

When Tired, Sleep. When Hungry, Eat

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Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, “If you want to get something then you need two things: Clear direction and a trying mind.” To find a clear direction, he would suggest answering the question “Why do you eat every day?”

To help us stay on track and get better results, we usually ask a teacher for further instructions, asking, “What kind of practice should I do?” and “How should I do it?”

However, only having a clear direction and instructions will not get the job done. We need to put them into practice not once, but over and over and over again. That is what we call a trying mind. In the Lotus Sutra, Buddha explained correct effort by using the analogy of rubbing two sticks together to get a fire going. “If we stop rubbing them together just when the sticks start to get warm, we will never start a fire.” That’s why we need to keep trying, and it requires sustained physical and mental energy. In today’s lifestyle, our energy is easily drained due to stressful and hectic activities throughout the day, and poor quality of sleep at night.¹ Perhaps there is another question we could ask to solve this problem, and that is “When to do this practice?”

One of the fastest growing branches of medical science is circadian medicine. This medicine is based on the simple fact that most living forms, including animals, plants and microbes, are affected by the twenty-four-hour cycle of light and darkness. Circadian rhythms are physical, mental, and behavioral changes that follow that cycle. The interesting thing is that not all organisms follow that cycle in the same way. Our circadian rhythms depend on chronotypes, which are determined genetically. In the case of humans, 351 inherited genes² will determine our chronotype. Those chronotypes have major impacts in diverse areas, from athletic performance to personality traits underlying behavioral and emotional problems, risk-taking, and even morality.³ Every system in our body is operating on an inner clock, and if we are aligned with our chronotype, those systems operate optimally.

Traditionally there were three chronotypes: early-rising “larks,” late-rising “owls,” and neither early nor late risers, the “hummingbirds.” Lately, Dr. Michael Breus, known as the “Sleep Doctor,” redefined the chronotype groups and renamed them.⁴ “Humans are mammals, not birds, and we share similar behaviors with other mammals.” Dr. Breus names four chronotypes: early risers become “lions,” known to hunt in the morning; late risers are now “wolves” the nocturnal hunters; nei-

ther early nor late risers become “bears” the anytime hunters. There is one more group, the insomniacs, those who are light sleepers. That group is named “dolphins,” mammals that sleep with only half of the brain.⁵

Knowing our chronotype can help us find the best time to wake up, eat, exercise, work, and go to bed, but also when might be the best time to meditate and even answer a kong-an.

Of course, for the question “When to practice?” the Zen answer would be “right now.” Unfortunately due to everyone’s different circadian rhythms, not every “now” is equal. That is quite obvious during group retreats. Morning sessions are favorites for “lions,” who can do 108 bows at 4:30 a.m. without a problem and will not be drowsy on the cushion afterward. “Wolves” will thrive during evening sessions, while “bears” will experience that they pick up clarity in the afternoon. Zen retreats are based on group effort. Wakeup, meals, meditation periods, and going to bed are at the same time for all participants, so everyone has to put down their personal chronotype for the time being—and practicing intensely together with others for a limited time helps us do that. Challenging our comfort zone from time to time is important, but those challenges are rarely sustainable for longer periods. Retreats are done occasionally, but what we do between them defines our practice in the rest of our lives.

There is an “after retreat” syndrome that many of us experience. We try hard to keep the momentum, attempting to copy and paste retreat schedules into our daily routines—mostly the morning part. I’ve talked to many students who become frustrated that they are unable to wake up early at home and do their practice. They blame their “weak willpower,” laziness, and they can even start doubting whether Zen is for them. According to Daphne Leprince-Ringuet in *Wired*, “No matter how hard you try you’ll never be a morning person”⁶ . . . unless you are a “lion,” of course. For most of us, willpower is overrated.⁷ Instead of simply trying to force yourself into a routine that doesn’t work for you, try finding out what is your chronotype, resetting your circadian rhythm, and scheduling your daily practice accordingly. These strategies can help us better than using our limited willpower in a blunt fashion. Also, thanks to technology, we can leverage the power of together action and practice with others during our optimal meditation times.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of our school’s Zen centers to start streaming practice via

Zoom. The Kwan Um Online Sangha creates programs such as twenty-four-hour retreats online, twenty-one-day Zen challenges, and online kong-an interviews, all of which cater to almost every time zone. When you visit the online sangha calendar⁸ you can virtually always find a group to sit with, 24/7, around the world. Here is a formula for successful practice: ask not only why, what, and how to practice, but also when. Then the old Zen saying, “when you are tired, sleep; when you are hungry, eat” will work for you.

If you are interested in learning more, you can find our 360 Zen Studies Series program, “Energy in Zen: Exploring the Sources of Energy in Our Practice” here: <https://kwanumonline.mykajabi.com/store>

1 Emily Dreyfuss, “You’re Not Getting Enough Sleep—and It’s Killing You,” *Wired*, <https://www.wired.com/story/youre-not-getting-enough-sleep-and-its-killing-you>.

2 Samuel Jones, Jacqueline Lane, et al., “Genome-Wide Association Analyses of Chronotype in 697,828 Individuals Provides Insights into Circadian Rhythms,” <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-08259-7>.

3 Mirko Pegoraro, Emma Picot, et al., “Gene Expression Associated with Early and Late Chronotypes in *Drosophila melanogaster*,” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4457141>.

4 <https://thesleepdoctor.com>.

5 “What’s Your Chronotype? How to Find the Perfect Time to Do Everything,” <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/chronotype-michael-breus-perfect-time-to-do-anything>

6 Daphne Leprince-Ringuet, “No Matter How Hard You Try You’ll Never Be a Morning Person,” *Wired*, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/morning-person-genetics-how-to>.

7 Brian Resnick, “Why Willpower Is Overrated,” <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/1/15/16863374/willpower-overrated-self-control-psychology>.

8 Kwan Um Online Sangha, <https://www.kwanumzenonline.org/events>.



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