



In Our Practice

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

A Letter from Cheri

Gasshō,

Recently I was asked some good questions by a woman who lives flying distance from the Monastery. She wanted to know 1) how to make sense of flying to San Francisco to participate in the Golden Gate Bridge Walk when she could contribute far more by just sending in the money, and 2) what the point is in spending millions of dollars on a Peace Center in Assisi, Italy, when that money could be put to immediate, better use here and now. She added that she really wanted to discuss these questions because conditioned mind was having a field day convincing her these differences in perspective were proof she needed to quit this practice. Yes, she had seen and learned a lot during conditioning's siege, but she had a growing concern that the voices would eventually wear her down.

I'm very glad she asked. I'm happy any time a person reveals what egocentric, karmic conditioning is doing to them. I'm pleased when I, as a representative of this practice, am given an opportunity to directly address concerns conditioning is attempting to keep hidden in its effort to sabotage a person's relationship with their spiritual practice. Plus, talking with her helped clarify what is true for me about Zen awareness practice and Living Compassion. And, last, I get to tell all of you about this conversation, which may be helpful to some who might be in a similar struggle with those "persistent voices of discontent."

Last weekend we had the first of our "Participation Days" at the Zen Center in Palo Alto. It was great fun. Our focus was on creating presentations to be used in some upcoming events, as well as the one we will send out to teachers and members of various organizations who want to be informed about our work in Africa so they and their students and colleagues can participate with us.

As we were leaving Palo Alto on Monday morning, we had a conversation in the kitchen about the work we're doing in Living Compassion and how people are still asking what Living Compassion has to do with Zen practice. Sister Phil, who lives at the Zen Center in Palo Alto, who was the head monk at the Monastery for many years, and who suggested twenty-two years ago that we buy the original Zen Center in Mountain View said, "But nothing has changed. We've always done this kind of service work, right from the beginning. We started with yard sales to pay the mortgage on the new Zen Center, then we created 'Shoes for Kids' when we learned there were children who couldn't go to school because they didn't have shoes. After that we did 'Bikes for Tykes,' refurbishing hundreds of bikes to give to underprivileged children at Christmas. We have supported the Ecumenical Hunger Project, a service organization in East

Palo Alto (a poor community near the Zen Center in Mountain View), since the Zen Center opened in 1984. We've always 'adopted' one or more families, providing gifts and food for the holiday season. In addition we agreed to provide 'extras' when someone needed something special such as glasses or a washing machine or maintenance on their home. We did maintenance on the East Palo Alto Montessori School, provided vegetarian meals to teach people how to cook and eat as vegetarians, and offered gourmet vegetarian meals as fundraisers. We've worked with women's groups, helped women and children in shelters, and done workshops in the local prison." She summed up with, "Living Compassion is doing the same work on a larger scale, but that's just logical—everything about the Zen Center is happening on a larger scale than it was twenty years ago. There are a lot more of us."

When my teacher sent me out to do this work of encouraging and guiding people in the process of awakening and ending suffering, he said to me, "You will do for the love of others what you would never be willing to do for yourself." He was right—as always. I would not have made the kind of effort for my own spiritual well-being that I have made knowing others might benefit from my endeavors. Years later I encountered another quote, from Ginny Ditzler of Your Best Year Yet, that to me expresses the point of Living Compassion perfectly: "If you don't have something larger to serve, you will self-serve." That's it!

This is a path of bodhisattvas. This is a path of people who commit not to enter Nirvana until all beings have entered. Now, that is worth thinking about! In the Three Pure Precepts we are exhorted to 1) Cease from evil, 2) Do only good, and 3) Do good for others.

The point of doing good for others is not the actual "good" that we do, though that can surely seem like the point to the person who is now eating instead of starving. So what is the point? The point is to be involved, to participate, to do for the love of others what you would never be willing to do for yourself, to serve something greater than yourself, to be a difference. The point is the conscious, compassionate awareness, the lovingkindness, the open-heartedness motivating the action. That's what is life-changing—for everyone. It's the caring that is life-changing. We go beyond our own egocentric, karmic conditioning in order to care for another. That is our challenge, our opportunity, and our blessing.

