

Ordinary Mind Zen Brisbane Information for New Participants

Welcome to Ordinary Mind Zen. This document seeks to answer some common questions about our group and how we organise our practice, and explains some things that may help you to settle in more easily.

Orientation

In order to assist you in coming into the group, on the evening of your first attendance, you will be asked to arrive early so that we can give you a short orientation. Orientations are held on some Sunday nights by arrangement. You will be introduced to the sitting place and its facilities, how the zendo is arranged, how to conduct yourself in the zendo, sitting postures, and other matters. You are welcome to ask questions during the orientation, which will be conducted by an experienced member of the group.

Sitting Times

Our weekly sitting is held on Sunday night starting at 7.00 pm. It consists of three periods of sitting (*zazen*), separated by short periods of walking meditation (*kinhin*), and concluding with a closing ceremony. Most sitting periods are 30 minutes long and walking practice (*kinhin*) 10 minutes. The evening concludes at about 9.00 pm and sometimes we have tea together afterwards. If you are relatively new to a sitting practice like this, please ask about staying for only a part of the evening in the first few weeks, but in time, you should remain for the whole evening. If you are a more experienced sitter, please plan to stay for the whole evening from the start. Since dharma talks are sometimes given in the last period of the evening, staying to the end allows you to hear these talks.

Location and parking

We rent a space at the Lavalla Centre in Paddington, about 3 km from the CBD. We will provide details of where exactly to find us when you confirm your first attendance. Parking is available on the street outside the centre.

How to dress

It is best to wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing in dark or neutral colours, consisting of long pants or longish skirt, and a shirt or top with sleeves. Avoid wearing shorts, short dresses, tank or string tops, or shirts with printed messages, bright colours or highly patterned designs. Socks are optional. If coming from another activity, you can bring something to change into.

Formalities of sittings

The Zendo (sitting hall) is a formal space and learning zendo formalities is an on-going practice involving mindful attention to what we are doing at each moment. This helps to create an environment in which the sitting practice is supported by watchful attention to

our physical actions. Don't be concerned about making mistakes but learn by watching and following the practice of more established members. Try to be silent and mindful when in the Zendo and also quiet and focused outside when coming and going. Arrive for sitting 5 or 10 minutes early. You can begin sitting as soon as you arrive or wait until the wooden clappers announce the start of sitting (the clappers sound for 5 minutes before the start of sitting on Sunday evenings).

Ways of sitting

In Zen practice, considerable attention is given to sitting posture. You may sit on cushions (*zafu*) in a formal cross-legged position, or in a kneeling posture with use of a kneeling bench or cushions, or in a chair. In all sitting positions, it is important to cultivate an upright but unstrained posture, with straight back and neck. In cross-legged positions, it is best if the knees are anchored on the ground or supported by cushions. The hands form the zazen mudra (left hand cradled over right palm, thumb tips touching). When you first come to sit, we will help you to find a suitable way of sitting if necessary. We have sitting cushions, benches, and chairs you can use at the zendo.

Other principles of sitting

Other than posture, the two cardinal principles of sitting are *silence* and *stillness* and you should try to observe these to the best of your ability. In the case of newcomers, if you need to move during a sitting, that is fine, just do so quietly and mindfully. The body may take time to adjust to this kind of sitting practice and there may be a little discomfort at times, but you should not try to endure high levels of discomfort – just move if you need to. If you would like to receive a brief written guide to commencing zen meditation, please contact us.

About practice

There are various practice techniques recommended for newcomers in Zen, but beginning practice always involves establishing a suitable, stable and correct sitting posture (whether on cushions, a bench or chair), cultivating outward stillness and silence in sitting, and beginning to direct attention to the inner activity of body and mind. There are many books that outline the basic principles of Zen sitting and you can consult these, or you can request a basic set of sitting instructions from us. On your first night or soon after, you will be invited to attend an interview with our teacher, Gregg Howard, to individually discuss a suitable way of practicing. This will occur during the Sunday sitting. Interviews are held in a room near the zendo.

Our Teacher

Gregg Howard, who is a Dharma Successor of Charlotte Joko Beck, is our resident teacher. He offers regular practice interviews for participants, gives dharma talks from time to time, and directs the practice activities of the group.

What commitments do I need to make?

Zen practice requires steady effort. Attendance at group sittings is an important support for your practice - many people find their practice is renewed and strengthened by sitting with others. Also, during Sunday sittings, guidance and encouragement are available through talks given from time to time by the teacher, and through interviews with the teacher. Particularly during your first six months with the group, we suggest you go to interview with the teacher at least once a month, regardless whether you feel you have anything specific to raise. Concerning attendance, we recognise that family and work commitments can affect your level of involvement, but it is best if you can establish some pattern of regular attendance at sittings. Ideally, you should also arrange to spend some time in daily sitting practice (zazen) at home, depending on your circumstances. At first this might be 10-15 minutes; later 30 minutes or more.

About Teaching Interviews

Interview (or *Daisan*) is an instructional method where the student and teacher meet to clarify practice. It is an opportunity for dialogue, clarification, and guidance. You may have a question or matter you wish to raise when you come to interview, concerned with your sitting practice or with your practice in daily life. Interviews are held during Sunday sittings and are quite brief (10-15 minutes on average) so it is necessary to be focused and to the point. When you wish to attend an interview, simply raise your hand when the leader announces interviews at the start of an evening’s sitting. The leader will note this and usher you to interview during the evening. If you are coming to interview for the first time, tell the leader and that person will guide you in.

Cost?

There is no charge for coming to the group, but you are welcome to leave a donation (dana) in the dana box from time to time. After six months of participation, you can ask to become a formal member of the group, which involves payment of an annual membership fee.

Recited Text

At the end of each evening’s sitting a short closing ceremony is held during which we recite a number of texts including the “Practice Principles”. You might wish to cut this off and bring it with you when you first attend. Try to memorise it over time so you can join in reciting from memory.

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Caught in the self-centred dream, only suffering.
Holding to self-centred thoughts, exactly the dream.
Each moment, life as it is, the only teacher.
Being just this moment, compassion’s way.

(3 times)