

The Appeal of Zazen to Athletes

When watching Olympians prepare to compete, take notice of the concentration in their eyes. What are they thinking about? Obviously winning, but it's more than just summoning the will to succeed. They are most likely trying to visualize the act itself—crossing the finish line first, leaping higher or farther, out-maneuvering their opponent to score the most points. Such visualization is possible through mindfulness, and its source is zazen.



Zazen experience at Shokakuji

Meaning “seated meditation”, zazen is a discipline and primary expression of Zen Buddhism, and it's fast becoming a daily practice for people of all faiths around the world. Though its method and meaning varies among schools of thought, mindfulness is generally regarded as a way of gaining insight into the nature of existence. While that must sound like heady stuff to engage in daily, mindfulness is increasingly practiced by people in all competitive walks of life, be it professional sports or big business.

Many athletes around the world, including America, practice Zazen as part of their training regimen. Eleven-time NBA champion coach Phil Jackson pioneered its use in professional sports in the 1990s. Many champion athletes meditate, such as basketball player LeBron James, baseball player Ichiro Suzuki, tennis player Novak Djokovic, volleyballer Misty May-Treanor and marathon runner Deena Kastor.

Although spectators will not be able to join this year's Summer Tokyo Games (July 23 – August 8, August 24 – September 5, 2021), athletes and sports fans alike should consider looking into the benefits of this unique Japanese method of meditation, especially those who plan to visit Zen Buddhist temples during their future visit to Japan.

The growing need for mindfulness

Mindfulness is a type of meditation in which one focuses on being intensely aware of senses and feelings in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery and other techniques to relax the body and mind to help reduce stress.

According to the [American Psychological Association](#), eight in ten Americans say the pandemic is a significant source of psychological stress. Moreover, many people have been stuck in isolation for long periods due to social distancing and quarantine. That means the market for mindfulness is bigger than ever before, as more people need mental support and are seeking out body and mind healing, self-retreats and inner refinement.

Mindfulness has become—along with a healthy diet and exercise—one of the three pillars of wellbeing. Evidence suggests it's a uniquely powerful solution for our stressed-out, digitally distracted times. According to the [CDC](#), meditation is the fastest-growing health trend in the U.S., with the number of meditators tripling between 2012 – 2017. Meditation studios, brands and apps are spawning worldwide. Apple named mental wellness/mindfulness apps the No. 1 app trend of 2018. The U.S. Olympic swimming team has encouraged its athletes to use the Mindfulness app to help them focus on competition.

Zazen in practice

Mindfulness is an individual's ability to be **fully present**, focusing on their immediate surroundings and what they are doing. This means not worrying about past events or things that are happening in the future. The perceived benefits of mindfulness in sport and life in general include a higher level of concentration on the task at hand, while it can also help individuals to **better manage stressful situations** by being more in control of their emotions.

For many people, athletes included, zazen meditation is all about fostering mindfulness, but those who want to delve more deeply into this practice in order to “raise their game” will want to explore its three components: concentration, koan introspection and shikantaza (which is just sitting).

The initial stages of zazen training resemble traditional Buddhist meditation in practice (i.e. sitting cross-legged) and emphasize the development of concentration. One begins by focusing on breathing, such as counting breaths. Mantras are also sometimes used in place of counting (e.g. “om” or even “score”). Practice continues until there is adequate “one-pointedness” of mind (e.g. visualize scoring points), experiencing *samadhi*, or oneness with object of meditation (e.g. “I am the ball.”). At this point, the practitioner moves to one of the other two methods of zazen: koan introspection or shikantaza.

Having experienced *samadhi*, one can now focus his or her consciousness on a koan as an object of meditation. A koan is a paradoxical anecdote or riddle, used in Zen Buddhism to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and to provoke enlightenment. An example of a well-known koan is “When both hands are clapped a sound is produced; what is the sound of one hand clapping.” A sport equivalent could be “How do I win? By not losing.” Since koans are, ostensibly, not solvable by reasoning, the act of pondering them is thought to provide a mental shortcut leading to direct realization of a something beyond the riddle.

Finally, shikantaza is a form of meditation, in which one does not use any specific object of focus, but simply sits and remains as much as possible in the present moment, aware of and observing what passes through their mind and around them. As Soto Zen founder Dogen Zenji wrote in his *Shobogenzo*, “Sitting fixedly, think of not thinking. How do you think of not thinking? Non-thinking. This is the art of zazen.”

