20/07/25 Dharma Talk: Our Core Practices: Part One

We could say that the path of our Zen lineage, OMZ, is found in the Four Practice Principles in an abbreviated form:

Caught in a self-centered dream, only suffering.
Holding to self-centered thoughts, exactly the dream.
Each moment, life as it is, the only teacher.
Being just this moment, compassion's way.

In this talk. I will show our practice principles can be translated into some *core practices* that I have inherited from Joko Beck, and in particular, from my teacher Barry Magid. These core practices are:

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.
3. Relationships and Mutual Recognition, including working with the precepts as relational guides.

Just-sitting (Shikantaza)

Ordinary Mind Zen is a psychologically-minded approach to the Soto Zen tradition of *just sitting*. Just-sitting is the performance of Shakyamuni Buddha's realisation that "life is already perfect, whole, and complete, just as it is" (Joko Beck, 1989: 3). Therefore, we share with Soto Zen a non-instrumental approach to just-sitting – that is a no-gain practice, which dovetails with a gradual realisation of *just this* is it. It is what Barry Magid calls a bottom-up practice, to distinguish it from a top-down practice of koans, where the student is encouraged to practice working on their koan intensively with the goal of

achieving a kensho experience. In contrast to this, just-sitting, focuses on the gradual development of the capacity for a radical acceptance of life as it is, which we believe has a much better chance of avoiding the traps of spiritual bypassing – that is, the use of spiritual beliefs and practices to bypass the legacy of psychological trauma.

Through the ongoing practice of just-sitting our capacity to tolerate and be with life just as it is increase on window of tolerance for processing psychological traumas and anxiety. On a psychological level, we experience this as a deepening of self-acceptance or self-compassion. Being able to accept difficult emotions rather than avoiding them or dissociating from them. Being able to accept our busy minds, just as they are. This also extends to our capacity to tolerate and accept the vulnerabilities of other people in our life. Rather than working through koans, students in Ordinary Mind Zen work through what Barry Magid calls our *curative fantasies* – which, like koan practice, can take many years - the ultimate curative fantasy being some idealised version of what enlightenment is.

The integration of a relational psychoanalytic perspective into Ordinary Mind Zen practice, gives it a very unique flavour, which would not be recognised as “Zen” by Zen traditionalists. Not only is our sitting practice much less intensive than in traditional Japanese Zen training, but practices such as *dokusan* (private interviews between teacher and student) are more psychologically focused. We do not claim that we are teaching a more “authentic” Zen Buddhism; neither do we claim to have the correct understanding of what the historical Buddha actually taught or indeed what the ancient Chinese Chan Masters taught. Although we study these traditions, we are very much aware that we are reinventing the tradition shaped

by the time and place and professional context we live and work within.

I will now reflect on the psychologically-minded approach we take in Ordinary Mind Zen, in particular, on the way in which we can integrate an awareness of *curative fantasies* and *core beliefs* with our *just sitting* practice leading to healing the injured parts of ourselves and the growth of self-acceptance.

Becoming aware of curative Fantasies and core beliefs

It is inevitable, that when we first begin a spiritual practice, it will take the form of the pursuit of something which we think is missing. Invariably we will be motivated unconsciously by an old *core belief* – some version of there is something wrong with me, or I will never be good enough, that developed during our childhood years as a result of relational trauma, to seek what we believe deep down we are lacking. Our core practice is to become aware of this movement of always seeking something outside ourselves we believe we are lacking.

During her years as a teacher, Joko Beck added the practice of *thought labelling* to the practice of just-sitting. By patiently noticing our thought patterns we may get a clue to what our underlying core beliefs consist of. We may begin to illuminate a core belief of “I will never be good enough” and how our emotional states (such as anxiety or depression) form around

these core beliefs and how we might develop certain strategies at home or at work in our relationships that are designed to protect us from the pain of re-experiencing these core beliefs.

