

Taking The Posture of Zazen

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For pedagogical reasons we have broken down the posture point by point, with a linear progression, but of course the posture of zazen is one in a unified body – in other words: everything is done at the same time.

The zafu

The posture of zazen begins with the cushion! It is indeed essential to have a *zafu* that is sufficiently padded to keep its shape after many hours of zazen practice: so you should make sure that you add kapok as soon as it loses its initial height. It's also possible to regularly add two or three handfuls of kapok.

How do we sit?

Once you have pushed down on the side of the zafu (photo 1) to give it back its original shape, sit down, paying attention to sit directly opposite the wall. If your body is not directly facing the wall, even if it's a little bit crooked, the gaze of



your eyes will tend not to take this information into consideration, and will, despite this, be perpendicular to the wall (photo 2) which means that you will have to turn your chest round to compensate, and the posture won't be correct.

So it's your whole chest which should be parallel to the wall.

Your bent knees should also be

parallel. The distance from the wall should also be taken into consideration: those who are in the first row should not sit less than a metre from the wall so that the gaze of their eyes is at the correct angle (45° – we will come back to this), but also so that they don't hit their heads when they do *gassho!* (photo 3). It's also a question of energy: if you sit too close to the wall, it reflects your own energy back, which risks pushing your body backwards.



Bending your knees, the half lotus position and tilting the pelvis forward



If you don't know how supple your pelvis is, or how widely you can open the adductor muscles in your legs, start with this little test: put your legs in the 'butterfly' position (see photo 4), foot against foot, and look at your knees. The knee that goes down the lowest, the closest to the floor, is the most supple one.

So firstly you should cross the more supple leg over the less supple one. On the one hand this means that the less supple leg isn't immediately twisted, and on the other hand this helps to improve the general suppleness of your legs in the long term. So let's say that you've noticed that your right leg is more supple, you should bend the left leg in front of you, your heel against the *zafu* (see photo 5).



For some people this movement will not cause any problem: their leg will be correctly bent, the top of the foot facing the floor. For these people the advice on tilting the pelvis forward will be useful to help them cross the second leg. But for other people, the knee of this left leg will simply not go down to touch the floor. In this case it's essential to realize that the reason the knee can't go down is nearly always linked to the tilting forward of the pelvis.



To tilt the pelvis forward, you need to place your hand (the left hand in this example, photo 6) in front of the knee that won't go down: the added action of putting the hand on the floor – action which also by-passes the problem which has been wrongly interpreted as a lack of suppleness – will have an immediate impact on the knee by giving the necessary impetus to the pelvis. This roundabout way of doing things using your hand allows you to feel the direct implication of the pelvis in the movement of the knee going down. People who teach the posture shouldn't hesitate to put their hand on the sacrum of the practitioner to make him feel this mobility which has too often been forgotten because of centuries of use of chairs and seats!

However it can happen that the reason the knee won't touch the floor is not because the pelvis is not correctly tilted forward, but that it's a structural problem. In this case it's necessary, in order to contact the posture of zazen, to put a support under the left knee – a small cushion which is a little thicker than the distance between the knee and the floor. Thanks to this small « aid », the suppleness of the adductor muscle will gradually improve to let the knee touch the floor in the end without the support (photo 7).

