

Okay, Hi. I'm Brad Warner again. And this is the last segment of this retreat. And we've been talking about daily zazen practice or daily meditation practice in general. I'm talking about zazen. I try to be ecumenical about my meditation practice, but also I feel like if I didn't think shikantaza-style zazen was the best sort of meditation practice, I wouldn't be devoting myself to it. So I would be lying if I said that all meditation practices are equal, because I don't think they're all quite equal. But I want to encourage you to do whatever practice works for you. I don't think they're all equal, but that doesn't mean that the practice I do is going to be best for everybody.

There may be practices that are better for other people than this one is for those people, but this has been the one that has been best for me. So there isn't really any secret to doing a daily practice other than just doing it. My own daily practice has been like that. I started off when I first began the practice; I was very gung ho about it. I was very impressed by Tim McCarthy, my first teacher, who I told you about in the first segment. And I wanted to practice and work on this thing. But that lasted about a year. And after that I kind of slacked off because before I started doing Zen, I hadn't actually read much about Zen. I had read a couple of sentences here or there. I barely knew what the words meant.

So I started reading about Zen and I started reading about enlightenment experiences and things that were supposedly supposed to happen, and I would get disappointed and frustrated like, “Well, that's not happening for me. Might as well give up.” And I would give up and just stop practicing. And what would happen over and over again was the same pattern would repeat itself, and it took me a while to catch on. But I would stop doing zazen. And as I stopped doing zazen, the sort of noise level and distraction level in my head and in my body as well would start to rise the longer I went without practicing. And after a while, it would kind of reach a point where I'm going, “What the hell is wrong?” And I would search my mind and think, “Well, what am I doing differently? Am I not getting enough sleep? Am I drinking too much coffee? I'm not drinking enough coffee?” You know, all this stuff. And then I'd think, “Well, I'm not doing zazen, am I? Maybe I better get back to doing zazen again.”

And I would kind of grudgingly and gruntingly go back to doing a daily practice, which honestly most of the time didn't feel that good—but I would just do it. Just get up in the morning, set up my little cushion, and do my zazen for 10, or 15, or

20 minutes, half an hour maybe if I was feeling really gung ho that day, and just get back into it. And things would get a little better. But I'd soon kind of forget about how much better it was, and then I'd slack off again. And I came back and forth and did this for years like this until finally I just decided, “Okay, enough of slacking off. I'm just going to keep doing this.”

And I feel in a lot of ways it mirrors my experience of learning to brush my teeth. And I think everybody has had this experience. You know, when you first—your first experience of brushing your teeth is your mom or dad, or whoever is taking care of you, is shoving a toothbrush in your mouth and forcing it in and making you do this thing. Eventually your parent or caregiver gets tired of doing this and then you have to do it yourself, but it's always a matter of being shouted out like, “Did you brush your teeth, Brad?” “Oh, no.” “Go brush your teeth.” And then you go brush your teeth and go, “Uh...” and you do a kind of half-baked job at it and you do it.

At some point in your life—usually in adolescence when you start to notice opposite or same sex, or whatever you're attracted to—you start to think that maybe having fresh breath might be a good idea. And you're kind of more motivated to brush your teeth. So you start to have an experience that gives you kind of a sense of why you brush your teeth. But then, after a while, it becomes just a thing you do. I know it is for me. I get up in the morning and one of the first things I want to do is brush my teeth, you know, and it's the last thing I do before I go to bed. And I don't think about why. I don't think about cavities. I don't think too much about fresh breath. I don't really even consider it. It just happens. I just do it.

And that's the way zazen is for me. I don't think about enlightenment, or being a better person or how it's going to calm my nerves or whatever. I don't. I just do it because it's become a habit. And I have heard that if you do anything for 100 days straight it becomes a habit and it becomes less difficult to continue it after that. I didn't count the number of days I did zazen, but I'm sure it was more than 100 and it has become a habit. It has become ingrained. Until such a point as it becomes a habit, it's always going to be a struggle. And even when it becomes a habit it's still a little bit of a struggle. There are days when I get up and I don't want to do zazen. I'm lucky enough that I've kind of established myself just enough as a writer that I don't starve to death. I don't make a lot of money with these books I put out. But I don't starve to death.

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So I don't have to go to a day job, which I had to do most of the time that I was practicing until about four years ago. So these days I can sit zazen any time, but I tend to do it first thing in the morning and last thing before going to bed, just like I did when I worked a real job. When I had a real job, I remember going through a process of thinking, “Well, how can I rearrange my schedule to make zazen fit into it?” And I realized when I thought about what I do everyday, there was a lot of time when I was just kind of goofing off and I didn't really need to be doing whatever it was I was doing. And if I just organized that a little better, I could still goof off and I could fit the zazen in. So that's what I did.

