

Can We Practice All the Time?

Mari Rhydwen Roshi, Zazenkai, 20 February 2021

Is zen practice just something we do, or try to do, on Thursday night at St Paul's and sometimes on a Saturday at zazenkai and, if we are diligent, every day on our mats or is it something we aim to do **all** the time? Do we have a sense of 'Now I'm practising Zen. Now I'm 'off duty' or 'Just being myself?' (Interesting one this, 'Being myself?' What does it mean to you?) Or do we try to maintain some sense of practising all the time and, if so, how do we tell if we are or not?

(Pause for comments and questions)

I know that early on in my practice it was pretty much confined to the cushion. I thought that the point was to meditate on the cushion and the magical effects would keep me going for the rest of the day and there is an element of that which is not untrue. Regular meditation changes us.

But there is another aspect here about whether we do or should practice all the time and what that even means. This is interesting to explore because most of the role models of our tradition are male monastics, which is why, for example, in the sesshin last month, I explored Ryokan's words, his poems and other writing, because although he was a monk, he was not cloistered, he did not live in a monastery. He lived and interacted in the world.

Over the coming year I'd like to explore this issue with you, the issue of how we practice seriously as lay people. I do not think this means trying to live like monastics, or as hermits, but it doesn't mean only practising part-time either. Over time we can look at the myriad ways that Shakyamuni Buddha taught, ways our tradition has built on, to help us live as Bodhisattvas. This can help to explore how others who do not fit the male monastic model can guide and inspire us.

Women Zen practitioners, even dharma heirs, have been around since Zen began. One of Bodhidharma's four Dharma heirs, Zongchi, was a woman, though that has not been much emphasised. She has sometimes been described as the daughter of the Emperor Wu with whom Bodhidharma had the interaction famous as the first koan in the Blue Cliff Record.

Remember? Emperor Wu was an early supporter of Buddhism on China.

The Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, What is the first principle of the holy teaching?

Dharma said, Vast emptiness, nothing holy.

The Emperor said, Who are you, you there challenging me?

Dharma said, I don't know.

The Emperor was not satisfied. He could not make sense of all this.

Bodhidharma then crossed the river, and went on to Wei. Later the Emperor discussed this with his head monk.

Chih said, Have you realised who that was yet?

The Emperor said, No.

Chih said, That was Kanzeon, the Bodhisattva, sharing the Buddhas's realization with you.

The Emperor regretted what he had said and wanted to send someone to get him back but

Chih said he could send the whole country after him, nothing would bring him back.

I can't help feeling bad for the poor emperor...that feeling, when you know you really stuffed up and missed your chance?

Anyway, like many of the known Zen nuns Zongchi had powerful family connections and status, which may make her seem in a somewhat special category but even if they were from upper class, even aristocratic families, many of the nuns in our Zen tradition came to practice after being married and having children, so they brought experience of family life as adults, as sexual beings, as people who had experienced romantic and maternal love and attachment and loss and so may have a different perspective from monks who have 'left home' to become monks as celibates, often in boyhood.

I'm not going to explore women adepts any more now, but mention it in passing, but we will return to them, along with some of the well-known lay people in our tradition, Layman Pang and his whole family for example, as we consider our intentions as lay practitioners in 2021.

Here, we are all lay practitioners but we need to learn how to do lay practice well and so it is helpful to look at different aspects of our practice.

I just want to say here that, as lay practitioners in the 21st century, we are all always dealing with situations that are new and different from those of the past practitioners of Buddhism who were from Asia and so we in the so-called 'West' are all feeling our way because we are practising in a different and rapidly changing culture quite unlike the culture lay people in China and Japan hundreds of years ago experienced. At the same time, we recognise the same sensations and feelings as people have done over millennia: fear, curiosity, anger, confusion, joy, shame, awe and we still live Now! Here! We still experience this! (Hits floor with kotsu)

Anyway, for now I'd like to explore a little more what our practice actually consists of.

Really we have, in our zen tradition, three different but interlocking aspects to our formal practice.

