

## General Guidelines For Pre- and Post-Sesshin Practice

Chuang-tzu once said, "To the mind that is still, the universe surrenders." Sesshin is a time of great inner solitude and concentrated effort; it offers a remarkable opportunity to quiet the mind and deepen our Zen practice. Clearly, the more quickly the upper layers of everyday consciousness fall away, the more fully we can absorb ourselves in the depths of our practice. The following guidelines are designed to aid this process by helping to cultivate the spirit of sesshin before it actually begins, and to sustain its energy, clarity, and power once sesshin has ended.

The most valuable thing we can do to get ready for sesshin is to sit as much as possible beforehand, and to make an effort to be more aware and concentrated in the midst of our daily activities. Also, with more than 9 hours of zazen each day, sesshin can be physically challenging; so it's definitely a good idea to do some careful stretching and back exercises prior to sesshin. And waking up earlier in the mornings makes it easier to adjust to the sesshin schedule. In fact anything that helps to cultivate inner discipline will carry over into the sesshin itself.

Generally speaking, it's also a good idea to simply slow down before sesshin -- if at all possible to take time for walks and other quiet pursuits. Be careful about getting caught up in needless talking, entertainment, and the general busyness of life. Getting involved with television and movies, or spending time on unnecessary or escapist reading or computing, may well create additional thoughts and images that wind up resurfacing in sesshin during zazen.

For many people, dietary issues can have a surprisingly strong impact on their sesshin experience. For those who use caffeinated drinks, especially coffee, cutting way down at least three or four days beforehand can make a big difference. Coffee isn't served in sesshin (although tea is available at certain times), and caffeine withdrawal symptoms can be a source of discomfort and distraction. And because one sits still so much during sesshin, one needs less food and lighter fare. For most people this means eating more fruits, vegetables, and salads. Over the years, many people have discovered that heavier foods, particularly dairy products, contribute to various physical problems both in and out of sesshin. Holding to a simpler diet before sesshin has many advantages - and many people have found eating this way during sesshin leads to greater energy, clarity, and even physical suppleness.

In the days and weeks prior to sesshin, try to anticipate things that will need your attention before the sesshin begins, and deal with them as early as possible. Big commitments like sesshin seem to let loose a whole range of last minute problems. The car breaks down, the computer crashes, or unexpected work presents itself - these things occur surprisingly often before a sesshin. It's also not uncommon for people to feel increasingly anxious or sick as the first day of sesshin approaches, but these states usually pass fairly quickly once sesshin actually begins.

Another point is to be sure to let your family and work contacts know you won't be available unless there's an emergency. If you have young children, let them know when you will be away, and where you will be. When our children were small, we would sometimes bring them into the zendo and point out where we'd be sitting. Many parents have found leaving notes, pictures, or small gifts (especially gifts) to be opened on specific days can make things easier on everyone.

In the days following a sesshin, the best advice is to not over-do anything, yet after so much stillness and silence many people find this a challenge. Words and ideas can take on a life of their own, and so it's important to be on the lookout for strong urges to talk, read, and ruminate. Often family and friends are dying to know what sesshin was like, and it's important to strike a balance between saying too much and too little. One may also have to deal with some resentment from others for being gone, a pretty natural reaction that calls for understanding and sensitivity.

After sesshin, food and desserts can taste so delicious, and restraint can seem so unnecessary. But if one overdoes it, in any sphere, or doesn't get enough rest and zazen, then that wonderful, bright post-sesshin energy may quickly dissipate, and one may find oneself surprisingly depleted and not much fun to be around. It's also good to be mindful of the fact that sesshin practice can stir up old and disruptive mindstates that may surface during the retreat or even afterwards. This is a difficult and complex area of practice, but one rich with potential. Learning to work with these emotional forces skillfully can help us live more freely, and will lead to deep levels of change.

So sitting regularly (more than usual, if at all possible!), staying focused, eating carefully, and getting sufficient rest are all important aspects of practice after sesshin. Simply allowing time for the sesshin energies to continue working, letting them soak in deeply, helps us to sustain and integrate this timeless teaching into our daily lives.