If you're a parent or if you have a job with very difficult hours, that's going to be more difficult. But I think most of us kind find a way around it. I've known people who were raising five small children and could—I know particularly one guy I'm thinking of who was still able to find time to do Zen practice, which I thought was really admirable. But he just organized his schedule and made it work. So if you want to do it, you can do it. And it's important to continue it everyday. And I think it's not so important that it be an amazing spiritual, wonderful experience, every time.

Most of the time zazen, for me, is these days mildly pleasant. Occasionally, there is a burst of insight or something else like that will happen. Most of the time, mildly pleasant. Occasionally, mildly unpleasant. Occasionally, extraordinarily unpleasant. But no matter what, I keep doing it. It's like an exercise routine. You just do it. The reason to keep doing it everyday is because it's a bit like an exercise routine in a lot of ways. You don't get the benefits. I think the metaphor can be extended fairly far with the exercise routine thing. You don't get the—if you keep doing an exercise routine, you'll start to notice results. You'll get, you know, you'll lose weight, or gain muscle weight, and whatever it is you're trying to do. And you'll start to see something happening and you'll start to go, “Okay. Well, now this finally makes sense.”

But also, same with meditation and exercise plan, these results take a good while of struggle before they start to manifest. And you can feel like you're totally wasting your time for a long time, but you want it because that's a part of the process. And once you sort of have the benefit, though you don't stop the exercise practice because I think we all understand that if we stop it. Well, you know, for a few months, maybe you can slack off your exercise for a year, I don't know, and still look pretty good. But after a while all that's going to stop. You know, you're just going—you're going to start get pudgy. And you're going to start to get soft

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around middle and everything is going to fall apart because you didn't keep up the routine. So that's the reason. You keep up the routine and keep it going. And you keep it going just like an exercise routine even if you don't want to do it that day.

You know, you can skip a day here or there and it's not going to be devastating but you want to keep it up as a regular thing. And I think this is much more important than doing some kind of massive extended practice all at once. I, in my capacity as a Zen teacher, run a lot of retreats. You know, I go around the world these days. I go to Europe a lot and do Zen retreats, which are three, or four, or sometimes seven days long. And I'm constantly amazed at people who come to those retreats who don't have a daily practice, who have never done practice at all. Because it took me—I did daily practice, daily-ish practice, I just told you about how it was—for about 10 years before I ever went on my first Zen retreat. So I don't understand people who just come to it first thing. But that's not a shame.

What I do find kind of a shame is that I run across people who don't do any zazen other than retreats. Like once a year they'll do a massive retreat and then they're not doing it at all. You know, that kind of practice can sometimes give you an experience because the practice itself is so different from your daily routine that it seems kind of magical. But I think what we really want to do with the meditation practice is kind of get beyond that magical stage, because that's where the real magic happens. That's where you realize that the magic isn't just a special moment like, “Ding,” the magic moment. It's every moment. Every moment is magic and special. And you do this by constantly—by actually—doing what is in my considered opinion the most boring thing in the world. There is really very little.

You know, one of the great common expressions for boredom is, “I'm just sitting here watching paint dry.” Well, that's what you're doing when you do Zen practice. You're actually just sitting there staring at a wall. You know, a blank wall that's not doing anything or going anywhere. And to make it even worse, if you do it according to the instructions Dogen gave, you're opening your eyes. So one of the reasons we open our eyes during Zen practice rather than close them, as a lot of meditation practices recommend, is because we want to maintain our connection with that boring, blank wall.

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If we close our eyes, you tend to get into your head, and a lot of beautiful things can happen there inside your mind that are very interesting. And what we're doing is kind of avoiding that interesting stuff and just kind of staring at this extremely mundane thing. And the reason we stare at this extremely mundane thing is because we want to get past the idea of things being mundane or not mundane. So we're looking at this wall, watching it be a wall. Looking at ourselves, watching ourselves be ourselves and seeing what we are. And what you are is incredible, and vast, and unique. One of the things I say a lot of times to people who come to me and ask about trying to change or improve themselves with Zen practice is that it's not really about self-improvement.

What we are, in terms of the universe, I think is a little bit like a puzzle piece. We are each individual pieces of this puzzle that makes up the picture that is the universe. And as a puzzle piece, an individual puzzle piece needs to be a certain shape, a certain size, a certain color in order to work in the puzzle. And if you are using your practice to try to make yourself the most round, white puzzle piece there ever could be that may be very beautiful, but it won't fit the puzzle anymore. So what we're trying to do is kind of come into our true self.

