

Chapter News

All of our Chapters will be focusing on the same topic each month for Dharma Talks. In November we'll be looking at the Pali Nikaya - the early Buddhist Scriptures. The individual session topics are listed below:

St Louis Center for Pragmatic Buddhism:

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

- Nov 6: Overview of the Pali Canon
- Nov 13: Kalama Sutta
- Nov 20: Mahasatipatthana Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness)
- Nov 27: No meditation (Thanksgiving)

Kawatha Lakes Centre for Pragmatic Buddhism:

Here is The Kawatha Lakes chapter schedule for November:

- 4 - Overview of the Pali Canon
- 11 - Satipattana Sutta (Arousing of Mindfulness)
- 18 - Vitakkasanthana Sutta (Removal of Distracting Thoughts)
- 25 - Kalama Sutta

Central Ohio Center for Pragmatic Buddhism:

The topics for November are:

- 2 - Overview of the Pali Canon
- 9 - Kalama Sutta
- 16 - Octet on the Ultimate
- 23 - Discourse on Aging and Death
- 30 - Visit by Indianola Presbyterian

The date of the visit by the Presbyterian youth group is not set yet. Whenever they come we'll do a Buddhism Q&A and move the other topics around.

The Sensei' Cushion: An important element of our practice in Pragmatic Buddhism involves the incorporation of nonjudgmental awareness in understanding of what we experience. While we inevitably depend on labels and judgments to make sense of our world and to communicate with others, there is great value in calm, dispassionate observation. One of our cognitive trappings as human beings is that we readily and unconsciously taint our current experiences with those from our past. If we can remind ourselves of this natural tendency and actively embrace an attitude of nonjudgmental awareness in our practice, we may train ourselves to better see and understand what kinds of causal factors are at play in our present situation. Having a careful understanding of what contributes to our situation-at-hand can equip us to make smart decisions about our present. Let us commit this month to introduce a higher level of awareness into our daily lives, one that embraces the opportunity to experience without the habitual repainting of past emotions onto our present. Instead, let us create a space where nonjudgmental awareness yields a clearer understanding of our present. With this understanding, may we become empowered to discern and craft positive and productive paths together.

 Jim Eubanks sensei

Interdependent Interconnection

"Recognize that the very molecules that make up your body, the atoms that construct the molecules, are traceable to the crucibles that were once the centers of high mass stars that exploded their chemically rich guts into the galaxy, enriching pristine gas clouds with the chemistry of life. So that we are all connected to each other biologically, to the earth chemically and to the rest of the universe atomically. That's kinda cool! That makes me smile and I actually feel quite large at the end of that. It's not that we are better than the universe, we are part of the universe. We are in the universe and the universe is in us."

— Neil deGrasse Tyson

There can be no doubt that we are connected, as Dr. Tyson, says to every being on earth, to the earth itself and to the Universe as a whole; but what does that mean in our lives? How do we actualize this connection?

The connection Dr. Tyson is talking about is not some sort of mystical union; it's a real, physical connection that cannot be denied. The interconnection that we talk about in Buddhism takes this into account, indeed this statement implies the dependent origination that is so important to Buddhist philosophy; yet in Buddhism we're talking about more than just the atomic, chemical and physical connection; we're talking about the connection of actions to their reactions, about the connection of intentions to behaviors, about the connection of mind to mind and even body to body. All of these connections go together to make our lives and to prove not only our interconnection but our interdependence. My actions don't just lead to reactions in my life - my karma - but also reactions in the beings around me - those I know about and those that I don't. My behaviors affect others and thus as a Buddhist I try to act with intentionality, considering how these others may be affected by what I do.

But interconnection isn't just about ourselves and other beings; it's also about the interconnection of all those things affecting our lives. How does my mood affect my work? My home life? My health? How does getting that book deal or big sale affect my mood? How does my health, my home life affect getting that book deal or big sale? So how can we keep it all straight? How can I manage my emotions, my actions, my reactions to the all things going on around me?

This all comes down to releasing the concept of "mine-ness". This is one of the primary themes of the Atthakavagga, one of the oldest collections in the sutras. In discourse VI (verses 2-3) the Buddha says:

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".

Everything that one calls "mine" is left behind at death; having realized this, a follower of the Way will let go of "mine-ness".

Without this sense of "mine-ness" we're able to begin acting in the manner most appropriate to the situation we're in without our ego getting in the way. This doesn't end the cycle of connectedness but it assures that we're able to act more naturally, seeing the truth of the moment, the truth of the needs of the other, the truth of what needs to be done not what we want to do. This is the Awareness that we speak of in the motto of the OPB. It has to be followed up by Acceptance - which to me is expanding this natural being into more and more moments of our lives - and which will in turn lead to appropriate Action.

