

Brad Warner
Week 3, *How to Get on the Cushion Everyday*
“The Benefit of a Teacher”
July 21, 2014

Okay, here we are in segment three of our retreat about daily practice. And this time I would like to address a topic which is related to the topic of daily practice, but it is perhaps slightly tangential. And this is one of my FAQs I actually brought along. I printed out a bunch of the questions that I get quite often and I'll read you two different variations on the same question, because it's kind of interesting how people will ask the same question. Different people ask the same question, but think it's a different question. “How important is a teacher? If you need a teacher, how often do you have to meet them?” Another version of it is, “Can”—sorry, “Am I missing some substantial part of this inexperience without a teacher or peer sitters?” So the question is about having a teacher and having a communal practice.

One of the things that's happened to me kind of recently is, I've gotten a few questions about doing solitary retreats. And there are certain Buddhist traditions in which people go off and do solitary retreats. And it never really occurred to me that that's really not part of the Zen tradition—that Zen Buddhism happens to be very communal, and this is something that I don't think a lot of people who write about Zen will specify. It's sort of implied but people don't say, “Hey, this is a communal practice.” They tend to kind of leave that unstated, but it is.

So there's an emphasis on having a teacher and having a community of sitters. It's not necessary to have a teacher all the time or a community all the time. Most of my Zen practice has been solitary. In the beginning I would meet with Tim McCarthy, my first teacher, once a week. After a while, I wasn't hanging around with him as much. I moved, so I would see him once a year. And then I had another teacher and it was kind of the same thing. So you don't need to have that. A lot of people in the ancient times who had teachers—like one of Dogen's students saw Dogen, I think, every couple or two or three years and they communicated by letter and not very many of those even, you know, the occasional letter.

So it's not like you need to have a teacher all the time or live with that teacher, but it does help to have a teacher and the reason is because it's difficult to judge your own practice. It's difficult. My favorite answer—to say favorite sounds like it's favorable and when you hear it, you'll see why I don't like to say favorite, but in terms of just being a very good illustration. One of my favorite examples of this is a story I read in a Japanese newspaper, and I think it was Asahi Shimbun or

Brad Warner

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Daily Yomiuri, one of these. There are two newspapers in Japan that are in English.

And it was a couple of years after the big Aum Shinrikyo thing, which I know a lot of people who are not—who didn’t live in Japan at the time—don’t think of it as a big deal, but it’s sort of like Japan’s own September eleventh in a lot of ways. It was a huge act of terrorism that did make the papers over here, but not quite as spectacularly. The Aum was a cult who decided that doomsday was coming, so in order to hurry doomsday along and to start some kind of a countdown to Armageddon, they put poison gas—sarin gas, which was developed by the Nazis—on the Tokyo subway system and killed quite a number of people, not a huge number of people, but they sickened a huge number of people.

I mean, there are hundreds of people who are still having debilitating conditions because of their exposure to this sarin. It’s extremely powerful poison gas. And I happened to have ridden the Tokyo mass transit system the day it happened, not on the lines that were poisoned, so it really hit home for me. So this was a religious cult and they were a bit of everything, even Buddhist. So the guy, Shoko Asahara, who led this cult, claimed to be a master of all sorts of things, including a Buddhist master. And there’s a famous photograph you can find on the internet of him shaking hands with the Dalai Lama. I’m sure the Dalai Lama had no idea who he was.

But the story was about the aftermath of this, so it’s a few years later. And the people who were in this Aum cult were spiritually minded people who were serious about their personal development. I mean, they weren’t all crazy nut cases who were going to put gas on the subway system. A lot of people were very committed spiritual seekers who just happened to get kind of caught up in this thing and then later found out, “My god, what have I gotten myself caught into?”

So there was a Zen priest who lived in the area where the Aum cult had its base of operations and a lot of former Aum people started coming to him for training and instruction—and meditation training specifically. So this guy, this priest, decided that he needed to understand what their experience was a little better, and he went and bought some of the books by Shoko Asahara—their leader—and read them. And he read about Shoko Asahara’s deep spiritual experiences, which he’d had during meditation, in which he formed his philosophy that ended up being to put poison gas on the Tokyo subway systems. And he has these very colorful

Brad Warner

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expressions of enlightenment experiences and spiritual experiences and vast wonderful visions and so forth that he had.