First there is concentration meditation. This is the jhana practice, dhyana practice, chan as it became known in China, zen in Japan. This is the deep samadhi practice that allows everything to drop away if we are lucky and determined. This is the practice where, sitting in a stable posture usually in the safe structure of formal and extended periods of zazen such as in monastic retreat, or in our case zazenkai and particularly sesshin, we can safely let go of the habitual thoughts and concerns that so often occupy us. At such times we do not have to do anything or be anyone so we can let go of our selves, our self-focussed concerns and just be *this*.

This is the practice which leads us to open to emptiness, or whatever you call it, that which is unnameable, the inexplicable mysterious source of it all!

Now this kind of focused meditation practice, breath practice, working with a first koan or whatever is not something that we can do all the time and *should definitely not be attempted while driving*. It requires our absolute attention and focus. It can, in fact, also become quite addictive and this is why we hear of people who become lost in emptiness and stay there. It

can be deeply pleasurable. But on its own it has no power for the way. While utterly complete, it is only half. This is the Dharmakaya realm.

There is also mindfulness meditation. In some traditions, this is done as a preliminary practice prior to concentration practice (for example, in the Eightfold Path, Right Mindfulness precedes Right Concentration) and, of course, in the West, mindfulness is now often taught as a practice detached from its Buddhist context.

Mindfulness is about the world of form which is the sensible (able to be sensed) manifestation of the world of emptiness. It is emptiness made visible, touchable, smellable, tastable, hearable and thinkable. Mindfulness, attention to the world as we experience it, is the most useful form of practice in daily life. We can attend mindfully to our sensations, thoughts and actions as they arise on and off the cushion, but there is a danger in this practice too. Joan Sutherland (a dharma heir of John Tarrant) neatly identifies three ways in which mindfulness can be problematic.

Firstly, it can reinforce a sense of self. ‘Now I am walking mindfully’ and ‘Now I am going to mindfully make a cup of tea’ and ‘Now I am mindfully drinking the tea’. Anyone know that one?

Secondly, it can lead us to think that everything is something we can bring into conscious awareness and that that is the place we need to be practising. But can we? And should we? Some things happen in the dark. Actually I’d go so far as to say that most things happen in the dark. Life happens in the dark and we don’t know about it. There is so much we don’t know. Partly it’s because there is so much going on. The trees are doing their thing. And the birds. And the clouds. And the fires. And our little toes. And other people. Our dreams do completely their own thing without us having any say in it. Even shifts in our own way of thinking and knowing often seem to happen by stealth. And just everything and everybody is part of this and we can’t be conscious of it all! But... we can be aware that we are an inextricable manifestation of this whole being that is so much bigger than the self we tend to habitually think we are.

Perhaps you might like to bring to mind some things that you are not consciously aware of... What does it mean to be aware of what we aren’t aware of and can’t be conscious of? Might it be important to respect that it happens, and to acknowledge that, by their nature, we might not ever be aware of what happens unconsciously and can never have those things under conscious control?

(Comments?)

Thirdly, there is a tendency, perhaps following on from our attempt to bring everything under conscious control, to think of our mindfulness practice as an act of will, ‘I will be attentive now’ rather than something we do naturally of necessity. You know, when you are really attentive it is usually not because you are willing yourself to be, but because the situation demands it. I am sure you can all think of situations where you were completely focussed, unaware of time or distractions, just doing what the situation needed. This doesn’t have to be anything special – just replying to an email, washing a small child’s hair, giving someone directions on how to get to the post office or learning to play a new piece of music. In each of these cases we just do it because the situation demands it. We don’t decide to be mindful, we just are, unselfconsciously.

So I think we can all see the dangers here, the danger that being attentive, being mindful, can often be very self-absorbed and lead to endless focus on ourselves: *my* body, *my* feelings, *my* actions and so on and, in this way, reinforce our sense of separation.

It is in this realm, the realm of form, as opposed to emptiness, the Nirmanakaya realm, that it is so easy to become self-absorbed because we find ourselves paying attention to our small self. How am I doing? Am I paying attention? So, perhaps we need to be aware that paying attention to the me-shaped small self, rather than the self that is vast and fathomless, reinforces the sense of separation that is so prevalent everywhere.

