

*An Introduction
to Zen Practice*



*at
Great Plains Zen Center*

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A Publication of
The Great Plains Zen Center
&
Myoshinji—Subtle Mind Temple,
Susan Myoyu Andersen, Roshi, Abbot

Palatine, Illinois

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Introduction to Zen Practice At Great Plains Zen Center

*Trust yourself! You are no other
than the Buddha Way itself to begin with!"*

—Taizan Maezumi, Roshi

We at the Great Plains Zen Center (GPZC) and Myoshinji-Subtle Mind Temple wish to invite you to share in the wisdom and compassion of Zen Buddhism and have prepared this booklet to help get you started. As you begin your practice, you will undoubtedly have questions that are not answered here, so please don't hesitate to ask questions of a senior practitioner or our teacher, Susan Myoyu Andersen, Roshi. Please note that a glossary of some commonly used Japanese terms will be found toward the end of this booklet.

What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is the religion based on the teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha, an Indian who experienced Great Awakening while seated under the Bodhi Tree and who devoted his life to teaching others about 2600 years ago. Though the Buddhist tradition today is vast and its outward expression varies from country to country, it nevertheless is quite consistent in its basic teaching: that all things in the universe are subject to change and that human suffering, dissatisfaction, or the sense that somehow life is unfulfilling or incomplete are all ultimately rooted in self-clinging and the greed, anger and ignorance it engenders. According to the Buddha, such self-clinging can be overcome through the development of the wisdom and compassion innately present in each of us.

What is Zen?

Zen is a centuries-old form of the Buddhist tradition that originated in China and developed into its current forms in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. In the 20th century, Zen spread around the world and is now one of the fastest growing religions in the west. Practically speaking, Zen helps people become more focused, centered, and more receptive. It helps them avoid being blinded by their own preconceptions of themselves and others. Zen can also help people practice another religious tradition more deeply. Though people practice Zen for many reasons, ultimately Zen practice is an expression of our fundamental completeness and wholeness as we are.

What is Zen Practice Like at Great Plains Zen Center?

Regular meditation sessions take place each Sunday at 7:00 PM at the Countryside Unitarian Church, 1025 N. Smith Street, in Palatine, Illinois. Regular practice includes personal instruction from our teacher, Myoyu Andersen, Roshi. Additionally, the Center provides monthly Dharma talks and renewal of vows ceremonies. Other events, such as retreats, workshops, and classes, are listed on our website at www.greatplainszen.org.

The best way to get acquainted with practice at GPZC, is to attend an *Introduction to Zen Workshop*. Workshops are held periodically on Saturday mornings from 8:30 – 11:30 at the Countryside Unitarian Church and are followed by an optional lunch. A donation of \$25 is requested. A list of scheduled workshops and registration forms appears on our website. If you are not able to attend a workshop right away, the information in the rest of this booklet, while not complete in every detail, will give you some practical guidelines for participating in the Sunday evening program.

Zendo Procedures

Entering the Zendo



First, arrive punctually, and dress appropriately. To avoid drawing attention, dress in modest, loose-fitting, dark (preferably black) clothes. Do not wear shorts. Also, please avoid conspicuous jewelry and strong perfumes or colognes.

Second, observe silence in the zendo at all times unless it is absolutely necessary to speak.

When entering the zendo, hold your hands in *shashu*. Select a cushion or *zafu* to sit on and then walk along the front edge of the sitting mats or *zabutons* to your seat. Bow, in *gassho*, toward your seat and then away from your seat before sitting down.

Correct Sitting Posture

Sit on the front third of the *zafu* with your knees touching the mat. Make sure you are not sitting on your tailbone. You can check this by pressing your hips forward at the base of your spine. After composing your legs, gently rock left and right, in smaller and smaller arcs, until your spine is straight. Tuck in your chin and then straighten your spine by imagining you are pressing the ceiling up with the top of your head and then relaxing. Lightly press your tongue against the upper palate. Your right hand should be placed palm up against your abdomen. The fingers of your left hand (also palm up), should rest upon the fingers of the right, the tips of your thumbs lightly touching each other, forming an oval. Your whole body should now be in a very stable pyramid or tripod form. Look straight ahead and then lower your gaze to four feet or so in front of you, letting your eyes go out of focus. Draw a deep “clearing breath,” and slowly release it. After that, just breathe naturally through your nose.

