

Inside Dharma

*A socially engaged Buddhist outreach organization
applying Buddhist principles in prison & on the street*

The Buddhist Newsletter Serving the Inmate and Ex-Offender Sangha

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together." - Lilla Watson, Aboriginal activist

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The topic posed in our last issue was...

"Which of your practices help you maintain awareness and minimize your ego?"

by James Hochschild – St. Petersburg, FL

As for the latest prompt, I don't have any specific practices, per se, that help to maintain awareness or minimize the ego. Though, I have combined several tactics from various sutras and teachings, as well as, life practices.

Motivation, intention and concentration are definite skills needed to maintain awareness. As for the ego, when focusing on something, the ego ceases on its own. For me, the sole time when ego grows is when I am either afraid, upset, or in disagreement about some topic which I have knowledge of. Knowing that allows me to pause before reacting due to these emotions.

"Which of your practices...."

by Luis Beltrán Jr. – Bridgeton, NJ

The practice that helps me maintain awareness and minimize my ego is zazen. Simply, deeply.

When in zazen there are moments in which everything is "lost"; not that I am deprived, but that a hum of awareness envelops everything.

Yet, I forget to keep track of time, to acknowledge myself, to remember that insignificants sounds outside my cell matter, but I am able to maintain my practice. Then thoughts arise, or perhaps are given more attention and values are attached to them and the world starts to be let in.

Nonetheless, I am grateful for these moments and wish for that state upon others as much as I want them to last longer for myself. But, what will be will be, and I can only do the best that I can with what I have...just like everyone else.

Zazen is essential.

"Which of your practices...."

by Brian Craig – Fulton, MO

These are the steps that I have been doing to help myself to maintain the awareness and minimize my ego:

- Taking care of myself – meditating
- Living in line with my values
- Staying focused on the present
- A voluntary choice

- Gaining freedom from the burden of the past
- Dependent on an ongoing commitment (to forgive, and I must redecide repeatedly)
- A process that takes time

By sitting with a pillow on the floor, and my back up against the wall, I then think of my ego and what is my pay off on it, is it good or bad. I do a person check-in on myself, being straight and blunt with myself about my awareness when it comes to my ego (which can go into the wrong way {bad} – ego; where I choose not to go by being aware not to minimize my issue or problem about ego.

Finally, I remember this process with this acronym:

E.xercise

G.et well

O.pen for help

“Which of your practices....”

by Paul Baber – Napa, CA

Having meditated for over 20 years, I have found the practice has slowed me to achieve restful awareness. My long-term goal has been to achieve the absence of thought whereby my mind is silent and still and where there is simply calm awareness.

I have sought seeing once again with the innocent eyes of a child whereby I can be free from the

layers of conditioning. This is the “beginner’s mind” which exists before being contaminated, programmed, and conditioned.

I believe that I have become significantly aware of a vast, timeless reality through having escaped – or gone beyond – being a prisoner of my thoughts.

I believe that being in this unconditioned state of being, one can go beyond being a concrete ego-personality. Through awareness, one can free oneself from one’s thoughts, which are the main cause of our delusions.

I am constantly practicing the art of mindfulness whereby I am mindful of conditioned habits of reacting, of forming opinions and prejudices. I believe that mindfulness and reflection/insight in daily life leads to self-knowledge, wisdom, compassion, and freedom.



“Which of your practices....”

by James Bettis – Clarinda, IA

Ever since I’ve been practicing mindfulness, I’ve been doing a lot better in my practice. It took a

while as I used to be really bad about messing things up.

I told a teacher about it and she told me to try mindfulness. It slowly started to keep my mind on what I was doing....to be in the now, or present moment.

It also helps me want to help others that have the same problem. I finally got to the point where I liked helping people in here (prison). Then they started helping others.

Being in the now gets rid of the past and minimizes the future. Just think of the now. Stay in the moment, and concentrate on what we do at this moment. Right now is really all that we need to worry about.

It also helps when you're stressed out. A few deep breaths, clear the mind and one can relax. Think about the now.

"With Every Breath

by Daniel Reyes (Thubten Choden) – Connell, WA

With every breath I come closer to liberation.

What is the value of the breath?

Without food I can survive weeks.

Without water I can survive days.

Without the breath, I can survive a few minutes.