Sending in the money is not the same as being with all of us who are walking. It's not the same as enrolling all your friends and relations to sponsor you on the Walk. When you enroll your loved ones, you give them the opportunity to participate, to go beyond their conditioning, to be a difference in this old world of samsara. Sure, they may just do it because it's you

asking. That's okay. Someone or something asked you to wake up and see a larger perspective, and look at the difference that's made in your life.

The money we will spend for the Peace Center in Assisi (and on the Monastery as we continue to make it an acknowledged Peace Center here in the U.S.) could conceivably be better spent. But when I visit the Louvre or the Roman Coliseum or even a beautiful college campus or a library, my first thought is not, "This money could have been better spent" (though, admittedly, I do have similar thoughts when I see a Wal-Mart or yet another mall under construction). Giving to what expresses the best in us humans seems a worthy use of resources. Expansiveness and beauty help us remember what we truly are rather than being lulled into believing we are what society says we are.

All that being said, if you can't make it to the Walk or to the Sit-a-thon (yes, we agree it is a bizarre name, but no one can think of a better one) or to a Participation Day or to as many workshops or retreats as we would all like, we will be very happy indeed for you to send us a donation. But if it is ever a choice between you and the money, we choose you. We are an intelligent, talented, creative, resourceful group of people. When we get together we can figure out where the money will come from to do what we want to do.

Gasshō,
Cheri

A HAIKU
old frog jumps in pond
water, reeds, fish, other frogs
participation

Participation

In looking at my experience of the process of participation (with this practice), the first thing that arises is a feeling of gratitude. From my first contact with the practice, at a daylong retreat with Cheri, I was drawn to participate further. I attended that daylong retreat at the invitation of a friend who correctly projected that I would enjoy it. Attending retreats strengthened the willingness to participate. To this day, when a request, invitation or opportunity from the Zen Center, now Living Compassion, comes my way, a "yes" always arises. Not all comes into fruition, and the yes remains. For this willingness, I am deeply grateful.

As I look at other areas of life, I see how conditioning will come in and say "NO!" More and more, I catch that and examine what is going on. The other day, I was asked to demonstrate my work at a local festival and the first response was "No, I'm too busy." Hmmmmmmmm. I called back and said, "I think we can work something out." It was a great day and a fabulous time.

Conditioning tells me that it is impossible to say yes to everything. There is not enough time in a person's life to DO

everything. This is a great example of one process does not lead to another. Saying yes is just saying yes. "Yes, let's see."

Another aspect of participation that I'm looking at is this: Different ideas and ways of being in the world are coming up. Ways that haven't been given much expression thus far in life. Parts of "me" would like to participate in life: the athlete, the traveler, the sculptor, the employer, the garden designer, the retired person, the monk, to name a few. I love the Best Year Yet work for just this reason. It gives me a format that provides a structure to make some changes in what roles are emphasized. It's not particularly comfortable because roles that are well entrenched don't let go so easily. Conditioning calls me nuts and is constantly telling me that I will not succeed. Well that's nothing new. Before practice, I just wasn't hearing those voices, but I bet they were still yakking away.

I do have experiences of resistance and suffering, and I bring practice to these areas. I find myself identified with processes that impede the flow of life. Yes, this is where I am. This is the work for me. How can I say yes to the resistance? How not to resist the resistance? This is where I'm looking now. Gasshō.

A Living Compassion Participation Experience

Living Compassion held a two-day participation event at the Zen Center in Palo Alto, September 17-18. We prepared presentations for the fundraising luncheons in early November, and created audiovisual presentations to share the many ways that Living Compassion is saying "Yes" to life as it presents itself.

On Sunday morning, before the first working session of the day, the doorbell of the Palo Alto Zen Center rang and Life presented itself in the form of a man and a woman standing on the doorstep in need. They appeared to be homeless and mentally challenged. The woman had lost control of her bowels and her pants and shoes were badly soiled. The man explained that they had no place to go to clean up, and that they could not even get on a bus with her in this condition. Life, in the form of these two homeless people, was asking Living Compassion to put aside the morning work schedule and say "yes" to these folks in this unfortunate situation.