Where to experience zazen in Japan

Athletes and other foreign visitors to Japan have often gone to the country’s temples just for sightseeing and photography, as these places are exotic and picturesque with towering pagodas, giant statues and tranquil gardens. These days many travelers from abroad visit Zen Buddhist temples for spiritual purposes as well, particularly for guided meditation. Thankfully, there are many temples in Japan that welcome foreign visitors for that purpose.

Here are a few prime recommendations for Soto Zen Buddhist mindfulness training, with special consideration for Olympic host locations—Fukushima, Kanagawa, Hokkaido, Miyagi, Ibaraki and Saitama—where popular competitions involving the U.S. are slated to take place, including football, basketball, baseball and softball.

Temples in Kanagawa

Originally founded in Ishikawa prefecture 700 years ago, [Daihonzan Sojiji](#) (or Sojiji for short) is one of two head temples of Soto Zen Buddhism, the largest Zen Buddhist sect in Japan. In 1911, the temple was rebuilt in Yokohama in Kanagawa prefecture, which will host 2021 Olympics football, baseball and softball competitions. As Yokohama is Japan’s “gateway to the sea”, Sojiji soon became one of the main international Zen training monasteries in Japan and to this day welcomes people from around the world for zazen meditation training, including English sessions. Members of the public, including foreigners, assemble in Sojiji’s study hall to practice the same zazen program that monks undertake in Sojiji’s enormous Daisodo Hall. Sojiji also communicates the mindset of Zen Buddhism to many people through sutra copying to foster a pure heart and a variety of other training and events.



Daihonzan Sojiji

Sojiji temple is in the suburban area of Yokohama, not far from Tokyo Bay and Boso peninsula. Even Mt Fuji is close. Though nestled in a large city, the temple grounds' lush greenery and serene atmosphere offer welcome respite from the pressures of modern life. From Tokyo, it is 2 hours by train, then five minutes by foot from Yokohama's Tsurumi station. Click [here](#) for more information on how to get there.

[Kenchoji Temple](#) is the preeminent and oldest in Kamakura, Kanagawa prefecture. Established in 1253, Kenchoji was originally the exclusive Zen training temple in Japan. A 730-year-old juniper tree stands proudly before the temple as a symbol of its longevity. The garden and bell are both recognized by the government as objects of national pride. The temple grounds are large, extending deep into the wooded hills behind it. The view from the observation platform at the highest point of the grounds is gorgeous, particularly in the autumn when the maple leaves are in full flush. On a clear day, one can even catch a glimpse of Mt. Fuji from Kenchoji Temple's highest shrine. From Tokyo, it is less than two hours by train, then just a 15-minute walk from Kita-Kamakura Station, one stop north of JR Kamakura Station on the Yokosuka Line. Click [here](#) for more information.



Kenchoji

Temples in Saitama

Shukoin Temple in Saitama near Tokyo is also known as Gokokusan Shukouin and not to be confused with Shunkoin Temple in Kyoto (also worth visiting). It holds zazen meditations on the second and fourth Sundays of every month. From Tokyo, it is about one-and-a-half hour by train, then reachable by foot from Minami-Urawa Station. If one comes by bus, please board from the East Exit of JR Urawa Station or the West Exit of JR Minami-Urawa Station.

Founded in the 15th century, [Fukuosan Shokakuji Temple](#) is in the middle of the idyllic mountains of Naguri, close to Hanno in Saitama Prefecture, which will host 2021 Olympics football and basketball competitions. The temple offers various zazen programs, including “Kandaza”, a meditation that “throws away even the desire to realize” to devote oneself to just sitting, which is said to be characteristic of Soto sect zazen in general. As one Soto sect monk on [YouTube](#) has wryly observed: “Zazen is good for nothing.” Shokakuji welcomes visitors from everywhere. From Tokyo, Hanno is about one and a half hours by train and is reachable via Seibu Ikebukuro Line to Hanno Station and the JR Higashi-Hannō Station from international Koshigyo bus. Click [here](#) for more information.

Temples in Miyagi

[Daimanji Temple](#) is said to date back more than 800 years and has been relocated a few times, with its current home located in Miyagi Prefecture, which will host 2021 Olympic football competitions. From Tokyo, it is about two hours by bullet train, then reachable in about 10 minutes by taxi from West Exit of Sendai Station, 10 minutes on foot from Atagobashi Station on the Nanboku Line, about 8 minutes by taxi from Yagiya Zoological Park on the Tozai Subway Line, and about 15 minutes by bus from Sendai Station. Click [here](#) for more information.

Practice zazen meditation like some of your favorite athletes

Whether one is looking to “raise their game” or simply find peace of mind during stressful times, practicing zazen meditation can do wonders for the body and soul. Consider a visit to a Zen Buddhist temple during your future travels to Japan.

