



# OzZen

## THE PRACTICE PRINCIPLES 26.04.20

So, today's talk is going to be on the practice principles. We are cultivating a practice here. We are cultivating a culture of awakening. In the old days, the Zen, the Chinese Chan masters would say things like, has it penetrated the flesh, bones, and marrow? There's a lot of repetition in our practice. A lot of the Zen centred do a lot of chanting. We might do more chanting next year, but we don't do very much chanting in our Sangha. But one of the things that we do a lot of is the recitation of the practice principles. And you're all familiar with the practice principles:

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

We recite this at the end of the sitting periods on a regular basis. It's really good to also recite it sometimes, learn it off by heart so it resonates in your own being. These two couplets have become very intimate and very familiar to me over many years.



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They've almost become like a companion along the Zen path. They were originally written by one of Jocko students and she approved them.

They are a rewording of the four noble truths. I think many of you are familiar certainly with the first noble truth. We're familiar with it in our own experience and also as a teaching. Existence is dukkha and dukkha is usually translated as suffering, but that doesn't quite capture it. In one of Buddha's sayings, he talked about birth being dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha encountering what is not dear, is dukkha, separation from what is dear is dukkha, not getting what one wants is dukkha or as the Rolling Stones said, you can't always get what you want. In some ways I think rather than translating it as suffering it's more really trying to capture what it's like to be a human being, living in this impermanent, ever changing, interdependent world that we always find ourselves, that we're born into.

This includes pleasures and joys. So it's not all suffering. It includes love, but it also includes knowing that those pleasures are fleeting and those joys are fleeting and love in the end leads to loss. So dukkha is really trying to capture that contradictory aspect of our lives.



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If the Buddha had only taught probably that first noble truth, existence is suffering, he may not have got many followers. So the teaching was reformulated and known as the four noble truths, which you're probably all familiar with too, is that existence is suffering, there is a cause of suffering and there is an ending of suffering and there is a path that needs to the ending suffering.

So this I think is where we all start. Most of us are drawn to this practice in our lives at a certain stage in our lives, because something in our lives has been difficult in some way, there has been suffering from the moment we were born but at some point when we meet the teachings of Buddhism or Zen, there's something that draws us to those teachings. And that usually is the promise of some kind of relief from suffering. We all want to feel better. We all want to be happier. So this is the promise that seems to be given by these noble truths.

However, this is what my teacher Barry Magid also refers to as a “curative fantasies”. And I'm often, although it's comforting to read that we can cultivate a path that leads to an end to suffering, this path, this ending of suffering, was often interpreted as a kind of escape from, or transcendence of suffering altogether. In fact, in the early Indian Buddhist teachings, they literally taught that Nirvana, the ending of suffering,



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was escaping from the wheel of Samsara, literally, escape from the endless cycle of being born and dying again and again, in this world of sorrow and lamentation and suffering; that was one of the literal teachings, that Nirvana was seen as the extinction of, or the extinguishing of, desire, the word tanha in pali often translated a desire or grasping or craving, which has seem to drive this endless cycle of rebirth. So in that kind of very early, Buddhist teaching, it was often seen as being that the job of practice was to extinguish desire and hence we would no longer be reborn into this very suffering world. Indian culture was very much a transcendent culture, somewhat like Christianity in some ways, the world of the body, the world of the flesh, the world that we lived in was seen as being full of sorrow.

Chinese culture was a little bit more every day and different from that in some ways. However, there are a number of alternative interpretations of these early teachings that have come down to us. One of these interpretations, alternative viewpoints, has been put forward by Stephen Batchelor, who is a secular atheist, Buddhist scholar who practiced in both the Tibetan and Korean Zen traditions and has also translated the Pali texts. Batchelor argues that the Buddha himself was never really into metaphysics - the so called truth claims, but was much more pragmatic in his



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emphasis on how we live in this world. And Batchelor believes that the four noble truths should be translated as the four tasks.

In other words, for Batchelor, the point of the Buddhist teaching was not to escape from this world in some way, but to allow us to live a satisfying life in this world and Batchelor translates meaning of the word tanha as more as kind of like reactivity. And he restates the four noble truths as these four tasks.

The first one is really saying yes to life, says ito embrace life fully. That includes both the pain and the pleasure, the suffering and the joy, the love and the loss. The second task is just to let the self-centered reactivity, just let it be. We're trying to get rid of difficult feelings or thoughts, whether they be sorrow or fear or anger, but more or less cultivating through our mindfulness practice the ability just to allow it to be. And in doing that, we're kind of like freeing ourselves from, as we would say, in our practice principles, getting caught in them, or holding onto them. And his third task is well letting be we choose to be aware of the reactivity and notice when the reactivity ceases or calms down, and then we can respond from the ceasing of reactivity. We can respond appropriately to the situation that we're in, responding with love and compassion from that place.