Though sitting on the floor in one of the traditional lotus postures is recommended because it is very stable, GPZC also provides chairs for those who, because of past injuries or other physical conditions, cannot maintain a seated position on the floor. If you must use a chair, place it directly on the *zabuton*.

You will find a convenient posture checklist on the inside of the back cover of this booklet.



Beginning and Ending Zazen

A bell is sounded three times to signal the beginning of the first meditation period, which lasts 30 minutes. The end of the seated meditation period and the beginning of the following walking meditation period, or *kinhin*, is signaled by two rings of the bell. Upon hearing this, bow in *gassho*, and then slowly stand up, talking care not to lose your balance, particularly if your feet feel numb. When standing, bow toward your seat, then turn clockwise and stand facing away from your seat, keeping hands in *gassho*.

Walking Meditation, or Kinhin

You will next hear a clap of the woodblocks. On this signal, make a standing bow and then turn to your left. You will immediately hear a second clap of the woodblocks that is your signal to change your hand position from gassho to shashu. (Shashu is used whenever moving about the zendo.)

Begin to walk *very* slowly, taking a small half-step with each breath. This slow walking meditation will continue for about seven minutes. Either continue to follow your breath or just absorb yourself in the activity of walking. You will then hear another clap of the woodblocks. On this signal, draw your feet together, make a quick bow with hands still in shashu, and then go on walking—but this time at a normal pace. During kinhin is when, if necessary, you may bow out of the zendo to go and use the bathroom. When returning to the zendo, look for your place in the kinhin line, make a quick bow with hands in gassho, then rejoin the line and continue to walk around the zendo with hands in shashu.

You will hear a fourth and final clap of the woodblocks that is your signal to place your hands in gassho, and to continue walking around the zendo until you arrive again at your seat. As soon as you arrive at your seat, bow toward it, then turn away from your seat with hands still in gassho. You will hear a ring of the bell that is your signal to bow and then to be re-seated. Adopt your posture as before. The beginning of the second meditation period will be signaled with three rings of the bell.

At the end of the second period, the bell will be struck, then stopped with the striker, then struck again. This is the signal to begin chanting the Four Bodhisattva Vows. The Vows are chanted three times in a row with hands in gassho.

*Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them.
Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.
The Dharmas are boundless; I vow to master them.
The Buddha Way is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it.*

Three Bows

Next, a series of quickening rings on the small bell is your signal to stand at the rear of the zabuton (move zafu off to the side), facing the front with hands in gassho in preparation for three full bows. A full bow begins the same way as a standing gassho. However, after bending slightly at the waist, go down on your knees. Then place your forehead on the floor, with your hands palm up beside your head. Lift your hands up just above the level of your ears (keeping your palms flat and level) and then put them down again, neither too quickly nor too

slowly. Raise your body and then stand up with hands back in gassho. Each of three full bows is signaled by successive rings on the bell.

On the next ring, make a half bow with hands in gassho toward the altar. And finally, on the last ring of the bell, place your hands in shashu and make a bow away from your seat.

Exiting the Zendo

It is customary, at this point, to kneel down in front of your zabuton and to sweep it off with your hands, plump up your zafu, and place the zafu in the very center of the zabuton.

When leaving the zendo, walk along the front edge of the zabutons with your hands in shashu position. At the end of the zendo, turn clockwise and make a half-bow toward the altar with hands in gassho. The practice session is now over.

You probably will not be able to remember all the foregoing details on your first visits to GPZC. That is fine. Just do your best, observe what seasoned practitioners do, and ask plenty of questions when the time is right. In addition to the assistance this booklet and others in the Sangha can provide you, GPZC offers periodic classes in zendo procedures will help you internalize the beautiful flow and rhythm of our practice. To find out when such classes are being held, just check our website at www.greatplainszen.org.

***Dokusan*, or Interview with the Teacher**

Dokusan (individual face-to-face teaching) is usually conducted during the second of the two meditation periods described above and the procedure for going into the dokusan room is as follows:

During the second meditation period, the attendant will announce that the dokusan line is open. Though dokusan is optional, you are strongly encouraged to participate. So, as soon as the attendant has announced that the line is open, get up carefully, bringing your zafu with you. Get in line with the other students near the dokusan room.

