

Live Oak Zen Practice Guidelines

Welcome! Here are some guidelines for our practice on Thursday evenings from 7:00 to 8:30 in Room 109.

The Zen practice atmosphere arises from the attitudes of the participants. We share this space not only to advance our own practice, but to support each other. We gain strength in our practice when we sit together. Common courtesy and consistent procedures promote awareness, stillness, and calm. Zen training requires flexibility, not rigid attitudes or actions. Guidelines are intended to support practice.

Sitting periods:

Sitting periods are 20 minutes each. A bell will sound three times to start of the sitting period, and again two times to signal the end of a sitting period. After each of two sitting periods, there is a five minute period of slow, mindful walking meditation,

Stillness (the most important practice principle): Please sit physically still, not moving; breathe in an ordinary manner (not loudly); do not look around or talk.

Quiet and calm: Wear clean, dignified, and comfortable clothing. Silence watches, pagers, or cell phones that make noise.

During periods of sitting and walking meditation:

Keep your eyes down; do not look about as this is distracting for yourself and others. In the Zen method of meditation, we sit erect with head pointing towards the ceiling; eyes are open but cast down at around a 45 degree angle and unfocused or they can be closed; body is relaxed (initially do a body scan); count your in breaths and your out breaths going from 1 to 4 and then resetting back to 1; when a thought comes, gently let it go and return to following your breath. (The objective is not to try to stop having thoughts, it is natural for them to come; rather, it is not to become absorbed by them in a stream of conscious so as to be fully in the present moment.) Other methods of silent meditation such as use of a mantra or being with a feeling are also possible.

Bowing: Start with palms together, hands in front of your mouth, then bow at a 45-degree angle.

We bow to express our respect and appreciation. Based on your personal inclinations, you may bow as follows:

1. At the end of a sitting period after the bell is rung two times.
2. After we stand up after the sitting period, we bow after wooden sticks are clacked for the first time (after they are clacked again, we begin the walking meditation).
3. The sticks are clacked again to signal the end of the walking meditation. At this point, we bow and then return to our seats.
4. At the end of the session after the last clack of the sticks.

Here are some other typical types of bowing at other Zendos, but not currently practiced in ours:

1. After you have taken one step into the room (not as you leave)
2. Before sitting down (first, arrange your sitting area, then while still standing, bow to your seat, then turn away from the seat to bow to all others in the room, then, sit down.
3. As a person next to you first bows (only before the first sitting)

More on bowing: it is up to you to offer whatever meaning you wish to the bows. You may bow to a loved one or to the one who criticizes you, to your pain or to your joy, to the suffering of others or to their happiness. There are many, many meanings that may infuse this simple gesture, in which we place ourselves in a position of humble appreciation and respect. Of course such meanings may be expressed in other ways as well. This is simply our tradition. If you try it for a while, you may discover its deep, mysterious meanings for you alone. Initially, do not give all this bowing much thought – in general, just follow what other people do.

There is no talking during sitting and walking meditations; please signal the practice leader and leave the room for instructions or help that requires talking.

Walking Practice:

Make mindful transitions from sitting to walking, as a continuation of meditation. At the bell to end the period, stand with palms together; at the first clapper, bow, turn to the left, form your left hand into a fist with thumb inside and place right hand over it at chest level. On the second clapper, begin slow walking meditation. During this slow walking meditation, consider getting your breathing to coincide with your footsteps, e.g. inhale as the left foot does its stride, and exhale while the right foot does its stride. (You may use the rest room during the walking meditation period; please wait until the second clapper sounds to signal the beginning of the walking meditation, unless it is an emergency.) A final clapper signals the end of the walking meditation period. At this time, return to your seat at a normal walking pace with the palms of your hands placed together.

Discussion:

At the end of the two periods of sitting and walking meditation, there will be a short reading or talk followed by an informal discussion period. This is a good opportunity to raise any questions you have about practice issues, as well as issues related to practice in everyday life. We finish by repeating the practice principles three times.

For the beginning Zen student:

Welcome to the Zen path of inquiry and transformation! Probably the most difficult part of early practice is simply giving yourself permission to do it. We are all very busy people, with many distractions, responsibilities, and commitments to others around us. However, if we are not grounded in real life, we diminish our ability to provide for ourselves and for others. Our efforts to “help” may cause more damage than good. Without true awareness, we are caught in our self-centered fantasies about ourselves and our relationships, and we miss our real opportunity to

intimately experience life exactly as it is—true liberation. This practice is not easy, but it is consistent and it is sane. As Joko Beck says, it has been around for many hundreds of years, and the kinks have been worked out of it. The changes in our lives are not always obvious; but with intelligent practice, day by day we are being transformed at the cellular level. If we are patient with ourselves, we will see the rewards in our everyday lives. Joko Beck calls this an empirical practice: All we can do is try the experiment, and observe the results.

Zen Practice Support:

The Live Oak Zen Group also has support from the Appamada Zen Group of Austin. Peg Syverson, a teacher at Appamada, is available for any practice discussions that you may have. Appamada is located at 913 East 38th St.; Austin, TX 78705 and on the web at <http://www.appamada.org/>. Peg can be reached at 512 689-5301 or pegsyverson@gmail.com.

Practice verses (Repeat three times):

Four practice principles:

Caught in the self-centered dream, only suffering;

Holding to self-centered thoughts, exactly the dream;

Each moment, life as it is, the only teacher;

Being just this moment, compassion's way.

Verse of the Robe:

Vast is the robe of liberation,

A formless field of benefaction;

Wearing the universal teaching,

I realize the one true nature,

Thus harmonizing all being.

General Order of Service

7:00 to 7:20 Sitting meditation

7:20 to 7:25 Slow walking meditation

7:25 to 7:45 Sitting meditation

7:45 to 7:50 Slow walking meditation

7:50 to 8:30 Reading, discussion,