**Title:** Be On Time

**Excerpt:** Punctuality as Practice

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In his book *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Buddhist Precepts*, Reb Anderson says that “Zen is, in a nutshell, being on time. Not being early and not being late is Zen.”

Ouch. I’ve read so many books on Zen and Buddhist practice, and spent hundreds of hours in meditation, both alone at home and in community at various Zen centres and on silent retreat, and I want so badly to be a Zen person. But I have yet to become a person who is, as a rule, on time.

I’m also, unfortunately, not particularly clean and tidy, another aspect of being who I am that makes me hesitate to even tell people that I meditate, not to mention that I am out here trying to practice Zen. When many people hear the word Zen they (or at least I) tend to associate it with, among other things, smooth-shaven heads, immaculate black robes, overall straightforwardness, and of course, being meticulous about cleanliness and order: in general, not being messy -- around the house, or with one’s feelings, or in one’s life.

But I’m a fundamentally messy, running-late kind of person in every sense. I’m emotional, I’m disorganized, and I forget things all the time. I often overreact, I frequently change my mind, and I have a hard time saying what I mean, especially where another person’s feelings are involved. I haven’t yet achieved the level of awakening that would allow me to tidy up -- I mean really tidy up, for good -- my apartment, my schedule, my life, and myself. Or to show up -- really show up -- on time, prepared, and ready to go.

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With that in mind, my belated resolution for 2021 is simply this: Be on time. Leave earlier, accept the reality of doing less, let go of that thing that feels urgent, err on the side of arriving a few minutes before I need to, and enjoy -- really relish the absolute pleasure of -- not feeling the feeling of running late. No matter what I’m doing, where, and with whom, show up punctually and prepared. Be on time.

This works for me as a mindfulness practice, as a mantra, and as a koan because it’s concise and direct. I can say it on my out-breath when I’m sitting zazen or walking. Be on time! It functions on both a literal as well as on a figurative level, and crucially, it’s something I have the opportunity to practice every day. I always have somewhere to be and some kind of schedule to follow, whether it’s my morning routine or my timetable of classes or the time I signed up to go to the gym or the friend I’m meeting in the evening for a walk in the woods. There are so many opportunities, every day, to be on time.

In my life, striving to achieve punctuality also has the refreshing, invigorating quality of swimming against the current. It’s easy to be a little bit late all the time when it’s normal among the people around you, and the kind of people I spend time with tend to be patient and flexible about lateness, whether it’s mine or their own.

Still, even though I know there’s not going to be any kind of conflict or consequences if it’s me who’s late -- my friends aren’t going leave if we’re supposed to meet at 1:00 and I still haven’t shown up at 1:04, and my students, bless their hearts, will sit patiently outside of our classroom if I fail to materialize at the appointed hour (which I have done) -- it still doesn’t feel right to be late. That is, there’s an internal conflict and consequence. Your body knows there’s something wrong, and you worry and rush and stress out about it. You become impatient with yourself and others as you hurry to get to where you’re already supposed to be. That’s not Zen.

As Will once said to me, in a formulation so simple and startlingly true I’ll never forget it, “Being late just doesn’t feel good.” I want to feel good, as much as possible, so I long to be the kind of person who is reliably on time. Punctuality doesn’t just make you a more effective person -- it’s pleasurable.

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In thinking about my own struggles with punctuality, I tend to put myself down by describing myself as a person who’s forgetful, disorganized and undisciplined. It’s hard for me to show up, in any sense. So it was refreshing to hear a friend, who is also regularly running late, describe himself as a *time optimist*. Which is such a helpful, hopeful way of naming the state of being someone who’s reliably, regularly not on time.

And I relate. I’m late a lot because I always think there’s more time than there actually is, and I always believe I can get more done in that time than I actually can -- not because I’m stupid, but because I’m overly optimistic. On a caffeinated Saturday morning, free from any schedule and all responsibilities, I can convince myself I’m going to take care of a near-infinite number of tasks before noon.

But by the time the clock strikes midday, I usually only end up having done a quarter or a third of them (on a good day). It’s not that I’m lazy, but because there’s always so much more to doing things that I’m able to foresee. Call it the *Ten-Thousand Things*: unexpected delays, necessary detours and digressions, distractedness and forgetfulness, chance encounters, and moments of off-schedule inspiration, all compounded by flagging energy, ambition and attentiveness. Which, when you put it all together, adds up to a not-insignificant number of time snags and stretches injected into whatever perfectly streamlined process I’d pictured driving my day.

“Time optimist” sounds kinder than *lazy*, *chronically late* or *forgetful* because it means I *want* to be productive and I *want* to believe that the time I have will hold more than it actually will. Which perhaps isn’t unrelated to the true issue in our relationship with time, and its inevitable, eventual running out: dying. I want to believe I have enough life left ahead of me to do what matters before I die. It can be chilling to take that Saturday morning model and apply it to the next few decades of my life; there are so many things I wish to accomplish and complete while I’m still relatively young and healthy, and the reality might be that I will only end up getting a couple of those things done.

I cannot be late for my own death, regardless of how much more I meant to do while I was living, which means, even more crushingly, that I have to prioritize certain things and let go of certain others: not just starting a bike repair or finishing writing an article, like on a Saturday morning, but the big things, the life things: starting a family, writing a book, building a home, becoming a monastic or teacher, traveling the world. Being on time means making choices, and not only ones as innocuous as whether to iron a dress shirt before work or just pull a sweater over it. What are you going to make time for in your life?

Making choices and choosing priorities this way seems to require a deep humility, sobriety and surrender that I still lack: the kind I would need in order to accept that I can have and do a lot less than I’d like. To be on time in the deepest sense means letting things go, and dialing back expectations, and keeping our feet planted firmly on the ground in the present.

And then getting to work. Thinking we have more time than we do is also part and parcel with putting things off.

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Punctuality arises in the space between the mechanically predictable, orderly functioning of the world of time-pieces and schedules and our own messy, uneven, suffering existence as human beings. The answer isn’t to try to be machines, streamlined and efficient, but to leave enough space in our collective schedules to accommodate the unpredictability of our own shared humanity, as well as the shared suffering of samsaric life. Running late is both a source and consequence of dukkha.

In meditation we learn that the mind and emotions do not run like clockwork, and the world outside our door doesn’t either. Public transit delays, friends texting in need of advice, and random run-ins on the street are not the universe attempting to frustrate our plans and postpone our arrival. Rather, they are life reminding us to be alive, which means not only breathing our breath and beating our hearts but also being attentive, responsive and adaptable: being present with what arises. The unexpected, the unscheduled, and often even the un-wished-for are also a mindfulness device and call to the present.

That is, the reality of our life is not only the reality of what we want, what we hope for, and what we have planned, but also the swirl and roil of the world of surprise and spontaneity, accidents and errors. These also require our timely arrival and attention.

Being on time is the essence of Zen, but there is also no avoiding delay. If we are present, we are where we are supposed to be.