

Chapter News

St. Louis Sangha

October Focus: Desire/ Attachment

- 02 Desire/ Intent
- 09 Attachment / Connection
- 16 Equanimity/ The Process of the Ennobling Truths
- 23 Bodymind/Habitmind

Kawartha Lakes Sangha

October Focus: The Four Ennobling Truths

- 03: No sitting tonight
- 07: Topic: The Four Ennobling Truths (7pm)
- 10: Final Candle Walk of the year (8pm)
- 14: Topic: Desire (7 pm)
- 17: Formal Sitting (8 pm)
- 21: Topic: Attachment
- 24: Formal Sitting (8 pm)
- 28: Topic: Goals
- 31: Formal Sitting (8 pm)

Central Ohio Sangha

October Focus: The 5 Hindrances

- 05 Last of the Eightfold Path
- 12 Desire and Aversion
- 19 Torpor and Restlessness
- 26 Doubt

There is now a Meetup group for the Central Ohio Center for Pragmatic Buddhism. The center will be open at 9:15 am and Nicky will be giving advice on stretching exercises prior to sitting.

The Sensei's Cushion: Growth space.

The focus of my career is to narrow the difference between where something is and where higher ups what it to be. In the course of this work I do a sort of what is called gap analysis, assessing the difference between the real and the ideal. I dislike the term gap analysis. Yes words are what we make them. Still, even Siddartha understood the importance of language, and the term gap in this context implies a lacking, a sense of inappropriate distance. I have come to prefer a slightly longer phrase: assessment of growth space. This seems to frame the awareness of difference between real and ideal in a positive and opportunity-laden way. If that can be accomplished, the acceptance of the reality growth space and the actions needed to be taken to grow into that space are also more positively engaging. And let's not gloss over this - growth is hard. It is disorienting and discomforting but we know that in the process we are ennobling rather than ignobling. We are not filling gaps just to close them; we are growing, purposefully guiding ourselves to be something better than we are today.

May our practice take us mindfully and energetically into the challenges and joys of our growth spaces.

∩ Meaghan Ruddy sensei

Building a Sangha

"A Buddhist community - a Sangha - is not something one is merely born into or chooses to join, but something one is challenged to create. {It} provides a matrix of communal support for people to realize their commitment to a common vision or concern."

- Stephen Batchelor, "Creating Sangha"

The Buddha's sangha was revolutionary, in that it broke from the customary traditions of his time. Instead of caste or birth, its hierarchy was based on time of arrival and spiritual accomplishment. It further challenged the cultural norm when women were permitted to take monastic vows. It is this practice of challenging tradition, of using what works and letting go of what does not, that we in Pragmatic Buddhism continue to carry on today. The face of Buddhism is changing. Yet, in spite of tremendous positive change and growth, there remains a major obstacle in the flourishing of the modern sangha, and this obstacle is both personal and communal. Let me explain.

Our Western culture is steeped in the idea of competition. We strive to be the very best, despite all odds against us. And we all do this on some level, whether we want to admit to it or not. This was illustrated personally in a recent conversation I had with Eubanks Sensei, really by accident. I found myself expressing the feelings of not knowing exactly how I fit into our sangha. Let me just say that we have a group full of wonderful people, not one of which caused me to feel the way I did. Yet, there I was, stuck feeling like I could not possibly compare to everyone else. Professors, psychologists, doctors, teachers.....and me: a life-long worker in the food industry - not glamorous by any means.

That afternoon we discussed something that was so vitally important for me to hear and ingest. We talked about how everyone brings something different to the table here, be it personally or professionally. Different people from all walks of life, coming together (as Batchelor said) for a common goal.

And what is that goal? Most card carrying Buddhists would say Enlightenment (with a capital "E"); but our definition of enlightenment is not the same in Pragmatic Buddhism. It's not just about individual enlightenment. There is no finish line where we transcend the earthly plane (at least not that we know of). Rather it is about the enlightenment of everyone: our community, our society, our world. A real bodhisattva ideal.

And while this can be done on an individual level, history has shown us time and time again that a better work can be accomplished when a group of like-minded come together for a common goal. Not people in the same job sector, or age group, or status, but people of like-mind, despite any differences.

