

Chapter News

In February the Chapters will be focusing on zazen. The individual session topics are listed below:

St Louis Center for Pragmatic Buddhism:

Weekly meetings continue on Thursday nights. The Dharma Talks for February are:

- Feb 5: Introduction to Zazen and Mindfulness Training
- Feb 12: Zazen and the Three Characteristics of Existence: Impermanence
- Feb 19: Zazen and the Three Characteristics of Existence: Suffering
- Feb 26: Zazen and the Three Characteristics of Existence: Nonself

Kawatha Lakes Centre for Pragmatic Buddhism:

Here is The Kawatha Lakes chapter schedule for February:

- Feb. 4 - Why Mindfulness?
- Feb 11 - Impermanence
- Feb 18 - Awareness, Acceptance, Action
- Feb 25 - Zen Master Dogen and Meditation

Central Ohio Center for Pragmatic Buddhism:

The schedule for February is:

- Feb 1 - The Development of Zazen
- Feb 8 - "Zazen is Useless"
- Feb 15 - Zazen: Beyond the Cushion
- Feb 22 - Instruction in Zazen

West Georgia Center for Pragmatic Buddhism:

The CPB-West Georgia is also discussing Zazen this month.

The Sensei' Cushion - Meghan Ruddy Sensei:

Why do people change?
Where is an organization's culture?

These are the primary questions from David Shaner sensei's book *The Seven Arts of Change* that we have discussed thus far. This month, let's tackle this question: whose culture is it? When Shaner sensei asks this question, he is asking high level leadership to help their organizational members feel ownership of the organization's culture. For our purposes, let's think about this in terms of ourselves in relation to the cultures in which we find ourselves. Last month we thought about how a culture lies within its members, and if someone wants to change a culture in which they abide, they must engage in change themselves. But does the fact that a piece of a culture lies within its members also imply that the culture BELONGS to said members? Could it be that we internalize things that are not truly our own? Another way to reflect on this is to think about whether we are passive or active in our cultures, in our lives. Are we allowing the whims and wherefores of others to dictate our responses, or are we mindfully, intentionally applying appropriate effort, view, and so on? We may not be able to change it all, but with appropriate and ennobling practice as can change ourselves. /\

Life & Death

Being in the world.
To what can it be compared?
The moon in a dewdrop on a waterfowl's beak.

Dōgen Zenji

The Universe, if indeed it is possible to say this in one sentence, is a vast interconnected whole. Because of this, there are myriads of connections among all of its contents. Along these connections, there is a constant transfer of energy which leads to endless transformations at the myriads of synapses in the Universe. We humans are no exception. Emerging from this process of dependent origination, what we call 'human being' arises due to certain conditions in the contribution of energy, and over time ceases due to certain conditions in the contribution of energy.

The choice of words is crucial here. We talk about arising and ceasing, not about immortality or annihilation. Dependent origination is all-embracing. From this follows that for one thing, no single content of the Universe is immortal/permanent and for another thing, no single content of the Universe is annihilated. The constant exchange of energy gives rise to ever-changing forms, including our self or consciousness we presently know. This is exactly what we emphasize when we chant 'Form is emptiness, emptiness is form'. Emptiness does not stand for some transcendent realm behind form, but as a feature of form, just as form is a feature of emptiness. Every single form floats in a detachedness between presence and absence. So in a sense, all forms are merging into each other.

So why do we chant something like this line from the Heart Sutra? Because to experience the mode of being that Dōgen evokes in the words above, our experience that we have a separate, independent existence should make room for an experience that is empty of a separate, independent existence. We are one with the Universe at all times. So what about life and death to name the usual suspects? Humans play by the same rules as all of nature. This means that we are conditioned beings arising from the natural world, and we remain part of it in a deep, important sense.

This may beg the question what will happen to our beloved self when our form ceases to be, and where was our beloved self before we arose as human form? By asking this question, we separate our self from the Universe, which is not a fault per se, for our sense of self serves important functions. But when it comes to existential issues like 'life' and 'death', it is important to know that we can become aware of another mode of being in which we experience our deep connection to the Universe. By emptying our self from inwardness, we are able to fill the blank space with everything we encounter: plum blossoms, purring cats, laughing humans, the Universe as a whole. We experience our oneness with emptiness and form. In some sense then, there is no subject left to be born or to die. We are the Universe.

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I would like to end with an interpretation of Dōgen's words from Jay Garfield's latest book called 'Engaging Buddhism':

Being in the world.

To what can it be compared?

The moon in a dewdrop on a waterfowl's beak.

Dōgen Zenji

"Here there is no focus on subjectivity, no focus on the character of experience, only of an ephemeral, impermanent, impersonal existence pregnant with illusion, but also with beauty."

(Garfield, 2015, 213)

Matthias Mauderer, OPB



Illustrations by Lawrence Akers, OPB

On the Zafu: Tips on Meditation

Why We Sit

If we go back historically to the Buddha, he tried to eliminate unsatisfactoriness in his life by practicing – and mastering – many of the trainings available in his time but found them all unsatisfactory in themselves. Finally he resolved himself to “just sit” under the Bodhi tree until he had reached full realization. It was this “just sitting” that finally allowed him to “let go of his attachments and cravings” and realize that our condition is already unified, and we create unsatisfactoriness and anguish for ourselves by insisting that it is not.