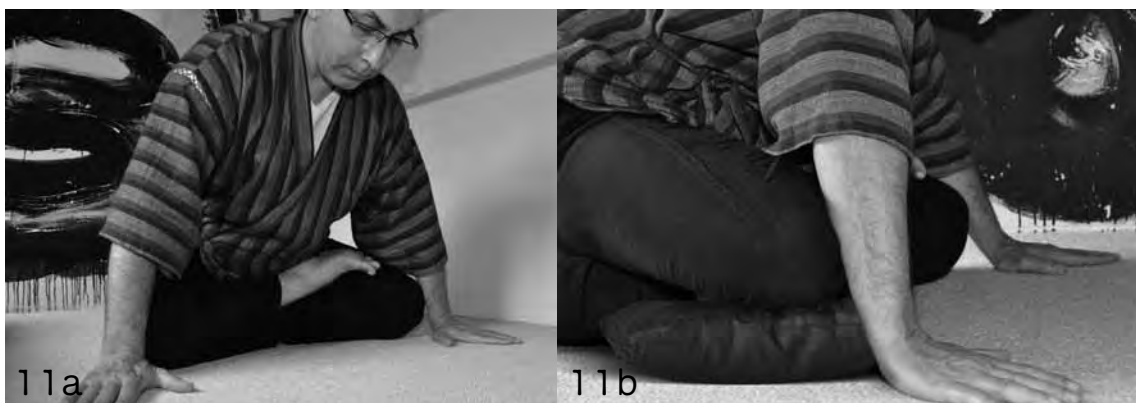


Once the pelvis is correctly tilted forward and the knees touch the floor, with or without a support, you need to move the top of the chest back while keeping the pelvis tilted forward. It's important not to move your whole body back, otherwise, of course your knee will leave the floor. Next you cross the second leg over the bent leg, placing the foot on the thigh of the leg that is bent.

It's interesting to immediately try the most difficult position, but if, nevertheless, you are not able to place your foot on your thigh (photo 8), you can place it on your calf (photo 9) or even on the floor against the tibia (photo 10).



Then you repeat the same movement as before when you positioned the first leg, but this time using both hands: place them on the floor in front of your knees to adjust the tilt of the pelvis and to make the second knee go down to touch the floor (photo 11a). If again, despite the pelvis



being correctly tilted, the knee won't touch the floor, you can also place a support under this knee (photo 11b).



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If the *zafu* slips, which often happens, you just need to tip yourself forward to reposition it under your buttocks, and straighten yourself up slowly, always keeping your pelvis tilted forward (photo 12).

To avoid pushing your pelvis back as you straighten up, you can straighten up in stages moving your hands from the floor up to your knees, then along your thighs until your back is vertical. In this way you

will have the sensation that your knees are fixed firmly on the floor (photos 13). From now on, the posture created by your crossed legs, your knees on the floor and your pelvis tilted forward, is stable and still (photo 14).



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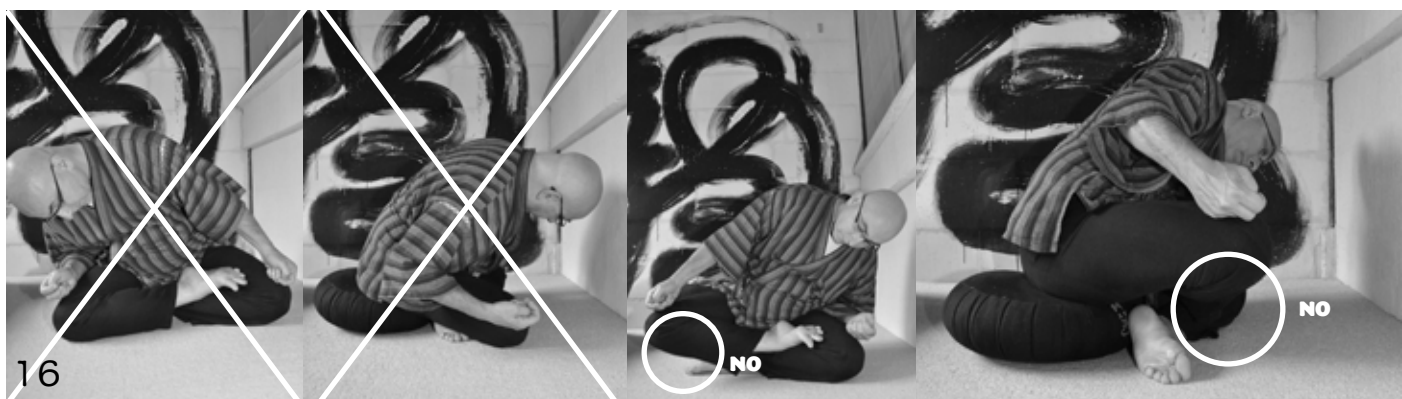


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Verticality of the posture: rocking from side to side

With this 'base', you are now going to build the verticality of the posture beginning by rocking back and forth from side to side: the back of your hands on your knees, your thumbs inside your hands, you rock from side to side (photos 15) – and not tilting forward, which we often see. You rock back and forth from side to side, seven or eight times, until you become stable in the vertical position. You start by rocking in wide arcs which gradually become smaller. Careful not to make your back round (photos 16): the movement comes from the pelvis because you need to stretch the meridians at the top of the hip bone which is on the opposite side of the tilt (photo 17).



