

How Continuity of Practice Will Help you Catch Fire ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 I'd like to start with just a couple practical suggestions in terms of getting the most out
00:00:29 of the retreat.

00:00:32 I like to distinguish formal practice from what I call practice in life.

00:00:42 By formal practice I mean a situation where you're attempting to maintain a continuity
00:00:50 of technique of some sort.

00:00:56 It could be done in stillness, seated, standing, lying down, or it could be done in motion,
00:01:06 simple motion or more complex motions, exercise kind of motions, even doing tasks, those kinds
00:01:14 of things.

00:01:15 But what characterizes formal practice is that it's all about maintaining whatever that
00:01:24 technique is.

00:01:26 If it's a technique that involves noting, then you're continually noting unbroken.

00:01:34 By way of contrast, in daily life often it's not feasible to do that.

00:01:42 We have to take care of business, we have to allocate time and energy to think about
00:01:52 stuff and to deal with situations.

00:01:55 So we typically in daily life can't have most of our energy focused on maintaining a continuity
00:02:06 of technique intentionally.

00:02:09 Of course, as you know, I define mindful awareness practices as practices that significantly
00:02:16 elevate your base level of mindfulness.

00:02:20 I define base level of mindfulness to mean how mindful a person is under ordinary circumstances
00:02:28 when they're not particularly trying to be mindful.

00:02:32 So as a result of practice, your base level of mindfulness should be elevated.

00:02:38 Even when you're just sort of bopping around taking care of business, thinking about this,
00:02:44 talking about that, over the months, years, decades of practice, you should notice that
00:02:51 just on autopilot you're much more mindful, even though you aren't necessarily intentionally
00:02:58 trying to implement a technique.

00:03:01 So for daily life, what I encourage is something that I call, quote, practice in life, which
00:03:08 means that when it's feasible, 30 seconds here, 3 minutes there, you implement a formal
00:03:15 technique.

00:03:16 When it's feasible means, well, you get a little hiatus.

00:03:22 Maybe you're an office worker, you have to sit there, you have to think, plan, have meetings,
00:03:27 etc.

00:03:28 But then you walk to the washroom or you're in a meeting where your full attention is
00:03:33 not really required.

00:03:34 And it's like, okay, I'm going to do a few minutes of practice here, I'm going to do
00:03:41 a few minutes of practice there.

00:03:43 And so you pepper the day with little micro hits.

00:03:47 I usually encourage people to have at least a half dozen, as I say, in daily life, under
00:03:55 ordinary circumstances, at least a half dozen little hits like that during the day where
00:04:05 it's feasible, you're in a simple situation, you're waiting or what have you.
00:04:10 Okay, now I'm going to do a technique and then just go back to taking care of business.
00:04:17 Now, if you make a Herculean resolve to really implement a technique for those 30 seconds
00:04:26 or for those 3 minutes, you can actually meditate retroactively.
00:04:31 I know that seems oxymoronic, meaning contradiction by nature.
00:04:37 Okay, oxymoron is something that is contradictory by nature.
00:04:46 Mindfulness is in the moment.
00:04:47 How can you possibly have retroactive mindfulness?
00:04:50 Well, here's what I mean by retroactive mindfulness.
00:04:54 As you're just bopping around taking care of business, not particularly implementing
00:04:58 any intentional technique, you're stirring up the samskaras.
00:05:05 Now if you then stop on a dime and implement a practice, you can replace quantity with
00:05:18 quality.
00:05:19 It takes a huge resolve to do that, though.
00:05:22 You have to really decide you're going to do that.
00:05:25 And then all those juices that got stimulated, that got stirred up as you were just being
00:05:31 ordinary and not even remembering that you're a meditator necessarily, you can process all
00:05:38 of that in 30 seconds or in 3 minutes if you really decide you're going to bring all you
00:05:45 got to those few minutes of peppering the day.
00:05:50 So you sort of get, if you fully process the juices that got stirred up by ordinary life,
00:06:04 then in a sense you meditated retroactively because you sort of, you've cleaned up or
00:06:14 broken up forces that got stirred up as you were just going about life.
00:06:21 So practice, there's formal practice, continuity of technique, and then there's practice in
00:06:28 life.
00:06:29 And I divide formal practice into stillness and then in motion.
00:06:34 So success on this path is likely to happen if you alternate day-to-day practice with
00:06:45 retreats.
00:06:46 So here we are at a retreat.
00:06:49 In day-to-day practice, there's a little bit of formal practice that you do.
00:06:55 Some people do an hour, some people do a half hour, some people do less.
00:07:01 There's a little bit of formal practice and then it's mostly, okay, just going about life
00:07:09 and hopefully you'll remember to pepper it with life, with some practice during the day.
00:07:15 So on a retreat, it's a figure of reversal.
00:07:20 Basically what you should aim for is from the instant you wake up in the morning to
00:07:28 the instant you lose consciousness at night, for the great majority of that time, you are
00:07:35 doing formal practice.
00:07:38 Either you're sitting or you're moving, and moving could be walking, it could be stretching,
00:07:44 it could be taking a shower, it could be eating your meal.
00:07:49 But you try to maintain a continuity of practice.
00:07:53 The one exception to that, which would be more like a practice in life situation, is

