

# *Your Place of Meditation.*

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*The means of training are thousandfold,  
but pure meditation must be done.<sup>1</sup>*

Although meditation can be done everywhere, it is very helpful to have a place set aside in your home for doing formal meditation. In monasteries, the meditation and ceremony halls are decorated carefully and beautifully to help strengthen faith in what they represent—the beauty inherent in all existence, the Eternal (Buddha Nature) which is found within ourselves and all things. They are kept neat and clean and treated with great respect. In setting up your own sitting place, you can keep these attitudes in mind; for in doing so, you are encouraged to believe that there is something beautiful within yourself and all things, something that is worthy of care and respect.

## **Setting up an altar and meditation room.**

Keep in mind that you want to make the place in which you do formal meditation the least distracting and most conducive to meditation as possible. The ideal is to have a quiet room in your home that is used only for meditation. If this is not possible, a part of a room that will not be used for anything else during your meditation periods—a corner of your bedroom or living room, for example—will work fine. It is not always possible to find a place that is completely quiet: you may hear traffic, a dog barking occasionally, people walking by. You can learn to meditate with a certain amount of noise; however, you want to avoid being around

such things as television, music or loud talking, which can be very distracting especially to someone new to meditation.

A small altar, as a reminder of the Eternal and one's purpose for training, is often placed in the meditation room or near one's sitting place. The altar itself can be a small table, a wall-mounted shelf or a specially-made altar cabinet. A statue or picture of a Buddha or some aspect of the Eternal, such as great compassion (Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva), great love (Samantabhadra Bodhisattva) or great wisdom (Manjusri Bodhisattva) is placed in the center at the back. To symbolize the blossoming of enlightenment, flowers are placed to the left of the statue and, out of concern for all living things, artificial flowers or potted plants are used instead of cut ones. A candle or altar light is placed on the right side, signifying the light of Eternal Wisdom. Placed directly in front of the statue or picture, a water-offering cup expresses the cleansing aspect of the Eternal. An incense burner is in front of the water-offering cup, the offering of incense representing gratitude for the Three Treasures: the Buddha (the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, and one's own Buddha Nature), the Dharma (the teaching transmitted through Shakyamuni Buddha), and the Sangha (those who live by the Buddha's teaching). Vegetarian offerings (fresh or dried fruit, nuts, prepared food, or any food edible without cooking) may be placed on the altar as well, representing the willingness to share the benefits of training with all beings.

If you are meditating on the floor and your room is not carpeted, it is advisable to place a large flat cushion or piece of carpeting beneath your meditation cushion or bench to help prevent pains in the legs and knees. You want to have the temperature in the room within a comfortable range, preferably on the cool side. One or two windows for natural light and air circulation are good. The lighting should be gentle: during the day, light from a window will probably be sufficient; when it is dark, a candle, small lamp or altar light

can be used. Meditation is an inward-looking process; for that reason we meditate facing a wall, and it should be as non-distracting as possible.

### **Clothing.**

Body and mind are one. Your outward appearance reflects your inward state of mind and can help or hinder your meditation. If you sit up straight, are clean and dressed neatly, you not only convey a bright, positive attitude, but you are also more likely to find that brightness and positivity. The clothing worn for meditation should be clean, respectful and comfortable. At Shasta Abbey, lay trainees change from work clothes to their meditation clothing for each meditation period: loose-fitting clothing is advisable—slacks that do not put pressure around the waist or restrict circulation when the legs are bent or a long skirt that is full enough to allow the legs to be bent underneath. Do not wear bedclothing (except when meditating as you go to sleep or when ill).

