

Chapter News

All of our Chapters will be focusing on the same topic each month for Dharma Talks. In December we'll be looking in more depth at Pragmatism.

With the Winter Holidays this month all of our Centers will have varying schedules for meetings. Please use the contact information on the last page to contact your local Center to see when they'll be meeting and what specific topics they'll be discussing.

Happy Holidays to everyone - whatever you celebrate this time of year may the season bring you joy and fulfillment and allow you time to spend time with those you love.



The Sensei' Cushion:

In the Seven Arts of Change, David Shaner (or Shaner sensei) provides six questions he asks as an organizational development consultant. A close reading by an eye trained in Eastern thought quickly recognize that we could ask ourselves such questions as part of our daily practice. These questions and their answers are written to address organizational culture but what is a human being but an organization of aggregates, an instance of manifested culture interacting with that which was responsible for its manifestation? It is in this way that we are social selves; we are emergent from all that came and continues to come together to cultivate our being. Given this, it makes sense to ask these questions of ourselves over the next several newsletters (yes, series!). Let's begin with the question that has the shortest answer: "why do people change? They change because they are given a clear reason to." This reason and the resultant change can be positive, neutral, or negative. May we all practice to change for the better by better understanding the reasons why we may be changing.

^ Meaghan Ruddy Sensei

Thoughts for the Season

Many people use the Christmas season as a reason for reminding themselves of people living a doom. Think of the people that are actual victims of terror attacks worldwide: Syria, Kenya, Nigeria, Iraq, Afghanistan and what-have-you. Think about their ineffable pain, their unthinkable, horrible disease. Not to forget the anguish of their bereaved. As a monk in the Order of Pragmatic Buddhists, how do I cope with such realities? I've brooded over this for some time now. And I've realized deep within me that I am part of those realities, too. I inhabit the same planet which gets more and more globalized. From this it follows that I am vulnerable to the highest degree as well. I somehow have to accept that this dependently originated world has a vast number of locations in which dependent origination has gone exceedingly awry. As a Pragmatic Buddhist, one of the cornerstones of my approach is Naturalism, the idea that we as human beings are completely embedded in the natural world. Naturalism awakes in me a sense of connection to all around me that leaves me speechless. The particles I'm consisting of were part of the cosmic dance before I was born, they are still part of that dance right now and will be part of the dance when my life as a relative stable unit of particles will end. This knowledge is lessening my need to see my little life as something special and ends my ignorance of the fact that the story began long before my life and will go on afterwards. I've stopped to focus narcissistically on my short lifetime. Now what does this all have to do with terror attacks worldwide and my very own vulnerability? The insight of being a fully integrated part of the Universe, of being the Universe, enables me to cope with such horror stories, for even death cannot cut our deep connection with the Universe. That is one part of the story. But it does not end with an acceptance that there are awry locations. As a Pragmatist, I ask myself what can I do to change situations to lead them in a more non-awry, wholesome direction. To be an embedded, fully integrated part of the constant flux of matter makes us highly vulnerable. And it allows us to widen the focus, to realize that what we express is the Universe, in all its defectiveness and magnificence, beyond individual categories of birth and death, far beyond. Let us try to feel and live this selfless connectedness during this year's Christmas season.

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Matthias Mauderer OPB

Novice monk



Illustrations by Lawrence Akers, OPB

On the Zafu: Tips on Meditation

Stick with it!

It matters less how long you meditate as compared to how often you do. 5 minutes a couple of times a day are better than 20 minutes once a week. In Buddhism we stress the consistency of practice over the length. While it's true that monks in some traditions may meditate 4-5 hours a day, this should not be seen as a guideline for regular practitioners. Significant research recently has backed up this view. We have - in this technological age - many advantages to assist us in this pursuit of consistent practice in the form of apps for our various electronic devices. I'm going to talk about just a couple of my favorites.

The first is Insight Timer which is available as both a free and paid app. The free version is good for timing your sessions and keeping track of how often you meditate day by day. The paid version adds the ability to insert interval bells into the meditation session - which can be an aid if you have difficulty maintaining focus. It also brings in a number of guided meditations from leading teachers that you can use in your practice and the added ability to set reminders for when you want to meditate - great for getting our practice onto our often busy calendars.

The second is called Buddhify and allows you to choose from timed, guided meditations based on the situation you're in when you can find time to meditate - for example, Work Break, Lunch, Waking Up, etc.

The most important thing is to aim for consistency. Whether you choose zazen, bell meditation, walking meditation or guided meditations try your best to practice in some form every day - and the more you practice the more you'll find yourself missing it from your day if you don't have time - this is what I call "felling at home on the zafu".

Who are Pragmatic Buddhists? Meet Glenn Gustafson, OPB

I've had a very diverse religious career. My father was a Presbyterian minister, but with a very strong academic training - he was also a professor of religion and philosophy. Though I loved his thoughtful approach to theological questions Protestantism never appealed to my spirit. In college I majored in Religious Studies with an emphasis in Eastern Religion but found myself being drawn to the Catholic tradition in Christianity - first with the Anglicans then the Romans. I actually spent three years preparing for the Roman Catholic priesthood - one in a monastic seminary in Indiana. There I had the good fortune to be studying with the Benedictines in an environment that encouraged rigorous self-honesty. During the year I came out as gay and instead of hiding my sexual orientation I told my bishop. Being gay is still an impediment to ordination in the Catholic Church so I had to leave the seminary and though I wandered around among the Anglicans and gay supportive Romans for several years I eventually came to the realization that I could no longer consider myself Christian. I still respected the teachings of Jesus but the codified dogma of the churches said that I was some type of second class citizen - if a citizen at all - while my own experience told me I was no less than - and no better than others.

