



INSIDE DHARMA

"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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Zen Practice

By Noah Toler - St. Louis, MO

Before I begin, I should like to share a little about myself. I am 30 years old and live in a hotel room. I was recently released from prison. I wash dishes for a paycheck. My job provides me with much practice. For me, zen is not what occurs in a zendo. Zen is the practice of living. Zen is life in the here and now. The reggae singer, Mattisyahu, talks about "drown in the now." That is zen.

What follows is not orthodox zen, or authorized zen. I practice zen, and these are my thoughts.

Zen is a consuming fire. That which is to be consumed: suffering.

Zen is a practice that is designed for one purpose: liberation from suffering.

To begin, zen is generally regarded as the formal meditation practice of a zen center. And, sometimes, of the ritualized sitting of zen practitioners in their homes. The ritual of a zen center can include such things as bowing, bells, incense, chanting and formal meditation. In effect, the zen of the zen center is basically a liturgical service of the Zen Buddhist religion.

However, Buddha said:

Brothers, before learning to observe thought with detachment, you must learn to observe your breathing, your body and your emotions. When you have calmed your breathing, your body and your emotions, practice



the detached observation of thought consistently. (Cularahulovada Sutta)

What I understand from this suggestion of Buddha is that before practicing Right Concentration, one must become calm. Master Dogen called zen the dharma gate of repose in his work *Fukanzazengi* (Universal Recommendation to Zazen). I looked up *repose* in a dictionary and found the following meanings: "the act of resting or the state of being at rest; freedom from worry; peace of mind; calmness; tranquility; to rest or relax oneself." What I get from this is that zen is calmness.

And what does this calmness we call zen consume? I suggest that it consumes agitation of the breath, body and emotions. And, this leads me to ask, "Why does zen consume agitation?" My suggestion is that there is a connection (interdependence) between the breathing, the body and the emotions. One should examine this statement for truth or falsehood. My experience has taught me that as the breathing becomes calm, the body relaxes and the emotions calm down.

Zen begins with breath. Generally, the first lesson of zen is to sit in an upright position and concentrate on the breath by counting the breath. Soon, we find our bodies relaxing. And, after that, especially as we

continue this practice, we discover that our emotions calm down. I liken it to a bowl of muddy water. At first, we cannot see through the water for all of the sediment. If we let the bowl sit, eventually the sediment settles to the bottom, the water itself has long been still and you can see through the water to the sediment at bottom. In this analogy, the breathing and body are like the water itself. Quickly, after you set

the water bowl down the water calms. It takes longer for the sediment to settle, and this is like the emotions. They do though. And once they do we can see to the bottom to explore what is inside of us. I am grateful to my master, Kalen McAllister, for giving me this analogy.

The next question is whether or not zen need be a formal practice. I am not of the opinion that zen need be the formal, liturgical practice that occurs in zen centers. Many people find that structure to be very conducive to their practice. However, others may be uncomfortable with the liturgy, especially the bowing, the prostrating to Buddha, the incense and the altar. I do, however, hold the opinion that one should make their zen formal. It should be formal in that we commit to make it a daily practice, and that it have some method.

I offer two suggestions for zen practice outside of the zen center. One is to create a meditation area in your home. And, to sit at the same time every day. The usual length would be to start with twenty minutes, and work up to sitting for forty minutes. The second suggestion is to commit to calming yourself every day. This can be done wherever you wish. What you do is take 8 calming breaths. As you breathe in, say (in your mind) "in." As you breathe out, say "out." Do this for all eight breaths. This can be done as and when needed. Many times throughout the day, just stop and take eight deep breaths.

Master Dogen wrote:

Therefore, put aside the intellectual practice of investigating words and chasing phrases, and learn to take the backward step that turns the light and shines it inward. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will manifest. (Fukanzazengi)

So, time for a little wrap-up. Though zen is often considered to be the formal, liturgical acts that occur in a zen center, zen is calmness. We need this calmness to build the practice of the Eightfold Path upon. It is like the foundation upon which we build liberation. Zen practice can be as formal or informal as you choose. Try different methods; find out what works best for you. Calmness



allows us the freedom to pay attention, or turn the light and shine it inward. Don't take my word for any of this stuff. I am no zen master. I have no ordination. But, you can make an experiment, and see whether this works. Zen is nothing if not an experiential practice that asks to be verified by personal experience. My experience may not be yours.