And the Zen priest who was reading this said, in the interview with him, he said, “When I read these books by Shoko Asahara, I recognized that he’d had the same sort of experiences I did when I meditated.” This is what the priest said. “But I had a teacher who would tell me to stop getting involved in those weird experiences. Just continue your sitting practice.” And these sorts of experiences I’m describing can be extremely powerful. Your mind is more powerful than you imagine and if you have a lot of ideas about what the perfect spiritual experience or the perfect enlightenment experience would be sort of shoved into the back of your brain, especially like a lot of us who get into meditation, have read a lot of books and things that have these experiences in them and we’ve thought about them a lot, and your mind will cough this all up to you during—sometimes during meditation. And you can feel like you have just discovered the most amazing secret in the world and, “My god, I’ve got to go to tell the world about this incredible enlightenment experiences I’ve had.”

One of the benefits of having a teacher is that—you’ve all heard I’m sure, because it’s in *Karate Kid*, the word *sensei*. It’s a Japanese word and if you actually take apart the word *sensei*, all it means is born before. So your teacher has gone before you. Your teacher doesn’t have to be the most vastly experienced, incredible meditator in the universe, but she or he has done more meditation than you have. That I think is probably the one sort of crucial point. You don’t want to have as your teacher somebody who’s done less than you have. And because of that, they’ve had some of these experiences and so they know the territory a little bit and can advise you how to deal with them. So that’s one thing.

I had a teacher who I trusted deeply and I had some of these kind of incredible spiritual experiences myself. And I remember going to him and telling him about one of these particularly amazing experiences I’d had during meditation and just kind of laying it all out for him in the flowery language that I had for it. And he said, “You work in a company that makes cartoons. You shouldn’t have so many fantasies.” And he was wrong because that company I worked for didn’t make cartoons, we made live action science fiction shows. But I remember having the experience of hearing him saying that and it was devastating. It’s kind of, when I tell it I laugh about it, but at the time it was happening, the experience that I was describing seemed like the validation of everything that I had been meditating towards for probably fifteen years by then, daily and working really hard at it and

Brad Warner

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July 21, 2014

everything. And to be told it was just a fantasy brought about because I worked for a company that makes cartoons, hearing that from my teacher was really difficult. And I remember that my first experience upon hearing that was to kind of reject Nishijima, like, “You’re just this dumb old man. How do you know what my experience was?”

And then I kind of reflected because the experience kind of made me feel like I was God. It was that kind of a thing. And I thought, “Well, if I’m God, then why am I getting kind of bent out of shape over what this little short old Japanese man is telling me about the experience? You know, God wouldn’t feel that way.” And I thought, “Well, then it means there’s something non-Godly about this.” So that day, my then wife, we’ve since split up, but she gave me a mikan, a Japanese tangerine in my lunch. And when I was opening up the tangerine, there was a window behind me and the light from the sunlight was shining on the tangerine. As I was opening up the tangerine, it just looked sparkling and beautiful and I thought, “Nobody—millions of people have eaten millions of tangerines—but nobody except me is going to eat this tangerine.

This is a unique experience that is alone in all the universe,” even though it’s a sort of mundane experience that we sort of pass by every day, pop a tangerine in our mouth, whatever, go on and do something else, we’re watching TV as we do it or whatever. But I thought, “No, this is a real experience and this experience of eating a tangerine is every bit as unique and beautiful and holy as that experience that I was telling my teacher about of cosmic union with the”—I don’t even want to tell you what it was about because the contents of it are frankly embarrassing to me today. It was goofy, new age dumbness, but it seemed incredibly real, you know, one with the universe. And I thought, “Well, oneness with the universe also means sitting at your desk eating a tangerine and getting ready to file some reports. That’s also oneness with the universe, as much as your cosmic enlightenment experience is.”