The Buddha understood the value of the breath.

The breath is the anchor.

The ego is tamed when the value of the breath is embraced.

Consider what the Buddha taught:

All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.

All phenomena whether conditioned or unconditioned are unsatisfactory.

All dharmas are not self.

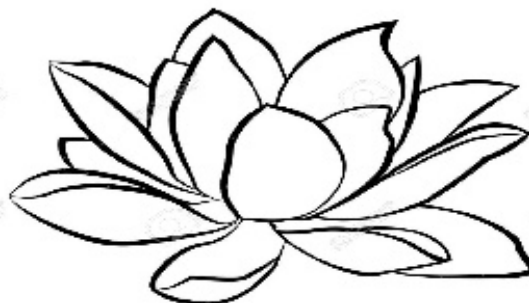
With every breath the mind races and the ego seeks permanence. Permanence is an illusion. Suffering is born.

Return to the breath.

Return to tranquility.

Return to compassion.

Return.



"Spirits

by James Bettis – Clarinda, IA

Seems like a lot of religions or faiths have spirits. Some good, some bad. I believe that the determination of good/bad depends on your karma.

I believe that spirits are everywhere in all living and nonliving beings including animals, trees, etc.

Some faiths or traditions even say rocks hold spiritis. Who knows for sure. They might be right.

To me, our life force is our spirit when we pass on. I believe we go to one big consciousness. But who knows?...there are so many different ideas.

Some spirits might stay on this earth to help out others or those who believe in them. Or, they could stay to help protect things.

I don't know if I believe in bad spirits. Maybe "bad spirits" are just protecting something or someone. Who knows?....but, that's just my opinion on spirits.

***"We are what we think.
All that we are
Arises with our thoughts;
With our thoughts,
We make the world."
- Buddha***

"Light"

**by Daniel Reyes (Thubten Choden) –
Connell, WA**

I wander the dark with the torch of my passion seeking enlightenment. I see the bright lights of the stars in the sky: those who have gone before me. It is then I extinguish my light.

"I am the light of the world"

My path is lit now...

Illuminated by the billions of wise people before me.



"Zazen"

**By Reverend "Shindo"
Tom Bradshaw
Inside Dharma
Zen Meditation Center
St. Louis, MO**

Almost everyone comes to zazen because of personal problems. Those of us who find zazen are fortunate.

Zazen feels refreshing when we begin. It's exciting and gives us a new perspective on life. It can seem like zazen is the key to happiness. But it's important to be aware of that idea.

That sparkly feeling fades. This isn't to say that zazen fades – just the feeling of it being fulfilling and special. Becoming aware that we've been sitting with expectations of zazen is a crucial step in practice.

This is a wonderful opportunity to sit with that unfulfilled feeling.

Zazen begins to feel ordinary after a while. When this happens, we can lose the motivation to sit during this period. "Why should I sit when it's not doing anything for me?"; "Zazen feels pointless."; "I'm not feeling it like I used to, maybe I should stop."

This is one reason all the teachers who have come before say, "Just sit." What is this "just" though?

We *just* breathe. We *just* digest. We *just* pump blood. Let's replace the word 'just' with 'basically'; We basically breathe. We basically digest. We basically pump blood. When it comes down to it, the life of our body is basic biological things like breathing, digesting, pumping blood. These are just part of being life.

Shunryu Suzuki says it like this in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* - "What we call 'I' is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale."

Likewise, zazen can be viewed as a function of life. Just to sit means to make it a part of living, just like breathing, digesting, and pumping blood.

We breathe, digest and pump blood all throughout the day and our entire life regardless of what we think or feel. Zazen works in a similar way – we simply sit whether we feel like it or not, whether we are happy, sad, excited, or worried. Just sit.

Zazen functions in the same way.

Earnestly dedicating a time of day and length of time to zazen is how we can make it a part of life. Dogen calls this *wholehearted practice*. We must stick to it as best we can through all of life's ups and downs.

No one but you will make you sit. Zazen is entirely up to you to do; but if you are determined, making it a part of your life is like breathing and digesting...then lifelong practice appears. Then we begin to see that the ordinariness of zazen is practice.

I chose this message because I'm aware that this is the last issue of this newsletter. Each of you who have written in and for this publication have been great teachers. Thank you for all you've taught.

