

*There are several poor ways to practice. When starting, you become very idealistic, setting up goals or ideals you strive to attain. This kind of striving is absurd, when you are idealistic, you have some gaining idea within. By the time you attain your ideal, you then find another.*

Working with goals and ideals is so woven into our culture and our sense of self that we should not be surprised to notice how persistent and pervasive it is, even in practice. Some Japanese practice traditions reinforce this with their focus on striving for big experience or kensho. Fortunately, we in the Soto School are saved from this more obvious distraction. There are still many more subtle forms: striving to master forms and details, responding to the challenge of long sitting periods or sesshin: Working with Zazen as if it was an endurance event. People have been injured by forcing their bodies into rigid classic forms or sitting through pain on retreats.

The most useful response is to recognise our striving and heroic tendencies for what they are, and realize that our appreciation of and connection to community are basic for cultivating a more sustainable relationship to practice. In my experience, the forms of practice that are offered in the beginning are fundamental and sane: work to develop a good stable posture: sitting either cross legged or in a chair, give yourself plenty of time to arrive and settle, and consider your own responses: physical and emotional, to the physical and emotional challenge of sitting practice. Beyond that we work with the forms of schedule and community. The experience of living outside the stream of our preferences is the basic mode of monastic practice.

What we notice in others develops and changes over time. We begin to appreciate a more modest and connected approach, rather than a reflexive striving for distinction and accomplishment. Patience and an unhurried relationship to sitting and sangha is what develops the most workable and sustainable approach to practice. Over the years, it is probably our ability to make sense of, find comfort in, and continue our practice, which becomes the most vital element in finding our own workable path.

*As long as your practice is based on a gaining idea, you will have no time to actually attain anything. You will also sacrifice the heart of your practice, thinking that accomplishment (which is always in the future) is it.*

*Sacrificing what is happening now (avoidance), for some imaginary future: and you end up with nothing. You are not attending to your present condition. Even worse is to practice in competition or comparison with others.*

The design of practice is to slow us down, rather than to make us busier or add agendas. We have to allow time to get to the zendo, and set time aside to sit with others. The challenges and comforts of community unfold over time. We find folks to connect with, to appreciate and to study with. Avoiding challenging relationships is a substantial barrier for most of us. Often it is uncertain relationships which alert us to the gaps and the rewards in our practice. The expression I use to describe the rhythm of practice: you need to build it in, rather than add it onto the life you are leading.

Most of us are not willing to reorder our priorities and make practice central in the midst of our lives challenges. It takes time to connect the practice we seek to develop with the complications we put in our way every day. But extending our appreciation for sitting into our everyday lives is what creates traction, possibility and confidence in practice.

*Our Soto way is to put an emphasis on Shikan taza: “just sitting.” There is actually no particular name for this practice, we just do it, and whether we find joy or satisfaction in our sitting: we just do it. Even when we are sleepy, or are tired of repeating the same thing day after day, we just continue.*

*Whether someone encourages us or not, we just do it.*

What Suzuki is offering here is a hint and acknowledgement of one of our most basic challenges. As students, we are always looking for what works, and tend to favor our preferences, building on our past strengths and successes.

Working with difficulties, and learning to appreciate the more challenging qualities in our lives, in the midst of sitting, on and off the cushion, is what creates stability, resilience and broader understanding. Eventually we make sense of the phrase, the Buddha Way is beyond fullness & lack.

Self power and other power is a fundamental Koan in practice. We need our own resolve & energy to practice, but we need community even more: to help locate ourselves in the midst of our many possibilities, efforts, exaggerations and limitations. My appreciation of Suzuki is what brought me to Zen Center, but it was the community and the inspiration of others which inspired me to stay.

*Even when you practice alone, without a teacher, you will find some way to tell whether your practice is adequate or not. When you are tired or discouraged*

*with your practice, you should recognize this as a warning signal. You become discouraged when your practice becomes idealistic, and you have some gaining idea. Your practice has become rather greedy. You become discouraged, and this is a warning about this weakness. But forgetting all about this mistake, you can resume your original practice.*

Learning how to maintain and refresh your practice turns out to be the most vital and fundamental of all the aspects of practice: which will allow your sitting and everyday life to inform and enrich each other. This is not an idea or information, this is simply making an appreciation of sitting practice and your life converge.

*As long as you continue your practice, you are quite safe, but as it is very difficult to continue, you must find a way to encourage yourself. It is hard to encourage yourself without becoming involved in some poor practice.*

One of the common challenges is our need for progress, and to find confirmation in our practice. These expectations stand in the way of developing patience and a more settled way of being in community. It takes time to develop confidence and find refuge in community, and perhaps even more challenging to sustain it. Finding our places, we eventually discover that friendship, openness and communication are what create connection and allow us to continue.

Religious practice, perhaps because it is so alluring and overlaid with mythology, is very easy to misunderstand. Initially we lead with our strengths and are driven by our karma and familiar patterns. There is a section in the meal chant which points to some of the benefit which flow from practice in community: “we give thanks for the sangha, which verifies our understanding.” We find ourselves appreciating the simplicity of the forms, and the freedom within sitting practice: and discover how they help moderate our pace and unclutter our thinking.

*This is why we have a teacher, and with him/her, you can correct your practice. Traditionally, you will have a very difficult time with him/her. But if you continue with a teacher, you will always be “protected” from wrong practice.*

A teacher is a useful mirror in helping us consider our relationship to practice. They may be encouraging, but for me, seeking confirmation has never been useful or productive. What seems to happen over time is a common recognition of our appreciation of practice, and our joint intention to continue. In the Japanese monastic tradition, there has been much more rigor and discipline employed. In the US, the rigor of our Soto way arises naturally over time, and those who come to appreciate its forms and balance, find ways of embracing and continuing our practice.

*But whether you have a difficult time with your teacher (or your Sangha), is not the point. If you continue this sitting (and these relationships), you have pure practice in its true sense. Even when you are not aware of it.*

*Dogen: Whether you are aware of it or not, you have your own true enlightenment within your practice.*

How can we benefit from something we are not even aware of? In fact this is our constant and universal condition. We are supported by the entire planet, including all of the life forms: sentient and insentient. Dogen's *Mountains and Rivers Sutra* describes all creation expounding the inexhaustible dharma. When you allow yourself the time and opportunity to appreciate the creation and our friends and partners in this life, the simple and the radiant moments and elements which we share with all beings come more clearly into view. City Trees We become less enmeshed in our travails, judgements and plans and become more alert to the unfolding present. Time unhindered by dread or impatience, allows us to experience the spaces that open up in the midst of our anxieties and self limiting calculations.

There are many statements in the sutras, and in Suzuki's far more accessible words, which become resonant over many years of practice. That is how it should be. His words extend from his own living experience and appreciation. You do not experience the joys and challenges of marriage or parenthood until you live through them. Here we have his testimonial of what practice feels like over a lifetime of dedication, struggle and restraint.

Buddhist practice is an experiment in growing up. It takes time, patience, the support of many people and the legacy of an ancient tradition to absorb it. Practice does not necessarily reveal its shape or its character in the early going. However, the Buddha Way is good, even at the beginning. It is also the work and challenge of a lifetime.