For many years I turned my back on religion completely, though I could never bring myself to declare as an atheist. This was not out of some deep seated clinging to my upbringing but rather from a realization that the atheists' dogma was just as faith-based and non-experiential as the most fundamentalist Christian's. They could no more prove the non-existence of a deity than Christians, Muslims or Hindus could prove the existence - yet they clung to the belief just as fiercely. Eventually, I began to remember my studies of Buddhism and began to read more from the Dalai Lama, Thich Nat Hanh, Pema Chodron and others and felt an immediate pull to read more early Buddhist writings. At the same time neither the ceremonialism of the Tibetans nor the Japahnophilia of the Zen groups I encountered spoke to me from the perspective of practice. Why should I need to act like a Tibetan or a Japanese to practice Buddhism?

The Internet came to my rescue as I started to research Western Buddhism - not that there are a ton of choices that are truly Western; most are simply Tibetan or Chinese or Japanese practice translated into English but changing little else. I did however find among the truly Western groups the OPB and after several conversations with Eubanks sensei I began my formal study.

Sutra of the Month: From the Atthakavagga

VI - Discourse on Aging and Death

1. This life is a brief span; one dies within a hundred years; or even if one surpasses that they will surely die of old age.
2. People suffer because of selfishness, yet there are no permanent possessions; this life is a state of loss and change, therefore let no one cling to anything as “mine”.
3. Everything that one calls “mine” is left behind at death; having realized this, a follower of the Way will let go of “mine-ness”.
4. Just as a person awakening does not see those things they met in dreams; so a beloved person will no longer be seen when they have died.
5. We can see and hear the people we call by name; yet only the name remains of those who have died.
6. Those who are greedy for possessions do not leave behind suffering because of the fear of loss; therefore the wise person lets go of greediness and finds security in Nirvana.
7. For a practitioner who is unattached to things and abides in sitting; they will say of this one, “They no longer cling to existence”.
8. Everywhere the wise person is independent, neither seeking to please nor displease; therefore suffering from fear of loss – like water on a leaf – does not cling to this one.
9. As moisture does not stick to a water lily, as water does not cling to a lotus; even so the wise person is not mired in what is seen or heard or felt.
10. Thus the wise person does not cling to anything that is seen or heard or felt. This person does not seek after purity that comes from another and is neither ruled by passions nor unaffected by them.

Commentary:

I think this is perhaps the most beautiful exposition on death and the transitory nature of the things in this life that I've seen - as a matter of fact I want this read as the sutra at my funeral. We should let go of 'mine-ness' because when we die we will let go of all our possessions; so why cling to them now. Abiding in what we have, seeking neither to please nor displease we are freed from fear and want and philosophy. This is the liberation to which the previous discourses looked. We are to be like the lotus, fixed in this world for a time but not letting it mire us - with either mud or pure water. We are visitors in each other's' dreams - here for a while then gone - and those possessions I might be tempted to call mine are phantoms in the dream that is my life as well. I might as well grasp for the rainbow as for material possessions.



Ask a Monk:

Q: Why do we take off our shoes in a Buddhist temple, zendo or meditation hall?

A: There are two reasons: respect and practicality.

In most of the non-Western world removing your shoes is a common practice showing respect. Whether it's entering a temple or someone's house you're actively saying, "I'm shaking off the outside world and entering your territory with humility and gratefulness." The practice is even catching on in Western homes - many homeowners now ask guests to take off their shoes and may even provide slippers or a place to store your shoes. Judaism and Christianity are the only two major religions which don't expect this show of respect, even though the Bible tells us Moses was commanded to remove his shoes before approaching the burning bush.

On the practical side, in temples, zendos and meditation halls we generally practice sitting on cushions on the floor with crossed legs or feet tucked under us. This is very uncomfortable wearing shoes and much more comfortable without them ☺.

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We're not all the same here in Pragmatic Buddhism, and I really enjoy the diversity. I'm certainly more of a "religious" Buddhist than many of our members; but they accept my robes and liturgies as I accept their commitment to a more secular Buddhism. Being monks in a religious Order doesn't mean we all need to be the same; the philosophy behind our practice is what binds us together. We're all committed to building a truly Western Buddhism that takes the authentic teachings of the Buddha and presents them in a way - or ways - that will resonate with Westerners the way Chan resonated with the Chinese spirit or Zen with the Japanese. As Matsuoka Roshi told Ryugen Sensei - "Why do you want to be a bad Japanese monk, you're already a bad American monk?". It's very freeing to be able to build practices that reflect the Western spirit - and even the multiplicity of Western spirits - yet draw them always back to the teachings of the Buddha as authentic guides to what it means to be fully human. This is the practice of Pragmatic Buddhism to me; not whether we wear the same robes - or any at all - or use the same liturgy in the Centers, but whether our actions help guide our members - both of the Order and of the Centers - to the recognition of their Buddha Nature and its expression in their lives for the flourishing of all beings.

^ Glenn Gustafson, OPB

OPB Rule of the Month: *Each month we'll present one of the Rules of the Order of Pragmatic Buddhists*

10) Lillian's Legacy

There are beings in this world whose sole function in your life is to allow you to acquire good karma, practice patience and build character. And sometimes they are all too easy to find.

The Centers for Pragmatic Buddhism offer services such as: Weddings, Blessings, Purifications of home and business, Memorial Services, Educational services, Speakers for events and Chaplain services. Please contact the Center near you for more information at the email addresses below.

Contacting Us: Visit our website at www.pragmaticbuddhism.org or one of our Centers:

The contact for our St. Louis Center for Pragmatic Buddhism is Danielle McCartney at Danielle.mccartney@pragmaticbuddhism.org

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