And I told my teacher that later on after I’d kind of calmed down from being so devastated and he said, “You know, sometimes eating a mikan is the real experience of enlightenment.” And I thought, “Okay, that’s nice. Thanks. Shut up.” Anyway, so that is what a teacher can do for you in sort of broad strokes. In sort of more general strokes, having a teacher is having somebody to reflect back at you what you are bringing to your teacher, like a mirror. I know that I’m on video and I keep kind of playing with my hair. You’re probably—some of you have noticed this because I don’t want my hair to look stupid, but I don’t have a

Brad Warner

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July 21, 2014

mirror. I’m not looking in a mirror. So unless you’re looking in a mirror, unless you’ve got something to reflect what you’re bringing to you, you don’t really know what’s going on. You can’t judge it without a kind of interactive experience, which doesn’t mean that your teacher is up here judging you down there. It just means you kind of work together to find that.

Now having said that, it’s not necessary to right now, immediately at the beginning of your practice, go out and break your bones to find a teacher. You can coast for a while. You can do your practice as a daily routine for—some people can do it for years before it ever really becomes apparent that you need a teacher. But I think if you are at all honest with yourself, you will know when that time comes. Things will start to get hairy and the experiences you’re having during meditation will stop being the kind of things you can talk to your buddy about. They need to be dealt with on a slightly deeper level. So at that point, start looking for a teacher.

You’re lucky to be living in the early twenty-first century when there are a lot of teachers around and there are a lot of new methods to communicate with those teachers. I personally have resisted, so far, taking students online, but there are a number of teachers who do, so you can find one of them if you can’t find somebody locally. I think it’s better to find somebody locally, if you can, because a local person—even though that person may not be brilliant and famous, world renowned or whatever you expect, whatever you are looking for in a teacher—they’re local. And there’s something to that because if you have—our real experience is often formed by our environment. So if you’re talking to a brilliant teacher who happens to live halfway across the world and maybe be of a different culture from you, their experience is different; and it might be harder to relate to that person than it would be to relate to somebody who’s right two blocks away. So I would encourage you to try to find a local teacher and find a local sitting group.

There is nothing evil or wrong about trying some groups out and trying teachers out. Dogen, the founder of the sect which I practice in, himself went through a number of teachers during his search until he found Tendo Nyojo, who ended up being his ordaining teacher. He traveled to China. He sat with a number of people—spoke to them, rejected most of them. Buddha, to give another good example, went through a number of teachers before he really settled upon what he wanted to do. Legend has it Buddha has a cosmic teacher, rather than an earthly

Brad Warner

Week 3, *How to Get on the Cushion Everyday*

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July 21, 2014

teacher, but I tend to take that with a grain of salt. I think he learned something from his earthly teachers. So you can go around, sample the groups.

My opinion is your best teacher and your best group is somebody who you are mostly comfortable with but slightly uncomfortable with. I think if you find a group where you're a hundred percent comfortable with and a teacher you're a hundred percent comfortable with, that's probably a red flag because there are people who want to be your teacher because they want something from you—either money or prestige or power or whatever people get. There are a lot of sort of sociopathic—I don't know if that's the proper psychological term—people who are very good at manipulating others by appearing to be what they perceive you to want them to be. So I tend to go for a teacher who is a little bit challenging. Both Tim McCarthy and my other teacher, Gudo Nishijima, were not a hundred percent agreeable to me ever. They were always and remain a little bit iffy to me, but I like that because it provides me with a challenge.

So go out, check out the groups, maybe we'll add that to your homework. Keep meditating, as I've said in the last several segments. Do it every day and just go online, google a few places and challenge yourself. Attend a group meditation, even if you don't like it. Just go in and do it for... “blank” and giggles. I don't want to work blue here on Tricycle. Just check it out, see how it is, if they're not too culty, they won't try to force you to stay. And if they do try to force you to stay, don't stay because you don't want a place like that. So keep meditating, check out a group, see what you think of it, and we'll be back for one more segment.