

MEDITATION

As used in the Prison Program of FREEING THE HUMAN SPIRIT

There are many paths in life's spiritual journey as far as meditation is concerned, and we are generally free to make our own choice according to our needs and the offerings of the fruits of the various kinds of meditation.

In FTTHS, we use a very simple Zen meditation, called Shikantaza. The Japanese word means 'just sitting'. This is what happens, when the sitter has settled down and the body and mind both become silent. At this point, all of us, inmates included, often experience some of the tiny spiritual benefits, which in turn, act as points of change in our lives. Those accompanying prisoners' on their spiritual journey to healing and hope, must maintain great care as far as both yoga and meditation are concerned, since they are each capable of producing bad effects as well, on either the body or mind or both.

This paper deals with principally with meditation. We in the FTTHS program, work with the three 'requisites which cover its concerns:

First, meditation must be safe. The psyche of the prisoner is both unknown and insecure, so the journey into silence must be gradual and non-abrasive.

Secondly, our meditation must be therapeutic. The ultimate goal of the Canadian Correctional Institutes is not punitive, but provides healing and rehabilitation.

And thirdly, meditation must be experiential. When the first two elements are observed, there will come a point when the practitioner experiences some of the promised fruit. In their letters, inmates will speak of anger control, or times of less tension, or as they frequently say, they stop telling lies.

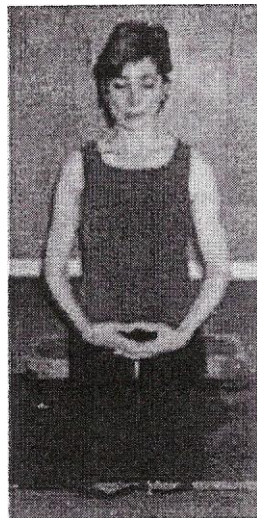
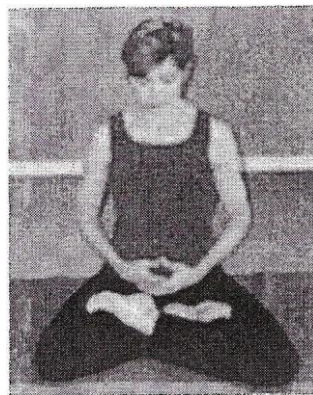
FTTHS trains 2 people to give each prison class. The first consists in offering yoga or yoga-based calisthenics as a class-starter. This helps inmates' bodies calm down to prepare for meditation, and it helps the various physical tensions to relax, to become alert, and to function normally. We endeavor to find certified yoga teachers to lead this part of the class, since the ancient discipline of yoga has proved itself for centuries as contributing to the welfare of human beings. It is also an excellent preparation for meditation. If certified teachers are not available, we train a local volunteer to lead the calisthenics (it is most

often the person leading the prison meditation class), and we call them "yoga leaders" .

The meditation program was set up by the founder of FTHS, Sister Elaine MacInnes and is based on her 45-year connection with the Sanbo Kyodan Zen group in Kamakura Japan. She also founded a Zendo (Meditation Hall) in Toronto~ where some of the FTHS meditation teachers are trained. A confirmed and fully experienced Zen meditation teacher is called a Roshi (literally an old teacher), and the Charity sees that a Roshi is always available for consultation if needed.

We do not offer Traditional Zen, using koans and teisho in prison. The older and more simple Zen, Shikantaza, is used. Shikantaza simply means 'just sitting', and requires a silent body and silent mind. The body position is of enormous importance. We teach 6 possibilities:

- 1 full lotus
- 2 half lotus (left foot on right thigh) 3
- half-lotus (right foot on left thigh) 4
- Burmese
- 5 Seiza
- 6 Kneeling bench

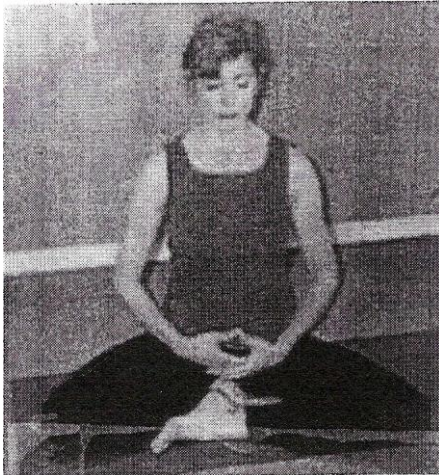


Full-lotus: Seen on the far left.

