17/08/25 Our Core Practices - Part Two

Introduction

In Part One of this series of talks, I began to translate our practice principles into core practices that I have inherited from Joko Beck, and in particular, from my teacher Barry Magid. The first two core practices we covered in Part One were:

1. *Just-Sitting.*
2. *Becoming aware of our curative fantasies and core beliefs and at the same time, cultivating an increasing capacity for self-acceptance.*

Today I am going to discuss: *The Principle of the Middle Way*

Introduction: The Principle of the Middle Way

The Mahayana Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna, writing in the second century (CE), articulated the philosophy of the middle way. The middle way is not getting caught in eternalism (the belief in a permanent enduring self; neither is it getting caught in nihilism (believing the self does not exist). Following Nagarjuna, I take a middle-way understanding of the self – that the self is neither permanent nor non-existent, but like all other phenomena we encounter, is impermanent and interdependent. The self in Indian philosophy is call Atman. In Indian philosophy, if the self exists, it must be one – indivisible whole, which does not depend on any other phenomena in order to exist. If Atman is true, then it would have to exist independently and not be subject to change. Nagarjuna argued, following the Buddha, for Anatman – meaning no permanent self - he argued this on the basis that all phenomena have dependently arisen from other phenomena; that is, they are impermanent and

interdependent, and this is what he meant by sunyata (emptiness). On the other hand, if we deny the existence of self, because nothing independent and permanent can be found, we fall into the extreme of nihilism. Nagarjuna's solution, which is compatible with contemporary phenomenology and cognitive science, is to understand the self as emerging from dialogue, narrative and the experience of a sense of self. The self that we experience therefore, is dependent for its existence on the presence of other selves. It is a dynamic form of subjectivity, which is interdependent and impermanent, yet also provides us with a necessary sense of continuity, unity and agency. Nearly a thousand years ago, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen, Master Dogen, stated "Buddha nature is impermanence". So, in essence, the self *is* already Buddha nature, we are already Buddha nature:

> *The self as it is, comprised of multiple shifting self-states, co-created by its world and its relations, is already, just as is the body, an ongoing expression of the dharma, of the joint realities of impermanence and interdependence. We do not have to discover a true self somewhere deep inside. Our true self has been hiding in plain sight all along. It is nothing but our ordinary self, experienced from the perspective of emptiness. Nothing needs to change, but that insight changes everything – Barry Magid*

But to begin with, we find it hard to accept this conclusion. Like the young monk who asks the Master, does a dog have Buddha nature? we tend to think of Buddha nature as some unattainable ideal, forever out of reach. This is understandable, especially for those of us who have experienced relational trauma, it can be very hard to accept ourselves as we are. We may feel hopelessly inadequate in many ways. We may even

experience self-hate. Even for those of us who have had the good fortune to have been born into a family that met our needs for trust and recognition, it is still easy enough to be caught in self-doubt and personal failure, given the competitive nature of our culture, and the failures of our social safety net system to ensure that everyone has access to decent accommodation, food, education and supportive relationships. It is understandable how we habitually get caught in the feeling of being a separate isolated self, clinging or grasping to the desire for permanence, independence and control. Hence, Buddha-nature is *both* a synonym for reality and a way of *seeing*, or experientially realising, we *are* Buddha-nature. That's *why* we need to practice within the context of a safe and supportive sangha – to *recognise* ourselves as Buddha nature and be released from the fear of impermanence and interdependence – because we *are* impermanence and interdependence. This of course, is the journey of a lifetime, culminating in the acceptance of uncertainty, vulnerability, limitation, loss and ultimately death.

Another way we can understand the middle way, is to see the interdependence between the absolute and the relative, being the one reality, we all share. You sometimes come across the Zen saying, "not one, not two", meaning *both* one and two. Both the absolute and the relative. The relative – the world of interdependent relationships, is the manifestation of the absolute, a formless field which is not located in time and space. The absolute is not another being. The absolute is always now - unborn and undying. The absolute now does not come and go. It is our original face before we recognise self and other. But it is important not to reify this into some metaphysical realm. It is beyond formulation and concepts but can only be seen through formulations and concepts. The

closest we can get in words is *just this*! It is simply *that* which is experiencing *this*. Another expression for the absolute is *not knowing*. It is simply being one with this moment, the gap between thoughts, before self-reflection arises - we are simply the sound of the rain, the sound of the bird, and the movement of the breath. But the absolute is the one aspect of reality that will never let you down – and being just this – we can be compassion's way.

The middle way is being able to walk the path of holding both these perspectives open at the same time - as equally valid perspectives on reality and integrating this insight into our everyday life. For example, we are both the same and different. We ourselves are the particular *and* we are inseparable from the whole universe. We are the dewdrop *and* the moon which is reflected in the dewdrop. Before practicing Zen, it is difficult to see this convergence between the whole and the part, eloquently captured in the following well-known poem by William Blake:

To see a world in a grain of sand

And heaven in a wild flower,

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand

And eternity in an hour.