Incorrect postures.

Your whole body is stretched laterally: you come back to the middle as you breathe in and you rock sideways as you breathe out: this attention paid to the breathing means that your energy circulates well, this is why the movement shouldn't be too rapid. Once you're still, you do a deep *gassho* (photos 18) which starts from the pelvis, without rounding your back. As you straighten up, you place your hands in the mudra of zazen – *hokai jo-in*.



Positioning your arms and your hands

Your left hand rests on your right hand, being careful that your hands are not too close together which would prevent the thumbs tips from lightly touching. You should place the fingers of your left hand on the fingers of your right hand, finger by finger: and in this way the thumb tips come together naturally. Then you place your hands



against the abdomen: the edge of your hands touch the abdomen, your wrists rest on the base of your thighs, at the level of the groin (photo 19).

It can happen, when you're in the half lotus position, that the difference in position between the two hands – one placed on the heel, the other in mid air – distorts the whole structure in a process of compensation that goes right up to the shoulders (photo 20). In this case, you should think of putting a support under the hand which isn't resting on your heel (photo 21).



Indeed your hands need to be really stable: you should constantly make sure that they don't lose contact with the abdomen because it's under these conditions that your shoulders can really relax, pulled down by the weight of your arms. The opposition between your back being stretched and the weight of your arms, keeps the back of your neck stretched, the relaxation of your arms depends on the spine being correctly stretched: everything is interlinked.

Verticality of the posture: stretching the back of the neck

The next stage in the verticality of the posture is the stretching of the back of the neck.

Everything around this axis, stretched towards the sky, should be relaxed. You don't need to arch your back: if the pelvis is correctly tilted forward, the curve of the back will be correct, you just need to straighten up the chest by pushing your torso forwards and moving your shoulders back. In addition to contributing to your verticality, this action has the effect of stretching the solar plexus.



By pulling your ears back, the back of your neck becomes aligned with your spine. In fact pulling your chin in tends to tense up your throat and activate your salivary glands which increases the need to swallow your saliva.

The only thing left to do is to cast your gaze in front of you:

not too far in front so that the chin doesn't come forward, not too close to you to prevent your head from falling forward. The reference given is an angle of 45° , a distance from the floor of about one meter.



Completing the posture: the importance of your breathing

You now have to concentrate on the breathing and the details of the posture: your eyes are half closed, your face is relaxed, your tongue is placed naturally against your upper teeth, your teeth touch without being clenched, your shoulders are relaxed, the edges of your hands rest against the abdomen. Your thumbs are horizontal, placed over your index fingers (they don't touch your stomach), your fingers are close together, your thumb tips touch with a light pressure. It's important to keep a truly oval shape between your index fingers and thumbs, an oval which is supple and which doesn't tense up into a rectangle.

Concentrate on your breathing, start by breathing in and out two or three times through your mouth, without making a noise, so that you empty your lungs of the carbon dioxide they contain. Then let zazen breathing come, meaning long and deep exhaling right down into the abdomen to the point when the breathing in naturally begins. In other words, the breath out coming naturally to its end, summons up the breath in.

Coming out of the posture

When the bell rings for the end of zazen, you come out of the posture by doing the movements the other way round: first of all a deep gassho tilting the chest forward (photo 24) then you put the back of your hands again on your thighs, your thumbs inside your hands and rock back and forth from side to side, this time starting with small arcs that become wider and wider. The pelvic joint relaxes, and you slowly release your legs, without any abrupt movements.

