

Sesshin guidelines

Montreal Zen Center

824 Park Stanley
Montreal H2C 1A2
www.zenmontreal.ca

Introduction

Please be sure to read the instructions carefully. If you need any further explanation, ask the greeter for help. It will be assumed that you have read them and are willing to comply with them during the sesshin. In a sesshin we work together for the benefit of all participants including ourselves. What happens to one happens to all. Even though you may not be consciously aware of others, what they do still affects you. These guidelines come from many years' experience in Japan, America and Canada. They are reduced to the minimum and made as brief as possible. Please be sure to abide by them in spirit as well as in word.

Be mindful at all times

Silence

Silence should be maintained and all movements should be made quietly and unostentatiously. If you need to communicate with someone, please write a note. If you receive a note while in the zendo, please leave the zendo before reading it.

Keep the eyes down throughout the sesshin and so minimize distractions. This in turn will help you maintain mindfulness. However, although the eyes are kept down, be sure to keep the head up. (If you happen to have a job which would make it dangerous to keep the eyes down, then of course look up).

Minimizing distractions

Robes are worn to help maintain an atmosphere of quietness and harmony; any visible clothing, such as T-shirts and socks, should be white, dark or a dull colour. T-shirts with writing on them are not suitable for sesshin wear as they can be very distracting to others.

As the eyes are kept down, feet are very noticeable, so please do not use coloured polish on your toenails if you are going bare-foot. Earrings and necklaces should not be worn because they can interfere with the use of the kyosaku. It is best not to wear a watch unless you need one for the job you are doing. It is both unnecessary and a potential source of distraction.

Odors can be very noisy and distracting, therefore please do not use perfume, cologne or aftershave, nor eat extra garlic during sesshin.

If you have a personal robe it is a good idea to wash it before coming to sesshin, out of respect for your zendo neighbour - simply put it into the washer and dryer or wash it through and hang it out to dry.

Please be sure to clean your teeth first thing in the morning. This too is out of respect for your neighbour.

Entering the zendo building

Do not stand on the entrance-way carpet while wearing shoes or boots because this soils the carpet and makes it unpleasant to stand on for other who are barefoot. Please put your shoes on and take them off while standing on the metal grid.

In summer, put something on your feet when coming to the zendo if it is raining or threatening to rain.

Entering the kendo

When entering the upstairs zendo, make a bow at the entrance, then go to your place slowly and quietly with hands held in the kinhin position. There is no need to rush. If you are in the doorway at the end of a kinhin, stay there until the inkin bell has struck the second time and then go to your place.

Punctuality

To help maintain a taut atmosphere, it is imperative that everyone is present punctually for all sittings. A warning bell is struck 10 minutes before the end of rest periods, the gong 5 minutes before the commencement of zazen, the han one minute before. If you see someone is still sleeping after the 10 minutes warning bell has been struck, please be sure to awaken them. However, each person has the responsibility to ensure that they are in the zendo in time. One must attend all formal zazen periods.

Kyosaku

The kyosaku is used at the discretion of the monitors during sesshin. However, if you do not wish to be struck, or if you wish to be struck only on request, please write a note to the monitors and leave it on a monitor's mat. Simply turn your head to the left when the monitor is in your vicinity if you wish to be struck by the kyosaku. It is not necessary to raise the hands in gassho afterwards during sesshin. At the end of sesshin there is a short kyosaku ceremony during which the monitors and participants express respect and gratitude towards each other. If your hair touches your shoulders, please tie it up so that it does not get in the way of the kyosaku. Even if you do not wish the kyosaku to be used, long hair should be tied back neatly.

Teisho

One should continue to sit in a zazen position during teisho. It is alright to move and even to raise both knees to rest for a short period. However, under no circumstances may participants lean against the wall. If you do need to move, please do so quietly.

Extra sitting

The formal schedule is the minimum amount of zazen that is to be done. You may do extra zazen during breaks and after the formal sitting is over in the evening. Chairs are set up in the dressing rooms (which become sub-zendos during sesshin and therefore should not be used as a place to hang clothes.) The women's changing room will be available after 7.35 am (during the work period) as a sub-zendo for kitchen crew who have jobs at other times during the day.

When you move in and out of the zendo during extra sitting hours, please be careful not to disturb others.

Work

The work period is an essential part of sesshin. Participants should go straight to their work-place after finishing breakfast and changing into work clothes. Please work the whole of the work period. The only exception to this is people working in the kitchen who have work duties at other times than the work period. Most work assignments will last the whole period if done thoroughly. Please see the work-supervisor if you finish early. There will be a clean-up bell eight minutes before the end of the period. Please use this time to put away any tools or implements you have been using, and if necessary, clean up the area where you have been working. There will be a second bell to signal the end of the work period.

End of sesshin work period

All who attend sesshins are encouraged to stay to the last supper, which is specially provided to help bring the sesshin to a graceful conclusion; extra care is taken by the kitchen staff in the preparation of this meal. If however you have to leave before supper, please be sure to stay for the end of sesshin work period, which is part of sesshin, to help with cleaning and putting the house and zendo back in order. Those who stay for the last meal are asked to help afterwards with the work necessary to leave the kitchen and dining area clean and tidy.

Meals

When going to the house for formal meals, move briskly so that you do not keep others waiting at the table. Please be aware of the serving area for your seat at the table and take food from that area; if food runs out in your serving area, you may pass your plate to another part of the table. This avoids one part of the table running out of food while another part has left overs.

