

Brad Warner

Week 1, *Daily Practice: How to Get on the Cushion Every Day*

June 30th, 2014

“Beginning a Daily Practice”

Hello, I’m Brad Warner, author of the book *Hardcore Zen, Sit Down and Shut Up*, a couple other books, and the newest one is *There Is No God and He Is Always with You*. I’m a Zen teacher, ordained by a guy named Gudo Nishijima in Japan, and I’m here to entertain you with retreat stuff. I should apologize because I haven’t done an online retreat before, so it’s a little bit of an unusual experience.

But I thought I would start out this retreat by telling you a little bit about how I got into Zen practice and how I do it because the purpose of this retreat is to encourage you—I was going to say teach you, but not exactly—how to do a meditation practice every day. The reason I think this is important is because it was one of the first things that was conveyed to me by my very first teacher, so I’ll give you a little bit of background about how that happened.

I was a student at Kent State University, and I was also the bass player in a punk rock band—a hardcore band called Zero Defects—and I had been interested in eastern philosophies, sort of vaguely interested in them for some time for various reasons. My family lived in Africa when I was a child, and I think I first sort of saw Indian iconography—and things like that—in Africa and got interested in learning more about that when I became an adult. So just kind of on a whim as the last addition—you know, you have a certain number of course hours you’re supposed to take each semester or something—I took a class called Zen Buddhism, you know, and it was an afterthought. It was just like, well, da da da da, and I’ll put this in now. And that class kind of changed my life and set the course for everything I’ve done since then completely unexpectedly.

But the course was taught by a guy named Tim McCarthy, who was a Zen teacher who had studied with a guy named Kobun Chino, a Japanese Zen teacher in America. And one of the first things Tim said about Zen practice is that the most important thing about Zen practice was to do it every day. And I found the philosophy and the way of life and the approach to things in Zen to be so incredibly sensible, and Tim was to me a very sort of convincing person. He wasn’t convincing to everybody, but I’m probably the only person who stuck with it after that class. But I really liked him and I thought, well, Tim is not BS-ing me. I’m going to do this thing every day because I wanted to understand what it was about. And so one of the things he said was, “Do it every day. Even if you can only do five lousy minutes do five lousy minutes,” so that became my practice. I did zazen every day even if it was only for five minutes or ten minutes or whatever I could manage I would squeeze it in. So what I’d like to do first is show you the practice.

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Now I think most of what I want to say in this retreat will be applicable, or I’m hoping it’s applicable to other practices, but I’m going to show you what I do in order to kind of make it clear. And what I do is mostly based on the instructions of a guy named Dogen, whom I’m sure some of you have heard of. He was a Zen teacher, a Japanese Zen teacher who lived in the 13th century, wrote a lot of books and writings about how to practice Zen, and he wrote a lot of nuts and bolts things. And he wrote something called “Fukan Zazengi.”

I’m not going to read you the entire “Fukan Zazengi,” but I’m going to read you two paragraphs here and then give you a demonstration of what I think those paragraphs mean. It says, “At your sitting place spread out a thick mat and put a cushion on it. Sit either in the full lotus or half-lotus position. In the full lotus position first place your right foot on your left thigh; then place your left foot on your right thigh. In the half-lotus position simply place your left foot on your right thigh. Tie your robes loosely and arrange them neatly. Then place your right hand on your left, on your left foot...” it should be—this translation says leg, “...and your left hand on your right palm, thumb tips touching lightly. Straighten your body and sit upright, leaning either to—neither left nor right, neither forward nor backward. Align your ears with your shoulders and your nose with your navel. Rest the tip of your tongue against the roof of your mouth with the teeth together and lips shut. Always keep your eyes open and breathe softly through your nose. Once you have adjusted your posture, take a breath and exhale fully. Rock your body right and left and settle into steady immovable sitting. Think of not thinking. Not thinking? What kind of thinking is that? Non-thinking. This is the essential art of zazen.” Excuse me.

