

QUESTIONS ABOUT SITTING

Taking care of breathing is the way to take care of yourself.



STUDENT: I understand from some students that they meditate a long time and nothing happens.

SUZUKI ROSHI: Nothing happens. That is okay.

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STUDENT: Do you always count your breaths to keep track of the mind, or do you stop at some point?

SUZUKI ROSHI: Just to sit is best, but that is not so easy, so we count our breaths. But it is not just to count our breaths like you count sheep jumping over a fence: one, two, three. That is rather busy—when you want to sleep, that may work, but for zazen it doesn't work so well!

To count is to do something with your body and mind, to devote yourself to practice with your body and mind. It is easier to say "Count your breaths" than "Practice with your whole body and mind." If we say, "Practice with your whole body and mind," you may wonder what we mean, so we just say, "Count your breaths."

The way to count is not just by counting. Even though you lose your count sometimes, it is alright. The way to count is with every part of your body: with your mudra, your breath, and your mind. That is the meaning of concentration, but actually we do not try to concentrate on anything. We just sit like this to organize our body and mind. It may be helpful to have some feeling of counting or following the breathing, because when you do so, your mind is with every part of your body. That is the way to count your breaths.

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STUDENT: How can you quiet the thoughts that come up in meditation?

SUZUKI ROSHI: The best way is not to have much on your mind.

You start to think because your mind is not participating in the practice, so it starts to wander about, asking, “What shall I do?” Your mind should also join your practice. The way to bring your mind into your practice is to physically pull your chin in and stretch your neck. Our chin and neck should always be that way, otherwise your mind will ask, “What shall I do?” and will start taking a walk. That is why you start to think.

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STUDENT: Is it better to leave the eyes half open, or do you ever close the eyes?

SUZUKI ROSHI: Half open. Fujimoto Roshi said, in *The Way of Zen*, to watch some point at your eye level, and turn the focus four or five feet ahead. Then you half open your eyes. You shouldn't focus on some point on the wall or the floor; your eyes are not gazing at anything in particular. If you have this kind of seeing, with no particular focus, you can catch everything. That is how to do it.

If that is too difficult, then instead, as you count your breath, you can focus on something in front of you. An older student, when she started practice, always prepared something and put it in front of herself to gaze at. I think that is not the proper way, and no Zen master ever told us to do

so. But for her I think it was very good; it worked very well! After a while she didn't need that kind of thing in front of her, and she could just sit.

STUDENT: Why do you keep the eyes open rather than closed?

SUZUKI ROSHI: If your eyes are open, naturally you will see many things. If you close your eyes, you will think more, and your mind will fill up with various images.

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STUDENT: Do you get anywhere if you just keep sitting every day for twenty minutes, doing your breath counting? Will there be progress, or can you just get stuck?

SUZUKI ROSHI: We sometimes tell the story of people who changed into stones after sitting for six days. I think that is good, but we do not practice zazen in order to change into stones. That is something that may happen in our practice, and I won't say that it is good or bad, but it is not why we practice zazen.

You will have various experiences in zazen, and gradually you will become less involved in duality, less involved in saying whether these experiences are good or bad. You will always feel a sort of composure or

consistency, wherever you go. With that foundation or composure, you will see “things as it is.”

We call this constant feeling by various names: “emptiness,” “Buddha eye,” or “Buddha mind.” It is a kind of fundamental openness of our mind. When you have it, you will not feel that you are “here” or that you are “there.” “Here” or “there” are just dualistic, mental understandings. Before we develop that dualistic understanding, we have a more pure experience. If you are able to maintain such a state of mind, or state of yourself, then you will not be bothered by the idea of “here” or “there.” You won’t seek for anything, because you will have a contented feeling.

STUDENT: And that happens by simply sitting there and doing that over a long period of time?

SUZUKI ROSHI: First of all, you should get accustomed to right posture and right breathing, natural breathing. Then eventually you will have this kind of feeling, even if it takes quite a long time. Your breathing is very important. If your mind is disturbed, your breathing will be disturbed too, because breathing is both a mental and physical activity. Taking care of breathing is the way to take care of yourself.

STUDENT: If you can sit for only five minutes, is it better to sit or is it better not to sit at all?

SUZUKI ROSHI: Five minutes?

STUDENT: Or ten minutes.

SUZUKI ROSHI: If you sit for ten minutes, usually your mind will not be calm enough.

For example, after standing up from sitting meditation, we walk slowly and practice walking zazen, *kinhin*. When you walk slowly, for the first six feet or so you may notice that your breathing is not deep enough. But as you continue, your breathing will grow deeper and you will have the feeling of zazen. It may take more than five minutes, so to stop after ten minutes is to quit zazen just when you have entered meditation. It may be better to sit twenty minutes, I think.

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STUDENT: I was wondering at what point in meditation one reaches *satori*, and how can it be recognized?

SUZUKI ROSHI: Buddha said, "It is wonderful to see Buddha nature in all beings." He found Buddha nature in all beings, but when he said so, I think it was too late. When he said it, that was not enlightenment, that was the first step in the ordinary world.

People may say that when he saw the morning star, he attained enlightenment. They may say that by seeing it, he attained enlightenment, as if the morning star helped him to attain it, and as if with no morning star he would not have attained it. But that is not so. That is why we do not say so much about enlightenment, because enlightenment is something which is there before anything happens to us.

“What is an enlightened mind?” you may ask. When we say “enlightened mind,” that is already making an object of enlightened mind: “Here is an enlightened mind; I will explain it.” But that explanation is something which is outside of enlightened mind. Do you see?

It might make some sense sometimes to say something about enlightened mind, even though doing so makes it an object. But if you say, “This is an enlightened mind; I attained enlightenment!” I would feel very funny. Do you understand?

So try not to say anything about enlightenment. Just practice zazen. Before you say anything, real enlightenment is there within yourself. It is on the side of yourself, not out there.

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STUDENT: Are there any differences between the way you practice Zen in the United States and the way you practice in Japan?

SUZUKI ROSHI: Zazen practice is the same. I don't feel much difference. Wherever I go, I feel as if I am in Japan! So it is rather difficult to answer your question. “American people” or “Japanese people,” we say, but if we start to practice zazen, it's nearly the same. We have the same problems.