The "yes" was unanimous from the Living Compassion team. Several people got hot water, soap, and other cleaning supplies. Another person gathered clothing to be worn while the soiled clothes and shoes were laundered and dried. The Guide offered her favorite African wrap-around skirt. The man and woman were served a hot meal and a cup of tea while the soiled clothing was laundered. Another Living Compassion team member ran to the store and purchased clean undergarments and protection against further soiling. Several people worked in the kitchen, serving food, cleaning up and doing the dishes. It was a joyful, enthusiastic group response to Life presenting itself in a form very different from what was on the schedule for that morning.

Participating in this group "yes" opened my heart and moved me to tears. This was not a "I will do what I can because it

will make me feel like a good person” type of Yes. This was an all-out YES, from the heart, give it all you’ve got Yes. The whole experience demonstrated to me the power of saying yes to Life and the importance of participation.

Ego tried to wiggle its way between me and the compassion being experienced by telling me that I probably would not have been able to say Yes to this request if I had been there alone when these folks come to the door for help. This little message from conditioning started a slide into a separate “I,” looking at compassion from the outside, rather than being a part of it. Fortunately, I saw that I was projecting goodness and compassion onto others, and then subsequently feeling separate from it, as a familiar form of suffering. I saw that No comes from listening to conditioning tell me that “I” won’t be able to do what is required after saying Yes. Conditioning says, “No, that’s too hard, too ... you can’t.” That Sunday morning at the Palo Alto Zen Center demonstrated the power of just saying Yes and of moving into the possibilities that open in the wake of that Yes. I saw that participating in this group Yes was a way to experience that saying Yes is all that is required to be a participant rather than a spectator of Life. Saying Yes is not about being good or being the right person. It’s about moving from being a spectator of life to being a participant in life... from feeling separate from life to being a part of all that is... from feeling numb and closed to feeling alive and open.

Willingness is the key. Participation is turning the key to the door to life and going on in.

Participation and Self-Hate

Participation: I am a long-time participant with the Zen Center and the Monastery. I live near the Monastery and am usually there twice or more each week. I have attended scads of workshops and retreats with Cheri and/or the monks. I do a lot of volunteer work for the Monastery from my home. If I were to tote up the amount of money I’ve donated over the years (I have no inclination to do so), the amount would probably startle me. And the truest thing I know is that I receive back vastly more than I give. (In Christianity this would be called “witnessing.”)

Self-hate: Self-hate tells me, with extreme frequency, that I don’t participate enough. “Yes, you participate, but not enough, and, frankly, your level of willingness could also use some work.” If I were the right person, I would devote all day, every day, to the Monastery, and then maybe my spiritual practice wouldn’t be in such a sorry state. If I ask self-hate how much enough is, it can’t really say. All it knows is that I would be the person I should be if I weren’t such a slug.

The good news: Participation has taught me not to believe the voice of self-hate. Oh, it still sucker-punches me occasionally, when I’ve drifted away into separateness and suffering; but, much of the time, I hear it as it arises. Most days, if I turn my attention to it, I can hear a stream of you should, you shouldn’t, why didn’t you, won’t you ever, you’ll never get it, blah, blah, blah.

In my experience, self-hates big problem is that it doesn’t know when to shut up. It goes too far. It’s not skillful at picking its battles. Participation is only one of a barrel full of criticisms it has of who and how I am. Over the years I have had several responses that I give it when it starts talking to me, things like “That’s projection,” “Is that so?” and “How do you know that?” My current favorite is “Shut up.”

Now, you might think “shut up” is a bit harsh. Where’s the compassion, the gentleness, the acceptance characteristic of this most marvelous path? Well, unlike my inner children, self-hate does not respond to kindness. Its only interests are judgment and sabotage. That’s who it is; that’s what it does. “Shut up” feels to me (today) like a perfectly fine response to it. I hear self-hate say what it says, I believe it for about two seconds max, and I tell it to close its trap. Simple. Elegant.

So I recommend participation. I recommend getting clear about which of the voices talking to you day in and day out “don’t have your best interest at heart,” as Cheri would say. Acquiring that skill is worth any amount of time and money.

