

Brad Warner  
Week 2, *Daily Practice: How to Get on the Cushion Everyday*  
“Goalless Practice”  
July 14, 2014

Hi, it's Brad Warner again talking to you about daily practice. And last time I left off talking about goalless practice. My girlfriend asked me, “If nothing happens, what happens? What's the point?” That's kind of the crucial question if you're doing this type of meditation, because you are not seeking anything. So it's very easy to kind of say, “Well, why do it at all?” And I brought an article here that I thought I would read to you and I don't feel too bad about reading this article to you because—as far as I know—I've only ever seen two copies of this in the world. So you're not going to find this anywhere unless you go to Tassajara and look in their library. That's where I found it.

It is a compilation that a guy named Rick Dreher put together in 2004 of essays of Sawaki Kodo or Kodo Sawaki, as he's more commonly known over here. He was a Zen teacher, Japanese teacher, who traveled around Japan. His story is kind of interesting. He was orphaned when he was quite young and sent to live with a variety of rather horrible relatives, who didn't really want to be burdened with a kid, and this kind of set him on a rather unique path in life. And when he was a teenager, he left the home of this uncle—who was a gambler and didn't really care about having a kid, and was sort of neglectful towards him—and walked all the way across Japan from somewhere in, I think either Tokyo or Yokohama, over to Eihei-ji Temple, which is on the other side of Japan, which is sort of like walking across California, not length wise, but horizontally across California, if you want to know the size of Japan.

It's a long way to walk, and he became a monk there at Eihei-ji when he was a teenager. And he became very convinced that one of the biggest problems in Japanese Zen was that the teachers and the monks and the priests were not very concerned with zazen practice—they'd lost the plot—that zazen was actually obviously the essential thing that they were supposed to be doing, but they weren't doing it anymore. So he had these—he would lead these retreats, which were zazen only retreats, that didn't have any chanting or any other things and would just strictly concentrate on zazen. But one of his famous phrases is, “Zazen is good for nothing.” So I'm going to read you several quotes and then just comment about them from Sawaki.

“What is zazen good for? Good for nothing. As long as this good for nothing practice does not penetrate our bones and we really practice what is good for nothing, it won't be good for anything.” So as long as the practice is not good for nothing, it won't be good for anything, which I think is an interesting way to put

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it. So this practice is good for nothing, meaning it's not for establishing something, it's not for making you a better person or more spiritual or for having the experience. It is for getting into your true experience, it is for learning how to not be chasing after something other than where you are right now. So any time you have a goal, even if that goal seems very lofty and beautiful, like enlightenment or becoming a better person, this is a construct in your mind, it's something you've invented. So you have an idea of what enlightenment should be or an idea of what being a better person should be or being spiritual, whatever it is, there's all sorts of goals you can put in there; but it's not what's going on at this moment, it's something that's off in the future or off somewhere else or embodied in someone else.

What we're trying to do in this practice is get to our real experience unadorned—as it is—and see that for what it is, and the results are surprising. For me, when I finally started to understand what life, what my own life really was, what I discovered was it was much more subtle and beautiful and important than I ever could have imagined—my own real experience. And I don't mean that implying some vast grand experience; I mean the experience of sitting on the subway, hearing the guy two seats over complain to the other guy about how he's picking his nose. That's what I heard this morning when I was on my way over here. That is a subtle and grand experience and important. So every experience you have is cosmic in scope and that's what good-for-nothing is about.

So here's another quote from him: “Practicing what is good for nothing with confidence, isn't it worth a try?” I like that. I'll just leave that as is. Another one: “You say you would like to try zazen in order to become a better person. Become a better person by doing zazen? How stupid. How could a person ever become something better in the first place?” So becoming a better person—what's interesting is over time, if you look at your progress through your practice, do you discover that things become better? There's a book that just came out recently, which I haven't read, but I've read some of the publicity for it and I like at least the publicity. And I think it's called *Ten Percent Better*, something along those lines. It's about a guy who was a newscaster and had kind of a freak-out on the air, and decided to try meditation. And he came to the conclusion that meditation made him ten percent better. And that was a significant thing. And I think that's really a good thing.