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So following Batchelor we can read the four practice principles as, the “caught in the self-centered dream” and the “holding to the self-centered thoughts”, as being caught in this resistance to embracing life as it is. The holding onto, getting caught into, is kind of like all the barriers that get the way of just allowing ourselves to be who we are, just allowing ourselves to be this moment. These barriers take the form often of both internal and external walls that we build to try and protect ourselves from suffering in some way. But the paradox is, by building those walls, we only actually increase our suffering or create unnecessary suffering. Those barriers can be anything from how we develop strategies to try and control the misfortunes that may happen in our lives, such as disease or financial misfortune, unemployment, someone losing someone we love and internal kind of controls like pushing away or warding off difficult feelings and thoughts that we don't want to feel such as fear or shame.

So this self-centeredness comes to what we might call is the embodiment of suffering. It's kind of like a suffering of self-centeredness that the practice principles are pointing towards. One of the biggest delusions that we all hold on to for many years often is the belief that we can escape this suffering. This is ultimately a project which is doomed to fail. It doesn't matter how much wealth we might accumulate or how



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many altered states we might experience we're never going to be able to prevent pain and misfortune of life: sickness, old age and death, et cetera, but this desire to seek to resist the reality of impermanence and interdependence is something that tends to be only something that we can let go of very gradually, because we're often getting caught in different versions of that.

We can in our own practice, we will often relapse into various other curative fantasies. These can be very well known kind of words that you would have heard of such as Enlightenment or Nirvana even “pure awareness” or “universal consciousness”, which is never born or never dies. These are often the kind of lures that we believe can somehow free us or help us to escape from this world of suffering. So, if our everyday life from birth onwards is suffering and our self-centered attempts to escape suffering only creates more unnecessary suffering. How does our practice create a radical returning from the self-centered dream? How does our practice shift us from that self-centered dream without getting caught up in more self-centeredness?

Well, it's not going to be easy. As one of our Ordinary Mind teachers, Elihu Genmyo Smith writes “as beginners, we approach Zen practice in terms of what we can get for



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ourselves. We are in the midst of the self-centered dream. Practice is another attempt to make the dream work”. So whatever shift is going to occur, it's going to be gradual, so be easy on yourself. If we find ourselves relapsing to some form of self-centered dream that's part of the practice; however, learning to let be, and developing the capacity to learn to let things be is part of what we do in our practice. Like I mentioned in my last talk, was kind of like two ways we do that in our practice. One is through other-reliance and one is through self-reliance. In other words, we're building these capacities in our practice. The other reliance is building a relational home. It's consciously developing relationships that enable us to be with the difficulties of life. And in many ways, as I mentioned before, this comes prior to the self-reliance. If we're fortunate enough to have caregivers who can attune to us as children when we're going through a difficult emotion, then we gradually learn to build that capacity to be with those difficult emotions. It's a lot more difficult if you don't have those caregivers, who can do that and help us; however, as adults, we can consciously pursue relationships and part of dharma practice is about that, it's about developing sangha relationships, it's about developing a relationship with a teacher, it's about developing even possibly a relationship with a therapist. It's a way in which we draw upon relationships in order to build our ability to be with this moment, whatever it is. One of the significant relationships in my life is my relationship with



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Barry, which continues to this day. There's a certain amount of idealization, which goes with that. But when you meet him you see that he's just an ordinary human being just like me, but has a capacity to show up every week, be there for others, act generously with kindness. And when we witness people doing that in our lives, other Sangha members, that helps us, that encourages us, and that inspires us to do the same thing. So this practice that we all engage in is very relational, very communal, how we support each other, inspire each other, and coming to terms with the tragic dimensions of life at times, as well as the joyful dimension.

The other one is the self-reliance, which the relationships prepare us for, which mindfulness and Zazen practice help us to develop. So that ability just to be fully this moment, when we're experiencing a difficult feeling or thought, or we're caught in some kind of reactivity or fear, mindfulness is kind of like the antidote to getting caught in the self-centered dream. Mindfulness is kind of like the antidote to holding on and grasping, mindfulness is that letting go, is letting be, it's just that being present to whatever it is we're experiencing.

And as we just practice in our Zazen, as we just learn to sit, to just sit, and be with this moment, we're enacting, in a way we are enacting Buddhahood. Buddhahood



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being that sense in which everything is complete, nothing is lacking. There's nothing to gain. Everything is complete in just this moment - that you are the Buddha in that moment. As we sit and as we practice, I still think and I still stress the importance of trying to develop a daily practice of zazen, so that physical reenactment of just sitting, just being, just allowing, is something that becomes a procedural part of our everyday existence that we can fall back when we're not even aware of it sometimes, not even conscious of it, but it's there in the background. It's creating that sense of our ability to be present even when times are difficult.

So when we sit with this understanding that there is no escape from being just this moment and being just this moment, the suffering, which is usually born from resistance, starts to gradually wither away or gradually fade away. And what we are left with, in the words of the Buddha, are, quote: “the happiness and joy that arise conditioned by life. That is the delight of life, but also that life is impermanent difficult and changing. And that is the tragedy of life. The removal and the abandonment of grasping for life, of holding on, that is the emancipation of life.” So, we kind of like shift from a self-centered self to a life-centred self. We embrace life fully. We say yes to life, that means the wholeness of life, both the delight and the tragedy.