Sitting in Pragmatic Buddhism is the same sitting (zuochan in Chinese; zazen in Japanese) of the Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen Buddhist traditions. We sit with no goal other than to cultivate awareness of self and world, and to begin seeing that the two are, in actuality, one and the same. We sit to understand that the causal world “out there” is also the causal world “in here.” We sit to realize that dualism is the illusion--the belief that the world is separated into two realities: “mind and body,” “self and world,” “us and them,” “self and not-self.” Turning “inward” into the self at the exclusion of the world “outside” is propagating the problematic belief that the world is two. The Buddha taught that we must practice with intent to unite oneself with his or her world, not in a magical way that only occurs during ritual and transcendental meditation, but by living our everyday lives with the understanding that our world is not two. Self is seen in our minds and the sensations that enter it. While sitting, we pay attention to our own mind as well as the worldly sensations that enter our consciousness, and in this way we embrace our holistic condition for “what it is.”

Who are Pragmatic Buddhists? Meet Lawrence Akers, OPB

After spending many years in a Hindu-based meditation movement, serving as a minister and teaching representative, I woke up one day and began to question everything I had taught (and been taught). I became dissatisfied with a set of absolute answers. In a sense, I lost my faith.

I made what I will call a “natural” transition into Buddhism, a path that proved to be a real tangible and earthy practice. One that did not heavily rely on the mystical or supernatural. It was a real way for me to work with my suffering, confusion, and doubt. But I lacked a community, a real sangha, to work with, something my schedule wouldn’t allow at the time.

I found inspiration in the works of Stephen Batchelor, and was moved to look for an online option for formal study. After searching and investigating, I found a home in the OPB: a wonderful family that inspires and motivates me to hopefully be a better person, and better equipped to help others. Always a work in progress, I fail daily, but try to pick myself up and try again. The OPB is an extremely supportive place for humans trying to be better humans, something I think the world needs.

Lawrence Akers, Deshi, OPB

Lawrence is the Chapter Leader of the Center for Pragmatic Buddhism in Atlanta, Georgia

Sutra of the Month: From the Atthakavagga II - Octet on the Cave

1. The person who lives, stuck fast in their body, forever unseeing; that person is mired in delusion and far from detachment. Sense pleasures in this world are hard to abandon.
2. Bound by desires, craving the pleasures of the senses; people are difficult to liberate, and indeed cannot be liberated by another. Hoping for what was or will be, they long for both current and past pleasures.
3. Those who are greedy - engrossed or confounded by sense pleasures or miserly; they are caught in the web of desires. When they are brought to an uneasy end they will worry, “What will become of us when we have passed away from here?”
4. Therefore a person should train themselves right here and now to avoid that which is wicked and unskillful and not practice those ways; for the sages tell us, “This life is short”.
5. I see in this world mankind thrashing about in the desire for existence; these people cry out in the jaws of death, not being free from the desire for continued existence.
6. See them thrashing about in selfishness, like fish in a stream with little water; seeing this we should follow the way of the unselfish, not holding on to a craving for existence.
7. Rejecting the extremes, understanding having without greed, not doing those things which they reproach in others; a wise person does not cling to what is seen or heard.
8. Having understood perception the wise will cross over the flood; they are not mired in desire. Having controlled passion they do not cling to a desire for either this life or another.

Commentary:

Here we begin the Buddhist teaching that liberation comes from the efforts of each individual and cannot be given by another - a theme that will continue throughout the discourses. Again, the greed for pleasures and possessions binds the person, keeping them from liberation. Even those who hold onto things realize they will not be able to carry them into death and this causes them grief and consternation; but the wise person realizes that all things are fleeting and nothing can be held as ‘mine’ and is therefore free from sorrow and fear and does not crave to continue this existence so as to hold onto what they possess. They ‘reject the extremes’ and understand ‘having without greed’ and so when death comes they will be able to lay down what they have and accept that their time has ended.



Ask a Monk:

Q: Do Buddhists worship the Buddha?

A: The Buddha was a man named Siddhartha Gotama, who became increasingly unsatisfied with the world (culture) around him, and sought to find a new way of living. We follow his examples of self-inquiry and self-reliance and revere his teachings, but do not worship him as a god. Rather, he is seen as a great teacher and example for us to follow.

In many traditions of Buddhism the forms of this reverence can look to Westerners just like worshiping a god, but teachers in all traditions will tell you we only revere him as a fulfilled human being.

Book Suggestions:

In this section I'm hoping to give some suggestions based on books that members of the OPB are reading. They will probably include quite a range of topics. This month we have:

"It Begins With Silence: The Art of Mindful Reflection. Stephen Schettini. Quiet Mind Books. 2010

What Makes You NOT a Buddhist. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse. Shambala. 2011

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.

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

1) Gautama's Law

The suffering of sickness, old age, death and rebirth are unavoidable; all other suffering is optional.

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