We are social creatures. We can exist by ourselves (so to speak), but we thrive within a group! A group can support us, guide us, and be guided by us. A group looks after one another no matter what happens. So the idea of not measuring up, this idea that all of us have had from time to time, is truly one of those items that can be filed under the "no longer useful" category. And when we drop this idea of the inferior individual, we can see that everything is interconnected, and every little detail can result in something greater.

This is an idea, I think, that we should strive for in every group: business, personal, global, etc. We are a social

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sangha - a group of like-minded individuals coming together to create something far greater than our individual parts. Each part is vital in very specific ways.

I am reminded of a quote by musician Phil Lesh of the classic rock band The Grateful Dead. He was asked about the group dynamic of the band, to which he replied that, sure, there were leaders in the band; there was a sort of hierarchy there. But ultimately they were all like fingers on a hand. When it came time to do the work, everyone worked together beautifully to create something far greater than their individual selves. Just like the fingers on your hand.

This is an ideal I believe we can carry with us as we continue to grow, both as a group and as people. We come together as a family within our group. Yes, we have people playing certain roles, but no one is unworthy to contribute in any way possible, be it on a small or grand scale. No one is any more deserving than the other. Rather, it is what we can do together that is important.

On that note, I'd like to close with a bow. A bow that not only signifies respect, but also acknowledges that we are connected by our common vow to create a world that is better for everyone.

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Lawrence Akers, OPB



Illustrations by Lawrence Akers, OPB

On the Zafu: Tips on Meditation

Meditation Techniques

Mantra ("AUM" or "OHM") (Primary Technique)

All mantra meditations involve the slow repetition of a short sound, syllable, word or statement. The mantra practice is ideal when it incorporates a basic, resonating sound that is easily controlled by the out-breath. A traditional and ideal choice is "AUM," also written as "OHM." This particular sound is thought to be the most basic of all sounds in traditional Indian philosophy. It is chanted very slowly, and the mouth is opened wide for the initial "Aaaaa," and slowly constricted as the sound is continued during the out-breath. You should breathe and exhale as long as you can comfortably, as this enhances breath control for physical activities (martial arts, yoga, and general physical exertion), and induces a powerful focus for the meditative experience. Additionally, the sound made through mantra practice elicits changes in brain physiology, allowing for a deeper meditative experience.

Dynamic Mind (Visualization) (Secondary Technique)

This is a visualization meditation technique that is intended to increase one's sense of interconnectedness. Begin by focusing your awareness at your center, which is located a few inches below and behind the belly button. A hand bell is struck to begin the visualization, and your awareness moves slowly and expansively away from your center, extending to the entire body. The expansion of mind continues outward to the room, the building, the town, city, state, country, continent and whole planet. Continue extending your awareness into the Universe as far as you can visualize. All things are included in your mind at this point. The hand bell is struck again, and the path is followed in reverse until your center is reached once again. As is emphasized in Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido, even when the mind is back to your center, maintain a dynamic awareness, never letting your mind come to a stop.

Who are Pragmatic Buddhists?

OPB members come to us from across the U.S. and Internationally. In this section, find out what draws our members to Pragmatic Buddhism. This month, meet **Sensei Meaghan Ruddy** in her own words.

Life event memory of depressive types is, well, depressed, lacking full expression. It is a long, slow, road of consistent melancholy. Happy moments are quickly disintegrated by the realization of their impermanence, felled by the dreary day to day.

I don't recall the moment when I first thought that death seemed a peaceful out, but I recall thinking it often. As I couldn't actually bring myself to pull the literal or figurative trigger, the resultant tension manifested in a myriad of diffuse pain-related health issues including headaches and digestive distress. The throbbing was as existential as it was physical. I removed myself from one engagement after another, the habits withdrawal fully fledging as I moved through to college. The impulse toward the final out was very strong, but again my refusal to hurt my mother kept me safe.

The closest I came to suicidal completion was in 2007. Due to circumstances and stress, every day on my way home from work I passed a tree that was very close to the road. I began to calculate how fast I would have to go to hit that tree, to make it look like an accident. Then no one would get hurt, right? My mom, my boys – it would be seen as an accident. Would I have to hit the brakes to make it convincing? That changes the math...

During a previously scheduled wellness visit with an attentive clinician, I was given a prescription for an SSRI. The provider told me it might take three weeks for the effects to be noticeable. Within three days I realized that what I felt for the bulk of my life was the depression/ anxiety cycle and it didn't have to be that way. A few years prior, I had gotten a copy of *The Art of Happiness* by HHDL and Howard Cutler. Something HHDL said in there stayed with me, causing me to explore Buddhism further. It was about the reasons people worry and why they shouldn't. Worrying doesn't solve anything. It robs us of energy and perspective. While taking the SSRIs I finally authenticated that so much of my life had been worry and that it was time to stop.