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This is what zazen helps us with. In an article in the Winter 2014 edition of "Tricycle" Barry Magrid says of zazen:

'Sitting' means sitting, walking, working, eating, speaking and being silent (and I would add playing with our children, mowing the lawn and even (gasp) having sex - GG). 'Just' means that there is nothing in the world that is not sitting...We are describing a way of being in the world in which everything we encounter is fully and completely itself. Nothing is merely a means to an end, nothing is merely a step on a path to somewhere else. - bracketed comments mine

He then places it in the context of Dogen's teaching that zazen is not a way of achieving Enlightenment - what we call Realization in Pragmatic Buddhism - but is instead an expression of Realization. So by this process of truly practicing zazen we are in contact with the natural being within us that in turn fully internalizes our interconnection and interdependence.

Realization isn't some state of supernatural abilities but simply and completely living within the complex web of interconnection that the Indian philosophers called Indra's Net - a net made up of faceted jewels where every jewel reflected every other jewel in the net. What a beautiful image for our lives together in the world.

Members of the OPB say as part of our daily meditation:

*Knowledge of interconnection is made known through my mindfulness of the dependent origination of all things. I sit, I watch, my awareness is non-judgmental.
Knowledge of interdependence is made known through my mindfulness of the dependent origination of all things. I sit, I watch, my awareness is complete...
I am the Way of the Universe. I am a Pragmatic Buddhist.*

So may it be for all of us.

Glenn Gustafson, OPB - Chapter Leader, Central Ohio Center for Pragmatic Buddhism



Illustrations by Lawrence Akers, OPB

On the Zafu: Tips on Meditation

Tips on dealing with sleepiness during meditation

Sleepiness - along with restlessness - can be the most often encountered hindrance to meditation practice; but there are some techniques that will make it easier to deal with. The two I'm going to talk about today are Ki Breathing - called Dynamic Breath Meditation in Pragmatic Buddhism - and Movement Meditation.

Dynamic Breath Meditation is a way to get energy moving in your body and helps counteract sleepiness. In Dynamic Breath Meditation you take a long, slow breath in through your nose and then expel it more quickly through your mouth with a "ha" sound. It's not as drastic an exhalation as in Lion Breath breathing in Yoga but the out breath is still more forceful than the in breath. You still want to focus your mind on the breath and make your overall rhythm slow and steady. The practice can sometimes be facilitated by using two small blocks of wood, one held in each hand. You bring them together at the start of each in and out breath and the goal is for the overall breathing to become slower and more controlled as the practice goes along.

Walking meditation is the most "active" of the core meditation techniques. In the Chinese tradition, the hands are placed directly at the level of the body's center of gravity ("center"), as this reinforces one's mindfulness of his or her center. The proper hand position is a traditional "closed" Chinese bow fist. To make this fist, take your dominant hand (right hand if you are right-handed) and hold it in a vertical position, as if you were going to grab a rope from the ceiling. Now place the non-dominant thumb into the opening between the thumb and index finger of the dominant hand, and wrap the fingers around the fist. Place it in its proper position at the body's center. We begin in a "chambered" position--that is, with the feet together and hands in proper position. Begin by stepping one foot forward, about the length of one foot, and then step forward into chamber position. Next step the other foot in the same manner. Continue this slowly, one foot then the other.

Who are Pragmatic Buddhists? Meet Dave Howard, OPB

During my childhood I was deeply committed to the Christian faith and I gained a lot from it, including a deep respect for ethics, altruism, and compassion as embodied by Jesus. The flip side of that coin is that I felt guilt and shame when I broke the rules. I remember a time when, after moving when I was about 8 years old, my family was searching for a new church. One of the ones that we tried was a Baptist church. In this case, it was a "hellfire and brimstone" type church, or at least the sermon of the day was in that vein. I cried during the sermon and, even though I'd done so before, I went to the front of the church to make sure that I had accepted Christ properly into my heart for fear that I would end up in eternal suffering. I remember being so terrified that I would go to hell that I would confess any potential sin to God right away through prayer and ask for forgiveness, so that if I died at that very moment I wouldn't go to hell.

I continued to be committed to the church, even leading the middle school youth group, until about halfway through high school when I began to have doubts about what I was being taught. I had issues reconciling the suffering of the world, including some very deep personal suffering of my own, with the concept of an all-powerful being that would let this happen. A skeptical person by nature, I also began to question the evidence behind the doctrine. I decided that I was an atheist leaning agnostic, open to new information but skeptical about it, and fell out of touch with the church and my previous beliefs.