Kneeler: Seen on the near left. Tuck a rectangular low bench under the thighs and buttocks.



Half-Lotus: An easier position for beginners: Stretch your legs out front. Bend your right knee and tuck your right foot in close to your body. Take your left foot in your right hand and push your left knee to the floor. Then place your left foot on your right thigh. Check that you are sitting straight on the cushion. You can also start on the other side by bending your left knee and following these instructions in reverse.



Burmese: Sit on the front half of the cushion with your legs out in front. Bend your knees and allow your legs to lie parallel. Keep your back straight, with the top of your head pointed to the ceiling, chest bone held high, and shoulders dropped as low as possible. Keep your hands open, resting wrists on thighs, and your left hand placed in your right with your middle knuckles touching. Allow your thumb tips to meet and pull them towards your body to form an oval. Keep your mouth closed, and don't clench your teeth. Rest your tongue behind your upper teeth (to control saliva flow). Lower your eyes to a spot about one metre in front of your nose.



Seiza: Seen on the left. Sit in a kneeling position on two zafus (5" thick, circular, densely filled, Japanese sitting cushions) or regular cushions.

Sit the way you can. To keep your body still and steady, make a tripod with your knees and buttocks. If your knees do not reach the floor, then let them rest on another cushion or pad. Keep your spine straight and your chest bone up. When your legs are in place, lean forward once, and with the hands, pull the fleshy part of your buttocks out and back. Then straighten up. Always try to let go of tension.

Hopefully, a quiet body is gradually attained in the yoga asanas preceding meditation. To help people attain a quiet mind, 4 steps are offered in Shikantaza. In presenting our program, we offer the possibility of a 4 or 8 week plan for the raw beginner, if the teacher/leader thinks it wise. (This is often impossible in Detention Centers where there may be an entirely new set of inmates at each class.)

The four steps are as follows:

1. Sitting in the prescribed position, and being one with the breath, the meditator counts each inhalation (1,3,5,7,9) and each exhalation (2,4,6,8,10), for 10 minutes. This is followed by a 5-minute walking- breath-counting meditation. Then another 10 minute sit, another 5-minute walk, and a last 10 minute sit. (The 10-minute sit is slowly increased until it reaches the 20 or 25 minute length.)
2. The breathing pattern is changed to counting only the inhalations up to 10, and then returning to one
- 3 the breathing pattern is changed to counting only the exhalations.
- 4 the breathing pattern is changed and there is no counting, just be-ing each inhalation, each exhalation.

Once this program has been completed, the meditation teacher/leader just leads the sitters into the proper body position (after a while words are not needed for this adjustment), and in a quiet voice take the inmates through 3 deep breaths, and finally suggests everyone just breathe normally, with the mind right into the breath. The mind and the breath are not two; they are one, just like a drop of water entering a puddle. (I repeat rather often the short Zen saying, "The joy of the rain-drop is to enter the ocean.")

Because Shikantaza can lead to experience, it is important that our teachers and leaders understand that this involves coming to a deeper state of consciousness. The process can be risky with anyone if the teacher/leader is negligent about possible changes, and if the sitter does not adhere to the method with absolute determination. Also, the probable vulnerability of inmates' psyche marks them out as especial potential victims. We must guard against such a happening in their meditation periods. Therefore, for one reason or another, we warn all in

meditation, that there must NOT be an object presented to the psyche at any time.

