



In Our Practice

The Quarterly Newsletter from A Center for the Practice of Zen Buddhist Meditation

*For this issue of IOP, we asked some Sangha members to respond to these questions:
What am I looking at in Practice?*

A Big-Hearted Practice

What I am looking at right now is the relationship between self-hatred and embarrassment/shame in conditioning's campaign to keep my heart locked away inside a small dark space.

When I try something new or something that feels bigger-hearted than my conditioning believes me to be, it pitches in with lots of irrelevant and unhelpful advice, accompanied by name-calling, "constructive" criticism, and internal eye-rolling and head-shaking. A story with a familiar bleak ending is told in a loop over and over again in my head and in my body in what has become a well-worn track.

If I am not paying close attention, I believe all of the lies and stay stuck in the rut of that track. I re-live the experience of a very small child who doesn't know what she has done wrong but can tell by a bigger person's tone of voice and body language that something is definitely not right and somebody (most likely she) is going to get into a lot of trouble. Identified with this small child's fear, I choose unconsciousness over and over again in an effort to leave the suffering, and while I am away, this dear little person is trying the very best she can to take care of situations and decisions she knows nothing about.

Then during all the heartache and confusion experienced by this little person, I am jolted back into my body, whereupon shame comes in to finish the job that self-hatred had begun. I feel my heart contracting and deadening in response to the overwhelming feelings of having abandoned myself once again.

And yet here in this very darkness is the miracle of seeing the partnership of self-hatred and shame: if I have been fooled and lulled to sleep by self-hatred, the feeling of shame that follows offers me another blessed opportunity to practice compassion for myself. The very thing that conditioning would have me believe will destroy me will actually save me. Another opportunity for healing and salvation. Another chance to rescue someone who is so very dear and who tries so very hard. Another chance to choose freedom, spaciousness, and light.

There is nothing whatsoever of any assistance to me in believing the voices of self-hatred or in feeling shameful or bad. Nothing. Ever. Self-hatred and shame exist only in the realm of conditioning, exist only to keep my heart, and therefore my life, small and dark.

So my practice is to rescue myself again and again, to welcome myself back home and into the space and light. To draw a bigger

and bigger circle with my heart until I remember yet again that my heart is as big as the world. I practice coming back again and again to center, disidentifying from the stories, not trying to get rid of anything or anyone, but rather, taking it all in--seeing everything--yes, everything--my big heart sees and holds everything.

With deepest gratitude to my role model--the big heart of the Monastery.

Gassho.

What's going on in my practice?

Since "The quality of my life is determined by the focus of my attention," and since "There is nothing wrong with anything," I "Recognize it! Drop it! Go back to the breath, and say 'yes and thank you!'"

This is my practice. Keeping the focus of my attention in the here and now, in the present. Whenever I notice my attention wandering I bring it back to my breath with a "Yes" and "Thank you."

Other than that I practice "paying attention, believing nothing and not taking anything personally."

This is the core of my practice. I practice this with every "what" that comes up in my life. Which means I am practicing with each breath. It seems "whats" come up as fast as breaths come up.

If left to its own devices, my attention will stray to my mind where "There is something wrong with something." So I have a personal trainer: me. I am in training to keep my attention focused on the awareness that contains it.

What a difference this makes to the quality of my life! With my attention focused on the awareness that contains it instead of the "what" (which is generally a "something wrong" kind of "what") there is joy and peace. It is miraculous! Then comes gratitude for the joy and peace instead of the suffering that is contained in the "something wrong what."

I love practice. It is the fiber of my life. Practice has given me Life! I am so grateful to all who practice. I bow in Deep Gassho

“Enlightenment”

by Joe Zarantarella

Most people see enlightenment
as a noun, as a thing, as
a steady state, as something
to be reached or achieved-
and always, always somewhere
in the distant future.
I see enlightenment as a verb,
as a process of ripening,
ripening until one day
the fruit just falls from the tree.

No amount of effort on the
apple tree's part can speed
the ripening of the apples.
It takes the right conditions
though - sun and rain - and
the great thing is, unlike apples,
the right conditions are
always already present
to ripen your soul.

Simple being present
to whatever is unfolding -
to just this,
right now, just this -
opens your soul to the
ultimate sun and rain.
And one day your soul
becomes so ripe; that it
just lets go of its limb-
and falls gently
ever so gently, back
to the warm ground of Being.

Everything Is an Opportunity

Gassho,

looking at how I experience distraction. The thief is in the house and I'm paying as close attention as I can.

Here is an example. Tonight, I took some money out of my wallet to put in my pocket for contribution to the sitting group. I noticed all of the receipts from the previous day's shopping. About 30 minutes later, I was ready to leave the house and could not find my wallet! It is still missing 6 hours later. I drove to group without it and my driver's license. I do not have a clue what has happened to the wallet. The money was in my pocket; the wallet has disappeared. It's in the house somewhere, and it may be in plain sight. That has also been happening. What I'm looking for is often is plain sight. That is quite a metaphor.