There's a lot of confusion in Buddhist circles about this “no self” or “self.” And that's because there are different ways to use the word “self.” And while we don't believe in a permanent abiding self, which is unchanging and travels through life as a single individual unit that experiences things and yet remains unchanged by them, that's obviously not what happens if you start looking at it. But there is kind of a thing you can also call “self,” which is your own unique position. So Dogen expresses it by saying, “We are the eyes and ears with which it experiences itself.” And the “it” that he refers to in this statement is the “big it.” The big unnamable thing that is the universe that some people like to call “God.” I wrote a book in which I express my idea that God may not be such a bad word for that thing as we've come to think of it.

A lot of us who are sort of the non-theistic bent, which I count myself as among those or slightly more, edging towards atheism, could learn a lot by just kind of settling down and accepting that maybe there is something, which deserves that name, God. But it's not far away and it's not unreachable. And it's not different from yourself. Your own experience is the experience of God. It's God experiencing the universe as 50-year-old ex-punk rocker—well, continuous punk rocker. It's whatever it is. And so in order to understand this experience, we travel

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deeply into it by just silently allowing it to be as it is. You don't need anything else.

I did talk about the usefulness and necessity of having a teacher. And I think that's because of the way human beings relate to each other. Nobody lives in a vacuum. But you don't need an experience. You don't need a book or a teaching, or something that's going to come from outside and fix you. What is really necessary is to see what you're actually doing. You are in the process of being part of the universe as it develops itself and that is an important thing, a holy thing. So stick with it. And stick with the practice even when it feels crappy.

There will be times when the practice will not feel good. I alluded, in one of the earlier segments, to my divorce a few years ago. That was a particularly devastating experience for me and there were certain times of the day—of each individual day as it dragged on, because it was one of these draggy divorces, as they often are; it wasn't an explosive one—where there was nothing I could do. The communication with myself and my now ex-wife had broken down so there was nothing more to talk about. There was no more discussion. There was nothing physically to be done. And I remembered that my first Zen teacher had told me a long time ago that if you're having a bad situation, the best thing to do is sit with it. And I thought, “Uh. That doesn't sound like the best thing to do at all.” You know, I would rather distract myself, or numb myself, or watch a movie. If I were a drug taking person, get stoned or wasted. Something like that sounded much more attractive than just facing it.

But I found that because I trusted him and because I'd been doing this practice for a long time anyway, I decided to put that advice into play. And I found that it was the best thing. It didn't fix everything. I still felt sad and torn apart and all of that, but sitting with it helped put into perspective what was really going on. I could see that what these churning emotions were in and of themselves, rather than trying to define them, or trying to make them stop. You know, one of the best things I found was when I was feeling bad rather than trying to make myself feel better or trying to make the bad feelings stop, was to face right into it. I once heard that if you are in a fight, a fistfight—and somebody is throwing a punch at you and there's no way to dodge the punch; you know you're just going to get hit—the best thing to do is to lean into it, because leaning into it robs it of some of its forward momentum and actually makes the punch less powerful than it would be if you backed away from it and then got hit a few seconds later.

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I found in my practice that emotionally that was the thing to do, would be to just face into it. Rather than trying to make it stop, face into it. I had an interesting experience early in my practice where my—I was dating this woman at the time who was a born-again Christian. Don’t ask how that happened. But she wasn’t very favorable to my meditation experience and she had this conversation with my first teacher about enlightenment. And Tim told her, “Oh. Brad will never be enlightened.” And then she very gleefully told that to me, “Oh, yeah. Your teacher said you’ll never be enlightened.” And I thought, “Uh...” And I was too shy to actually confront Tim and talk to him about it at the time. But I thought, “Well, you know what?” I’d already been doing this practice for a year or two. I’m kind of committed to it. I’m just going to sit with being not-enlightened. I’m just going to sit and find out what being not-enlightened is all about.

Years later I finally developed a relationship with Tim and I told him that story. And he said, “Oh. She was talking about some goofy things. She didn’t know what enlightenment was. And I said you’d never be enlightened, meaning nobody will ever have that experience.” She had no idea. But it was very useful to have gone through that because I decided rather than sitting—going for the brass ring—just to sit and see what desiring the brass ring was all about.

So I encourage you to keep working on it, even if it feels bad. And if it feels good, all the better. I’ve been warning you a lot about the bad feelings. But the fact is most of my practice has felt very good and I wouldn’t have kept it up so long if that wasn’t the case. So not to scare you about practice and make you think it’s all about bad feeling, but when you feel bad, keep going. And I hope that this retreat has helped you to establish a solid daily practice and keep it up. Just do it. And thanks for watching.