When the teacher is ready to receive a student, she will ring a handbell. If you are next in line, you will respond to the teacher's bell by striking a small bell twice. Then get up and go to the dokusan room. Make a full bow alongside the student who is leaving the dokusan room. The student leaving should close the

door behind you. (Dokusan is considered private and confidential, and you should avoid discussing the details of your dokusans with other students.) Step toward Roshi until you are before the student's zabuton, then make another full bow and sit down facing the teacher. Your knees should come right up to the edge of the zabuton that abuts the teacher's zabuton.

At this point, you should initiate the conversation by saying, "My name is such-and-such, and my practice is counting my breaths/watching my breath/shikantaza." Even students who have had a long relationship with the teacher use this statement, repeating their names and indicating what type of practice they are following. You should take this opportunity to ask any questions relating to posture, meditation, sitting at home, etc.. Dokusan is not a time, however, for small talk or to discuss things that are not pertinent to your practice.

Listen intently to the teacher's remarks concerning practice. It is rare to encounter the true teaching and instruction should be considered most valuable—even if at first you do not understand what you're being told.

It is important to remember that it is the teacher, not the student, who determines when the interview is over by ringing the handbell. Even if you are in the middle of a sentence, the handbell is your signal to stop talking, gassho, stand and retreat backwards to the door, where the next student will be momentarily arriving. Open the door for the next student. And, just as you did when you entered, perform a full bow alongside the new student. The new student will step forward into the interview room; you should step out, closing the door behind you.

Return to your seat in the zendo. Make a half-bow toward your cushion, another half-bow facing away from your cushion, and finally resume your seated position and meditate until the period is over.

Establishing a Home Practice

While sitting once or twice a week with the Sangha is an excellent and necessary part of Zen practice, our spiritual work really requires a *daily* effort. Indeed, it is more important to sit every day, even if you can only devote ten minutes to that effort, than to sit for longer periods only occasionally.

At home it is good to designate a room or at least a corner of a room as a meditation space. Purchasing your own zabuton and zafu, as well as items for a

small altar can help provide the physical and psychological space in your life to incorporate the practice.

Any small table will serve for your altar. On it, you should place a candle, a small vase of fresh flowers, a water cup, and an incense bowl with the sand, rice, or ash in which to burn sticks of incense. Most altars, of course, also have a Buddha image as well, but if you wish, you may substitute a beautiful rock or other item that is suggestive of your spiritual practice.

Each of these things has symbolic value that helps us connect to our practice tradition and to our own deeper sense of gratitude, reverence, generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

The Buddha image reminds us of the awakening of wisdom. The candle, which is placed on the right, represents the light of wisdom. The fresh flowers, which go on the left the same distance from the Buddha image as the candle, represent impermanence. The incense that is burned represents purity. As shown in the picture, place the incense burner in the front of the altar. Finally, the water cup, which should be kept about half-full of water, is a symbolic gesture of giving to the “hungry ghosts,” those sentient beings who suffer with worldly “thirsts” they can never satisfy. (We ourselves are hungry ghosts most of the time.) The cup is raised and placed before the Buddha image.



Keeping your meditation room or area clean, orderly, and uncluttered will help support consistent and orderly practice.

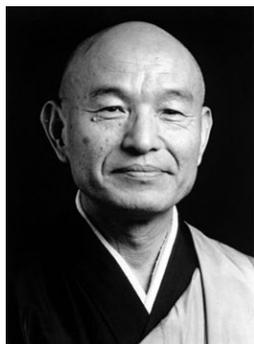


Showing Respect

It is important to recognize and appreciate the many others who have preceded us on the path of Zen as well as those who practice along side of us. It is therefore appropriate to treat our teachers and other Sangha members with respect, even when we disagree. Trust in our teachers, practice community, and

ourselves makes the difference between a genuine commitment to the dharma and one that holds back and never fully ripens.

