



The Three Foundations of Meditation

In describing the process of meditation an analogy is often made of a cat waiting patiently at a mouse hole. The cat is described as relaxed, still, alert, and continuously ready for the sudden appearance of the mouse.

The practice of meditation is built on these, mutually supportive foundations of *stillness, alertness and relaxation*.

A good way to start a meditation period is to begin by adjusting our sitting posture to accomplish these three goals. We want to sit so that we can become as still (physically and internally) as we are willing to become, release any tension that we may find, and support an elevated level of arousal.

Stillness is an important condition that allows us to:

- a. detect novel and subtle events and changes in consciousness,
- b. reduce the amount of stimuli coming from body and sense organs
- c. reduce reactivity
- d. support alertness
- e. facilitate the observer position
- f. promote an experience of profundity

Continuous **relaxation** wipes away physical tension as it arises. This is important in that tension tends to significantly mask and prevent other events from coming to our conscious awareness. So relaxing allows:

- a. releasing tension
- b. direct practice in the process of "letting go"
- c. reduction of general "experiential noise level"
- d. support of stillness

Alertness or arousal facilitates our focus on the meditation at hand and provides the requisite energy for the activity of meditation and supports:

- a. engagement with practice (staying on task)
- b. detection of changing elements in awareness
- c. detection of fine grain (subtle) changes
- d. avoidance of sleep or sluggishness that may be promoted by relaxation and stillness

Like the three legs of a stool the three foundation activities function to maintain a balanced practice from which we can come to other meditation practices. For example, stillness and relaxation could, without the antidote of alertness, result in sleepiness or torpor, while alertness and stillness can result in tension if not countered by relaxation. Similarly alertness and relaxation need to be oriented and grounded by stillness.

The three foundation activities can, themselves, be practiced as a meditation. The simultaneously monitoring of relaxation, stillness and alertness while arousing ourselves when alertness slips, and keeping the body still, hones the skills necessary for all meditation. This allowing of increasing stillness, while detecting and releasing tension, together with the continuous release of distractions can be practiced until they become assimilated, automatic and done without any special attention. This practice, then, naturally becomes "Shikentaza" or just sitting. 🌸