This is why, as well as our concentration practice and mindfulness practice that we can do on or off the cushion, there is also the third part of our practice, our inquiry, koan practice, that helps us to explore and articulate the Sambogakaya, the containment of all things by all things.

What we commonly think of as reality, what is widely accepted as reality, me here, you there, and all these different things we can name and categorise, is a delusion and the primary purpose of our Buddhist practice is not to *do* what the Buddha *said*, but to *realise* what the Buddha realised when he looked up and saw the morning star saying, ‘Now I see that all beings are the Tathagata. It is just their delusions and attachments that prevent them from seeing it.’ (Tathagata = thus come, an epithet Shakyamuni used henceforward to refer to himself...so what he was saying was ‘Now see that all beings are myself.’)

You know, when we truly realise that we are not separate and that we are indeed a manifestation of this, this whole marvellous catastrophe we call the universe, it is truly liberating. For some people it comes as a deep, clear experience that changes them for ever but for most of us, even if we have some clear glimpses of this, we need to keep practising in ways that keep chipping away at our habitual tendency to revert everything back to this one, to me. And, whether we think we have had a clear awakening experience or not, chipping away at this habitual tendency of ‘me’-ing can help this sense of a separate self, the one we’ve been tending for so long, to gradually fade away.

Indeed, at the start I mentioned that sometimes we think we are having time off our practise to ‘just be myself’ which is interesting because what do we mean by this? In some cases it can mean that we have an idea about ourselves that categorises us into good and bad bits and we think that the me that sits counting my breath and remembering to clean my teeth, and visit my sick but annoying uncle in hospital and donates to refugees is good, and there’s a bad bit that likes to go a bit wild and have fun and drink too much and gossip and stay in my pyjamas until midday and fancies people who are off limits and that’s the bad bit. Sometimes it’s also the bit we are talking about when we think, ‘Oh I just want to let go and be myself.’

But what if it’s not like that?

What if this is just an illusion? If so, the idea that we should monitor what we are thinking about and keep censoring and judging the bad bits and hanging onto the good bits is also an illusion. It’s a view of ourselves and the universe that is mechanistic and judgemental and conceptual and actually doesn’t work very well for anyone. And you know, when we have that relieved feeling, ‘Oh now I can just be myself’ it doesn’t usually result in us doing

terrible things. Often it just results in us deciding to sit down and take off our uncomfortable tie or shoes!

Notice that!

I think we all know, in our hearts, the relief we feel when we can just be ourselves, without worrying about being judged by anyone, even ourselves. There is a sense of lightness and play, even if what we are doing is very serious.

This is practise, which is not about burdening ourselves with rules and edicts and judgements.

And now you may expect me to tell you how it is...but it isn't like that! All we can ever do is point the way and actually we all already know from hearing the old exchanges between people in koan stories how light and playful they so often are.

This tradition continues:

In his Raven manifestation, Aitken Roshi speaks about ego

Sharing one of the early gatherings at Tallspruce, Badger asked Raven, "How can I get rid of my ego?"

Raven said, "It's not strong enough."

"But I'm greedy," Badger said insistently, "I'm self-centred and I tend to push other folks around."

Raven said, "Like I said."

This is probably not what we expect to hear, and what does it mean? Well who does Badger remind you of, judging himself? We all do it, don't we?

And how about Raven? Perhaps not giving the answer we expect.

There is no point in judging our thoughts and opinions (for that is all these so-called self-judgements are) but there is a point in being attentive in general. Being present. Not wasting our lives.

When we bring mindfulness to our everyday lives we may find ourselves doing what, according to one translation¹, Shakyamuni Buddha encouraged us to do and that is, 'Act without inattention.'

Acting without inattention is not the same as constantly monitoring ourselves, judging if we are being mindful, being good (whatever that is depending on your personal marking system). Rather it is living our lives fully, each moment as me, totally unique, nothing missing, complete and yet empty of a permanent self.

So, can we practice all the time?

¹ Roberto Callaso