The Lineage of Masters



Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi (1931-1995)

The Great Plains Zen Center / Myoshinji-Subtle Mind Temple is a member organization of the White Plum Asanga, which consists of Dharma heirs of Hakuun Taizan Maezumi, Roshi. Maezumi Roshi trained under a number of eminent masters, in both the Soto and Rinzai sects, the two major schools of Zen Buddhism in Japan. He established temples in the United States and Europe and is the founder of GPZC.

Maezumi Roshi completed his Soto monk's training at Sojiji monastery, one of the two main Soto monasteries in Japan. In 1955, he received Dharma Transmission from his father. He later received approval (Inka) from both Hakuun Yasutani Roshi and Koryu Osaka Roshi (a lay Rinzai teacher), thus becoming a Master in three Zen lineages, a rarely encountered achievement.

Below, you find some details about his teachers.

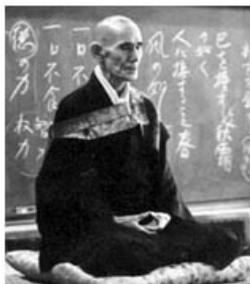
Baian Hakujuun Kuroda Roshi (1898-1978)

Maezumi Roshi's father, Baian Hakujuun Kuroda Roshi, was head of the Soto Sect Supreme Court and one of the leading figures of Japanese Soto Zen.



Hakuun Ryoko Yasutani Roshi (1885-1973)

As a student of Harada Daiun Sogaku Roshi, Yasutani Roshi took what he considered the strengths of the Soto and Rinzai sects and created a new lineage of Zen, the Fellowship of the Three Treasures.



Koryu Osaka Roshi (1901-1987)

Koryu Roshi was a Rinzai teacher who emphasized lay practice. Koryu Roshi's teacher, Joko Roshi, empowered him to remain a lay teacher and this emphasis on the validity and importance of lay practice continues at GPZC today.



Who is GPZC's Guiding Teacher?



Susan Myoyu Andersen, abbot of Great Plains Zen Center (GPZC), studied for over twenty years with [Taizan Maezumi Roshi](#) at the [Zen Center of Los Angeles](#). In 1978, she was ordained as a Buddhist monk and in 1995 received *shiho* (Dharma transmission), authorizing her to become a Zen teacher. Myoyu Andersen received the title of *Roshi* from the [White Plum Asanga](#), an organization consisting of Dharma heirs of Maezumi Roshi and their successors.

Myoyu Roshi is also the mother of two children. In addition to her responsibilities as a mother and as the spiritual director of GPZC, she works as an occupational therapist for children with developmental disabilities.

Membership

Becoming a member of GPZC carries with it both practical and spiritual benefits. Because the center has fixed monthly expenses (church rental, mortgage, utilities and maintenance costs at Myoshinji, etc.), it is dependent on its members' donations to meet those expenses. Thus members at all levels help

sustain the center and perpetuate the spread of the Buddha-Dharma by submitting their dues on a regular basis.

There are three levels of membership in the *Sangha* of the Great Plains Zen Center.

Practicing Membership (\$50 per month)

This level of membership is for anyone who will be practicing zazen with the Sangha on a regular, weekly basis. Practicing members receive a discounted rate for sesshin and Summer Ango retreats.

Affiliate Membership (\$30 per month)

This level is for Sangha members who live at a greater distance from the regular sittings in Palatine, and who are not able to attend on a regular basis.

Friend of Great Plains Zen Center (Any annual contribution)

This level is for anyone who wishes to support the Zen Center and receive newsletters and special communications, but attends Zen Center activities infrequently.

To become a member, you will need to attend an Introduction to Zen Workshop and to submit a membership petition. The workshops are listed on our website at www.greatplainszen.org/membership. Your dues can then be paid by mailing a check to

Great Plains Zen Center
W7762 Falk Rd.
Monroe, WI 53566

You may also pay by credit or debit card by simply going to our membership page on the web at www.greatplainszen.org/membership. A receipt for dues and donations will be mailed to each member and donor every January for tax reporting purposes.

Myoshinji

Located in rural Green County, Wisconsin, Myoshinji (Subtle Mind Temple) is our newly acquired residential training center. Situated on approximately 3 acres, Myoshinji overlooks meadows and trees, pathways, and a Jizo garden.

