

Introduction to our way of zen —wholehearted silent sitting

Crystal Springs Zen Sangha practices in the tradition of the Japanese Soto Zen school, as modified and developed by the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center and other teachers in his line of influence.

This westernized way of zen emphasizes wholehearted silent sitting as a path to greater awareness. **When we sit, we notice what is present for us physically and what comes up for us mentally.** And that's pretty much it.

Ours is a pragmatic approach. Without promising any specific benefits or fulfilling any gaining purpose, wholehearted silent sitting allows practitioners to better recognize and accept what actually is going on for them.

To develop clarity and calmness while sitting, practitioners often use **concentration practices**. Such practices can help us to settle into silent sitting by tuning down the noise of judgments, plans, memories, and other forms of distraction or habitual thinking that can get in the way of direct apprehension. These concentration techniques include noticing breathing or other bodily sensations, counting breaths, and labeling or categorizing persistent thoughts.

Primarily, however, we practice wholeheartedness by means of **relaxed attention**: being available to whatever thoughts or feelings arise. Our practice is, after acknowledging those phenomena, to then allow ourselves to let go of any distractions or habitual thinking patterns. We sit with stability, uprightness, and unity in our posture and with our sense gates open, including our eyes.

A few simple instructions can help anyone to practice our way of zen and, with some experimentation, to find what is his or her most comfortable method. Because **there is NO way to sit zazen “incorrectly” or “badly,”** none of us needs to strain for accomplishment or effect. We can just be and, by doing so, better recognize who we are and the ever-changing nature of our world.

Over time, regular practice of wholehearted silent sitting often leads to increased equanimity and reduced suffering, a stronger sense of our shared humanity, and heightened appreciation for the beauty and opportunities in every moment.

& please note:

Our approach does NOT need a religious belief system. Many practitioners find that it supports their practice to formally accept the ethical tenets of Buddhism. However, others do not take that step. Because practicing zen does not require holding specific beliefs, zen practice is compatible with belief in another religion (and many practitioners are believers), yet zen also is just as compatible with atheism or agnosticism. The ceremonies that we follow are mostly mindfulness practices that nod to traditional symbolic forms but are empty of specific sacred meaning.

Our approach does NOT need a specific philosophy of life. Many practitioners find that it supports their practice to study the history of zen, which includes Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Shinto, and other cultural and intellectual influences. However, others find simple sitting sufficient without pursuing additional scholarship.

Our approach does NOT need assumptions about psychology. Many practitioners find that it supports their practice to research, interpret, and predict the effects of zen practice on mental well-being and even to associate those with physiological effects. However, others prefer just to experience mindfulness, rather than to analyze it.

When we talk after and about our sitting practice, we may share thoughts about any of the topics listed above. However, we do so in the spirit of sharing encouraging experiences and insights (and sometimes even debating them). Our goal is not to develop a collective point of view, but rather to listen and speak openly. We do so in the hope of learning more about how we can apply the mindset that we cultivate as sitters to **help us to operate in our daily lives more effectively and with less difficulty and harm.**

In sum, by sticking to our single, basic practice of wholehearted silent sitting, we follow a way of zen that is flexible and open. **This practice allows each of us to find, explore, and benefit from our very own personal way of zen.**