Truth

In our heart of hearts
we know the truth;
we feel the truth.
My heart is bonded to yours,
we are one.
This is the Truth,
through and through.

David Rogers - Norton, KS

Butchering the I

By Zarko Mladenovic

There is a chicken in my kitchen. It eats, it drinks, it sh*ts - it's alive.

We have to be careful with our ideas. They could be very dangerous if taken lightly. The manifestation of an idea requires the awareness of responsibility of its creator. It is never "just an idea". It embraces the whole world in it, and it always involves many lives in its consequences.

Last week I had an idea to shoot a commercial for a video competition in my home country of Serbia. This idea, besides other technicalities, required a chicken as a part of the scenario. I was able to find a live chicken for sale at a farm in Cape Girardeau. The farmer sold it to me for \$5 and I gave him an extra \$5 for the feed. He was surprised when I told him that I would probably bring it back after the shooting. After many suggestions on his behalf that I should butcher it, and not bother coming back such a long way, I told him that I do not want to eat it. That was still an unacceptable realm for his mindset, so he told me that if I have some Latino friends they would do that for me if I don't know how.

After a couple of days the shooting was done. I fed the chicken every day, but the poor thing was in prison. People around me were taking the life of this being so lightly that everyone was looking at me like I was crazy for not butchering it. But then, I realized - that is what we do. We butcher everything. Whatever we find unpleasing to our taste, imperfect to our judgments or unacceptable to our illusion of reality - we butcher it. We have to do that in order to feel safe, and be in "control". That is a human condition - a cycle of constantly creating an abomination of what is given to us. We butcher our present to make it more bearable and in the end we butcher the people around to so that they don't disturb our insanity.



Photo by eurleif on Creative Commons.

Right Thought

By Noah Toler - St. Louis, MO

To obtain control of the mind and liberation from suffering, we practice Right Thought. Buddha said, "Right Thought consists of thought in which there is neither confusion nor distraction, neither anger nor hate, neither desire nor lust." (Vibhanga Sutta) Buddha goes on to describe a method for eliminating these thoughts.

To overcome confusion and distraction, practice the contemplation of breathing: it will clear your mind and increase the power of your concentration. To overcome anger and hate, practice the contemplation of compassion: it will throw light on the causes of the anger and hate present in your mind and in the minds of those who have aroused them in you. To

overcome desire, practice the contemplation of impermanence: it will throw light on the beginning and end of all things. To overcome lust, practice the contemplation of death: it will throw light on the decay of all things. (ibid.)

What is clear is that one aspect of Right Thought is eliminating negative thoughts. At first, this may sound like a daunting task. We are all too aware how these thoughts just pop in our head. True. What this tells us, however, is that these thoughts are involuntary. They come from our subconscious, sounding in our conscious mind as words. Knowing that they are involuntary allows us to take control of our thinking.

Thought has two aspects: initial thought and developing thought. The initial thought is that which comes from the subconscious. What too often happens is that we then cling to the initial thought and develop it into a daydream or fantasy. Often what happens is that we develop whole scenarios in our head from an initial thought. So, while the initial thought is involuntary, the developing thought is not. It is at the point of initial thought that we intervene. This is the practice, and it requires a great deal of Effort.

When an initial negative thought comes to mind, one thing we can do is smile at it and say, "Hello Habit Energy." This will disrupt the natural sequence from initial to developing. Again, this takes Effort and Concentration. However, liberation from suffering is a large order. It is not accomplished in an instant.

Buddha has some further advice on the practice of Right Thought: "Loving kindness, compassion, shared joy and non-attachment are wonderful, profound mental states...By practicing them, you will become a source of vitality and happiness for all creatures." (Cularahulovada Sutta) This is the second aspect of Right Thought: construction of positive thoughts. We noted above that negative thought is involuntary. This second aspect is voluntary. It requires Effort to purposely construct positive thoughts. One way to construct positive thought is to cultivate mind of love. The mind of love is the deep yearning to develop understanding in ourselves in order to contribute to the liberation of all sentient beings.

