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## BODY TREATS: WHERE TO GO TO DESTRESS, REJUVENATE AND UNWIND

# Try this for multitasking: Sit, breathe, meditate

By Glenn Jeffers  
Tribune staff reporter

Advertisement

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First impressions: The path to enlightenment requires focus and concentration. That became evident as I searched for the Cenacle Retreat and Conference Center, passing it several times before finding it nestled between some town houses on Fullerton Avenue. Walking up to the second floor, I found the Ancient Dragon Zen Gate inside a conference room and prepared to sit and meditate for 40 minutes.

The Ancient Dragon Zen Gate is not an actual gate, but the name of a Chicago-based group that practices Soto Zen meditation ("Zen Gate" refers to an entry into the Buddha way through Zen activities, according to the group's Web site). A central method is zazen, a Japanese form of meditation that, in a nod to keeping things simple, translates to "seated meditation."

I learned this after walking into the meeting room and meeting Hogetsu Laurie Belzer, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and one of three priests leading the zazen. We went into a separate meeting room and, as she does for all newbies, she instructed me on how to practice zazen.

I learned to sit with my legs folded, spine settled but erect and hands cupped in a gesture called a mudra. Belzer told me not to focus on any particular thought or object. "Be present without being present," she said.

Once the lesson was over, I re-entered the meditation room filled with about 20 people, bowing before I stepped through the doorway. I found a black mat (zabuton) and a small, round cushion about the size of a regulation base (zafu). I bowed to the cushion, then again to the room before attempting to sit down in a lotus position. Managing a wobbly half-lotus, I turned to the brick wall and lowered my head, fixing my eyes on the wall.

Zoning in: After a few minutes of subtle squirming -- noticing everything from an itchy nose to nagging shoulder pain -- I settled into a relaxed state. My breathing slowed. I entered what I can only describe as a "soft focus." The wall's red hue blurred as random thoughts zipped through my head.

Soon, the noise from those thoughts was gone, leaving an empty, clear mind inside a quiet, still space. I appreciated that. Most adults I know lead busy lives, with activities packed into every hour. Drop off the kids at school. Go to work. Thirty minutes for lunch. Fifteen minutes for Starbucks. Get to the gym. Walk the dog.

Most people could use 40 minutes of uninterrupted stillness inside a darkened conference room, the only sounds coming from a central air conditioner and a pair of lungs. I don't have half those responsibilities and yet I soaked in the silence as if I were sitting in a whirlpool.

That is, I did until my foot fell asleep, snapping me out of my semi-conscious state. As I wiggled my toes, trying to circulate blood into the foot, head priest Taigen Dan Leighton stood up and walked over to me. With a serene demeanor, he pointed to a chair, saying it would help with my posture.

I felt a little embarrassed using the chair, but sitting upright for 40 minutes sounds easier than the act itself. And it did help me keep my posture.

Once the zazen ended, Leighton led the group in a 15-minute Soto Zen Buddhist service, open to people of all faiths, that included chanting and bowing. Then, over cups of tea, he held a 35-minute Dharma discussion on Bob Dylan and the many Buddhist connections one could make listening to Dylan's classic, "Visions of Johanna." Even the song's first lines speak of trying to be quiet while the night play tricks on you. It's an almost literal analogy of my session inside the Zen Gate. But while I had it, I enjoyed the peace.

At your service: A true novice to Buddhism, Soto Ken and otherwise, I called Nancy Easton, a group member listed on Ancient Dragon's Web site, before attending the zazen. She quickly but thoroughly explained what I should expect during my first zazen and recommended that I wear loose, comfortable clothes for the session. If you do bring a change of clothes, the Cenacle center has several restrooms available.

Buzzkill: This is just nit-picking, but I wished Belzer had given me a heads-up on the bowing. The sound of a small bell and suddenly I'm dropping to my knees with my head on the floor, raising my hands, palms up.

Soothing Extras: The tea was an unexpected bonus. Likewise, the free parking at the conference center. In a neighborhood like Lincoln Park, almost-guaranteed parking seems like a blessing from Buddha.

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Soto Zen meditation with Ancient Dragon Zen Gate

(four suns)

Cenacle Retreat and Conference Center, 513 W. Fullerton Pkwy.; 773-528-6300, [www.ancientdragon.org](http://www.ancientdragon.org)

Price: Free; \$5 donation welcomed

Hours: Zazen sessions are held 6:45-8:45 p.m. Mondays

Credit cards: None. Checks are welcomed

Ratings key: 4 suns, body bliss; 3 suns, one of the best; 2 suns, very good; 1 sun, good

Reviews are based on anonymous visits by Tribune staff members; treatments are paid for by the Tribune.

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[gjeffers@tribune.com](mailto:gjeffers@tribune.com)

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