00:07:58 what we're doing right now.

00:08:02 It's fine with me if you are entering formless samadhi as I'm talking and maintaining a formal

00:08:09 practice and not listening to me in terms of content.

00:08:14 That's fine.

00:08:15 But you may want to listen to some of this content also, in which case it's a little

00:08:20 bit of going back and forth.

00:08:23 Or maybe you're mostly just listening to listen and it's just like ordinary things.

00:08:29 So interviews, group process, that kind of stuff, that's a practice in life situation

00:08:39 where you go in and out of technique as you wish.

00:08:43 But other than those times, all the other times, chanting, waiting for me to get here,

00:08:52 you know, what have you, putting your clothes on, taking a shower, try, if you can, to have

00:09:03 a well-defined technique going.

00:09:06 What technique?

00:09:07 It doesn't matter.

00:09:10 Whatever appeals to you under different circumstances.

00:09:14 There's sort of like two kinds of people on this planet.

00:09:22 There's the way most people are, and then there are people that think about their day

00:09:29 in terms of opportunities to cultivate and apply their mindfulness skills.

00:09:39 It's just a whole different way to approach life.

00:09:44 Many of you have probably read the Don Juan books, the Carlos Castaneda books, teachings

00:09:51 of Don Juan and so forth.

00:09:54 If you haven't, there are these great classic, it was written by an anthropologist from UCLA

00:10:01 who started to study a Yaqui Indian who lived in Arizona and in Mexico as an ethnographic

00:10:11 study and eventually, even though he was a scientist and a modern anthropologist, he

00:10:21 actually got pulled into the cultural view of that Indian and stopped being an anthropologist

00:10:31 and became a shaman and wrote about it.

00:10:37 But anyway, the native teacher that he calls Don Juan, that's not the guy's real name,

00:10:43 but that person was not just a medicine person.

00:10:48 It was not just a power healer kind of person.

00:10:53 It's absolutely evident, abundantly evident when you read that material that Don Juan

00:11:02 knows about impermanence, no self, and emptiness.

00:11:10 He has the liberated consciousness, which can result from those traditional practices

00:11:17 in some cases.

00:11:18 So the reason I'm mentioning this is there's a lot of incredible sound bites in those writings.

00:11:31 One of the things that Don Juan told Carlos was the ordinary person thinks about their

00:11:41 life, everything in life, in terms of fortune and misfortune.

00:11:58 But the person who sees things about everything that happens in life as an opportunity, a

00:12:09 challenge, a challenge to apply and develop a certain state of consciousness.

00:12:22 So becoming that kind of person that sort of thinks of life that way, you can still

00:12:30 acknowledge fortune and misfortune, but the day is more or less about cultivation.

00:12:40 So that's really desirable.

00:12:42 It's really desirable to become that kind of person.