When we begin to understand interdependence, we can see that there is no such thing as a separate thing – each thing, shining in its own unique particularity is dependent on everything else for its existence. Sometimes, we may have a special experience of "oneness" or nonseparation, when we experientially realise emptiness, helping us to see the world, just as it is, as our self. For example, we look up at the evening

star and realise that's me! Or we look into the face of a stranger and see our own face reflected back. On the other hand, this special experience of oneness may inadvertently cause the person involved to prematurely leapfrog over unresolved relational trauma or it might lead to boundary violations between teacher and student. There are countless ways in which we might stray from the middle way. But we don't have to long for mystical experiences to experience our oneness with the world – we are always, already, nonseparate from this world – we are always in the world and the world is within us. However, we all experience some form of trauma and this disrupts our sense of being at home in the world – we can experience alienation and estrangement from this primary nonseparation and we are tossed out of our original home in fear and trepidation. Zen practice gently and gradually guides us back home again and we can integrate these two perspectives so that we continue to see unity in diversity and respect both our common humanity, our essential sameness and equality *and* at the same time respect the unique difference of each person we meet. There is only one reality, but it is expressed as myriad dharmas, the ten thousand things. The one reality is both the absolute and the relational. They are two equal perspectives on the one reality. So we exist as a particular human being with a unique personal history and viewpoint and at the same time we are Buddha nature, impermanence and interdependence with no substantial self, manifesting as this particular unique and precious moment which will never again be repeated. We do not prioritise or elevate the absolute over its unique expression in the particular. This particular self, warts and all, in this particular time and place, is Buddha nature. Therefore, we steer a middle way, holding both perspectives without getting stuck in either side.

For example, we understand our zen practice as cultivating trust in being just this moment and trust of being a relational self, founded upon the capacity to trust and be trusted, to empathise with others, to be a reliable support for others and to be able to accept the reality of impermanence and interdependence. This is contrasted with a self that has been badly injured by relational trauma which results in a self-centred mode of being, that is primarily configured around self-protection - from the expectation of being hurt again and again in the context of family, friendship and work relations. The injured self is sensitive to nonrecognition and subject to fragmentation and breakdown in the wake of further let downs and disappointments. However, the self, even if injured, continues to seek coherence, continuity, and meaningfulness in experience. A healthy self is not simply the absence of symptoms but is marked by positive attributes—vitality, values-based ambitions, self-esteem, and the ability to form meaningful relationships. Heinz Kohut, the founder of Self Psychology, articulated that the healthy self is primarily forged in the context of empathic responses from significant caregivers. In fact, there is no 'self' to be found, outside the matrix of relations with other selves – meaning there is no separate, isolated self. Therefore, we also need to have some understanding of what we mean by healthy supportive relationships. Drawing on attachment research, relational psychoanalysis and philosophers such as Martin Buber, healthy relationships are founded on safety, trust, reliability, intimacy, mutual recognition and the capacity to repair breakdowns in communication, disconnections and misunderstandings. Healthy relationships can be seen as *I – Thou* relationships, rather than *I - It* relationships, to use the language of Buber. This simply means we aspire to relate to each other as equals,

as subject to subject, or person to person, rather than subject to object.

Unfortunately, many teachers, including our own founding teacher, Joko Beck, seem to focus only on a narrow conception of the self, as self-centred and defensively configured. Relating to others, only as objects that provide us with pleasure or pain, objects to be used to fulfil our own needs rather than equal subjects meeting each other's needs on the basis of respectful reciprocity. Although this does fit the description of being caught in a self-centred dream, it doesn't present us with a healthy alternative for engaging in mutual beneficial relationships. Other spiritual teachings see the "self" as an illusion, as something that needs to be *erased*, or *transcended* which tends to become a recipe for spiritual bypassing. While acknowledging that the self-centred mode is often activated by traumatic disruption, conflict or fear, I see the establishment of a healthy sense of self as crucial for our personal wellbeing, the wellbeing of others and for integrating the spiritual aspects of life. While acknowledging that "special" spiritual experiences can occur, prior to the maturation of a relational self, the maturation of the self allows us to integrate these experiences in a healthy way, along with healing relational trauma. I therefore see spirituality as being continuous with the maturation of a healthy relational self – a self that is comfortable with being in a close relationship to another self on the basis of subject-to-subject relationality and through empathy being able to recognise and respect personal differences while at the same time being able to acknowledge what we share in common, including our personal uniqueness.

I would argue that spiritual love or love for humanity and other species, is founded in human love which is reciprocal in nature and shared with particular individuals. Our need is to love and

be loved in return – not to love without being loved in return. We don't have to remain in relationships where our love is not returned because of our religious or spiritual duty to love without any expectations of being loved in return. We shouldn't use zazen to by-pass our emotional needs and our dependency on others. We use our zazen practice to allow ourselves to be able to contain the experience of uncertainty and emotional hurt and misunderstandings that can arise in intimate relationships or indeed within the sangha of practitioners. All too often there can be break-downs between teacher and student or student and student. But this is what our practice is for. To repair the relationships that can be repaired and end the relationships that need to be ended. Our embeddedness in intimate relationships and in sangha is an acknowledgement that our practice depends on one another. As *householders* rather than *homeleavers*, we prioritise our family and friends and community. What use is our zen practice if the benefits don't flow through to the relationships that are central to our life or indeed if our practice doesn't support us in engaging in helping us meet our own relational needs for recognition and support?

Well, I will finish there. Thank you for being here and listening and I look forward to our discussion. Please feel free to ask any questions you like, or to share your own thoughts and experiences on the issues I have highlighted tonight.