Not only am I noticing a lot of distraction, I seem to be really forgetful. The other day, I was in mid-sentence and forgot what it was I was intending to say. (It came to me a few minutes later.)

I also find myself moving from one thing to another, back and forth between projects, e.g., in the middle of hanging out the clothes to dry, noticing that the plants in the greenhouse need watering - leaving the clothes in an unconscious way to water the plants - and then after the plants are watered, notice that I've been distracted from the clothes hanging.

I could offer many more examples.

The thief that I referred to is from the story Cheri tells about walking into the kitchen and finding the appliances gone missing. A wake up call to pay very close attention. How is it that the appliances disappear? How am I being distracted? I've still yet to discover that.

Now it occurs to me to look up the word, distraction, in the dictionary. Two of the meanings: a thing that prevents someone from giving full attention to something else; extreme agitation of the mind or emotions. Now that rings true. These days, I feel like I'm on an emotional roller coaster; I wake regularly between 3 and 4 a.m. in an agitated state of mind - fears about the future and my inadequacy. A familiar story. I return to the breath again and again. Sometimes I sit for a while and return to bed.

One of the many reasons I love contributing to IOP is how I feel when doing so. It's fun to show up and participate. And it is helping me to feel a bit lighter about all of this. Conditioning would have me get all serious and upset about the current state of affairs with this distraction thing. Waking up in the middle of the night isn't so bad. I would venture to say that conditioning is really working overtime to maintain itself. A good sign from a practice point of view. It's all part of the mystery. The detective on the case!

Life is giving me plenty of opportunities to see how distraction happens - Life has given me a practice with which to see.

Gassho.

PS. It's the next morning. I saved this to proofread before sending. As I was walking through to the kitchen, out of the corner

Everything Is an Opportunity

Gassho,

Everything is a practice opportunity, isn't it? I love contributing to IOP and it's an extremely busy time of year for me, so I've been watching ideas come and go relative to this issue's theme and also the feeling of urgency to come up with a topic because the deadline is approaching and perhaps gone by!

So here I am, breathing, typing, smiling. Happy to be showing up and participating.

So what is going on in my practice? DISTRACTION! I'm

of my eye, I saw the wallet lying in the chair at the dining table. It must have fallen off the table when I got out my zafu and cushion, getting ready to leave for group. I just love that I saw it out of the corner of my eye. Gassho.

From the Tao:

Empty your mind of all thoughts
Let your heart be at peace...
When you realize where you come from,
you naturally become tolerant,
disinterested, amused,
Kindhearted as a grandmother,
dignified as a king.
Immersed in the wonder of the Tao
you can deal with whatever life brings you.
And when death comes you are ready.

A Great Discovery

In my silent exploration of lands far and wide, I recently discovered a remote tribe of sub-personalities. They are peaceful and friendly toward outsiders and have a very childlike view of the society outside their own village. They are aware of the outside world but do not like to venture out because of stories and legends that they have been circulating for decades. When I asked to hear the stories, as a way to better understand them, they were surprisingly eager to share. Villager after villager began to talk about times long ago when they were children (although they appeared to be children still) when a big person laughed at them or belittled them or called them “show-off” or brushed aside their contribution in one manner or another. This caused great confusion and pain to the children who had been quite joyful and who believed themselves at the time as having much to offer the world. The collective meaning that was drawn from these disturbing experiences was “We don’t matter.” One of the older children told me that once this meaning was scripted and accepted, the tribe withdrew to the outskirts of life to watch and comment, but not to participate.

Their belief in this scripted story impacted the tribe in many ways. They did not attend to their nutritional needs because they don’t matter. They kept their creativity and vitality underutilized because they don’t matter. They did not take their presence on earth seriously and therefore wasted huge amounts of time because they don’t matter. They didn’t speak what was in their hearts and minds because they don’t matter. They only nominally participated in the world because they don’t matter.

I found my heart going out to these children and began to speak of a world that wanted their contributions. I told them of a village – my home village – who missed them and would be so happy that they were found. I told them they did, indeed, matter and their absence had been felt and mourned. They were loved, missed, and wanted. Moreover, my home village would be forever crippled if they did not return with me and again begin living who they are.

They were elated to hear this message! Then they were scared.

But finally they agreed to walk with me home. When we arrived home and they were announced to the others, great cheers, applause, and smiles greeted our young emancipated citizens. Bursts of enthusiasm, care, attention and compassion have erupted in our village. Now there is a new experience being lived: we do matter.

Commitment

Until one is committed
there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back,
always ineffectiveness.
Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation)
there is one elementary truth,
the ignorance of which kills countless ideas
and splendid plans:
that the moment one definitely commits oneself,
then Providence moves, too.
All sorts of things occur to help one
that would otherwise never have occurred.
A whole stream of events issues from the decision,
raising in one’s favor all manner
of unforeseen incidents and meetings
and material assistance,
which no man could have dreamt
would have come his way.

