

PERSEVERE

"If you lose the spirit of repetition, your practice will become quite difficult," Suzuki-roshi says. Most of training goes to teach us perseverance, especially sesshin, the intense training periods.

SESSHIN—INTENSE TRAINING PERIODS

Sesshin is an intense training period, of either one day, three days, seven days, three months, or sometimes more. From morning until night we do nothing but practice. This is a great teaching in perseverance, going on and getting through each day's schedule no matter how we feel. Life itself can also be considered a sesshin, where we must go on no matter what.

Usually we wake at four or so in the morning and continue until nine or ten at night. Along with intense zazen practice, there is time for daily work. Some of the jobs a student does are washing dishes, mopping floors, cleaning toilets, lining up the cushions exactly, making sure the water for the flowers is fresh. One task is not regarded as more significant than another. No person is too important to do any kind of job. No matter how much pain, annoyance, or boredom comes, no matter how much we are resisting, we just continue on and on.

At one of my early sesshins, it was evening of the third day of retreat. We had been sitting in zazen for seventeen hours a day. By now the pain was almost unbearable and I was exhausted and bored. My legs and back were aching and I wanted to go home. Then came time for evening sitting, which lasted a good hour. I didn't think I could make it.

I sat down on my cushion and the bells rang out to begin. After the bells, absolute silence. Soon the pain began to mount. There was no way I could escape it. The more I fought, the worse it became. Beside myself, I broke the silence and started sobbing loudly. Although I was disturbing others I couldn't stop. The more I cried, the worse I felt. Still, I could not go on.

Then, to my horror, the head monk Dogo bellowed at me. “Shut up or get out. Go and sit by yourself down at the lake. There is no pain. You are the pain. Become stronger than the pain.”

At that moment I stopped crying. The pain went. I went. Instead there was incredible joy.

ORDINARY MOMENTS

Just as we think we need to create perfect gardens or lives, we also think spirituality is about moments of great revelation, peak experiences, personal ecstasy. While these moments, when they come, are precious, they can also be nothing more than a drug, removing us from what needs to be done—sitting through a painful sitting, keeping quiet so as not to disturb others, taking care of those who are needy, attending to that which is right in front of our eyes.

Suzuki-roshi, the Zen Master who died in 1971, abbot of San Francisco Zen Center and author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, focuses a great deal upon the simplicity of practice, not adding anything extra to it. “If your practice is good, you may become proud of it. What you do is good, but something extra more is added to it. Pride is extra. Right effort is to get rid of something extra.”

What he is saying is that the right effort is to get rid of pride. Putting full attention to ordinary life, to simple moments, diminishes our ego. We realize that life is already miraculous and we become concerned with doing what we are doing, not building our false selves up. By not trying to take charge of anything, a strange thing happens—we become the master of circumstances, no longer in their grip.

THE SIMPLE MIND

The modern-day Zen Master Joko Charlotte Beck, currently head of the San Diego Zen Center and author of *Everyday Zen*,

says, “Awareness is completely simple; we don’t have to add anything to it to change it. It is unassuming or unpretentious; it can’t help but be that way. Awareness is not a thing, to be affected by this or that. When we live from pure awareness, we are not affected by our past, our present, or our future. Because awareness has nothing it can pretend to, it’s humble. It’s lowly. It’s simple.”

As we apply simple awareness both to our questions and to the everyday tasks before us we learn to persevere in practice, develop a taste for boredom, or repetition, and not run to imagination. Most of us must do or hear a thing a thousand times before we are able to break out of the fog we are living in. The ongoingness of practice builds momentum. It makes it a part of our natural, daily routine.

When we focus our simple awareness upon daily tasks, the false self has no place to take hold, and ego, which causes so much anguish, gives way to something else. As well as being great medicine, this daily practice of doing what needs to be done—sweeping the floor, washing your plate after you’ve eaten, walking to the beach with someone who needs you—is the practice of caring for life. No questions asked. No hesitation. The benefits to all beings, and to yourself as well, are infinite.

ZEN IN ACTION

Exercise 1: Peel an Onion

Peel an onion. Peel it again. And again. Peel some more. Keep peeling. Notice everything that’s happening as you peel on and on.

Boring? Annoying? Why? Are you searching for something? Trying to get to the core? Forget it. Just peel. Your responses are irrelevant. Watch them come and go. Do you base your life upon transitory responses like these? What have these kinds of responses really done to your life?