So we tend to compare ourselves to others or compare ourselves to what we think we ought to be or should be or what we think other people think we should be and

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all this other stuff. What we're really trying to get at is what we are right now. So becoming a better person, that'll happen gradually, but if you—you become a better person by stopping wanting to become a better person, ironically.

The next one is something that I mentioned in the last bit. He says, “You say Zen means to empty your mind, right? You will never have an empty mind as long as you don't die.” So if you find that you're becoming distracted in your practice, that, in itself, is not a problem. Distractions are just part of what happens while you're doing Zen practice. My most frequently asked question is, “Dear Brad, this and that and the other thing and you can plug in a whole bunch of things are happening while I'm doing zazen. Am I doing it right?” And it's always some kind of distraction I'm thinking about, and we do this—I did this when I started practicing and it took me a long time to learn what I'm doing to tell you very quickly.

You think that your particular brand of distraction is somehow unique or it's never been encountered before or is evidence that you're doing it wrong, etc, etc, but it's not. Because you are a unique human being, your sort of distraction is different from anybody else's. There's certain categories of distraction, the sex distraction or the possession distraction, the thing you want to get or things like this. I had an interesting conversation with a guy who came to me and he was saying he was constantly distracted by thoughts of sex during his meditation and along the conversation I asked him what he did for a living and he said, “Oh, I'm a gynecologist.” And I said, “Well, there you go.”

He had so sort of compartmentalized his thoughts, that he had led himself to believe that looking at women's privates all day long wasn't making him think of sex, but obviously it was. And so it's whatever you put into your mind during the day is going to manifest itself. So this is what I meant last time by saying the secretions of your mind are like the secretions of your stomach. You've put things in there. You've had experiences, conversations, random things you saw while surfing the internet. They're all in there and so when you sit, these things will start to bubble up. In and of itself, it doesn't matter if it's sex, if it's money, if it's whatever. Just keep sitting. And as I said in a previous installment, adjust your posture; you'll find that helps. It doesn't fix everything instantly, but it helps.

Here's another one: “You think that things are supposed to become better because you practice zazen. No, zazen means to forget about better and worse.” So that's one of the things—that's his way of saying something that Dogen says in

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*Fukanzazengi*, which I read last time, a little bit of it. I didn't read this bit. He says, “And yet if there is a hairsbreadth deviation is like—it is like the gap between heaven and earth. If the least like or dislike arises, the mind is lost in confusion.” That's what happens and just because the mind is lost in confusion, doesn't mean you're doing it wrong, it just means the mind is lost in confusion. Keep sitting. But like and dislike are very powerful things because they drive us towards living. We need to be able to discern what's good for us from what's bad for us. So we are hardwired to do that and throughout life, we're making comparisons, like, “Am I doing this right?” “Am I doing it wrong?” When you do zazen, there isn't a right or wrong.

There's a right or wrong in terms of posture and in terms of just doing it, meaning doing it as opposed to not doing it, but if you're actually doing it, you're probably doing it right. There's very few ways you can screw up zazen. You just keep on—and the fact that it isn't what you think it ought to be is not a problem. That's just something else you're sitting with. You sit with the thought of, “This is not right. I hate this.” I can't tell you how many times I have sat zazen, especially in long retreats and things, where the main thought on my mind is, “I got to get out of here. I have to—no, this is not working.” But I found in retrospect that the ability to sit through that kind of thing has been incredibly useful and I'll give you an example, which I didn't really plan to give, but I think it's useful.