### **The meditation period.**

Treat your sitting place with respect. At the monastery, we bow as we enter or leave the meditation hall, thus showing gratitude for having a nice place to sit. We then bow to our sitting place (cushion, bench, or chair) and turn around and bow to everyone else who is meditating with us. Once seated, we bow again to begin and end the meditation period. This helps us in many ways: when we bow we express our gratitude, and the act of bowing itself helps us to find that gratitude; it helps us bring ourselves together when we feel scattered; and it helps us bow to our Greater Selves, for it is only when we put our trust in that which is greater than ourselves, the Eternal, that we find what we are looking for. Even when sitting alone, we still bow “to others” before and after sitting, thus recognizing that we train for both ourselves and others and that we are grateful for the training of others.

Before each meditation period you can offer incense at the altar (or simply in an incense burner if you do not have an altar), blessing the incense by touching the base of the incense stick to your forehead and reciting the Three Homages aloud or to yourself (“Homage to the Buddha; Homage to the Dharma; Homage to the Sangha”) before putting it into the incense burner. You may time the meditation period by the burning of the incense stick (the short stick incense that we use at Shasta Abbey burns for thirty minutes and the long stick incense burns for forty-five) or you can time it with an hourglass or a gentle-sounding alarm clock or watch. If a few people are meditating together, usually one person times the meditation period, ringing a gong to begin and end it. After you stand up from meditation, you again bow to your seat and bow outwards to everyone else. You may also wish to recite a Scripture and offertory verse before or after a meditation period, Great Master Dogen’s *Rules for Meditation* being a very useful one.

### **When to meditate.**

At Shasta Abbey we sit formally when we first get up in the morning, mid-afternoon, and at eight in the evening. Rising time varies during the year: during formal monastic terms, it is usually forty-five minutes before dawn so that we are meditating during the half hour before dawn. Some people find that on first arising in the morning, especially if this is before dawn, their minds tend to be bright and positive. The Buddha Nature within us is always bright and positive; through old habits, likes, dislikes, opinions and the like, we create clouds that cover up this brightness. I have found that when I am freshly awakened from sleep in the early morning, the clouds are fewer or have not yet formed, and I am able to see the brightness and feel faith more easily. Meditation in the afternoon is an opportunity to be still once again and find our true purpose in the midst of a busy day. Meditation in the evening can help us see and let go of

whatever has been happening during the day and renew our faith if events have obscured it. These times may not be possible for you: find what fits into your schedule so that you will actually be able to meditate on a regular basis; you can do seated, formal meditation any time during the day except for the forty-five minutes or so after a meal when your food is digesting.

When you first start, you may only want to sit for five or ten minutes and gradually work up to twenty or thirty minutes once or twice a day. It is better to start out slowly than to overdo it at first and then lose interest; but, try to meditate every day, if only for a few minutes, as it is important to commit yourself to a regular practice—the times when you least feel like meditating can be the times of greatest benefit. You can meditate formally once or twice a day, or more often, if you have the time, although you should not meditate for longer than forty-five minutes without a period of walking meditation and possibly a short rest. You can also take a few minutes periodically throughout the day wherever you are to bring yourself back to the stillness of meditation and get in touch again with what really matters. No matter how busy your life may seem, you can always find the time and place to meditate if you really want to.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of having a special place for meditation that you care for and respect is so that you can begin to open the door to your True Self, so that you can start to find that Something that warrants great care and respect. However, the Eternal can be found everywhere and in all circumstances, and we eventually discover that the true meditation hall is within our own hearts and that we carry it with us wherever we go. The priest Nyogen Senzaki wrote:

Like a snail I carry  
 My humble Zendo<sup>3</sup> with me.  
 It is not as small as it looks,  
 For the boundless sky joins it  
 When I open a window.<sup>4</sup>

*Notes.*

1. *Rules for Meditation.*

2. It is inadvisable to spend many hours in formal meditation to the neglect of one's responsibilities or spend hour upon hour in formal meditation on one's own, without the direction of a qualified spiritual teacher.

3. Meditation hall.

4. Quoted from *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy: The Zen Writings and Translations of Nyogen Senzaki*, edited and with an introduction by Eido Shimano Roshi and published in 1978.