So, what one can do to construct positive thought is:
1. Become aware that you are being overwhelmed by negative thought or emotion.
2. Develop in the mind the opposite positive thought or emotion. Here, we remember that negative is that which leads to suffering and positive is that which leads to liberation.

Right Concentration

By Noah Toler - St. Louis, MO

To gain control of our minds, we develop concentration. Within a Buddhist framework, we call this Right Concentration (*samyak samadhi*). To quote Buddha:

Brothers, practice Right Concentration. Right Concentration is the noblest element of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right Concentration consists of concentration on thought. Concentration on thought consists of the detached observation of our own thoughts. Observe your thoughts with detachment just as you would observe with detachment the distant flight of birds in the peace of the evening. Learn from the earth: whether you strew it with sweet-smelling flowers or cover it with feces, the earth receives each thing impartially, without preferences or aversions. When a thought, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is born, do not let yourselves be trapped by it, do not become slaves to it. Observe with detachment and let it go: it will not grow inside you and will not produce the poisoned fruit of suffering. If you let your thoughts grow, they become very powerful, take possession of you and make you their slaves. Observing your thought with detachment, you will discover a great unsuspected truth: that your thought is not the product of your will but is an autonomous plant, independent of you, nourished by your attachment, and with its roots in your fear. If you practice detached observation of thought, vain thoughts will cease and you will dwell in pure consciousness. Detached consciousness of thought, if practiced constantly, leads to liberation. (*Cularahulovada Sutta*)

This statement contains three pieces of information I find fascinating. First, Right Concentration is the noblest element of Buddha's method. Second, Right Concentration consists of the **detached observation of our own thoughts**. Finally, that if Right Concentration is practiced constantly, it *leads to liberation* from suffering. Now we know what Buddha said on the subject of concentration. So, how might we practice concentration?

First, using sight to look inward, what do you see? Are there images? Of course there are. We daydream all the time. Observe the images that appear. Take note of what you see. Do not cling to

the images. Do not try to hold the image in your inner vision. Just observe. Doing this over time, you will come to note patterns, or recurring themes in the imagery. Take stock of this information, as it gives insight into the seeds in your subconscious.

Next, using hearing to look inward, what words do you hear? Thought is mainly words, the mind having a conversation, so to speak. This can be especially interesting in the middle of work, if you concentrate on the flow of words that occur in your mind as a reaction to events around you. For instance, notice the words that arise in response to someone taking longer in a line than you think they should. This practice, like observing the imagery of the mind, can produce significant insight into our unconscious mind. What seeds are there? Concentrating on the thought patterns that occur in response to stimuli will reveal a great deal to us.

Concentration is observation. This practice is like being on the side of a stream, observing the objects that float downstream, passing you by in your observer position. Notice that, as you stand on the bank of the stream just observing, how thought flows down the stream without your permission. It is as if the thought leaks out of the brain (the subconscious)



and floats down the thought stream. Become aware of the involuntariness and automatism of thought, how it arises without your voluntarily bringing it up from your subconscious. This awareness occurs over time, and is powerful. Cultivate it.

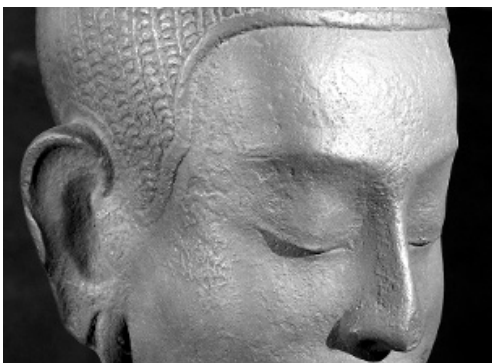
This awareness allows us to dis-identify with our thoughts. Aware of the automatism of thought, we can honestly say, "This thought arose quite without my permission. I did not voluntarily birth it. I shall not cling to it, because it is not mine. I am not this thought."


Concentration comes in two forms, active and selective. In active concentration, the mind dwells on whatever is happening in the moment, even as it changes. Practicing active concentration, we observe whatever comes along. We do not wish for anything else other than the present moment. Whatever comes, comes; whatever is, is.


Selective concentration is about choosing an object to concentrate on. The object can be anything. For instance, during sitting, some selectively concentrate on the breath. Or, during walking meditation, we concentrate on walking. When we are at work, we use selective concentration to complete our tasks.

