

# Information for Newcomers to an IZAUK Sesshin

If this is the first time you have attended an IZAUK sesshin thank you for booking. Before you arrive, we would like to give you a little information about what to expect.

The information is divided into two sections. Firstly, information around the structure and organisation of a sesshin and secondly looking after yourself during sesshin.

## 1. Structure and organisation of a sesshin

It's a good idea to have an informal chat with your dojo head before you come to sesshin to get an idea of what to expect from someone who has experience of attending sesshins.

### Daily routine

During a sesshin we generally sit zazen four times during the day, with each sit lasting around 1.5 hours, so the day is pretty structured. As you will be sitting zazen for a significant period it's helpful to have a zafu (cushion) that's the right height for you. If you don't have your own ask if you can borrow one from your local dojo, or ask the organiser to borrow one. Zafutons (large padded mats) are supplied. You may wish to bring a dark towel to rest your hands on during zazen and maybe one to support your knee(s).

We generally get up 6 – 6.30am with the last zazen finishing around 10.30pm.

### Mealtimes

Meals are taken together and we harmonise by paying attention to each other in respect of serving food and finishing each course at a similar time. Do listen for the metal that rings before each meal to let you know to make your way to the dining room. We chant a sutra (verse) at the beginning of the breakfast and lunch meal.



*1 - Chanting the meal sutra before a meal*

During the announcements at the end of each meals the programme for the following period will be given, so you will know the times of the next zazen and meal.

If you have any food allergies or intolerances, please do let the organiser know as soon as possible before the sesshin starts, in order for the Tenzo (head chef) to prepare an alternative if needed. Usually, the food is vegetarian or vegan, and we use organic products as much as possible.

Before the sesshin you will be advised of what to bring in terms of bowls, cutlery, drinking cup etc.

### Samu

Samu is practical work for the community, and after each meal we ask for volunteers to help, for example with clearing tables, washing up, preparing food. Helping with these tasks is a good way to meet people and feel part of the sesshin, especially if you don't know many people. We encourage everybody to take part in what is essentially a continuation of Zen practice, so please do fully participate or let the person in charge know if you can't for any reason.



*2 The Chiden cleans the alter - sifts through the ashes and makes it presentable*

## Allocation of roles

Every sesshin has a named organiser, whose name will be on the publicity material. This is the person to discuss any concerns you may have, and dietary or other requirements before the sesshin. They will also deal with any practical issues during the sesshin.

There are also named people for each of the main roles, from the cooking team to the person in charge of the dojo (meditation room). Names of people with responsibilities are read out after the evening meal on the first night.

There is usually a person allocated to support newcomers, who will meet you following the first meal and show you the dojo and answer any questions you may have. This person will be available throughout the sesshin to help you, if needed.

In addition to this role the two main people responsible for the dojo, called the Ino and Shuso, are available to support you in your practice throughout the retreat. These are also the people you should let know if you are ill, need to miss a zazen, need help with your zazen posture or have any problems.

If you have questions around the practice and would like a one-to-one interview with the Godo, or teacher, you can arrange this through the secretary. You can also ask questions during a Mondo – a group question and answer session occurring usually once during the sesshin.

The main organisers of the sesshin (people with allocated roles) will sit together at meal times, and will usually have a small meeting at some point in the day in order to plan and deal with any issues. If you don't see them much of them during samu it's simply because they are busy doing another type of samu.

## 2. Looking after yourself

Sesshins can sometimes be a little challenging, also for more experienced practitioners, because of the relatively long periods of sitting meditation and silence; the set activities (i.e. samu), and living communally. Sesshins are meant to, at some level, unsettle our habitual ways of thinking and behaving. On the other hand, sesshins are designed to support us as we face these challenges

It's important that we don't feel too overwhelmed, especially if we have some underlying concerns or issues in our everyday life. Everyone can experience some difficulty during a sesshin at some point, however long they have been practising for, whether it be sore knees or becoming aware of some deeper feelings. The practice of zazen is to observe, and not to analyse or get caught up in our emotions or feelings, but sometimes this might be hard to do. If this is the case and you are feeling a little overwhelmed it's helpful to stay connected to people and keep participating in the daily routine. Things that often help are chatting to people during coffee breaks, and helping with samu. It's not helpful usually to detach and retreat into ourselves too much. Sharing a room might not be ideal for many people but it's often helpful to have people around us during sesshin

If you do find yourself struggling at all please let somebody know (Ino or shuso) as soon as possible. If you sit with a group and the group leader is present do chat to them, and any other people in the group if you feel able. Whilst we are not trained health workers or therapists in any way we will try to help, mostly in a mostly practical way.

Finally, whilst a sesshin can be a supportive experience, it relies on all attenders being able to participate as fully as possible. Knowing yourself and your sense of your own well-being is therefore important. If someone has been recently or currently experiencing significant mental distress before a sesshin, then it



might not be the right time. If you are unsure about this, we encourage you to discuss with either the sesshin organiser, or if you sit with a local Zen group with your group leader.

Also, if you have no prior experience of sitting zazen, then it is helpful to first practice with a local group. Locally run Zen days provide similar opportunities. Having said that many people do attend sesshin without any prior experience and find it both manageable and enjoyable, so it's really up to you to make the decision.

It's best to come to sesshin with an open heart and mind, simply observing and experiencing each moment of the day.