00:12:48 One of the Zen masters said that the average person is used 24 hours a day, but the person
00:12:55 of Zen uses 24 hours a day.
00:12:58 So on retreats, it's good if, other than the few times that we're sort of talking and interacting
00:13:07 and that kind of thing, other than that, I would strongly encourage you to attempt unbroken
00:13:15 formal practice.
00:13:17 So basically the whole day is just one practice period.
00:13:22 I did a two month retreat many years ago with Upendita, who was Mahasi Sayadaw's sort of
00:13:29 heir apparent.
00:13:32 And this is a traditional Mahasi retreat.
00:13:35 Some of you have done those kinds of retreats.
00:13:37 You know, everything, and I mean everything, is done in slow motion.
00:13:46 And there's almost this, a little bit of one-upmanship, who could be the last person to get to the
00:13:55 dining hall?
00:13:56 Now mind you, the dining hall is only about 30 yards from the meditation hall.
00:14:09 And there were people that, you know, it was 45 minutes by the time I got there.
00:14:21 This is everything, okay?
00:14:22 So it's a two month retreat, so you know, occasionally you have to do laundry or whatever.
00:14:28 It's like, so you're doing your laundry in slow motion.
00:14:30 Two hours, do your laundry.
00:14:33 And by the way, that's just three pairs of underpants.
00:14:39 So it's absolutely continuous practice.
00:14:45 Sit walk sit walk sit walk walk sit walk sit eat sit walk sit walk like that.
00:14:51 And that's all you do all day.
00:14:54 They suggest that you sleep for four hours, so that leaves 20 hours of noting practice
00:15:00 to do every single day for two months.
00:15:03 It's incredible.
00:15:05 So just try to, as I say, try to keep things going and be that person that sort of strategizes.
00:15:13 Okay, chanting.
00:15:14 How am I going to focus?
00:15:18 How, it's, you'll have a clear-cut strategy.
00:15:21 It could be a lot of things.
00:15:23 Maybe it's a focus out.
00:15:24 You're going to listen to the sound.
00:15:25 You're going to merge with the sound.
00:15:29 Or maybe you're going to merge with the physicality of the breathing of the chanting.
00:15:36 Or maybe it's a nurture positive.
00:15:38 After all, that's what chanting originally was.
00:15:41 The mantras and so forth.
00:15:44 You did visualization.
00:15:45 You got the mantra going.
00:15:48 Or maybe it's like a flow.
00:15:51 Or you're grok on how the chanting induces restful states.

00:15:57 Really a lot of our agitation is mental talk.

00:16:05 And either an internal or an external chanting kind of thing.

00:16:14 The mental talk tends to go in all different directions.

00:16:17 But if you set up a kind of rhythm in talk space where you're going, om mani padme hum,

00:16:23 om mani padme hum, over and over again.

00:16:26 So what that rhythm does is it's like a comb.

00:16:32 If your mind is like hair that wants to be a bad hair day and go in all directions, but

00:16:41 you're constantly combing through it these times of om mani padme hum, these syllables,

00:16:47 they make it difficult for the mind hair to fly in all different directions.

00:16:54 That's to induce a here rest experience relatively.

00:16:58 Even when your mind is wandering during chanting, you'll notice it can't wander as fast or as

00:17:04 big.

00:17:05 So you can go into see rest, hear rest, feel rest.

00:17:08 Or you can go into flow states.

00:17:10 There's a lot of possibilities.

00:17:14 Those of you that are familiar with the range of techniques.

00:17:18 You sort of decide on how you want to do it.

00:17:25 This morning for myself, for example, I was doing expansion contraction.

00:17:29 Oh, it was so cool.

00:17:31 It was in all three modalities, inner and outer.

00:17:34 It's just the whole thing was just like simultaneously expanding, contracting.

00:17:39 It just sort of opened.

00:17:41 That was like an interest, opportunity, necessity, right?

00:17:45 So it's like, okay, I think I'm going to go with this plan this morning.

00:17:49 And like, okay, that's the strategy.

00:17:52 At other times, you might want to do other things.

00:17:56 So how am I going to practice when I'm taking a shower?

00:18:00 Or when I'm doing my meal?

00:18:02 Fortunately, you get lots of chance to even get guidance specifically on that.

00:18:08 So that attitude of, okay, it's like, keep the continuity, I would strongly encourage

00:18:19 that.

00:18:20 But one of the metaphors that the Buddha used for success with practice is he compared it

00:18:28 to getting fire by rubbing sticks together, actually.

00:18:33 He said, in other words, it's an emphasis on continuity.

00:18:40 So if you rub and then you like stop, and then you rub and then you stop, well, it's

00:18:45 not going to develop something that catches fire.

00:18:49 So retreat is a situation where you can sort of catch fire with things by keeping a continuity

00:18:57 of practice going.

00:18:59 So that's something that I think would be good to consider and think about and try to

00:19:08 achieve.