Concentration is about being in each moment given us. Rather than be a passenger in life (which is passivity), using the practice of concentration, we live more fully (through active and selective concentration). This means we are fully present in the moment and aware of what is going on. When eating, eat; when drinking, drink; when putting on your clothes, put on your clothes. Know what you are doing. You may find it helpful to ask yourself several times a day, "What am I doing right now?" This helps to bring your focus back to reality from the world of daydreams.

We might summarize Right Concentration as **detached observation of the mind**. And, we also recognize that concentration cannot be effected without Effort.







Letters to the Editor

Dear Inside Dharma,

Hi, and thank you! As long as there are ones imprisoned, may your efforts free them and allow who we are to be discovered and shared with all. My practice has become somewhat unexplainable by words but I will try to relate. Also I was homeless and I want to thank you for helping out as you can those in Hopeville. In the end the greatest gift is given from the heart, and I'm sure your action will build a brighter future for all. If there is anything I could do or any task that needs solving, please write, or put it in the newsletter, as I wish to help out. May you have peace in your heart and clarity of purpose.

If you are able to "see"
That everything you see taste touch think smell hear
All experiences
Are just the extension of who you are
No more questions arise
You are one with All
Loving kindness
For yourself comes without question

Russell Curtis
LaGrange, KY

Dear Inside Dharma,

After reading about your organization in the prison Activist Resource Center's Prison Support Directory, I had my mother email you my address, and I now am getting your Inside Dharma newsletter. This is a great thing you are doing. I am still in the dark about Buddhism and Zen, but I'm gathering knowledge. When I am out of confinement and able to access books and can speak to other Buddhists, I intend to learn more.

I must thank you for putting me on your list and sending me your newsletter. I am gaining insight, knowledge and peace of mind from reading others' thoughts. Thanks, and keep up the good work.

James Bruski,
Mayo, FL

Dear Inside Dharma,

I just wanted to write and say thank you for all your hard work during the past year. I look forward to receiving your newsletter every month despite not being from your area. When I finish reading it, I make sure to pass it on to the rest of the Sangha here at Marion...Your help in spreading the wonderful Dharma is truly appreciated.

Josh Katus,
Marion, IL

Dear Inside Dharma,

First I would like to say sorry about the handwriting. I'm currently in the hole, and they give us flex pens, and they are hard to write with. Now with my story.

Well, my name is Jeremy Mansfield, and I'm from Caruthersville, MO. I've been to prison twice, but hope is not lost because I'm lucky enough to have an out date and my meditation, which a lot don't have. My life has not been the best. I've never had a steady life or home unless I was locked up. My mom told me when I was nine that the dad I had was not my real dad, and that my real dad had been killed before I was born. That messed me up a lot, but my dad that's been there has done everything he could for me through thick and thin, no matter what. Plus I've got two brothers and a sister. Now granted my mom and dad split when I was young, and that also messed me up. Like I was saying, my mom moved around a lot, always dragging me along with her. So at 12 years old I started using a lot of drugs—I mean a lot—all the way up until last year.

I did a lot of stuff in life, and also a lot has happened to me, but my point is that we can't live in the past because if we do there is no future. I've been clean now for 13 months—my choice, because if I wanted to use, believe me I could. Now I've got a plan for life. It's not a big one, but it will work. We have to crawl before we can walk. Another point is that no matter how bad your life was growing up, it should not slow you down. My mom has settled down and we have a good relationship. It's time to start living for the good and not the bad. We are all somebody, whether we know it or not.

Jeremy Mansfield
Bonne Terre, MO

Dear Inside Dharma,

I hope this letter finds you in good health.

I feel a great joy, a mixture of feelings and emotions that if I dwell on them I will end up crying.

Year after year all of you have given me love and 90% of your hearts...you need the other 10% to keep sharing love around you...as you can see I'm a greedy person.

You are in my life these days when many people—even outside—may not have somebody to talk with. Thank you for your time and for being with me when I feel myself alone.

I write to share with you one of my shattered dreams.

When I was a kid, one of my schoolteachers asked us if we would like to learn to play guitar. I don't know what I was thinking, but I said yes. I signed my name to the list, and my teacher told me to buy a guitar so that I could start lessons. I was all happy on the way back home, not knowing what the future would bring.