So that’s the nuts and bolts of the thing. And some temples chant that, which I find—whenever I go to one of those temples I find that hilarious because you’re actually sitting there chanting, “At your sitting place spread out a thick mat and...” these instructions. I think it’s kind of goofy, but that’s a tradition. So right now I am sitting on a zafu and zabuton, a kind of a standard thing, and maybe we can get just a shot of what it is. I kind of figure about half of you watching this are so familiar with this you don’t need it and half of you might not have seen one of these. So a zafu is a round cushion. It’s made for sitting. I’m sitting on two of them to get a better—so I’m higher up so the camera can get me. I usually just sit on one. And a zabuton is a mat underneath. And zafu is just a Japanese word that means “sit cushion,” and zabuton is “sitting futon,” the buton part of it is the word “futon” that you’re familiar with from going to the Bed Bath & Beyond or wherever they sell futons. A futon in Japanese is many, many different sizes. So you’re sitting on this, and this is what Dogen is describing.

Now when I first started doing zazen I was a broke college student, you know, subsisting on whatever I got in my work as a part-time mail carrier and a

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dishwasher, so I didn't have the \$60 to go out and spend on a zafu and then another 60 on the zabuton, so I would use a variety of things. I brought this over to show you. This is the sort of thing I would use. I just picked it up. There's some chairs over there in the corner, but I would use things like this, a chair cushion. Rolled up towels I found worked pretty well because you can always mash them up into a vaguely zafu-like shape, jackets. Bed pillows not so good because they tend to be a little too smooshy, but I used a variety of things. So just not having a zafu is not a good excuse to not do the practice. You can always work out something, and there's a lot of things it doesn't have to be.

So when I sit I do the posture as Dogen recommends. I usually sit in a half-lotus myself. I used to do full lotus, but then my knees started complaining about it, so I now do half and half; sometimes do half-lotus, sometimes do full lotus. It's not that important. I think proper posture is important in Zen practice, and I say that a lot. And when I say that on the internet I always get a bunch of angry people making comments that I'm being cruel to people who have bad legs and bad knees and all this other stuff. The knee position is not all that crucial, but when I'm talking about proper posture I'm talking about the whole body being in the proper alignment. I'm not a big fan of trying to do zazen practice on chairs. I think if it's the absolute last resort and you can't do it any other way, then better to do it on a chair than not to do it at all. I've even talked to people who have very— what was the person—MS and horrible diseases like that and said that if you have to do it lying down on your back that's better than not doing it at all, but I don't recommend to able-bodied people that they should do it in chairs or lying on their back because it's not the same thing. These are workarounds for people who have no other choice. If you can do it at all you should make the effort to do the proper posture because it makes a difference.

I always say that Zen practice, zazen practice, is as much a physical practice as yoga, so whereas there's downward facing dog in yoga, and going like this is not downward facing dog, there is a posture of doing zazen and kind of leaning back or being sloppy about it. That's not zazen. Or sitting in something that, if you have to sit on a chair don't use the back of the chair, because chairs are funny in that they force your body into a specific position that we imagine is natural, but it's not really because the legs like to be tilted forward a little so that the upper body can balance itself. And when you're on a chair that tilt is gone. You're tilted kind of flat like this, which means you're sort of slightly tilted back as far as your body is concerned, and so you need the back of the chair and you want to rest in it. So that's my recommendation there.

So when he talks about the hand position, he talks about putting this hand on the foot and this hand like that, and that's what you get there. You get your hands looking like this. It's called the cosmic mudra. If you're not able to do the half-

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lotus you kind of just put the cosmic mudra somewhere around here around your bellybutton. I see people doing this and doing this. You know, it's not like it's evil or satanic to do that, but I think there's something to this posture. It's been used for thousands of years, and there's a reason for that. It's not arbitrary, so I like to do it this way.

