

Goalless Practice

One of the hardest aspects of Zen practice is getting your head around the idea that zazen has no goal. No goal at all. You don't do it for anything except itself. It doesn't get you anywhere. It doesn't gain you a damned thing.

Part of the reason this goalless practice is hard to accept is that anyone who has ever done zazen or indeed any kind of meditation practice knows quite well that there are benefits. Some people can't function without their morning coffee. I can't function without my morning zazen. It makes me feel better, lighter, happier, more alive. If there were no benefits, why would anyone do such a ridiculous thing as sit and stare at a wall for half an hour or more every morning and night? Who has that kind of time to waste? There are plenty of folks working hard to determine and explain exactly what these benefits are and why they come about. There are a dozen books out right now that will tell you exactly what meditation is good for. And it ain't nothing!

The weird thing is that the only way one really gets any of the most important benefits of meditation practice is by giving up on the notion that there are any benefits to meditation practice.

People often get hung up on semantics. Isn't the goal of having no goal just another goal? You can twist your mind around this one forever. Logically, it's a perfect loop. You can define having no goal as a goal and nobody can argue with that on a linguistic level. But in actual practice not having a goal really isn't a goal at all. It's something different from having a goal. It's not having a goal.

Even so, this is much easier said than done. We've been taught since birth that the worst thing any activity can be is pointless. Understandably, we always want to know if something difficult we're considering committing to is going to produce results. I think some of us look upon meditation the way we look at dieting. We want to choose a diet that has been proven to be effective. Otherwise we'd be starving ourselves for nothing. When it comes to meditation, we certainly don't want to spend hours and hours sitting in some weird posture only to find we have nothing to show for it afterward.

We are deeply committed to the idea that for something to be worth doing, it needs to produce results. More than that, it needs to produce the results we desire. The diet that made me deny myself all those delicious desserts had better help me shed 20 pounds! And that meditation for which I had to give up all the time I could have spent playing video games or hanging out with friends had better fix what's wrong in my life and bring me profound peace and contentment!

The problem is that goal-seeking activity is always the enemy of real peace and contentment. The idea that what is here and now is less valuable than what's over there just past the finish line prevents us from ever being truly content and happy right where we are. No matter what your ultimate goal is, it's always off in the distance. It's never here. This goes for any goal at all, even the goal of attaining ultimate inner peace or saving all beings. It's still a goal. It's still over there, not here.

Part of striving for a goal is telling yourself that you're not good enough, that you've got to push harder. If you tell yourself you're not good enough over and over and over, what sort of effect is that going to have? How is that ever going to produce any kind of peace and contentment, even if your goal is peace and contentment? If you do accidentally achieve a little peace and contentment, you've set up a habit of telling yourself that you're not peaceful and content enough.

In order to learn to be truly content here, you have to practice being truly content here. And that means giving up any notion that there's something better just around the next bend. Even if what's around the bend really is better.

It's perfectly fine to just let your goals be as they are. I have personally found this to be a very useful approach. There's no sense in beating yourself up over having a goal for your practice. That's just another way of telling yourself you're not good enough as you are. So have your goals. Have all the goals you want! Just leave them be and don't take them too seriously. Like all other thoughts, they'll drop away of their own accord if you stop feeding them.

In a very real sense, when you start getting into that endless thought loop of trying to have a goal, but trying not to have a goal, but trying not to not to have a goal, while trying not to not to not to have a goal and on and on and on, you're just playing a mind game with yourself. So treat yourself the way you would treat that annoying neighbor who tries to draw you into an argument that no one could ever possibly win. Refuse to be drawn in. Don't respond. Just like you'd do with that annoying neighbor, let your inner voice talk and talk and talk until it's so hoarse it has to shut up. Meanwhile, just keep doing your practice.

After doing this for a while you'll see that your goal-driven thoughts have less and less power. They may still crop up. But you'll find that you just don't care about them anymore.

And if that doesn't happen, don't worry about it. Just keep on sitting anyway. After all, who couldn't use a few moments of pointless peace and quiet each day? Even if those moments are good for nothing!

[Excerpt of an article by Brad Warner, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/goalless-practice/>]