

11. BEGINNING AND END OF A SITTING PERIOD

At the beginning of contemplation: the dry, resonant sound of the wooden sticks announces the impending start of the contemplation period. Prepare yourself, find your posture and become quiet. The teacher might possibly say a few words before the gong sounds three times.

THREE TIMES. With the fading reverberation of the gong the joint contemplation begins. Try to not change your posture again during that period.

At the end of contemplation: there are two distinct signals after a sitting period:

TWO strikes of the gong announce that the contemplation will be continued by an adjoining walking meditation;

ONE toll announces the end of the contemplation period. In both cases bow while you are still in a sitting position, rock your torso a couple of times back and forth/side to side to gently move again. Now, still sitting on your cushion, turn carefully clockwise towards the centre. Stand upright with due precaution, e.g. if your feet fell asleep, and stand up in the correct hand position. Wait, facing the centre, for further announcements.

12. WALKING MEDITATION

Walking meditation does not indicate a break, but a continuation of the contemplation through walking; it is performed by meditatively circling the room.

Stand in a focussed manner until the 'clack' of the wood sticks, then bow, turn left and start walking immediately. With every step you take, mindfully perceive your contact with the ground. Let there be no gap between you and the person in front of you. Turn each corner at a right angle. As soon as the wood sticks sound, walk as quickly as possible back to your place, then turn right, facing the centre. After a joint bow you prepare again for Zazen in your sitting posture on your cushion.

During the walking meditation, one may leave the room to use the restroom. To do so, continue walking meditation until you reach the exit, then leave the row of practitioners, turn toward the altar and bow before you leave the room. On returning, wait at the entrance until the person in front of your walking place has passed, bow toward the altar then join the walking meditation.

Should the walking meditation end while you are still waiting at the entrance, remain standing there until everyone has reached his/her place. Bow together with the group and then return quickly to your place and take the sitting position.

The sound of the wood sticks and three tolls of the gong signal the beginning next period of sitting meditation.

INTRODUCTION:

Via Integralis is the chosen name of the contemplative school in which Zen and Christian mysticism encounter each other. Its key feature is the practice of Buddhist Zazen. Literally meaning: 'sitting in silence', 'gathering the heart-spirit'.

This jewel of eastern spirituality has been introduced as an integrative component of the contemplative practice of Via Integralis by the founders, Zen Master Pia Gyger (© 2014) and Zen Master Niklaus Brantschen SJ. It is highly suitable for leading the body, soul and mind from distraction to unity and vivid presence. We do not just sit 'Zen-like' but practice Zazen in its original quality 'by every trick in the book' (N. Brantschen)

The basic exercise is the same whether we sit at home on our own or together with others in a group, during a calm morning hour or during an extended week of contemplation. Carefulness in performing the rituals or sitting in a good posture assists us for entering into a focussed state of awake presence. Thus this practice provides us with a form for the encounter with the 'formless'. As a shared ritual the practice connects us to a community even in the absence of words.

This handout describes the postures and rituals of a contemplation period the way it is applied in the Via Integralis contemplation school.

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The book *Via Integralis*: is available in German

N. Brantschen, P. Gyger u.a, *Via Integralis. Wo Zen und christliche Mystik sich begegnen. Ein Übungsweg*, Köselverlag 2011

THE PRACTICE OF ZAZEN DURING CONTEMPLATION OF VIA INTEGRALIS



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1. POSITION OF THE HANDS IN GREETING AND WHILE WALKING AND STANDING

The many bows familiar in Zen are performed with a distinctive gesture called Gasho. This greeting gesture is an expression of respect towards the other people in the room. The palms of the hands meet. Hold the hands with the fingertips at about the height



of the tip of your nose, without touching it. Your elbows should be some distance away from the body so that the forearms are aligned.

While standing and walking, the hands are held as follows: make a fist of your right hand, with the thumb inside. Place your right fist at your sternum, the back of the hand facing up, then lay the left hand on top of your right fist. Your elbows should be some distance away from the body so that the forearms are aligned.



2. ENTERING THE MEDITATION ROOM

On entering the room, please bow toward the altar or toward the centre if there is no altar. Then walk to your place, holding your hands in the described walking position.

3. ARRIVAL AT ONE'S PLACE

At your place, bow facing the row in which you are sitting. Then turn clockwise to bow towards the group or the other rows. After yet another clockwise turn, face your place and take a seat on your cushion.

4. THE POSTURE

There are various postures for sitting in meditation. Each person is different regarding physical form and constitution.

Thus it is important to find a posture that is not too challenging for your body. Try the various postures to find one in which you are able to sit upright without major tension during a sitting period. It might be wise to ask an experienced person for advice¹. Sit on the front of a cushion (or use a bench) and bring the legs into position. No matter what posture you choose, it is most important to have a firm base formed by your pelvis and knees, which together form an equal-sided triangle that supports your torso. The body weight should rest equally on these three points.

Pull your chin in slightly toward your chest without lowering your head. Extend the back of the neck as if you would touch the ceiling. Your ears should be aligned with the shoulders and the hips, as your nose is in line with the navel.

After stretching the spine straight, relax your shoulders, your back and your abdomen without changing the posture. During contemplation, remain in an upright posture leaning neither right nor left, neither forward or backwards.

5. THE COSMIC MUDRA

During contemplation we hold the hands like this. Position your right hand just below your navel slightly touching the belly, palm facing upwards. Place the left hand on your right hand's palm or fingers. The tips of the thumbs should touch slightly. In Zen this form is called the 'cosmic mudra', the place in which the whole world is gathered together. Hold the tips of your thumbs in front of the navel and your arms, bent at the elbows, slightly away from the body. Do not apply force to keep the thumbs together, but do not let the tips of your thumbs lose contact.



6. THE MOUTH AND BREATH

Hold your mouth closed, your tongue placed on the palate slightly touching the upper row of your teeth. Do not breathe through your mouth.

7. THE EYES AND THE ALERTNESS OF YOUR SENSES

The eyes are half opened, your gaze pointing in a 45 degree angle to the ground, approximately a meter in front of you or on the wall ahead. Let everything in front of your eyes rest without focussing on any particular object.



With closed eyes you are very likely to become sleepy or lose yourself daydreaming. In the same manner as your eyes are open at every single moment, so are your other senses alert and present, your hearing, smelling, feeling and tasting. Perceive with all your senses what is in this very moment without clinging to any of it.

8. A DEEP BREATH

After you adjusted your posture for contemplation, inhale and exhale deeply yet silently for a couple of times. Then continue breathing calm and slow thru the nostrils, following your natural rhythm of breathing.

9. ROCKING THE TORSO BACK AND FORTH

To find the most upright position start rocking your torso like a pendulum a few times from left to right, back and forth in circles that are initially wider then become ever slighter. Eventually you will have found your most upright position. Now remain calm for the sitting period not leaning in any direction.

10. THE CRUCIAL INNER DISPOSITION

What in Zen is known as the art of 'non-thinking' is also true in the contemplative practice of via integralis: it is the appeal to dare entering the 'cloud of unknowing' and to remain there without words, images or thoughts.

This entails: do not focus on any object and do not try to control your thoughts. Given you maintain an upright posture and your breath became gradually calmer, so does your mind quite naturally become calm. Should thoughts arise within your mind try not to catch them nor fight against them. Do not follow them or even attempt to flee them. Leave the thoughts alone and allow them to come and go in liberty. Crucial is to attain a state in which you neither think actively nor fall into dullness but rather enter a state called 'mere sitting – vivid presence'

¹ See the Via Integralis lea_et's "Sitting Postures" with its relevant pictures and suggestions for preparation exercises