But the thing that I think is more important than any of this stuff with your hands and with your legs is your spine. So we human beings are unique in the animal kingdom. There's no other animal that we know of, at least on this planet, that stands erect like we do. The other two-legged animals like birds, they are tilted forwards, and kangaroos and things like that are tilted forwards. The other great apes walk on their knuckles, but we walk upright with this odd posture, and that's what we're trying to do, this uniquely human posture that is our birthright, I suppose. So what you're trying to do is balance your upper body on your hips so that you are not using a lot of effort but you are not also being lazy, so it's this sort of position between being very effortful and being very effortless, so it's a balance pose, like in yoga, like the tree pose or one of those poses in yoga.

You're trying to establish balance. And the best thing to do if your mind gets foggy, and we'll talk about that later, is to adjust your posture. I heard this from my second teacher, who was Gudo Nishijima. When I moved to Japan I started studying with another Zen teacher, and he said that if your mind is cloudy adjust your posture, and I remember distinctly when I heard that thinking that's a load of crap. That's not going to do anything. And it's been more than 20 years since I heard that and sitting pretty much every day for those 20 years I have never found a moment where I was deep in thought or distraction and my posture was still good. So every time, at least in my experience, that I am going off and daydreaming or getting kind of distracted, the posture follows that distraction. So you notice the distraction first. Probably, if you're like me, you don't even notice your posture has gotten weird. You've noticed that you're distracted so adjust your posture. Come back and just keep doing that, and if you have to do it every two minutes, that's what kind of day you're having.

The thing that hangs people up most in this bit of instruction is that bit of the thought of not thinking, and it is different from thinking. That's how my teacher translates it, and the translation I brought in today says, “It is non-thinking.” There is a peculiar idea that Zen practice or meditation practice in general is about emptying your mind, and recently when I was working on a new book I decided to try to figure out where that came from, because none of my teachers ever said, “empty your mind.” I never found it in Dogen's writings or in any other writings about meditation that I've read, and I don't claim to have read them all, but I've read, you know, a fair share, and I've never seen any meditation teacher say that meditation is about emptying your mind. Yet if you go on the internet you will

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find many people saying that. And I actually found the quote and I brought it, so I'd like to read it for you: “Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless, like water. Now you put water in a cup it becomes a cup. You put water in a bottle it becomes a water. You put it in a teapot it becomes a teapot. Now water can flow and it—or it can crash. Be water, my friend.” And the quote is from Bruce Lee, the martial arts actor, and it was in a character he played in a 1971 TV series called “Longstreet.”

So I don't know if that's the first place it appears, but I think that that must've been terribly influential. You know, people sort of heard that and it sort of went out into the atmosphere. So the people who are telling you that meditation is about emptying your mind are quoting Bruce Lee, who's probably not the best source for advice on how to meditate. So it's not about emptying your mind. Emptying your mind has nothing to do with it. Kodo Zawaki, who was one of my teacher's teachers, said that the only time you have a completely empty mind is when you're dead, so don't try to empty your mind. But what you are trying to do thought-wise is allow thoughts to just happen. This is something that we are generally not familiar with in our culture, and probably I would think—having lived in Japan for quite a while—it's not just a western culture thing. It's all over the world. I don't think most of us human beings are used to this idea that we can allow thoughts to just happen. We imagine that we are our thoughts, so we place tremendous importance on what's going on thought-wise.

But Shunryu Suzuki, who was the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* had a way of expressing it that I think is really good. He said, “Thoughts are the secretions of your brain the same as stomach acid is the secretions of your stomach,” so your stomach is sitting there in the middle of your body secreting stomach acid and just doing its business because its business is digesting the things that you ate. Your brain is also doing a bit of business, which is digesting what you've put into your brain during the day or during the week or during the month, so thinking is happening. There's no need to stop that; in fact, I would say it's probably unhealthy to try to stop that the same way that trying to make your stomach stop secreting stomach acid because you don't like it or something would be unhealthy. So you don't want to stop the secretions of your stomach, and you don't want to stop the secretions of your brain.