I wanted my father to get home from work. Finally he arrived and, full of joy and innocence, I was certain that he would buy me a guitar. Father said, "Music if for queers and faggots, and I don't like the idea. I want you to be a lawyer."

Since that day, fear overtook me, and I never again asked my father for anything. I did not have any communication and did not share any type of experiences with him. Up to this day my relationship with him is precarious. I never feel his love, nor my mother's. I never experienced one small piece of affection. When I moved from Mexico to the States, I promised him that I would help with money. I did help him for years with money, but he never appreciated my efforts.

You know, I've spent many days in Licking Prison, and many times during the day I mumble, "It's okay. The past is past, and the future I don't know." Right now is the time. I can't force my family to accept me the way I am, and the chances are less since I don't practice the Catholic religion anymore.

From the bottom of my heart I thank you all for the Christmas cards and all your good thoughts and feelings toward me.

When we finally know who we are, we will have already realized how connected we are.

Juan Meza
Licking, MO

Dear Dharma Friends:

Below are copies of my monthly Buddhist columns. These columns appeared in the Kansas City Star newspaper on Saturday, Jan. 29th and Feb. 26th in the Faith Section. As always, comments are welcomed.

Your Friend In The Dharma,

Lama Chuck Stanford
(Lama Changchup Konchok Dorje)
Rime Buddhist Center
www.rimecenter.org

Question: "How can one overcome the anxieties of the world?"

Answer: The word anxiety is generally used to refer to feelings of fear, worry, uneasiness and dread. H.H. Dalai Lama has said, "Why worry about something? If you can change it, you will. And if you can't - why worry about it?" When you truly examine life's experiences you'll find there are basically two types - those that you have no control over and those that you have some control over.

We often feel anxiety over those things in life that we have no, or little, control over such as the economy, gas prices, terrorism, etc. Steven Covey calls such things our "circle of concern." Rather than focusing our attention on those, Covey recommends focusing our attention instead on the things that we actually have some control over like spending more time with our family, advancing our education, becoming more spiritual, etc. He calls those things our "circle of influence." An effective way to reduce anxiety is to reduce the focus on things we have no control over (circle of concern) and to increase the focus on those things that we can actually control (circle of influence).

If you focus on things that you have some control over, it means you are living in the present moment. Living with awareness in the present moment enables us to transcend both fear and hope and takes tremendous courage. It means committing ourselves fully to responding moment-to-moment with compassion regardless of the situation.

Question: "What attitude of mind should we take toward our suffering and toward other's suffering?"

Answer: The Buddha recognized 2,500 years ago that life is characterized by suffering. There's not a person alive who has not experienced suffering first hand. So what causes suffering? The Buddha recognized that life is problematic because

everything in this phenomenal world is impermanent - nothing lasts. We all desire pleasure, joy and permanence. We desire things that we can't have or things we once had but have lost. Even our thoughts, feelings and emotions are impermanent and constantly changing. Inevitably we experience frustration, unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

The Buddha also recognized that it is neither things nor situations that cause suffering, but it is the clinging nature of our own mind. We want from life what it can never provide - pleasure and security undisturbed by change or loss.

Therefore, instead of mistakenly thinking that the causes of our suffering are things outside of ourselves, we need to begin to examine our own minds. When we bring our awareness within so that it doesn't seek anything external we discover within ourselves a natural sufficiency that is stronger than any sensation. This is the attitude we should take with own suffering.

Toward the suffering of others we should extend compassion. The 8th century Indian saint, Shantideva said, "All those who suffer in the world do so because of a desire for their own happiness. All those happy in the world are so because of their desire for the happiness of others."

Editor's Note:

What a blessing. We had a couple of submissions that we could not fit in this issue, so they will appear in the next issue of the newsletter. Thank you to all of you who spent the time, the stamp, and the investment of your selves in mailing us. All of our readers surely appreciate it.

Our theme for the next issue will be

Getting Out: What will we take with us, and what will we leave behind?





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This issue is dedicated to

**Lisa, Ashley, Dom,
Noah, Steve, and AJ**

**for the energy and service
they have contributed
to our mission.**

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