

## The essential point of Zen practice - Jeff Shore

*Editor's preface: In my encounters with beginners in meditation, I have often felt that the true aim of practice is lost or confused. Many people sit to experience calm and pleasure, to get a momentary escape from the stress of the world. While this is a worthy goal in itself, and actually one of the worldly benefits of Buddhist practice, it is not the aim of Buddhism.*

*The goal of Zen and Buddhism is to "see things as they are" so that we are free from suffering. But how do you do that? And what is it to "see things as they are"? This part is often missing or glanced over, even in the classic [Zazen manuals](#). I find that Jeff Shore puts some flesh on the bones in the following, which I have edited from some of his Dharma talks. May it be helpful for many people.*

*Pablo C - Zen student*

—

Zazen is the practice of letting the mind come to its own end.

We start by settling our body and breath, as explained for instance in the *Zazen manual*. Then the discursive mind starts to settle down as well. All of those thoughts and ideas just dissolve of their own accord. If they don't dissolve, see how you are feeding them. And then just return to the body and the breath.

If you're practicing properly, discursive thoughts dissolve in a few days. They can still happen when needed, but they should not be an interference. What do you do then? Rest content and think about how few thoughts you have? No. WHAT REMAINS?

For some people, there may be emotional stuff that comes up and needs to be dealt with. Most superficial thoughts can be let go. But emotions that are still not really resolved can come up. The aim of zazen is not to heal emotional trauma, but if something is there and it really holds your attention so you can't go through, maybe you need to open up to that. Zazen is not the answer to everything, but it can be a very good way to open up to these things. If you are settled enough in the body and the breath, you can just let it come. You don't need to judge it, or condemn yourself for having that experience, or condemn someone else for causing it. Just let the experience come in its rawness, just as it is. Maybe it brings tears or laughter. Let it come all the way. What can you learn from it? What is it showing you? Then you can let it go.

WHAT REMAINS? When all is truly settled, we face the very urge or craving to be something, anything. This is deeper than discursive thought or emotions. It's not all bad: the desire to be better or even enlightened can be very noble. But in the depths of our practice, we must get to that point where the very urge to be anything—even Zenistic *nothing*—is undone. Otherwise we just go around and around in those

intellectual-emotional-wilful circles. Thus, the practice must be thoroughgoing. It's not just sitting there playing with thoughts, or even letting them go. Finally, we must sit through that very urge to be anything. When that is undone, you walk freely through the universe. Until then, you are subject to that deep craving. It's the master of you; it pushes you around, hauls you over the fires and the coals. You suffer as a result of it.

That's why when Gotama Buddha was awakened, he made it very clear: "*There is no more being for me.*" There's not another life that I have to go on to live. What needed to be done has been done. The end of the disease of craving has been reached. None of this fuzzy "maybe I feel a little bit better today" talk. It's the end of the very craving to be. Once that comes to an end, life springs forth in a way that is impossible otherwise—free from itself.

Some people obsess about getting the breath just right. I say: open up to this great doubt under your own feet and you'll know how to breathe! But people want to manipulate their breath endlessly. No! Open up to what's in the depths of your own heart. It may take a little while, but you'll know. And then simply remain with your eyes and your heart fully open. What is there? WHAT REMAINS? We don't need to create problems or questions or even answers. What is it in the depths of your own being that needs to be made clear in this life? It's not someone else's concern. It's not just some intellectual thing; it's not even emotional; it's not even the will. It's something even more basic than that.

What do you do with the mind in sustained zazen? We are not dispersing it into thoughts and ideas; it's clear. But we're not indulging in emotional memories or hopes about the future and so on. That's not bad; it's not evil. We don't have to shoot it down. There it is. But what is at the root source of that? Until you see through that, you solve one problem, then another one comes; and on and on: it's endless. You'll never get to the end of disease that way. That itself is a profound symptom of the dis-ease of the self.

Zazen helps us see what is here so that we stop seeking after some kind of in-the-clouds experience that will solve all our problems. That's pure ego parading as spiritual practice. Zazen is to come home, to truly come to rest here with this. There is nothing else.

Don't make the mistake of thinking zazen is difficult. Zazen isn't even one; it's the simplest thing in the world. It's your mind that's so complex—not the practice. That is why we need the proper attitude and regulate body, breath, and mind. Yes, this is a discipline—not because zazen is very difficult, but rather because the mind is so wrapped up in things. So we give it to the breath, which isn't a thought, and we regulate the body, both of which help the mind come to rest. The practice allows the

mind to come fully to rest, so that we can then see, realize with every sense, what is here. Then you don't go running off again.

When you realize this is what must be done, with proper practice it will be done. You don't have to get rid of your family, your friends or quit your hobbies. It has nothing to do with that. The only thing you have to get rid of is the self-delusion that is the delusion of a self. Then you walk freely in the universe. You are free of the very need to be free, free from the very need to be anything. It's not an experience in that sense, it's to be free from the very need to have another experience. Then, when you experience, it's ten thousand times more vivid and alive than through the lens of your self. You realize you were just seeing a shadow, a reflection of your delusion through the lens of yourself. When you really see that, how can you do anything else? Finally, my question is: How can you not do it? How can you not be released?

Often, after having a breakthrough, the self will come back. That's why the practice must be thoroughgoing—not just a glimpse. We then have to see it through with all the humility, patience and love we have. If self returns, it becomes our teacher, showing us where we must apply ourselves until the root is finally undone. No more, no less. An initial breakthrough can be very encouraging and inspiring. But if we turn it into something that "I" now have, it becomes the seeds of its own destruction. I struggled for a couple of years after my own experience, trying to get back to something that I never really lost. Consider well: the practice must be thoroughgoing.

You don't have to attain some profound state. Only see what your mind is doing. Not what you want it to do, or what you think it should do. When you really see through it, it can't help but collapse. It has no support unless you feed it. The self might then try to replace it with something else—perhaps a new and improved, enlightened mind. That's just continuing the same disease. You don't need to replace it with anything.

Before this very mind has taken shape, before it has turned into something, before you have objectified it—what is it? It's the most obvious thing in the world; and yet you can't turn it into an object. That's how marvelous it is. It is beyond conception. You can conceive it endlessly in endless different ways if you like, but that's just a shadow—and so we cannot come to rest in that. But when you come from it, rather than trying to go to it, you can't get out of it then. However you leap up, get frustrated or angry, you can't leap out of this. You must confirm this in your own bones.