In the early fall of 2008, after rereading the works of William James and pondering my situation in light of the little Buddhism I knew, I realized the two were remarkably similar. I ran some database searches to see if anyone else had published on that connection and really no one had. Ah ha!, I thought. That's where my academic career will take me! But first, a Google search to see if the internet has yet figured it out. Lo and behold, the Center for Pragmatic Buddhism came up in the results. Damn! Oh well, if you can't beat them, join them. After some emails and phone called with Jim Eubanks sensei, I formally joined the sangha and by December of that year, 18 months after starting the meds, I began to wean off and have not taken them since.

It is not difficult to understand why the first few years of my practice constituted pain management. In truth a lot of my practice remains either pain management or sustaining the neutral. Learning about habits of bodymind, that they are not necessary but conditional and capable of being changed is a lamp unlike any other. It lights the dark nights of our experiences, glowing brighter with each moment of practice. We can alter the narrative, calm the physiology, and not because of some mystical intervention but because we intentionally, pragmatically apply this ancient wisdom to our everyday lives.

May we all provide lamplight for ourselves, for others. /\ (palm together in respect)

Sutra of the Month: From the Atthakavagga Sutta

V. Octet on the Ultimate

1. *Holding to a philosophy, thinking "this is the ultimate", a person places it above all others; therefore all others are seen as inferior. This person has not passed beyond contention.*
2. *Because this philosophy brings good feeling to the person in what is seen or heard, in morality or good deeds; this person views all others as inferior.*
3. *The adept calls this a tie – dependent on which is viewed as superior and which as inferior. The wise person does not depend on what is seen or heard or felt, neither on morality nor good deeds.*
4. *The wise one does not advance a philosophy as superior, whether conceived on what is seen or heard or on morality or good works or religious observance. This person does not present themselves as equal to others but neither do they present themselves as inferior nor superior. They are without attachment.*
5. *Having abandoned what was acquired, not grasping anything, the wise person does not cling even to knowledge. This person does take part in debates on the merits of philosophies and does not cling to any view.*
6. *For the one to whom there is no desire for either of two extremes, for this world or another, now or yet to be; for this person there are no entrenchments among the doctrines that have been investigated.*
7. *By this person there is not the least prejudice among what is seen or heard or felt. The wise person does not cling to a view; therefore nothing in this world can move them.*
8. *They do not advance any view as superior, nor do they make a choice among philosophies; the wise person is not swayed by morality or good deeds or religious observances. Gone to the other shore this is surely a person who will not fall back.*

I wanted to include this octet from the Atthakavagga in light of the main article by Lawrence, for this too speaks of the wise person seeing themselves as neither equal to, inferior to nor superior to any other person. We're used to hearing in the West that we should think of ourselves as neither inferior nor superior, but how do we help from feeling equal? By cultivating detachment from all attempts at comparing ourselves to any others. The octet also applies this same detachment to the philosophies we choose to practice in our lives. Remember that the Buddha compared his teaching to a raft that should be used to "cross the flood" but then put down when they were no longer useful. Don't reject teachings because they're not "Buddhist". Don't try to convince others that Buddhist teachings are better than the ones they follow; and don't get upset when others say their teachings are "the Truth" and all others are false. Take the best that every philosophy has to offer – use the best logs to build your raft – and you will surely advance to the further shore.

/\ Glenn Gustafson, OPB



Ask a Monk:

Q: How does a person formally become a Buddhist?

A: Buddhism is not like other religions where there is a major rite to become a member - there is no "sacrament" of membership. Across the Buddhist community it is generally accepted that a person is a Buddhist if they have "Taken the Refuges". The Refuges refer to the three-fold statement that you take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. This normally occurs by the prospective member simply stating that, "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha"; though it can often take the form of a Question and Answer exchange with the leader of the local sangha. In some traditions the new member is given a "dharma name" at this point while in other traditions that naming may not occur unless they take the further step of "taking the precepts" or even wait until and unless they take formal ordination as a monk. Most traditions also accept if a person has formally stated the refuges at a shrine or temple even if there is no one else there at the time.



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