square angle. The important thing is that you should not sit with your back slumped or press your back against the backrest, but should sit with your back straight. In this way, when you have stopped wandering

thoughts, you will experience beneficial physiological effects on the body and on psychosomatic illnesses.

A correct sitting posture is important because it helps us enter samādhi more easily, by helping us control our mind more easily. In contrast, if we use a too large cushion that presses too hard against the thighs, we will experience sore legs very quickly. Or if we don't sit with our head straight, we will experience neck or back soreness when we sit for a length of time. If the cushion is too high or too hard, or if we sit with our spine too taut, we will experience a sore back after a half-hour sitting. If we sit with our back slumped, we will tend to feel sleepy or have difficulty breathing. In all of these situations, our mind will focus on the area of pain and will not experience serenity.

When we practice correctly and have stopped wandering thoughts, i.e. we are experiencing samādhi, we will experience a physiological effect that pulls our back up straight. Conversely, if our back is already straight, it will make it easier for us to enter samādhi.

Practice steps

When we practice sitting meditation, we should wear ample and comfortable pants and should not wear hard materials such as jeans or tight pants. Also, we should avoid having a heavy stomach as this will not produce good results. Lastly we should avoid windy locations.

When we practice and experience sore legs, we should stretch and massage our legs before resuming our posture and our meditation. We should not endure the pain, as this will only trigger the sympathetic nervous system resulting in us sweating or feeling dizzy.

When we start practicing, we may sit in front of a mirror to check our posture, but it is not advisable to sit in meditation in front of a mirror.

The wordless awareness mind

The essence of meditation is maintaining awareness. Awareness is the state of mind that recognizes clearly what is happening in the external world and inside the body. For example, when there is warmth in the body, we are aware that there is warmth in the body. When there is a sound, we are aware that there is a sound. But once awareness has occurred, it stops there, without any further thoughts. This is the awareness of the wordless awareness mind.

There are several levels of awareness achieved through the wordless awareness mind:

- the first level is wordless awareness.
- the second level is a longer and steadier flow of wordless awareness. It is called silent awareness, which is awareness without any inner words arising.
- the third level is called awakening awareness. It is a clear and complete awareness of what is happening without any attachment. This awareness comes from the wordless awareness mind and not the consciousness.
- the fourth level is called wordless cognitive awareness

In reality, awareness has no boundaries, no divisions. It consists of states of mind that evolve continuously. When we practice, once our wordless awareness becomes steady and longer lasting, we enter silent awareness. As this silent awareness, without any inner talk and inner dialogue, becomes even more stable and strong, it gains a clear and complete quality and becomes awakening awareness. When the awareness experiences are repeated, committed to memory and become part of our cognition, we have a steady flow of wordless cognitive awareness, clear, complete and without any attachment. The various states of awareness are a process by which the wordless awareness mind becomes steadier, stronger, clearer and deeper.

Obstacles when practicing sitting meditation

The obstacles we face when practicing sitting meditation are all related to not being able to maintain awareness.

One obstacle that beginners face is falling into a state of torpor. The practitioner would feel sluggish, dreamy. His/her body would slump, requiring occasionally to be jerked back into position. The meditator may even feel sleepy and drowsy. There are several ways to alleviate this problem. The first is to maintain awareness; this may involve using inner talk repeatedly if we are still at the stage of using inner talk. If we have a clear awareness, we will not fall into torpor. The second technique is to maintain a correct sitting posture, in particular by ensuring that our head and back are straight. This will help us maintain alertness and avoid torpor. We may fall into sleepiness if our head is bent down when we have stopped wandering thoughts. The third technique, if the others fail, is to temporarily stop the sitting meditation session, do some walking meditation, and then resume the sitting meditation.

Another obstacle is having the mind falling into blankness or nothingness. This is the situation where our awareness is hazy. We don't know what we are doing and at the end of the session, we couldn't tell how the session was. This problem also comes from not maintaining awareness.

If we have managed to eliminate all thoughts and achieve a still mind but do not experience any spiritual insights, we may experience what is called deluded samādhi. This is also due to not maintaining awareness. When we maintain awareness, we activate our wordless awareness mind and, as a result, spiritual insights come forth. The deluded samādhi problem arises when we have stopped thoughts but do not maintain awareness, thus not activating the wordless awareness mind.

Another problem that meditators may encounter is the occurrence of psychosomatic illnesses, or becoming irritable, difficult, overly engaged and judgmental while not experiencing spiritual insights. Some people have mistakenly called these problems "being possessed by demons". However, they are a consequence of incorrect practice. They are the consequence of exerting effort, of applying intention and concentration, which activate the verbal areas of the mind and the sympathetic nervous system. This, in turn, causes the release of a number of biochemicals that have harmful effects on the body and cause the mind to become agitated, resulting in psychosomatic illnesses.

When we practice correctly, we experience physiological effects such as the secretion of saliva and a feeling of warmth in the body, but we may also experience other bio-actions such as a feeling of lightness in the body, or a loss of feeling in the arms and feet. This may be caused by the shutting down of sensory pathways when we are in deep samādhi, but may also be simply the fruit of our imagination.

Coming out of meditation

When we have sat in meditation for a period of time, for example for one hour, our limbs have become accustomed to immobility. When we end our meditation session, we need to allow our blood circulation to slowly come back to normal by first making slow and small movements, and progressively making more pronounced movements.

The practical steps for coming out of meditation are:

- Move the two hands, wiggle the wrists, rub the two hands together and gently rub the eyes with the hands. Repeat about three times.
- Then open the eyes.
- Gently rub the face, forehead and head with the palm of the hands. Use the fingers to gently massage the head in order to improve blood flow. Rub the neck with the hands.
- Rub each arm with the other hand.
- The legs probably feel numb. Slowly unfold each of them in turn and massage them.
- If the back feels tired, massage the lower back and use the closed fists to gently pound the upper back.
- Then get up slowly. You may continue with some walking meditation.