Gasshō

Excited About Participation

Participation. Participation. PARTICIPATION!!!! I get very excited about participation. And when I read in Cheri’s recent letter that this is the “Year of Participation”, I was thrilled! I have to confess – I’m writing this while here at work. I notice sometimes at work (and elsewhere) that I feel like I’m dragging. And what it feels like is that I’m not participating. What I see about the process is this:

(1) Conditioning tells me that I live in a “zero-sum” world. I have only so much time/money/resources available and I have to guard them jealously. So yes, I would like to participate more at work, but the other areas of my life are going to be overwhelmed.

Yes, I would like to say “Yes” more often to opportunities that come to me, but I’m going to get stressed out and not be able to handle it, not be able to survive.

(2) So, once these beliefs and assumptions are in place, I just say “no.” No, I’m full up – my plate is full. No, I can’t handle that. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. Do you get the point? No. No. No. No. And, of course, there are REASONS why I have to say “No.” I would like to, but I can’t. I would like to, but but but but but but but... conditioning won’t let me say Yes!

(3) And then I feel like I’m dragging!!! Well – is that a surprise?!!!! Hello!?!?! I’m busy saying no, staying small, not participating, jealously guarding my time, money, and resources – it’s no surprise that I feel like I’m dragging.

If I’ve said it before, I’ve said it 100 times: Cheri Huber knows what she’s talking about! And don’t take my word for it! Nor hers. Find out for yourself. Participation is the answer. Participa-

tion is the answer. Participation is the answer. And to me, the beauty of this practice is the focus, focus, focus on self-hatred and conditioning. Not that we are in battle against self-hatred and conditioning, but they are the inspiration for continuing to do this work.

For me, when I'm present, it works like this: (1) I notice that I'm not participating in a way that part of me wants to; (2) I get curious about what's going on with me – how does that work? And it's just fascinating! I'm not wrong for not participating. I'm not right for participating. It's just that I have this one fabulous lifetime to fully experience what it means to be human. And I intend to experience it!

When I'm not present, it works like this: (1) I notice that I'm not participating in a way that part of me wants to; (2) conditioning beats me up for not participating; (3) conditioning "notices" that I'm being beaten up, and then beats me up for allowing myself to be beaten up.

Oh, by the way, "I" didn't have time to write this article. "I" didn't have time to participate. And that's OK – the heart has time. Gasshō.

Practice to Be Able

My "paying job" is to encourage people to participate in public, political life – to act like citizens (whether they have papers that say they are citizens or not). I use all kinds of angles or approaches to appeal to them such as their self-interest, the social justice teachings of their religious traditions, and their desire for the common good. Some people choose to participate and some don't. I sometimes wish I had a magic wand that would free people from their resignation, helplessness, cynicism, and/or over-extended schedules. But there's really no mystery about why people participate; it's because they can. They can see possibility. They can find the energy. They can step into the space of movement and action. They have the power to participate. "Power" comes from the Latin word "poder" which means, "to be able." For me, the most interesting question is: What makes human beings able?

As I look to my own experience I can see times when I am able to participate and times when I just can't. Without exception, the times I can't participate are times I'm identified with some aspect of fear. If I'm at a meeting not participating, if I'm at a party wishing I were somewhere else, if I'm not signing up to help in the kitchen at the Monastery, or if I'm simply daydreaming during meditation, I'm not participating because some part of me is afraid of what is going on in Life. When I was 4 years old I was taken to a photographer's studio to have my picture made. My caretaker dressed me in a beautiful red velvet dress and curled my hair. I knew something big was coming up. When I stepped into the studio the big cameras and the bright lights and the strange thing they were telling me to sit on were just overwhelming and quite frightening. Despite their urging, pleading, and bribing, I could not bring myself to smile and look like everything was okay. It wasn't okay! I was scared and

being asked to act like I was happy! My caretaker, who I loved dearly, was so disappointed that I hadn't smiled and looked pretty for the camera. I felt so miserable and had no language or concept to help me understand why. Today, I have that picture of myself hanging in my living room. I am frowning and looking distrustfully at the camera. And I look absolutely precious. That is a part of me I so love to reassure. She gets to participate in all the big things in Life that she wants because I can be there to make sure she's okay – really okay.