Barry Magid introduced curative fantasies into our practice in his second book *Ending the Pursuit of Happiness*. Barry also integrates becoming aware of our *curative fantasies* into our just-sitting practice, because invariable it is very difficult for us to simply just sit, and the pursuit of *curative fantasies* or gaining ideas arises as a resistance to just-sitting. They are the manifestation of the unconscious desire for permanence and independence – versions of trying to control the uncontrollable, which is almost a universal human longing. They go to the heart of our suffering – the resistance to life as it is.

"Our curative fantasies always contain within them a corresponding fantasy of what's wrong with us, a private explanation of the way in which we're damaged, deficient, or unworthy." (from *Ending the Pursuit of Happiness: A Zen Guide* by "Barry Magid").

He says one way to describe the teacher's job, is to illuminate and then undercut the student's curative fantasies over and over again. Whatever the student thinks is missing, there's nothing missing. Whatever the student thinks they've gotten, they haven't gained anything. Whatever the student thinks the teacher has, that they don't have, is entirely a projection. It's usually only by wearing out our *curative fantasie*s after many years of practice that we finally arrive at finding our home in the reality of just this moment.

When we are first starting Zen practice it is very difficult to understand the claim that life is already perfect, whole, and complete, just as it is. That *we*, are already perfect, whole, and complete, just as *we* are. We generally enter Zen because of the desire to get some relief from suffering. So, we invariable start by seeking solutions to our problems outside ourselves. *Curative fantasies* start at the fairly mundane level of wearing out what Joko Beck called our "if onlies …". If only I had … fill in the blank … I would be happy. For example, if only I had my dream job, I would be happy. If only I found my soul-mate, I would be happy. If only I owned a house, I would be happy. Or sometimes they take the form of "I'm waiting for … my real life to begin" sometime in the future – to quote the Scottish born Australian songwriter, Colin Hay. For example, "I'm waiting for my kids to leave home" or "I'm waiting for the day I've paid my house off or the day I retire". Or sometimes the "if only" takes the form of "if only I could get rid of …." fill in the blank - some part of ourselves we hate or feel ashamed of.

Joko Beck claimed that "not one of us isn't, to some degree still wearing out our "if onlies". Then then says something very interesting:

"First of all, we wear out those on the gross levels. Then we shift our search to more subtle levels. Finally, in looking for the thing outside of ourselves that we hope is going to complete us, we turn to a spiritual discipline. Unfortunately, we tend to bring into this new search the same orientation as before. Most people who come to the Zen centre don't think a Cadillac will do it, but they think that enlightenment will. Now they've got a new cookie, a new "if only". "If only I could understand what realization is all about, I would be happy." "If only I could have at least a little enlightenment experience, I would be happy."

Coming into a practice like Zen, we bring our usual notions that we are going to get somewhere - become enlightened - and get all the cookies that have eluded us in the past (1989: 3-4)."

So if we stick with our practice, we start uncovering various *curative fantasies* of what Zen *practice* is going to do for us. Barry Magid has now diagnosed nine curative fantasies. Here are some examples:

- Vowing to save all beings minus one – denying ourselves compassion in the pursuit of being the perfect Zen Buddhist. We always put the needs of others before our own needs – a form of self-sacrifice.
- Leapfrogging – the idea spiritual experiences will help us transcend our emotional difficulties – like Norstrom's hope that kensho and the samadhi of no-self would alleviate his psychological difficulties.
- The idealisation of Teachers – creating a situation where they will always have something we lack or creating a situation where we lose our ability to be critical of the teacher's unethical behaviour.
- Pure Awareness – one fantasy that I got caught in for a while – the teaching that who we really are is not our ever-changing bodies, thoughts, or emotions but a pure state of consciousness that is eternally blissful and unchanging.
- Immaculate Perception – the belief that after enlightenment the enlightened person see's reality directly just as it *really* is.
- The fantasy of enlightenment – which is usually imagined as some special unchanging state, in which all my problems will be over. The fantasy of enlightenment becomes the biggest barrier to

> enlightenment because *this* can't possibly be *it*. We need to liberate ourselves from the fantasy of enlightenment once and for all.