So just allow thinking to occur, but Dogen uses this phrase, *mushiryo* or *fushiryo*, which is a Japanese word, and the word *shiryo* is not the usual Japanese word for thinking. That would be *omou*. *Shiryo* is actually more like consideration, so what Dogen is pointing to here is not just the automatic sort of bubbling up of images into the head, but deliberate consideration of those images so you're not chasing these images around. You're just allowing them to be. At first this is extremely

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difficult because you’re not used to it, but that difficulty is not a problem. That’s just part of what you’re doing.

This practice is difficult for anyone who does it. That’s the reason that they build giant statues to people whose only claim to fame is that they could sit still for a long time, because sitting still and being quiet and facing yourself is a difficult task. There’s another quote I wanted to give you about somebody. This is Charles Tart. I’m not sure who he is, but he’s quoted in a book called *Zig Zag Zen* and that book happens to be about why—well, I’m simplifying things—but part of the book is a lot of people explaining why psychedelic drugs are a much better path towards enlightenment than meditation, a position I happen to disagree with very strongly. And Charles Tart is one of those who believed at least when he said this that drugs were much better than meditation. He says, “Meditation is—was far more difficult than I imagined, and a lot of meditating was spent daydreaming, rebuking myself for daydreaming and getting nowhere. It’s clear that many of us westerners have such hyperactive minds and complex psychological dynamics that it is very difficult to quiet and discipline our minds enough to make any real progress along the meditative path.”

Everybody feels that way, and I don’t like the implied racism of that statement, either, that there’s some sort of oriental mind that’s better at meditating. Everybody’s mind is pretty much lousy at meditating. Well, I think it’s a natural activity that we do, but I think we have covered that up so thoroughly in our various societies that everybody has trouble with it no matter where you’re from, and there’s nothing particular to the so-called Western mind that makes it any more difficult. It’s difficult for everybody. It was difficult for Buddha 2,500 years ago and it’s going to be difficult for you, but that just means it’s a worthwhile practice. So you just sit there, and the type of zazen that I learned is called *shikantaza*, and *shikantaza* means “just sitting,” so what you’re attempting to do is just to sit with no goal in mind or no object of concentration that you’re trying to focus on.

You are just sitting. So whether you’re counting your breath or doing any of this stuff is kind of unimportant. The only time I ever resort to anything like counting my breath is when I’m entirely too distracted. When I was going through a divorce several years ago, I found that counting my breath was a usable thing, but in general I don’t do any of that. I’m just sitting. And what you’re trying to do is be purely within that moment of sitting, whatever it is. My teacher used to say when you brought up to him something that was distracting in practice he would say, “That’s just the contents of your zazen that day.” But this idea of goallessness is difficult for a lot of us because the old argument that the people who make the argument seem to think trumps everything is that, “Well, if your goal is to be goalless then that’s a goal, too. Ha ha!” Well, yes and no.

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Yes, semantically you can say that the goal of having no goal is just a goal, and so you still have a goal. But in the actual practice of setting your sights on not having a goal it's actually something you can do. So you're making goalless practice your aim rather than your goal, so you're kind of—it's like you're pointing an arrow and hoping that it hits somewhere near the target, but you're not too concerned about the target. You're more concerned about the aim. And when we come back again in the next installment I will talk more about goalless practice, but what I would like for you to do, and this is going to be my homework in every installment, is to meditate.

Since this retreat is about learning to meditate every day, what I'd like you to do is just start it. Figure out a way to work your day such that you can do a certain amount of meditation. I've shown you what I do. You can do another sort of meditation if you want but, whatever you decide to do, do it daily. And if you can only fit in five minutes, do five minutes. My recommendation, as far as time goes, is if you have enough time to do this the best thing is sit as long as you can stand it and then add another five minutes. I think those five minutes of “I can't stand this anymore” are actually extremely beneficial to practice, so unless you have to, of course, don't just stop when you start to hate it. Keep going through that bit of hating meditating. So we'll return again in the next installment and talk about goalless practice. Thank you.