At the present time, the living quarters have been remodeled and updated to comfortably accommodate sesshin and zazen participants. Handicapped access and accommodations have also been added and plans to build raised gardens and a vastly expanded training hall (zendo) are in the works.

We hope you will join us in one of our many retreats this year at Myoshinji. If you think you may be interested, please see our calendar of events at www.greatplainszen.org.



Myoshinji
W7762 Falk Rd.
Monroe, Wisconsin 53566
(608) 325-6248

Glossary

Ango. “Dwelling in Peace”; intensive training period usually lasting three months.

Bodhisattva. Literally “Enlightened Being.” Bodhisattvas compassionately put helping others to be enlightened ahead of their own enlightenment.

Dokusan. Personal interview/instruction with a Zen master.

Dharma. The Teaching of the Buddha, or more generally, the universal law or truth.

Gassho. Hand position with the palms of the hands pressed together; the tips of the fingertips should be about one hand’s width from the lips. No space between the hands means no space between our life and the life of the Buddha.

Kinhin. Walking meditation. The mind is absorbed in the activity of walking.

Koan. Literally “public document.” In Zen tradition, a record of a short dialogue or encounter between a student and teacher given by a teacher to help students go beyond discriminative, conceptual understanding to a more direct, experiential wisdom.

Mudra. Hand gesture or position. The position of the hands changes depending on what type of meditation or activity is being carried out.

Roshi. Literally “old teacher.” Honorific title bestowed on elder Zen master/teacher. It is customary to address the teacher simply as “Roshi.”

Sangha. Congregation of Buddhist practitioners, or more generally, the harmony of the Buddha and Dharma treasures.

Seiza. A traditional Japanese sitting posture in which one sits on one’s shin’s, knees together, ankles under the buttocks.

Sesshin. Literally “Gathering of Mind.” An extended and intensive meditation retreat, varying in length from two or three days to one week.

Shakyamuni. “Sage of the Shakya clan.” An epithet for the historical Buddha, Siddhatta Guatama

Shashu. Common *mudra* for *kinhin*. Formed by making a fist with the left hand, thumb inside. The fist is held over the heart, and the right hand is held over the left. Forearms are parallel with the floor.

Shikantaza. “Just sitting.” Refers to zazen without any specific focus or technique and is characterized by intense non-dual awareness.

Shiho. Dharma transmission. The act by which a master affirms that a students’ training is complete and that he or she is ready to begin to teach the Dharma independently.

Soto. Zen lineage founded in China by Masters Tung-shan Liang-chieh (Tozan Ryokai) and Ts’ao-shan Pen-chi (Sozan Honjaku) and established in Japan by Zen Masters Dogen Kigen and Keizan Jokin.

Teisho. Zen lecture given by a Roshi (elder Zen teacher).

Zabuton. Large square, padded mat on which the *zafu* (meditation cushion) is placed.

Zafu. Small circular cushion upon which practitioners sit when meditating.

Zazen. Literally, “seated Zen.” Because there is no object of meditation in zazen, it is more appropriately and commonly translated as “sitting.”

Zen. Japanese form of the Sanskrit “dhyana,” (Chinese ch’an) referring to the school of those who practice zazen. The Zen school of Buddhism originated in the 6th century in ancient China and spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Zendo. The Zen training hall.

Zenji. “Zen master.” A title bestowed upon the most revered masters.

Contact Information

Please feel free to contact us at any time.

(608) 325-6248
gpzc@greatplainszen.org
Great Plains Zen Center
W7762 Falk Rd.
Monroe, WI 53566

Keep up with events at Great Plains by checking out our website at

<http://www.greatplainszen.org>

Zazen Posture Checklist

- √ Sit on the front third of your zafu.
- √ Sit on your “sitting bones,” not on your tailbone.
- √ Straighten your spine by “pressing the ceiling up” with the crown of your head.
- √ Align your nose with your navel.
- √ Ears should be in line with your shoulders.
- √ Press your tongue lightly against the upper palate.
- √ Hands should be in the universal mudra, left hand on top of the right hand, palms up, thumb-tips lightly touching and gently pressed against your abdomen.
- √ Look straight ahead and then lower your gaze to about four feet in front of you.
- √ After one or two deep clearing breaths, breathe normally through your nose.