I continued in this way throughout my early to mid-20's until I went through a dark period in my life that caused me to seek some meaning from my existence. I had also accepted a new job at the time and was working long hours. The stress of events and the job caused me to seek out some form of stress management. I was curious about meditation, having used guided relaxation techniques in the past, and began meditating on my own. This lasted for about a year, and this thought kept coming up - "Am I doing this right?" I decided that the Buddhists seemed to know a thing or two about meditation so I went out and bought a copy of Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind to learn more about how to meditate. The meditation instruction was valuable, but the philosophy of Zen also piqued my interest. One thing that Shinryu Suzuki stressed in the book was the importance of sangha (a group of like-minded practitioners).

So I sought out a sangha in my area, St. Louis at the time, and was fortunate to find the Center for Pragmatic Buddhism chapter there. Based on my past experience with religion, I was wary about dogma & mysticism, but this place sounded like a solid secular practice that I could get into. I found that the teachings resonated with me immediately, especially the empirical nature of them and the fact that everything should be verifiable by one's own experience. There was

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Sutra of the Month: From the Atthakavagga

III - Octet on the Corrupt

1. Some corrupt minded people engage in arguments; but then again some just people engage in arguments also; only the wise refuse to be drawn into arguments that arise; for this reason there are no discontented among the wise.
2. How can one see the error of their views when they are led on by their preferences and clinging to their own inclinations? A person argues from their own understanding.
3. The person who, unasked, speaks of their own morality and good works; the wise call ignoble.
4. But a practitioner at peace in mindfulness who does not boast of their own morality; this person, with no attachments, the wise call noble.
5. Those whose philosophies are arbitrarily contrived and formulated to give themselves a good feeling about how they live; these people exist in a peace that is conditioned by instability.
6. It is hard to get past the dogmas of philosophies; thus a person seeking to choose amongst these dogmas may pick and discard many philosophies.
7. For one who has shaken off attachment there is nowhere in the world a prejudiced view of different philosophies; having abandoned all illusion and conceit, this person has no need to be called by any dogma. This one is unattached.
8. A person being attached to a dogma has need to argue its value; but one being unattached to any dogma has no reason to be drawn into argument. For this person indeed there is nothing either grasped or rejected. All dogmatic views have been shaken off.

Commentary:

With the third discourse we begin the theme that is most prevalent in this collection - that of having no need to argue about the Way you follow if you don't judge it in comparison with others. This discourse also introduces the concept that is called 'intoku' in Zen - the good done in secret. We are enjoined not to boast of our morality or works and to not choose a philosophy because it conforms to how we already are. Yet we are not told to reject all philosophies, but rather to reject clinging to them. The wise person is one who neither grasps nor rejects any philosophy. \



Ask a Monk:

Q: Do you have to be a vegetarian to be a Buddhist?

A: No, not at all. Many Buddhist are vegetarian and many are not. One Chan Master is said to have said, "All Chinese Buddhists are vegetarian, but most prefer to spice their vegetables with beef, pork or chicken". For monks the Buddha only specified that they must not receive meat from an animal that was killed specifically for them. Even the Buddha's own last meal was "soft pork". He left no special instructions for laity.

If you choose to be a vegetarian as an expression of the precept on non-killing that's wonderful; just remember that as a Buddhist you are admonished to not judge the path others choose to walk.

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nothing that was "sacred" that had to be believed without question.

The leader of the St. Louis group left in 2010, and another group member and I took the opportunity to begin leading the group. We also joined formal training with the Order of Pragmatic Buddhists, our form of monasticism, at that point. I helped to lead the group until last year when my wife and I moved to San Francisco.

Under the guidance of Jim Eubanks sensei and Meaghan Ruddy sensei I've grown and learned practical (and practice-able) techniques to live my life in a way that leads to my own fulfillment as well as the flourishing of others. The philosophy and practice of PB are difficult to sum up in just a few words, but Awareness, Acceptance, and Action with the goal of flourishing for oneself and humanity is the best way that I know to succinctly describe it. The Buddhist teaching that inherent in this life is suffering, discontentment, and anguish resonates with me and matches my experience, but more important are the actions that we can take to reduce this suffering both in ourselves and others through training.

Mindfulness practice has benefited me in many ways - reduced anger and frustration, the ability to manage stress, be compassionate, and be honest with myself about my thoughts without judging them. Well, of course that's all still a work in progress. With Pragmatic Buddhism I have an actionable life philosophy that works for me and a great group of people with which to practice! I am thankful for each one of you. ^

Dave Howard, OPB

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

15) The Pursuit of Happiness

Happiness is NOT a right, but the result of karma (physics), effort, personal opinion and often, a distorted view of the distant or not so distant past.

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