After many years of practice (which is more like a spiral than a linear progression) we enter into something that Barry Magid calls *post-enlightenment practice,* our sitting is now *performative* or enacting of 'this is it.' In post-enlightenment practice, we are no longer pulled around by the *idea* of enlightenment, by our sense of lacking something. As Barry says, "we're simply staying with our mind as it is. We're simply staying with this moment just as it is. We're no longer on the track of anything. We're no longer engaged in some means to an end project. We sit as though we have arrived because we have". Which is a good description of shikantaza, the Soto Zen practice of *just sitting*. *Just sitting* is leaving everything alone. It is performing the realisation that there is nothing missing. As Barry Magid says:

"After all our futile efforts to transform our ordinary minds into idealized, spiritual minds, we discover the fundamental paradox of practice is that leaving everything alone is itself what is ultimately transformative." (from *Ending the Pursuit of Happiness: A Zen Guide* by Barry Magid).

"To simultaneously stay attentive to our environment and to those around us, without any trace of self-consciousness about our own condition is the beginning of what ancient Zen Master Dogen called "forgetting the self." Forgetting the self means letting practice open us up to a world of experience outside our secret practice, outside our self-centered gaining ideas. But before we forget the self, we must, as Dogen said, study the

self, and become fully aware of all the ins and outs of our habitual self-centeredness." (from "Ending the Pursuit of Happiness: A Zen Guide" by Barry Magid).

Relationships and Mutual Recognition: The Precepts as Relational Guides

One of my sangha friends recently told me a story about Ananda, the attendant to the Buddha. Apparently, one day he got sick of sangha politics and went off to practice on his own. After a while, he realised that he needed sangha, and when he returned to the sangha, he said to the Buddha - I've realised that sangha is half of the practice. To which the Buddha replied - no Ananda, no Ananda, it is the whole of the practice. Barry Magid has significantly expanded my appreciation of the importance of sangha, emotional interdependence and mutual recognition based upon a realistic understanding of the relational self.

One of the significant ways in which our Ordinary Mind Zen practice differs from traditional Zen, and many contemporary Zen schools, is our different understanding of and use of *self* and *no-self*. This is because given the foundational influence of Self Psychology on Barry Magid, we see the emergence of a healthy self as an essential developmental achievement. So we need to have some understanding of what we mean by a healthy self and also healthy relationships. And the guide for this can be found in philosophers such as Martin Buber and psychoanalysts such as Jessica Benjamin who speak of the

importance of mutual recognition or *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. Many teachers, including our own founding teacher, Joko Beck, seem to focus only on a narrow conception of the self, as egocentric and defensively configured. Relating to others as *objects* of pleasure or pain. Relating to other selves as objects rather than equal subjects. This would fit the description of being caught in a self-centred dream but it doesn't present us with a healthy alternative. Other spiritual teachings see the personal "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 our taken for granted experience of the self is often egocentric to begin with, especially when the emergent self has been disrupted by relational trauma, we see the establishment of a healthy sense of self as crucial for our personal well-being and for integrating the spiritual aspects of life. "Special" spiritual experiences can occur prior to the maturation of the self, but 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. Respecting the difference of the other while at the same time through empathy being able to acknowledge what we share in common.

The self that we experience is not an illusion. 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 later, the founder of

Japanese Soto Zen, Master Dogen, stated “Buddha nature is impermanence”. So, in essence, the self *is* already Buddha nature, but to begin with, we don’t *see* this and hence don’t *experience* this. Through our conditioning and our culture, we habitually get caught in the illusion of being a separate isolated self, clinging or grasping to the desire for permanence, independence and control. That’s *why* we need to practice – we *experientially* realise ourselves as Buddha nature when we cease resisting impermanence and interdependence. Which is a lifetime journey culminating in the acceptance of death.

The middle way is also how we understand and work with the dialectical relationship between the relative and the absolute perspectives on reality – what Barry often refers to as the Duck-Rabbit drawing. Before zen we are trapped in the relative. Then we might go through variations of spiritual bypassing where we are trapped in oneness. There is only one reality, one dharma, but we experience as both the absolute and the relative, the universal and the particular. They are two equal perspectives on 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 human being. However, unlike some Zen teachings, we do not prioritise or elevate the absolute as the universal ground of being. This very self in this particular world is Buddha nature. Therefore we steer a middle way, holding both perspectives without getting stuck in either side.

