

SHORTCUTS TO HAVING A STRONG SESSHIN

by Sunyana Graef, Roshi

Going to sesshin is a bit like preparing oneself prior to taking a journey to a distant land. You need appropriate clothes, you need to know a few survival phrases, and you need to have passing familiarity with the culture. In the same way, when you come to sesshin, you need to dress correctly, you need to know a few terms, and you need to know what is expected of you.

The best preparation for sesshin is to do as much extra zazen and chanting as possible. This enables you to enter sesshin with a mind already receptive, concentrated and attentive. Equally important are those things you should make every effort to avoid because they will make it more difficult for you to settle into the sesshin.

MOVIES & TV—Watching any movie, even one with a Buddhist theme is probably the single worst thing you can do prior to sesshin. The imagery of movies is implanted in the mind in such a way that it readily comes to consciousness during zazen. Between our rampant thoughts, unstable emotions, and physical discomfort, we have enough to contend with during sesshin. Why add to the burden? Same goes for television.

EXTRANEOUS READING—Specifically novels, books about Zen, books with violent themes (even if they are non-fiction), and magazines. It should be obvious why it is inadvisable to read novels or books containing violence—you'll be setting yourself up for fantasies or particularly distressing makyō. As for magazines, you will end up spending extra time trying to let go of the mental clutter created by what you have read.

But why not Buddhist books? It is because the phrases in Zen texts will haunt you during sesshin. You'll find yourself comparing your mind states to those that were described in the book you read. Instead of concentrating on your practice, you'll be concentrating on ideas concerning the practices you read about. It's a no-win situation. Give yourself a break—don't read prior to sesshin.

MUSIC—If you start to quiet down your environment before sesshin begins, likewise, your mind will begin to quiet. For many people, music sticks in the mind like super glue. Catchy tunes, romantic melodies, bits and pieces of classical music can become a broken record during sesshin.

Now here are a few things you should do, in addition to the essential extra sitting:

PREPARE YOUR BODY—Cut down on caffeine, stretch, get some extra sleep. Coffee isn't served during sesshin (black tea is available in the mornings), so if you're used

to multiple cups of coffee it would be a good idea to cut back to avoid headaches. With respect to sleep, if you are exhausted when you come to sesshin, you'll fall asleep during zazen. Try to get some extra rest both before and after sesshin.

PREPARE YOUR FAMILY—Family members need to know a bit about what you will be doing, even if you're not too sure yourself. At the very least, explain that you will be incommunicado during sesshin, but that you can be reached in case of emergency by e-mailing or calling the Center.

When my children were young, they looked forward to sesshins because my husband let them get away with things I wouldn't have, mostly at mealtimes, and because I always left them a letter and tiny present for each day I was away. Every morning they awoke to the letter, and each evening they looked forward to opening their "sesshin present." It was a little thing, but it made a huge difference in their attitude toward my absences.

TAKE CARE OF COMMITMENTS—In the week or two before sesshin begins, try to take care of things that need your attention so that you won't be thinking about them during sesshin. Be aware, too, that it is not uncommon for people to feel anxious or even ill as sesshin approaches. This usually passes quickly once sesshin actually begins.

Following these suggestions will not guarantee that your sesshin will be without ups and downs, but it will go a long way to smoothing the road.