

Seated Zen Meditation (*Zazen*)



The practice of *zazen*, or “seated meditation,” is fundamental to Zen Buddhism. The term “Zen” itself comes from a Sanskrit word (*dhyana*) that is often translated as “contemplation” or “meditation.” Contrary to popular conception, *zazen* is not practiced solely for the sake of reaching enlightenment; for some schools, the purpose of meditation is to practice being fully present in each moment.

In Japanese temples and monasteries, *zazen* is usually conducted in a meditation hall as a group activity led by a head monk called the *jikijitsu*. Sessions begin and end with the ringing of a bell. One session lasts for “one stick” (*itchu*), the time it takes for a single stick of incense to burn—typically about 40 minutes.

Some aspects of *zazen* practice differ between the Rinzai and Soto schools of Zen. Rinzai practitioners sit around the perimeter of the hall, facing inward, and they focus their minds on a specific image or idea. Soto practitioners usually sit facing the walls, and they strive for a sense of conscious awareness from moment to moment without focusing on any particular object. This is called *shikantaza*, or “just sitting.” Chichibu’s Zen temples are of the Soto school and practice *shikantaza*.

Several temples on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage provide guided experiences of *zazen*, and Hosho-ji (No.32) offers instruction in English and Mandarin. After a brief explanation of how meditation is performed, visitors seat themselves on small cushions called *zafu*. There are several possible sitting positions, including half- and full-lotus, cross-legged, and sitting on the heels of the feet with legs folded underneath (*seiza*). The *seiza* posture forms a triangle between the hips, legs, and back, which relieves stress on the lower back, and is popular with Japanese beginners. Ultimately, it is important to choose a posture in which one can sit comfortably for the duration of the meditation session. Hands are typically held in the lap, with the fingers of the left hand resting in the palm of the right and the tips of the thumbs pointed toward one another to form a triangle. This triangle symbolizes the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddhist teachings), and the Sangha (Buddhist community).

During a meditation session, when everyone is properly seated, the priest will strike a bell three times to signal the start. Eyes are kept half-open, to block out external distractions while remaining awake, and one's gaze should be fixed about 1 meter ahead on the wall or floor. The back should be held straight, but not rigid, and breathing should be light. Focusing on one's breathing can help to clear the mind, but the ideal *shikantaza* is sitting in quiet self-awareness without focusing on any specific thing. The session is over when the priest strikes the bell again.

During the session, the priest leading the meditation may circulate with a flat wooden stick called a *kyosaku*. Traditionally, this stick is used to strike meditators on the shoulders to call attention to poor posture, bring a wandering mind into the present, or even provide a flash of awareness that can aid in reaching enlightenment (*satori*).

During the session, meditators can request the use of the *kyosaku* by placing both palms together in a praying position and bowing. After the *kyosaku* is administered, the meditator bows once more to express gratitude.

Reservations for *zazen* can be made by emailing or calling the temple. Same-day bookings are often possible, but visitors should confirm in advance. A ¥2,000 donation is requested for each participant, and visitors should wear clothing that will allow them to sit comfortably and modestly.



Sutra Copying (*Shakyo*)



Two temples along the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage offer the opportunity for visitors to try copying a Buddhist sutra: Saiko-ji (No.16) and Hosho-ji (No.32). Those who prefer instruction in English or Mandarin should go to Hosho-ji. No reservation is required, but there is a requested donation of ¥1,000 per participant.

Hosho-ji offers three sutras for copying: the *Heart Sutra*, the *Kannon Sutra*, and the *Life-Extending Ten-Phrase Kannon Sutra (Enmei jikku kannongyo)*, a shorter form of the *Kannon Sutra* that has only 42 characters. The *Ten-Phrase Kannon Sutra* is ideal for beginners, and completing a copy usually takes between 30 and 60 minutes.

Visitors are led to a tatami room with the desk and materials prepared. The chosen sutra text is overlaid with a translucent sheet of copying paper. To copy the sutra, trace the characters beneath from top-to-bottom, right-to-left. While it is important to proceed slowly and carefully as a sign of reverence, the copyist's sincerity outweighs the quality of the handwriting. Any mistake should be crossed out and the correct character written beside it in the margin.

The final lines of the sutra contain blank spaces to write in the date, the person to receive the merit, and the copyist's name. Traditionally, upon completion, the copyist reads the sutra aloud, repeating after the priest, who pronounces it a few sounds at a time. Visitors can choose to take their copied sutra home or to dedicate it to the temple. If they choose to dedicate it, the sutra will be placed on the altar with other offerings and ritually burned.

History of Shakyo

The practice of copying sutras (*shakyo*) came to Japan in the sixth century with the introduction of Buddhism. By the Nara period (710–794), sutra-copying had become a popular activity among the aristocracy, the new faith's main adherents. In the days before mechanical printing, the propagation of religious texts relied upon the labor-intensive process of hand-copying. Depending on the skill of the copyist and the length of the chosen sutra, it can take months or even years to fully copy a text. In Japan, the most frequently copied sutra is the Heart Sutra (*Hannya shingyo*), but the Kannon Sutra (*Kannongyo*), Diamond Sutra (*Kongokyo*), Amida Sutra (*Amidakyo*), and Lotus Sutra (*Hokkekyo*) are also common. In the Nara period, Court-sponsored projects to copy the entire corpus of all sutras took place every three and a half years, engaging the efforts of around 10,000 people for a year at a time. Copying sutras helped the religion to spread and was also considered a meritorious act that expressed the piety of the copyist.

In Buddhist doctrine, this "merit" is more than just the sense of having done a good deed; it can affect a person's fate in the cycle of death and rebirth (Sanskrit: *samsara*). Earning merit in the current life is believed to improve the level at which one is born in the next. Being born human, rather than a beast or insect, gives one a better chance of achieving enlightenment and being freed from the cycle of rebirth. The merit earned by *shakyo* can also be transferred, and as sutra copying became popular, it became common practice to commission the copying of sutras for the benefit of a deceased loved one.

The *shakyo* process is highly contemplative. Approaching the act with sincerity and reverence is more important than understanding the meaning of the text. Copyists make sure their hands and clothing are clean, the copying materials are neatly arranged, and the desk is uncluttered.