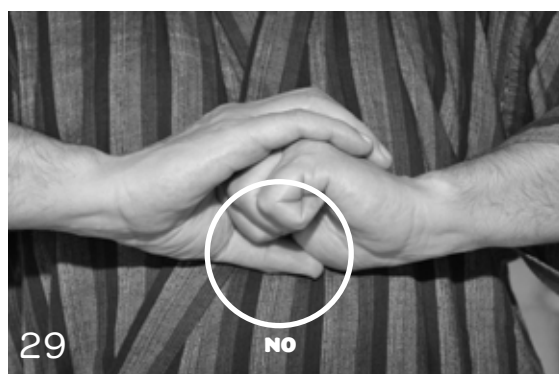


If it's necessary you can massage the energy point which is just below the knee on the outer side of the tibia. But it should be enough just to use your *zafu* as you slowly get up: you push down on the side of the *zafu* making sure you stretch your legs well each time you push down on the *zafu* to relieve the knee joint and to start up the energy circulation in your legs (photos 25). You straighten up and breathe normally several times through your mouth to avoid the dizzy feeling that the change in position can cause, and to not suffer from the effects of low blood pressure.



Kin hin

Once standing, you tightly grip the left thumb in your left hand and you place the base of this thumb – the second phalanx when you start at the thumb tip – under the sternum. This zone of the solar plexus is generally quite tense and this is what you are going to try to stimulate during kin hin. Then you cover the left hand (without grabbing it) with the right hand making sure you keep your fingers close together: there should not be space between your fingers (photos 27 and 28).



Don't hold the fist with the thumb underneath.



the back foot's halfway point, your feet are parallel and sufficiently wide apart to keep a stable posture. Your feet are in general a foot's width apart (photos 30).

Then you move one foot forward. The steps in kin hin are half steps in time with the rhythm of your breathing. The heel of the front foot is placed at

Each time you make a step, from the beginning of the out-breath, you place all the weight of your body on the front leg, while pressing your hands against the sternum and stretching the back of your neck as in zazen.

When you put the weight of your body on the front leg, you strongly press on the base of the big toe against the floor – and more globally on the part of your feet under your toes – (but your toes are relaxed) and you tense the leg muscles right up to the hip. In compensation, the back leg is completely relaxed (it’s only holding its own weight) but make sure that the heel stays on the floor. To feel this relation between pressure and relaxation, you can test your balance by slightly lifting the back leg: this should have no impact on the whole posture.



The nose is vertical to the big toe of the foot in front.

The joint pressure between the hands, the hands against the sternum, and the opposition between the pressure of the front foot against the floor and the top of the head stretched upwards towards the sky, builds, as during zazen, a verticality that you develop as you breathe, paying attention to your body. Make sure that your forearms are parallel to the floor, your elbows are not stuck to your body and your shoulders are back. Your chin is tucked in and the gaze of your eyes is at an angle of 45° in front of you, in other words at about 2 metres, or at the level of the waist

of the person in front of you. So as you breathe out your body is stretched like a bow from the base of your feet to the top of your head. At the end of the out-breath, which is accompanied as always as deep as possible into the abdomen, the in-breathe comes naturally. Then you relax all the pressure, you move one step forward and start to breathe out once again. (photos 31).

At the end of *kin hin*, you put your hands into the *shashu* position (photos 32) as you bow (photo 33) then you go back to your place. You begin the whole process again from the beginning but you change legs – to balance the body and the mind.



Other postures

For people who are unable to assume the posture sitting on a *zafu*, it's possible to sit on a *shogi* (a small stool) or on a chair. With the *shogi* you sit in the *seiza* position (on your knees) the knees on either side of the stool, this will prevent your legs from being crushed by the weight of your body. The upper body is in the same posture as on the *zafu*.



If you are sitting on a chair, you should be careful to sit at the front of the chair and to keep your back straight without having your back against the back of the chair. As the pelvis is not naturally tilted forward, you should make sure that you're sitting on the front of your sitting bones (the bones in your buttocks) which will automatically mean that your pelvis is tilted forward, the knees are about a shoulder's breadth apart and your feet are slightly pointing



outwards. If you feel the edge of the chair too much under your thighs, you should lift your legs up by placing a cover or a cushion under your feet to relieve the pressure on the underside of your thighs. The upper body is in the same posture as on the *zafu* (photos 35).

Good practice.