

How do I start Zen practice when there are no groups where I live?

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I've been asked this question quite a few times in different contexts, and I've seen and corresponded with some people who are desperate to establish a formal Zen practice but feel entirely alone. Just in the past two weeks I've exchanged emails with a young ex-Marine in the American Midwest and a British guy in East Anglia. Their contexts are worlds apart but the problem is the same. I've cobbled this together from a few responses I've made to people and tidied it up a bit - hopefully it might start to answer some folks' concerns.

There are very few of us lucky enough to have a Zen group within easy reach. Even for people in London who seem to have loads of choice, once you factor in travel times, the restrictions of a regular working day and so on, it's very often impossible - or at least difficult and inconvenient for those you live with - to get to a sitting group.

So: you've [googled](#) your heart out, asked around online, checked around on [Zen Map UK](#)... and all to no avail. What can you do?

Luckily there are fortunately a few options, and one or some of these should be enough for you to establish and maintain a strong practice. Ultimately, it comes down to you: effort and dedication are required. Fortunately, as you start get into Zen, it's all new and exciting and easy to get enthusiastic over. As you carry on, though, things get more 'ordinary' (as they definitely should!) and a different type of effort is required to keep turning up on the cushion and to every moment of your day-to-day life. This is where the support of a community and a teacher are the most important.

Sit at home on your own

This one is a no-brainer. This isn't just advice for just people who are far away from others, this is something that all practitioners should be doing. A daily zazen practice is the heart of Zen life, it is the root and the foundation. Even for those who live right next door to a Zen centre, it's not enough to pitch up once a week: practice needs to be daily if at all possible. Nearly everyone can find 10 minutes a day free - and if you can find 10 minutes, maybe 20 or 30 minutes can be built into your routine, too. The key is consistency. Find a place in your house that you can

dedicate to practice, away from housemates, kids, electronic screens, noise and so on. I've got a small table in an office where I keep my zafu, zabuton, stool and rakusu, and it's developed into a permanent altar but takes up almost no room. You don't need all that kit, though - a folded up blanket or two will serve, and there are plenty of [instructions on how to sit](#) all over the internet. Find a time that works for you - the most common advice is to sit first thing in the morning, and good for you if that works. Night-owls like me can't cope with this! I much prefer to sit late at the evening in the silence of the night. Whatever... *whenever...* just... sit.

Still, sitting alone can be tough. Worse, it's easy to get the wrong idea, to develop bad (or just odd) habits or get stuck in strange conceptions of what Zen practice is. Without a community of others or a teacher to check in with, you may never know when things are going wrong. So, we're back to the start - what to do if you can't find a group to sit with?

Find a close match

Perhaps you're really keen to study Zen, but the only group you can find near you is a Tibetan Buddhist group or perhaps a secular mindfulness meditation group. It's entirely OK to be a 'cuckoo in the nest' at these things - I've never heard of anyone who was turned away from a practice group because ultimately they were interested in a different tradition but were still keen to seek out company on the Way. You may even find that the tradition you sit with is a better match for you than you'd expected. If you can't be with the one you love, as they say, then love the one you're with.

On the other hand you might find it frustrating if you end up disagreeing with some of the tenets held by that group, and of course they don't necessarily want or need to hear even a friendly critique at every meeting.

Find an online community

Many people who are far from fellow practitioners turn to the internet for answers, and find something more - vibrant communities of practitioners providing support for one another. There's a range of these communities - from more casual groups like the almost 10,000-member [Soto Zen Buddhism Facebook group](#) that I help run, to quite mature communities like the [Zen Forum International](#) discussion group, all the way to [Treeleaf Zendo](#), an entirely online Zen sangha run on fairly traditional lines (except for the bit where everyone lives miles away from each other) by Jundo Cohen Sensei, dharma successor to Gudo Nishijima Roshi.

Many online Zen forums and communities seem to attract a large number of non-practitioners, the merely curious, intellectual pseudo-Zennies [who've read everything by DT Suzuki and Alan Watts but never tried to do any zazen and who have a strong opinion on everything], outright trolls (people trying to cause angry

reactions) or even Buddhist fundamentalists (this is I'm afraid a real thing) who have a very fixed idea of what Zen is and have no tolerance for anyone who disagrees with them. I suspect you need quite a thick skin in most online communities - perhaps Treeleaf is different, though: I've had passing dealings with Jundo Sensei and he seems like a guy who wouldn't tolerate too much nonsense.

Move closer to a group

This might sound drastic, and it's something usually only available to people in very particular life circumstance. Actually know quite a few people who've done this, though, relocating to the UK from other European countries to be able to study with a particular teacher, or emigrating to the US from the UK to live as a monk. This is serious commitment! I've done something similar but not quite so drastic: when I was moving to London anyway some years ago, I made sure to look for accommodation near to a Zen centre in Highbury.

If you're considering this, I'd strongly recommend visiting the group you're interested in first. Attend a sesshin, or take a short break in the city or town where they're located. Get to meet some of the group members if you can. And of course, speak with the teacher and get their advice. Finally, do make sure you aren't causing irreparable damage to relationships with friends and family by moving away from them to join a group they know nothing about. They may well worry that you're joining a cult or somesuch. The black robes and Sino-Japanese chanting won't reassure dear old Mum much either!