Why? Well, first of all, an object disregards the ultimate goal of Shikantaza, which is to experience one's own Nature. We cannot come to this point by means of an object. To create an object is to make into two, what is in reality, just one. So, an object is a distraction for all of us, but for a vulnerable prisoner (sex offender) it is much more. For them an object-centered meditation is just another opportunity to indulge the very devil they are trying to banish.

Secondly, another goal of meditation, is participating in the world of Be-ing. This point is more subtle, but the very basis for Buddhism. Be-ing is a verb, and has to do with life and life-ing. Some oriental disciplines call it our Life force. It is certainly 'power', a Sacred Power, and sitting with a silent body and mind is harnessing that power to appropriate use. We all know that the Japanese martial arts are the product of that power point (as opposed to an over-active ego). I sometimes relate of an occasion of playing the violin for Yamada Roshi, who happily exclaimed, "You have finally let go and allowed 'It' to take over."

Neither the meditation leader nor the sitter can do anything active about getting that power harnessed. It is given interiorly, and gratuitously. Dogen says although we can do a lot by ourselves; we ultimately need a little help from beyond.

It is a long slow process, and as teachers, we must encourage the sitters at all times. As practitioners, we may not be aware of each little step forward. It has been my happy experience that inmates usually are more attuned than those of us outside, to these little changes. Our progress seems to leap ahead a bit, which keeps us encouraged, but at the same time there can be weeks and months of practice where nothing seems to happen. I have often thought that the prisoner is more determined and more watchful for signs of progress. The files of the PRISON PHOENIX TRUST are full of testimonials, which inmates have written about their points of change.

Sitting with others provides a great incentive to keep going and not give up during arid periods. Rising a bit early in the morning for meditation, is also a bonus-time, because jails are usually noisy places, and prisoners often rise

before the noise begins for the day, and do their yoga and meditation in the early quiet.

I have been teaching Shikantaza to inmates for over 20 years, and have not had a case of anyone coming to the full experience of seeing one's Nature. So it would seem that the chance of one of our sitters coming to that experience does not warrant a lot of teaching precaution. But since it is not impossible to happen, we always state that every one of the FTHS teachers/leaders should have recourse to a Roshi for consultation, should anyone in the class have a deep explosive experience.

Because we have to be responsible for the content of the teaching done in our program, we allow only Shikantaza in our meditation program. We designate as 'teacher' those who have had the experience of their Nature confirmed by a Roshi or a legitimate teacher. Since they form an insufficient number, we also appoint meditation practitioners as 'leaders' in our prison program. They are expected to report to one of our 'teachers' or to the Roshi, should a question arise beyond their own experience.

At the moment, the majority of the prisons we work in are either detention centers or short-term facilities. We have an 8-week program for beginners, but often our meditation instructors do not see the inmate for that long a period or even 4 weeks, if we cut the program in half. In such cases, it seems wisest to teach a simple breath-counting exercise, usually 1 for each in & out breath, then 2 per breath and finally 3 per breath. Encourage the sitter to try not using the counting as soon as possible, but always to come back to it, if distractions take over.

Instructors in long-term prisons can of course start with the 8-week program, and then advance to Shikantaza. Remember that the practice itself brings its own empowerment and reward. When a prisoner comes to a class and reports that he has been able to control his anger on 2 or occasions, then everyone can be sure the process is working.

Now a few words about SHIKANT AZA

pronounced SHEE-KAHN-TAH-ZAH (there are no accents)

Shikantaza is a type of Zen meditation that does not use koans or teisho. The Japanese word means 'just sitting' ... "shika" is 'just' or 'only', 'ta' means

'hitting' in the sense of 'hitting the mark right on' ... and 'za' points to the body position, which is sitting on the floor in a lotus position.

Now let us look at those 3 Japanese kanji. 'Shika' has more than "just" as its meaning. When the Japanese want to point directly and exclusively, they say 'such and such means 'only this'. It is an under-lining, of special reference. Another articulation is 'nothing but this' or 'nothing other than this'. In translations of Yamada Roshi's teisho, we often come across the phrase 'nothing else but ... ' So in a cultural or language sense, it is usually used when something important is going to be said.

