



Practice is Practice

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In my first year at Shogoji a visiting teacher told a story about Eko Hashimoto Roshi. In the days when Hashimoto Roshi was elderly and a bit frail, this teacher had been his attendant (anja). One day, all the monks were asked to go on takuhatsu (begging rounds). Only Hashimoto Roshi stayed at the monastery. As noon approached, the attendant worried. How could the old man prepare his lunch? He asked to return and see to Hashimoto Roshi's meal.

Upon entering Hashimoto Roshi's quarters, the anja saw that Hashimoto Roshi had made himself a little rice and miso soup and found some leftover vegetables. His oryoki (formal set if eating bowls) was laid out and he was eating in the formal ritual manner. The anja was surprised. Why would the old teacher trouble himself with laying out bowls and cloths and doing the chants all-alone? Hashimoto Roshi told him: Practice is not different when we're alone. Practice is always the same.

How many of us can be like Hashimoto Roshi? A lot of effort goes into arranging bowls and cloths and saying verses. How often do I do full formal eating ritual as I eat alone at the table in our discussion room? I'll tell you - never. I put my food down and say the short verse:

*As we take food and drink I vow with all beings
To rejoice in zazen
Being filled with delight in the dharma.*

Then I dig in. Often I forget the verse that ends the meal:

*As we have taken food and drink
I vow with all beings
To be filled with virtuous practice
Completing the ten powers.*

Worse yet, I sometimes get some bread, some cheese and maybe an apple and return to the office to munch as I work.

I greatly admire Hashimoto Roshi's solitary practice. It's difficult to do it just to do it, with no agenda. This requires commitment. However, diluting our practice weakens us. Practicing always in the same way even though there's no one to praise us gives us more stability, greater connection. It makes our lives deeper and stronger.

Many people, especially in non-urban areas, practice alone—maybe you're one of them. Having few Zen centers or dharma centers or friends, people make a place for their practice in small towns, on farms, and in the countryside. They do zazen, read dharma books and try to live the Buddha's life.

Practicing alone, it's hard to continue the habits we know are productive. There's no one to encourage us or to point out our sloppy ways. There's no structure to hold onto. We cut corners, allow other commitments to intrude, then feel that our lives are out of control. If our practice is to be strong, we must clean up our acts on our own.

Practice that deepens our life is a matter of building a habit. Hashimoto Roshi's habit was to have rice, soup and vegetables in formal style. What should our habit be? Let's start with something we can manage pretty easily. How about a little zazen each day?



Let's start by setting a time, maybe a time when we know people are sitting here at Zen Center. Maybe at noon or after the kids are in bed. How long should we sit? Perhaps—as long as we can! If that's fifteen minutes—fine. If it's forty minutes—fine. Whatever we can fit in will be just fine.

How to build this habit? Do it just to do it. Do it just today. Don't worry about the long term. If it didn't go well, simply return and sit when it's time again. When we do this our habit will continue, independent of praise or disapproval from others, including ourselves. We will become content just to practice a practice that is always the same.

Don't worry about results - only worry about returning. With rigid plans and great ambitions, we get discouraged and quit when we notice that reality is not following our agenda. Maybe something will happen, maybe not. "Maybe not" means that perhaps something happened and we didn't see it because we weren't looking for it. The effect of a habit is subtle.

So it's best not to worry about the quality or quantity of zazen, or what it will do for us. Let's only sit quietly giving thoughts a chance to settle. If they settle, next day we return. If not, next day we return. After all, we have no agenda here. As the months pass and the years pile up, having no plan, we drop our ideas and know contentment and satisfaction.

