

Excerpt from "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" by Shunryu Suzuki

MISTAKES IN PRACTICE

"It is when your practice is rather greedy that you become discouraged with it. So you should be grateful that you have a sign or warning signal to show you the weak point in your practice."

There are several poor ways of practice which you should understand. Usually when you practice zazen, you become very idealistic, and you set up an ideal or goal which you strive to attain and fulfill. But as I have often said, this is absurd. When you are idealistic, you have some gaining idea within yourself; by the time you attain your ideal or goal, your gaining idea will create another ideal. So as long as your practice is based on a gaining idea, and you practice zazen in an idealistic way, you will have no time actually to attain your ideal. Moreover, you will be sacrificing the meat of your practice. Because your attainment is always ahead, you will always be sacrificing yourself now for some ideal in the future. You end up with nothing. This is absurd; it is not adequate practice at all. But even worse than this idealistic attitude is to practice zazen in competition with someone else. This is a poor, shabby kind of practice.

Our Soto way puts an emphasis on shikan taza, or "just sitting." Actually we do not have any particular name for our practice; when we practice zazen we just practice it, and whether we find joy in our practice or not, we just do it. Even though we are sleepy, and we are tired of practicing zazen, of repeating the same thing day after day; even so, we continue our practice. Whether or not someone encourages our practice, we just do it.

Even when you practice zazen alone, without a teacher, I think you will find some way to tell whether your practice is adequate or not. When you are tired of sitting, or when you are disgusted with your practice, you should recognize this as a warning signal. You become discouraged with your practice when your practice has been idealistic. You have some gaining idea in your practice, and it is not pure enough. It is when your practice is rather greedy that you become discouraged with it. So you should be grateful that you have a sign or warning signal to show you the weak point in your practice. At that time, forgetting all about your mistake and renewing your way, you can resume your original practice. This is a very important point.

So as long as you continue your practice, you are quite safe, but as it is very difficult to continue, you must find some way to encourage yourself. As it is hard to encourage yourself without becoming involved in some poor kind of practice, to continue our pure practice by yourself may be rather difficult. This is why we have a teacher. With your teacher you will correct your practice. Of course you will have a very hard time with him, but even so, you will always be safe from wrong practice.

Most Zen Buddhist priests have had a difficult time with their masters. When they talk about the difficulties, you may think that without this kind of hardship you cannot practice zazen. But this is not true. Whether you have difficulties in your practice or not, as long as you continue it, you have pure practice in its true sense. Even when you are not aware of it, you have it. So Dogen-zenji said, "Do not think you will necessarily be aware of your own enlightenment." Whether or not you are aware of it, you have your own true enlightenment within your practice.

Another mistake will be to practice for the sake of the joy you find in it. Actually, when your practice is involved in a feeling of joy, it is not in very good shape either. Of course this is not poor practice, but compared to the true practice it is not so good. In Hinayana Buddhism, practice is classified in four ways. The best way is just to do it without having any joy in it, not even spiritual joy. This way is just to do it, forgetting your physical and mental feeling, forgetting all about yourself in your practice. This is the fourth stage, or the highest stage. The next highest stage is to have just physical joy in your practice. At this stage you find some pleasure in practice, and you will practice because of the pleasure you find in it. In the second stage you have both mental and physical joy, or good feeling. These two middle stages are stages in which you practice zazen because you feel good in your practice. The first stage is when you have no thinking and no curiosity in your practice. These four stages also apply to our Mahayana practice, and the highest is just to practice it.

If you find some difficulty in your practice, that is the warning that you have some wrong idea, so you have to be careful. But do not give up your practice; continue it, knowing your weakness. Here there is no gaining idea. Here there is no fixed idea of attainment. You do not say, "This is enlightenment," or "That is not right practice." Even in wrong practice, when you realize it and continue, there is right practice. Our practice cannot be perfect, but without being discouraged by this, we should continue it. This is the secret

of practice.

And if you want to find some encouragement in your discouragement, getting tired of practice is itself the encouragement.

You encourage yourself when you get tired of it. When you do not want to do it, that is the warning signal. It is like having a tooth-ache when your teeth are not so good. When you feel some pain in your teeth, you go to the dentist. That is our way.

The cause of conflict is some fixed idea or one-sided idea.

When everyone knows the value of pure practice, we will have little conflict in our world. This is the secret of our practice and Dogen-zenji's way. Dogen repeats this point in his book *Shobogenzo* (A Treasury of the True Dharma).

If you understand the cause of conflict as some fixed or one-sided idea, you can find meaning in various practices without being caught by any of them. If you do not realize this point you will be easily caught by some particular way, and you will say, "This is enlightenment! This is perfect practice.

This is our way. The rest of the ways are not perfect. This is the best way." This is a big mistake. There is no particular way in true practice. You should find your own way, and you should know what kind of practice you have right now.

Knowing both the advantages and disadvantages of some special practice, you can practice that special way without danger.

But if you have a one-sided attitude, you will ignore the disadvantage of the practice, emphasizing only its good part.

Eventually you will discover the worst side of the practice, and become discouraged when it is too late. This is silly. We should be grateful that the ancient teachers point out this mistake.