I worked for a company most of the time when I was doing my Zen practice. My most sort of intense Zen practice, was when I lived in Japan. But I didn't move to Japan to go to a temple and study Zen. I went to Japan initially to get a job as an English teacher and then quit that job and started working for a company called Tsuburaya Productions, which makes a television series called Ultraman, which is a really cool TV series about a gigantic, hundred and fifty foot tall super hero with big bug eyes who fights big Godzilla type monsters. It's not an animation, it's done in live action. It's really good. Anyway, I'm not going to talk about that too much. But I had an incident where every year, they would introduce a new Ultraman character. This is just backstory. You don't really need to know too much about, but every year they would introduce a new Ultraman character.

Well one year, instead of introducing him the way they normally did, they decided to keep the name and image of the character a secret. But nobody really conveyed that to us, the people who were working in the international division. That's where I worked. And they gave us a bunch of postcards and these postcards are called, in Japanese, nengajo. These are cards that go out at New

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Year’s Eve—New Year’s Day, sorry. And the post office knows that a card stamped nengajo in it does not get delivered until January 1st. Well, if you send a nengajo outside of Japan, they can’t even read the phrase that says nengajo, so they just deliver it whenever. And I sent a couple of these out because I thought that’s that I was supposed to do with them because they dump a bunch of postcards on the office and they’re promotional materials, so I’m thinking, “Well, I should be sending these out to people who write about Ultraman.” I send them out, immediately one of the people who got them, put them on the internet and I got in huge trouble because this was not supposed to be—he got it on December 28th or something and he put it on the internet and it was not supposed to be seen until January 1st.

So I got in huge trouble and there was this great sort of meeting that they set up, which is sort of a brilliant Japanese kind of thing, where they kind of put me in the center of the room and I’m surrounded by all of the board of directors, the powerful people in the company and they’re sort of grilling me in Japanese, which I never—I could speak Japanese, but I was never brilliant at it, about why I did this horrible thing. The interesting thing was this entire setup was made to make me feel unsettled and bad, nervous, upset, whatever as punishment basically, kind of thing. But I had sat zazen for a long time. I had been doing this practice for a long time and I kind of faced myself over and over, how I judge myself, how I punish myself, how I criticize myself, how I do all of that. And I just, without any goal in mind, had been sitting every day twice a day, sometimes for longer retreats of several days at a time, watching over and over my mind do that to me.

So I found that when I entered that room, I almost had to playact the thing because I knew that it was in my best interest in terms of keeping my job that I pretend to be remorseful and that this punishment tactic had worked, but I didn’t feel anything. I mean I felt something, I wasn’t without feeling or numb. But there was nothing this group of people surrounding me could do that was worse than I could do to myself. And in real terms, they could have done a lot to me because if I’d lost that job, I would have lost my standing with immigration, which would have meant not deportation, but it would have meant I would have had to get out of the country pretty quickly and I had already been living there for several years, had a home, had a wife. It was a fairly big deal that I was facing, but I found nothing was really working in terms of that, because I had already faced it for myself. So that, I think, is a great testament to the usefulness of this goalless practice.

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So I'd just like to read one more thing from this—two more little quotes from Sawaki that I like and I'll leave you with those two to think about until next time. “How could that which is eternal and boundless ever satisfy our human desires? How could that which fills the whole universe ever fit into the frame of our human minds?” So this again is a testament to this sort of goalless practice. When we have a goal, when we have something we want, it's something that is part of our desire system, it's part of what we think we want and we think we need. And what we're actually doing for is something boundless, something rather cosmic, not to sound like too much of a hippie, and it can't fit into our human minds.

So that's where I'd like to leave you there for this installment. Again, the homework is exactly the same as it was last time and is going to be exactly the same in the next couple of these segments. Just practice. If you can't manage any more than five minutes, do five minutes. It's better to do five minutes than to skip it. It's better to do one minute than to skip it. I would recommend, if you've been doing it for a week, that twenty minutes is a good sort of beginner's speed version. In certain sects of zazen, in the Rinzai sect, they generally do twenty or twenty-five minute sittings and Soto, which is the type I learned, we generally do thirty or forty minute sittings. So if you want to try thirty or forty minutes, be my guest. But see if you can get through twenty minutes of sitting twice a day, or at least once a day, and we'll talk again next time.