When you enter the dining area, please move as far as possible to the end of the table near the window, leaving no gaps, and stand in front of a place setting. Please kneel seize fashion at the table rather than sitting in one of the lotus postures so as not to take up more room than necessary.

If you are in front of a casserole, vegetable or grain dish, you should serve others and then yourself. This makes it unnecessary to pass around casserole dishes. Please remain seated on your heels if you are serving. Please indicate when enough food has been put on your plate by rubbing the palms of your hands together. Avoid unnecessary noise in serving and eating.

Point to items required if they are out of your reach. Be attentive to the needs of others- and also return items on the table to the same place after using.

Chanting sheets are put on the counter and on a chair by the St-Hubert entrance for you to pick up on the way to the table. If you do not know the chants, please be sure to take a sheet. Keep chanting sheets off table while food is being served and pass down to the end of the table when chants are finished.

When clappers sound for second part of the chants, after the food has been served, raise your bowl or plate to eye level. Please do not continue to serve yourself or others once the clappers have been sounded; more food may be taken after the chants are finished.

Please pass hungry and thirsty ghost bowls down the table promptly, but not hurriedly.

Take what time you need eating. You may leave the table as soon as you have finished. All food must be eaten in the dining area; this includes fruit served at lunch time.

People who do not wish to eat should remain in the zendo doing zazen. Please do not go to bedrooms nor use the bathroom during meal times. Please do not take meal mugs for use in bedrooms or bathrooms. If you need a mug for one reason or another, please ask the head cook for one, and return it to the kitchen at the end of sesshin.

Water tables

Water jugs and cups, numbered according to zendo seating, are available in the changing rooms. It is best to drink fairly frequently during sesshin in order to prevent dehydration.

House entrances

To enter the house for meals, to change for exercises and at the formal closing in the evening, please use the kitchen door if your bedroom is on the ground floor and the St-Hubert street entrance if your bedroom is on the basement or third floor.

Please do not use kitchen door after 10 pm as this disturbs the sleep of the person in room 5. Use the St-Hubert street door instead.

When going from the zendo building to the house and back, keep the eyes down, but do not keep the hands in the kinhin position.

Bathrooms

Always leave the door open and turn off the light when leaving a bathroom; an open door indicates that the bathroom is free. Please hang all towels on the towel racks provided. **When you take a shower or bath, please see that the bath is left clean and the floor dry for the next person.**

Bathrooms and shower times have been assigned as per the lists on the board in the house hallway. Please use your assigned bathroom at all times, other than during kinhin when any bathroom may be used. Please take short showers and do not linger in the bathrooms as other people are usually waiting to use them. Do not wash hair or shave during sesshin.

Close the zendo bathroom door quietly by holding the handle down as you close the door. If you use this bathroom when returning from dokusan, do not flush the toilet if a round of sitting is still in progress, only during kinhin. Do not use ground floor bathrooms in house while dokusan is in progress.

Rooms

Remember that you are sharing a common space with others. Be sure to make your bed each time you rise and tidy up your clothes. As a rule, only night lights should be on, in order not to disturb those who are sleeping or resting. Turn off all lights that are unneeded or when leaving the room.

Exercises

There is an exercise period each day which participants are expected to attend.

Smoking

Smoking is forbidden at all times on Center property. This of course applies during sesshin.

Not leaving the grounds

Participants should not leave the Center grounds during sesshin.

Negative emotions

It is inevitable that during sesshin one passes through many different mind states. From the point of view of the practice of Zen, one mind state is as good as another. One can practice as well during times of fatigue, despair, grief, as during times of calmness, peace or joy. All that is required is the initial and unrelenting determination to see into the nature of mind itself. To surrender that determination under any circumstances whatsoever is to fall from the way.

Fire

Please acquaint yourself with the location of all exits and fire extinguishers. If you have any questions about what to do in the event of fire after reading the following, please speak to the greeter.

If you detect fire:

1. Get everyone out of the building
2. Call the fire department - 911
3. If the fire is small enough, fight the fire
4. If in any doubt, get out of the building

In the event of fire:

1. once you have left the building, do not go back in
2. do not panic -all the walls in the zendo building are covered with gyproc which will contain the fire long enough for everyone to get out
3. gather at St-Hubert Street entrance

Zendo building exits

There are four ways out:

1. down the main stairs and out through the regular door
2. through door at further end of upstairs zendo and down fire-escape
3. through windows in dressing rooms. Both these windows push open like doors for emergency exit

House exits

There are two exits from third floor:

1. down main stairs
2. through bedroom window and down fire-escape. On second floor roof, turn to left and enter door for stairs leading to ground

There are two exits from second floor:

1. the main stairs
2. back staircase, reached through door in second floor kitchen

There are three exits from first floor:

1. kitchen door
2. St-Hubert street exit
3. Park Stanley exit

Fire extinguishers

There are fire extinguishers:

1. outside entrance of third floor
2. outside lobby on second floor
3. by kitchen entrance on first floor
4. in basement
5. by entrance to main kendo

Finishing the session

Once you start the session you must see it through to the end, come what may. For your own sake and for the sake of all others, both at the session and elsewhere, do not give way in the face of this Great Word.

Bring to the session

1. Robe
2. Clothes to wear under robe - white or dull, solid colours please.
3. Clothes for work period and exercises -these should be modest and sober: please do not bring short shorts
4. Toilet articles
5. Towel
6. Sleeping bag or blankets. The Center does not have many blankets and these should only be used as additional covering in case of very cold weather
7. Sheet to cover and protect the foam mattress. Please bring a sheet in addition to a sleeping bag for this purpose
8. Pillow case - this should be put over the Center covering case, which is left on at all times.