It's that reassurance that makes people able. I project that we all have scared parts of ourselves that hold back, run away, get distracted, keep busy, go unconscious, etc., so they don't have to face the big things in life alone. The good news is that they don't have to! We need never feel alone. Doing this practice has made me able to participate in Life because I have proven to myself, over and over, that I'm not alone, never have been, and never will be. I can step into Life and powerfully participate in all ways and means. With a good mentor around, a person can participate in just about anything, even getting her picture made.

The Heart of the Matter

Participation is the heart of the matter. Another word for participate in the dictionary is "share" or "sharing in" or "have a share in." I can see no other way to do life than to participate in it. One day when I was younger I realized that I could either sit back and watch or read about other peoples' lives, or I could get out there and take the responsibility to fully participate in my life. What does that look like? For me it is being present, showing up for life and saying yes to whatever opportunity is in front of me. It is "playing ball," not sitting on the sidelines watching others play, not sitting around complaining about how I wish things were different.

For some time now I have wanted to play a bigger game. I practice conscious compassionate awareness. I practice being the person I want the world to be. And now I am so grateful for all the new opportunities that Living Compassion has afforded me. I have wanted to make a difference in a larger way. With Living Compassion, I can be a part of, or as the dictionary says, "share in" or "have a share in" the work of Living Compassion in so many ways; with my financial support, my volunteer efforts, my prayers and what ever other way presents itself. As I participate in the work of Living Compassion, I feel like I am participating in MY life in a big way because, as we know, there is no separation. I receive much more than I could ever give. That is the funny thing about participation. The more I participate in life, the more I "share in" my life, the more "shares I have in" my life and the bigger and more joyful life gets.
Deep Gasshō

About Our Yogurt

Our plain yogurt is made by a family-owned and operated dairy on the coast of Northern California, the “Straus Family Creamery.” The Straus approach to their business seems to be as caring and conscious as we might all wish for “family” to be: their farm is a small one, nestled in the rolling hills of western Marin County, right on the cool, green-all-year coast of Northern California. The Straus family has promoted an agricultural land trust, which protects thousands of acres of beautiful land from commercial suburbanization. They continually experiment with resource-saving techniques such as fueling farm vehicles with methane gas produced from cow manure. The process that produces the fuel also creates organic fertilizer for use in the pastures. The milk they produce is sold in old-fashioned, reusable glass bottles. And the Straus family—creators of the first organic dairy farm west of the Mississippi—actively promote organic farming throughout the area.

We hope you will enjoy the yogurt when you attend a retreat with us.

Only Good News, Please

Once in my young adulthood, before I knew anything about Buddhism, I had an insight: Wouldn't it be great if there were a good news channel? Every time I would hear something on the radio or on TV, it was bad. I wondered about all the stories that didn't get told about people helping people and children who survived cancer and heroes that brought food to their elderly neighbors. I think I voiced this idea to someone and they said, “No one would be interested.”

I am very interested, and one day as I was reading the news from Associated Press about another bomb that killed several people, I received an e-mail from Living Compassion. The e-mail was a newsletter about all the good things that were going on with them. I was astounded by the contrast and immediately remembered my earlier idea about good news. As I thought about this idea, I realized that awareness practice is all about good news. Egocentric karmic conditioning only delivers bad news. True? I think so. It is only interested in suffering so therefore only bad news. We are bombarded daily with our thoughts and the chatter in our heads, all bad news. As well as all the news we get from TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

Awareness practice helps us to see that much of the bad news is untrue and unhelpful. As we practice, we become aware of the compassionate mentor, and we realize that we are more than what conditioning is telling us. Our lives are full of possibilities that we could not have imagined. That, in fact, the good news is always available to us when we are paying attention.