I will now explore the relationship between mutual recognition and the Three Refuges. We can reinterpret taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha from a psychological perspective. When we are taking refuge, we are not taking refuge in something which is external to us. We are taking refuge in what Heinz Kohut, the founder of Self Psychology, called the *selfobject experience* or what I call these days, self-affirming experiences. Like the self, the three refuges are a metaphor. They have etymological roots in shelter and protection – but these refuges are not a place to hide – they are not defenses to keep the world outside at bay. Rather, they are affirming of the self – allowing the self to open and take care of self and others. Experientially, they have the quality of expansiveness. They are not something we take refuge in; rather, the refuge is our experience, when we are in intimate relationship with them – as Thich Nhat Hanh might say, they inter-be with our selves.

The historical figure of the Buddha can be interpreted as an idealising self-experience and when we sit in Zazen with our sangha we feel a sense of belonging or being at home in the world – what Kohut called a “twinship selfobject experience”. We can also interpret taking refuge in Buddha as taking refuge in Zazen. Takin refuge in Zazen helps us to create the context for self-recognition through just-sitting being an enactment of self-acceptance. Zazen is an activity. It includes the activity of stillness, silence and feeling the breath or contemplating a koan. All these activities are regulating and facilitating of self-experience: as our body relaxes, we feel our self, relaxing, letting go of thoughts and surrendering to this moment. The self-experience of zazen is self-affirming and self-actualizing. We may feel a greater sense of stability (sitting like a mountain). Feelings of gratitude may arise for being alive. Our

heart opens. We can also feel a sense of being “held” nonjudgmentally, in the loving arms of Zazen, so to speak - a kind of maternal holding – by something bigger and wiser – a kind idealising, self-affirming experience. Self-intimacy. Self-merger. The feeling of arriving home in the activity of Zazen.

Similarly, the dharma or teachings can also provide a sense of finding a home or sense of belonging in a tradition. When I was younger, in my formative years as a Zen student, I once thought of becoming an Anglican Priest and teaching a form of Christian Zen meditation. I actually enrolled in the seminary at Morpeth College in Newcastle. However, I couldn’t find my home in the Biblical scriptures – I had already found my spiritual home in the Zen Buddhist scriptures. We can also think of dharma as reality and hence taking refuge in Dharma is being able to accept life as it is.

The relationship between teacher and student is one of the pillars of the Zen tradition, along with the creation and maintenance of a Sangha. Without a Sangha there is no Zen. The teacher can work with the student in helping them to recognise their *curative fantasies* but also part of this work requires the teacher to be aware of the possibility that the curative fantasy is working on an unconscious level and for the student to experience some insight. It is very difficult for this to be the case, if the teacher is only meeting with the student in order for the student to pass through a traditional koan curriculum. The relationship needs nurturing, in the same way a psychotherapy relationship needs nurturing, through meeting on a regular basis to discuss the emotional and relational issues that are arising in the student’s everyday life. One of the ways I like do this, is to offer a one-hour dokusan meeting every four weeks. The meetings could also be more frequent,

depending upon need and availability. Alternatively, it is also the case that the teacher (if they also practice as a psychotherapist) can take on the *dual role* of both psychotherapist and Zen teacher to the same person.

The sangha can also be just as important if not more important that the teacher – student relationship. Spiritual friendship can provide many opportunities for mutual recognition and in our OzZen Sangha we intentionally create opportunities for Sangha members to express themselves creatively in Sangha settings through performing music, or poems or re-telling their own spiritual autobiographies.

The Precepts as Relational Guides

"The I-Thou relationship is a stance of genuinely being interested in the person we're interacting with as a person. It means that we value her "otherness." By otherness is meant the recognition of the uniqueness and distinct separateness from us of the other person without obscuring our relatedness and underlying common humanity. The person is an end in herself, not a means to an end, and we recognize that we are a-part-of this person." (from "Between Person and Person: Toward a Dialogical Psychotherapy" by "Richard Hycner, Maurice Friedman").

I will now finish my discussing the precepts as relational guides.

Conclusion

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.