—W.N. Murray
The Scottish Himalayan Expedition

The Stories that Are ME

It is pure fiction that there is a ME. This being that I call ME is a collection of short stories, novels, poems and essays on various themes that present themselves as “real.”

There is the novel about the emotional life of ME: Suppressed Passion.

This ME that I am is not an emotional person. She learned early in her life that her fears, grief, rage, and joy must be hidden from others at all costs. In Chapter One we read the familiar story that has been told at the Monastery so many times that all the monks and neighbors can recite it by heart. “One day when she was about three years old, Little ME was set down by the radio (yes, it is a very old story) to listen to Bambi so that her mother could do the house work. When Mom came by later and saw ME crying, she turned off the radio so that ME (or she) would be spared the sadness of Bambi’s mother being killed. And so ME learned not to let anyone know she was sad – or anything else.”

There is the short story “I’d Rather Do It Myself” about ME’s propensity for introversion. It’s short because ME is hesitant about speaking at length to people she doesn’t know. She avoids crowds and new and unfamiliar situations. Actually, there is no story, just a title.

This week, as temperatures in the foothills soar well over the 100-degree mark for many days in a row, she is living her poem

of “Weather.” ME is a cloud and rain person; she simply does not do “heat” and “sun.” She has Seasonal Affective Disorder in the summer, not the winter. ME writes:

I do not understand the soul
that can call this land its home.
Endless days of piercing sun
bind me like a tomb.

My soul can't feed on cloudless skies.
Bluer's never better.
It's rain brings me to life again,
born to live in weather.

When ME looks to her experience, not her stories, she sees that she can be powerfully expressive with her feelings, that she enjoys being a contributing member of many groups, and that she can at least survive the heat. But so often the fiction seems really, really real. This is who she is. And, if not these stories, then who is ME? Who am I?

What would life look like if ME woke up every morning into a new set of stories? What if tomorrow ME was a daring risk taker, unafraid of consequences? If she was eager for a day of house cleaning and yard work? If she saw herself as a “mover and shaker”? What if the entire old library was given away and replaced by a new collection of fictional works? Then who would ME be? Would I recognize ME, or not? Would there be familiarity even amid the new stories of how ME is, or would it be a whole new world?

In my practice, I am simply watching who believes the stories. I am remembering that they are works of fiction and that I can choose new stories or no stories. I see that they create the ME that is a separate self.

I am in the space between breaths: the no word, no story, no thing moment where ME is not even interesting. I might say I am learning to un-author my life, to erase not necessarily my biography but at least my interpretation of it.

Seeing How Conditioning Wants Me to Struggle

What am I looking at in my practice? Always an excellent question. And for me, just considering the question takes me back to center, takes me back to that sense of well-being, that everything's all right.

What I'm looking at in my practice was pointed at in a recent Open Air show (July 11, 2006). One of the monks was talking about having free time in an airport (due to delayed flights) and spending his time eating french fries and watching a baseball game. Now, in my belief system, monks don't sit around watching baseball games and eating french fries. When was the last time you had french fries at the Monastery?!? Fortunately, life does not happen according to my belief systems. Life is just life. And life can put together three seemingly incompatible things:

(1) monk, (2) watching baseball, and (3) eating french fries.

So I'm seeing how conditioning really struggles – let me rephrase that, I'm seeing how conditioning wants ME to struggle with what it sees as incompatible things in my life. Conditioning doesn't want me to have an incredibly interesting and busy life that includes: a marriage, a child, a job, and a big commitment to spiritual practice. Conditioning says: “You can't do that. You can't have that. You can't reconcile all of those diverse things. You need to pick one or the other. You know that this is not going to work – you can't keep all of that going. It's never going to work. There's not enough time.” And it's true – conditioning can't do that, can't have that, can't reconcile that. But fortunately, as with the french fries example above, life can do that. Life can put these seemingly incompatible things together. It's not a problem. I just do what my heart is drawn to do. Life works out the details. Life can keep things straight. There's no need for conditioning to “understand,” “figure out,” “plan,” and “get it right.” Just breathe.

A related thing I'm looking at in practice is commitment. And this too was pointed at in a recent Open Air show (August 8, 2006). A caller was commenting that things were going so well in his life that it didn't seem there was time for practice, or even a need for it. Cheri's response was that there is time for everything when everything is done in the context of practice. For me, that's true. It has seemed that, for some time, I've been practicing “like my hair's on fire.” I go to every retreat, workshop, event I can. I make practice a BIG PRIORITY in my life. And, amazingly enough, there's still time for everything else I want to do in my life. I don't know how it works, but it does. And still I'm saying YES to more things. Life gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And I can only suspect that practice is what makes it possible – at least that's where I'm placing my bet.