Living Compassion is a model for what is possible. Hearing good news throws a wrench in the plans of conditioning. The day I read the good news from Living Compassion, I became happy, motivated to help, and closer to center. It seems that always hearing only bad things contributes to feelings of hope-

lessness and powerlessness. However, when you hear about the home for the orphans in Zambia, the meditation pants, the micro loans, the food programs at the schools where most children barely get one meal a day; when you hear about the combined efforts of the people in Zambia from other faiths working closely with the monks; when you see the pictures of the children smiling despite the fact that they probably don't have two parents; or when I tell someone about Living Compassion and the work they are doing and I see their eyes light up with interest and curiosity, I know that good news inspires passion and love and causes people to want to help. It gives them something to do about all the problems they see in the world delivered via bad news. Good news tells you about someone that has a need and a way to go about helping. When I hear about one person or several people taking action, I feel more capable and more hopeful that there is something that I can do. Bad news just feeds the system of egocentric karmic conditioning and keeps me and everyone else in a place of suffering. Most people are looking for a way to participate and Living Compassion provides that opportunity. The way in which you can help does not have to be well defined; it can be offering support and saying “Yes” when we are usually hearing “No.”

An Interview with Conditioning

(In the following dialogue, “me” is someone or ones in me somewhat close to center. “I” is a variety of identified subpersonalities and egocentric, karmic conditioning.)

Me: I have wanted to write about participation for months, and I keep getting stuck. Do you have anything to say about the subject?

I: Oh, I'm all for participation. I say “yes” often! I like being part of a group that is up to something, something meaningful, relevant. I especially like being a small part of something big. You know, part of the team, but not very responsible in any particular way. Kind of good to leave the back door open, you know? So if it doesn't seem like it's going my way at any point, I can just cut out and try something else.

Me: Hmm. I see. However, we do sometimes find ourselves with a big role, a major responsibility. For example, being the “champion” of a major event, seeing it through from start to finish. How do you like that?

I: Well, I don't like that very much, thank you! Quite frankly, I don't know how I ever get into such a predicament. Saying “yes” in a major role makes it really hard to sneak out the back door! You just end up having to hang in there, and hope it will all be over soon. Yes, that's it. Just do it. Get it over with. Then life will be better. And we will never make that mistake again!!

Me: I think we've done that together many times, haven't we? Say “yes,” gut it out, swear never to do it again.

I: Yes, yes. We've got that one down pretty good! It's just about as standard a routine as Lucy, Charlie Brown, and the

football.

Me: And yet, I recently had a different experience. I'm wondering where you were? It started out like all the old times together. I had said "yes" in a big way. I was keeping the big picture and a lot of little details and helping people move along to an event. There were many days when we were playing our familiar song and dance routine: "This is too hard. I can't do it. I quit."

And then, and then.... There we were in the midst of the final push of preparations, working fast, focused, staying up late.... all the conditions for dissolving me, with your help, into a puddle of angst and tears. And yet, and yet....as I took a brief break and checked in I found that I was HAVING FUN! A lot of fun! I said to the folks, "Oh, I just got it. We really do this because it is so much fun."

I: Obviously, I was not there. Had I been, you would not have had that experience! I would never have permitted FUN, and I had better make sure that never happens again.

Me: Well, it might be harder to pull it off now that I know that fun is possible in these circumstances. Be present, anytime, anywhere, and fun is possible. Be somewhere else other than here, and fun is not possible, or at least not likely. And I might never have seen this had I not said "yes" in the first place. Participation: showing up, making a difference, the fast track to ending suffering!

"Really Good Person" — Pass It On

I sent a "Really Good Person" cap to a dear friend with this instruction: If she did not feel comfortable wearing it in public, she had to come to a Zen retreat and explain to Cheri why not. Turns out she not only had no problem wearing it (must have been some projection on my part...) but added a whole new dimension to it. At a big picnic, she wore it for a while, enjoying the comments she received. Then she put it on somebody else, with the request that that person wear it and pass it on to another person, with the same request. And so the cap made the rounds, and a marvelous time was had by all. Except for one person who was unable to wear it — alas, I was not present to invite him to a Zen retreat, but maybe his karma will lead him in the right direction.

The Little Sparrow

Here is a story that certainly expresses one aspect of participation.

It was a chilly, overcast day when the horseman spied the little sparrow lying on its back in the middle of the road. Reining in his mount he looked down and inquired of the fragile creature, "Why are you lying upside down like that?"

"I heard the heavens are going to fall today," replied the bird.

The horseman laughed, "And I suppose your spindly legs can hold up the heavens?"

"One does what one can," said the little sparrow, "one does what one can."

—Source unknown

A HAIKU
participation:
when the student is ready
the sangha appears