'ta' is 'hitting'. This kanji is a bit more subtle, and rarely used in Japanese, but it reinforces the goal of sitting in meditation, namely, to come to experience. For that we must 'hit the mark' indeed, 'hit IT right on'. So the effect of the type of meditation we are learning is to hit the mark right on.

"za" as we know, points to the body position, and is translated as 'sitting', which refers to the Oriental way of sitting on the floor or ground. (There is another kanji used for sitting, as our western way of sitting on a chair, 'koshikakeru' which literally is 'to hang one's hips on'). ZA is used in the proper word for Zen, "zazen", and points to the lotus position, which we assume when sitting on our cushions.

In our stream of Zen, the Sanbo Kyodan, we state our goal as the experience of Shakyamuni, through the dharma gate of Dogen Zenji. Dogen is the Japanese sage par excellence, who lived from about 1200 to 1250. Of royal blood, and a brilliant and sensitive mind, he received the best education that could be obtained in his day, from the Buddhist monks on Mount Hiei overlooking Kyoto. On his mother's deathbed, she advised him to become a monk, and at her funeral when he was 7, he was gifted with some kind of an insight whilst gazing at the incense smoke rising from her bier. He eventually completed his religious studies on that famous mountain, and desiring more than anything to devote himself to meditation, he journeyed to China, where Buddhism was in full bloom. After a 2-year search, Dogen found the teacher he wanted, and came to a deep experience.

His return to Japan six years later was very much anticipated by the Japanese, both lay and religious. It is said that when his boat docked, there was a great crowd to welcome him, clamoring to know what he had learned of Buddhism (still a rather new religion in Japan). He replied, "My nose is still vertical, my

eyes are still horizontal, and there is not a smell of Buddhism about me." I think this story is very important for non-Japanese, non-Asians, and nonBuddhists to remember when they try to place our Zen meditation in context. Dogen is credited for bringing Soto Zen to Japan. Shikantaza is the type of meditation ~hat Dogen Zenji particularly recommends. He has written volumes in its praise, and written simply as well.

Dogen's Shobogenzo gives abundant instructions. It also states, 'just assume the lotus position' ... 'sit like a mountain' ... and 'put the breath gently in the nose.' Let us use those simple ordinances for our consideration and practice today. When I studied Zen under Yamada Koun Roshi, he would say over and over again, there is nothing special about Zen. When you can say that from your own heart, your sitting is maturing.

First we adjust our sitting position as near as possible to the traditional lotus posture. Our Website offers 5 other easier positions. In a prison class, the yoga instructor leads the sitters into the opening breaths, and after that the meditation instructor carries through, as simply as possible into the silence of no thinking, no remembering, no feeling, no planning, no visualizing. We maintain this silence as long as possible. Our goal is to sit for 25 minutes. This is followed by a 5-minute walking meditation called kinhin.

It goes without saying that the class time is set by the prison authorities, and we do our best to give advanced classes equal time to yoga and meditation. But we start beginners with longer periods of bodywork, and then on to meditation.

Just what IS meditation? How can it be defined? We say that Shikantaza meditation is silencing the body and silencing the mind, and using the ONENESS of breathing to open up the possibility of the sitters coming to a deep state of consciousness. This brings with it, an experience of one's own Nature, the deepest longing in the human heart. Shikantaza can be trusted to build its own securities whilst this process is going on, and is therefore always referred to as being safe. The practice is one of the most profound journeys we can make as human beings. The process must not be meddled with. The teaching is very simple with no complexities, as long as the stated discipline is maintained. FTHS expects its yoga and meditation instructors to show respect & humility towards the goal of their prison work. And the most profound utterance after that satisfying experience was made by my teacher, who said simply "My teachers have not deceived me."