Do loads of retreats

For many people, the answer lies in a less total commitment - continue living your life (where 'true Zen' is found in any case) but maintain a connection with a sangha who hold regular [retreats](#) that you can take time off work to travel to. The StoneWater Sangha, for instance (and others too) run a busy [schedule of retreats](#) and sesshin throughout the year. We have two 'main' sesshin a year at [Crosby Hall](#) - traditional Zen retreats. Many people attend these very regularly as their only contact with the sangha. Alongside that, there are smaller sesshin throughout the year at the [StoneWater Zendo in the Lake District](#), and reasonably frequent "Retreats to the City" which involve staying at the [StoneWater Centre in Liverpool](#) (though the accommodation is pretty basic).

Again the advice to do sesshin isn't limited to those who sit far from others - for serious practitioners who can manage it, this should really be a regular feature of your practice year. The experience of sesshin is rich and intense, and I can't emphasise how much it provides a support for daily practice: coming back from sesshin is for me an absolute shot in the arm every time.

Just visitin'

For some people, while weekly or even fortnightly visits to a group are too big an ask, finding a group you can drop in on once a month or so - even if you do have to make a fairly substantial trek to get there - can form the basis of a long and vital relationship with a community. It would be hard to do this with my own group in [Northampton](#): the meetings are on weekday evenings and usually don't end until 9.40 or even later so if you then had to drive an hour to get home the next day at work might be very tough. However, groups with weekend meetings like the monthly Saturday practice days (10.00-1.00) at [StoneWater North London](#) might be much more attainable.

Do I need a teacher?

This question crops up in online discussion time and time again, and things can get somewhat heated over it. There are plenty of people who maintain that you don't need a teacher; that all that hierarchical nonsense is against the spirit of Zen; that there's enough info online and in books to get everything you need; and anyway Zen is like everything man so whatever I am is like already totally zen, man. You might be able to detect from my tone that I'm not a proponent of this approach...

The relationship with a Zen teacher is not just 'one thing', there's a lot of variety out there. They can be frequent and regular (unlikely if you live miles away), or perhaps more intermittent and based on bursts of close contact at sesshin once a year. It can be fairly relaxed or perhaps formalised in a private [shoken ceremony](#). You may only occasionally have questions about your practice or you might commence a [koan curriculum](#) that requires regular testing. Perhaps a teacher will only meet people in face-to-face contexts, or perhaps you might find someone who will maintain an email correspondence with you.

Regardless, establishing such a relationship means you don't have to do it all alone any more, that you can reflect your concerns and your practice in the mirror of a person who you know has been judged competent in the role by a lineage that stretches back to the time of the Buddha (though don't take that too literally...). The teacher has walked this path already; they've probably already helped people through very similar issues that are arising for you. The teacher is a dependable guide on a tricky journey.

Your teacher can also be a challenge for you - the relationship is not always comfortable: a Zen teacher may not always feel like a friend! Part of their role is to help you question where you stand, to point out our assumptions and easy generalisations and make you face up to them. I've had a few teachers, and they've all been quite tough with me at times. Boy, did I need it. Still do.

The trouble is, while Zen groups can seem few and far between, teachers are even more difficult to find. However, I'd really urge you to try to establish some relationship with a teacher *as well as* some form of practice community.

When all else fails: Start your own group

The last suggestion is a biggie: start your own meditation group. The form of this can vary greatly, from pretty casual groups of like-minded folk meeting in someone's living room to a formal off-shoot of an existing lineage. It all depends on how much time and effort you can put in and how you stand in relation to an existing group or teacher.

You need to be clear about your status and relationship to a larger community, if any - it's your responsibility to make sure that you're not mistaken as an authorised Zen teacher (unless you are one!). Also, while you'll probably be the main force behind your group for some time, the more you can make the running of the group a collaborative exercise, the better both in terms of the effort you have to put in and the sense of commitment the other members of the group will feel.

My experience of starting a group has been very positive. Even when my dharma brothers and sisters seem far away and I haven't seen my teacher in months and months, the responsibility to the group I've established forces me each week to turn up, to sit down, to offer incense and keep the zafu warm. And that in turn supports my home practice, and all of this supports my life.

It's not all roses: it can be hard at times and you may go through periods of wondering whether it's worth it, and of course not all groups survive very long. Perhaps there's just not the demand for a group near you that would meet as often or as long as you'd like, or in the way that you'd like. Perhaps you'll have to make some compromises. Perhaps you'll fail. It's all OK. Perhaps it'll end up costing you loads of money. (This is not an uncommon complaint, by the way...) Perhaps your husband or landlord will have objections. Perhaps you'll feel like a total fraud and that you have no place 'leading' a group (this is so common as to be nearly universal).

But perhaps it's worth a try.

In the end it's up to you

I'll finish where I started. Effort. It's all good and well hearing about "effortless effort" and being "goalless" or living "without thought of gain" ([*mushotoku*](#)) - and of course ultimately all these are important. But the journey starts where you stand, and to get over the initial inertia requires just plain old effort.

If you have any questions, I'd be happy to respond to them by email at alasdair@gordon-finlayson.net.

Good luck.