The Sangha you created is a wonderful turning of the Wheel of the Dharma. It may feel like support for your practice is fading. Please remember to keep sitting. Make it a part of your life. The Buddha's last words were, "Be your own light" so I urge all of us to make practice lifelong by making zazen a part of your life just like breathing.



"Value"

**by Daniel Reyes (Thubten Choden) –
Connell, WA**

Value given

Value taken

The balance remains

The balancing remains



Kris (Kyoryu) Ash
Inside Dharma
St. Louis, MO

EDITOR'S CORNER:

Dear Readers,

Thank you for your various submissions for this...our last Inside Dharma newsletter issue (Oct.-Dec. 2023). Please know that your works are deeply appreciated! As I divulged in our 3rd quarter 2023 issue, due to the changing of the prison system bulk rate receiving guidelines, the dwindling contributions towards our Inside Dharma budget, and the decreasing number of received submissions from inmates, we have had to make the decision to stop publishing this newsletter.

It seems that this newsletter is just another life example of impermanence. Everything changes. Nothing lasts. And so it goes.

It is with this understanding that I want to express my utmost gratitude for the role that each of you has played in the unfolding of our journey together with this publication. Many of you have contributed as wise teachers providing your insight and experience while all of us have shared in the energetic connection of this amazing sangha. It has been my privilege and honor to be its editor during two separate periods of time since its inception some 25 years ago.

And although this particular part of our journey is ending, we will still remain connected through our oneness of our buddha nature as we reach out to those within our circles with compassion and loving kindness.

It is my wish for each of you that you will find comfort in your meditation (zazen) practice, joy in your interaction with others, and the realization that you are never really alone.

In gassho,

Kris (Kyuryo), Editor



As a final note, I would like to share an insight of enlightenment that I stumbled upon while traversing along this Buddhist journey (which I began some 25 years ago)....

As Shindo mentioned in his article in this newsletter, it does seem as if our own personal suffering is what brings each of us to Zen. At the onset of our journey, we tend to

read the 4 noble truths with the expectation that becoming a Buddhist will “end” our suffering. (3rd Truth – Awakened mind can cause the end of suffering. “Ahhh!” we say, “We can make it stop!”)

But, lifting the veil does not stop the conditions that cause suffering. It simply allows us to recognize that we do not have to attach to the thoughts that cause our suffering (...“they can be as passing clouds before our mind”). We can recognize that it is our human brain creating narrative stories (thoughts) that causes our suffering.... and we do not have to believe everything that our brain is telling us. Why is that? Because all of the things that our brain is telling us are not who we really are!

The moment of my awakening was when I heard a direct path teacher talk about the pure nature of a newborn baby. Eckhart Tolle described how our true nature was this unconditioned self or life force (consciousness) which had no judgement of worldly phenomenon....no assignment of “goodness” or “badness” to things, thoughts, people, situations, ideas, events, etc. He described how at this point in our life, we don’t really have thoughts...just a few survival instincts such as suckling. It isn’t until we are “brainwashed” with the thoughts of others (our parents, family members, community members, teachers, cultures, religions, societies, media, etc.) that we begin to record moments of experience in our brains assigning them values of goodness and badness and cataloging them as “who we are”. But, these are not our thoughts....they are the thoughts of others. And once they are recorded in our brains, we begin to guard them as if our lives depended upon it!...which is truly ironic, since what our lives really depend upon is our letting go of these

thoughts and the opening of our minds to the possibility of something other than what we are currently thinking.

But, despite there being no judgemental thoughts in a newborn’s brain in the beginning, there is still a “being” inside that little body...pushing them to live and interact with their environment. There is still a level of “awareness” or consciousness allowing each of us to perceive everything around us.

It hit me at that point that my true nature was this nonjudgemental “awareness”, not the thoughts (of brainwashing) and narrative stories that I had been thinking were “me”. And, at that moment, I understood what it meant to be “enlightened” and what I needed to do from that point forward...question each of the thoughts and stories that pop into my mind and study them from this perspective of nonjudgemental “awareness” before determining what my next step would be.

And once I realized who I really was, an entire world of wonder opened up with right before my eyes!

May your life be filled with wonder!
May your world be filled with love!
May your journey be emersed in joy!

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***May Your World
Be Merry & Bright
And May It Be Filled
With Love***

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