Why Zen Practice?

by Garrett Kelly

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This a common question asked by people who are who are new to Zen and to meditation in general. As someone who is visiting with our group for the first time, you may already be familiar with some of the difficulties that are common to someone who is just beginning to take up meditation practice for the first time. The physical discomfort from sitting on the floor for long periods. The psychological discomfort many experience from simply sitting in silence---perhaps for the first time in their lives---and confronting the relentless busyness and chatter that goes on in the untrained mind.

You may be asking yourself, "Why do people put themselves through this?" Don't worry. You are not alone, and this is something everyone who takes up this practice as a beginner must go through. In hopes of perhaps making the answer to that question a bit clear, and hopefully inspire you to continue with the with the practice during this difficult adjustment period, I write this. Ultimately, the answer to that question is not something that can be fully expressed in words…it must be experienced for one's self. But within the confines of the limitations of the spoken word, I will do my best to answer that question.

Buddhism---The life of the Buddha

Zen Buddhism is a sect of Buddhism that comes to us here in America principally from Japan. But it is spiritual discipline that has it's roots in India, and was initially got it's start in China, before being transplanted to Japan. In order to understand Zen practice and its relevance to modern life, one must have a basic understanding of Buddhism as a whole. The most essential lessons of Buddhism can be found within the life story of the historical Buddha himself, and his first teaching after his Enlightenment….The Four Noble Truthes.

The Buddha was borne Siddartha Gautama approximately 2500 years ago. A prince of a small kingdom of Northern India. It is said that at his birth it was foretold that Siddartha would either grow to become a great king, or renounce everything and become a great spiritual leader. Like most fathers, the king wanted his son to be happy and to follow in his footsteps. So his father resolved to raise his son in a life of luxury, isolated from all suffering and unpleasantness, in hopes that he would not turn toward spiritual matters and grown into becoming a king.

Siddartha grew to adulthood having lived a pampered life, but one day---on an excursion from the palace---he encountered in the roadway , four people. An old man, bent over from the aging process. A man sickened from disease. The corpse of a dead man. A traveling monk who looked peaceful and radiant. He had encountered the reality of old age, sickness, and death for the first time. He also learned that they were the eventual fate of everyone. This left him deeply troubled.

To make a long story short, Siddartha became deeply dissatisfied with his pampered life, seeing the pointlessness of it all. He resovled to renounce his life, his wife and his family to pursue the path of the monk, believing that this held the key to ending the suffering he had seen. For six years, he pursued all of the spiritual practices of his day in an attempt to find the key to end human suffering. He was unsuccessful until he vowed to sit in meditation under a tree until the answer occurred to him. At the end of 49 days, the answer came to him, one morning as he looked upon the Morning Star. The planet Venus.

The Four Noble Truths
Fortunately for us, upon discovering the answer, Siddartha---now a Buddha, an "Awakened One"---elected not to keep his discovery to himself. But rather to teach it to anyone, and everyone who was willing to listen. What he then did was go to find a small group of monks that had followed him for a while prior to his Enlightenment, and to teach them the most basic and fundamental teaching of what is now called Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth. **Life is difficult and unsatisfying.** While this may seem obvious, here in America, we are particularly stubborn in not wanting to accept this notion. We have become so affluent and so comfortable as a culture, that as a society we have come to believe that this is how life should be. So whenever anything unpleasant or painful happens, our first reaction is to assume that something is wrong. Pain and discomfort are things that happen to other people, not to us. If I am suffering, either it is because I am doing something wrong, or someone else has done something wrong.

The Second Noble Truth. **Life is difficult because of craving and attachment.**
Because we have lost sight of who we truly are, and are ignorant to how Life really works, we try to seek fulfillment, stability, and security in the world outside of us. We seek permanent satisfaction and predictability in a word where all things are impermanent and subject to change. We suffer because we demand that life be something other than what it is, in order for us be happy. We suffer because we try to resist the reality of impermanence of all things, and of change. We suffer not because of what happens to us, but rather because of how we react to what happens to us.

The Third Noble Truth. **An End of suffering is possible.** While the Second Noble Truth may be hard to hear, with its message of the fact that our suffering is self-inflicted, it is in actuality, very good news. Since our suffering find its origins within us, it means that it is also within our power to put an end to it. We can end our suffering by giving up our attachments and cravings. We can end our suffering by giving up the habit of demanding that life be a certain way for us, in order for us to be happy and find peace of mind. Suffering ends when we give up our resistance to life as it actually is.

The Fourth Noble Truth. **The End of suffering lay in the Eightfold Noble Path.** That is in the basic teachings and practice laid out by the Buddha….what we now call 2500 years later, Buddhism. The Eightfold Noble Path consists of Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. At this stage don't worry about what all of this means. I, frankly can never remember all Eight….I had to look them up. I'll explain why in a moment..

Zen Practice.
It is not necessary for you to memorize the Eightfold Noble Path, simply because (from a Zen perspective) the Eightfold Noble Path is part of your very nature. You are already Enlightened. You are already a Buddha….you just don't realize it yet. The whole point of Zen practice is to help you realize that which you already are.

I know some of you are thinking, “What in the World does he mean that I am already Buddha?” There is no way, I’m some saint or enlightened master when you look at the shape my life is in right now. Yes, you are. Look at it this way. A diamond is the most beautiful of gems, but in its raw state is looks like a non-descript black lump of rock. For it to become the beautiful gem, that is a worldwide expression of devotion, it needs to be cut and polished. When cut, and polished it becomes the radiantly, beautiful gem that we all recognize. Nothing in the fundamental nature of the diamond has changed in going from the black lump of rock, to the radiant gem…all that had to be done is to remove that which prevented it from realizing its true nature.

It is the same with you (and me, and every human being). Right now, you are the black lump of rock that is an uncut diamond…but within you lay the potential to be that radiant diamond. You don’t have to change. You don’t have to make yourself better. All you have to do, like the diamond, is let go of all that which prevents you from seeing the beauty and perfection that already lies within.

Zen practice is what will allow you to cut and polish that black lump of rock that you feel that you are right now, in order to reveal that inner perfection. Like a diamond, there is nothing “out there” that needs to be added to you in order for there to be radiant beauty.

So if we are already perfection, why can’t we see it? The answer lay in the First and Second Noble Truths. Because we are ignorant to the perfection and radiant beauty that are already present within us, we seek to find and add things to ourselves “out there” in order to achieve that perfection. We grasp at things outside of us, in order to feel “okay”. We look for self-esteem and validation in things and people and experiences that are only temporarily satisfying. They change. They stop satisfying us. Or they satisfy us, but eventually leave us or change….and we desperately want them to stay just as they are. Because we resist these changes….we suffer.

Because our minds are so busy with thinking, we cannot see the beauty and peace that lay within out hearts and minds just beneath. Because our minds are so busy with thinking, judging, and blaming, we cannot see the beauty and perfection that lay within everyone and everything, when we stop labeling them and stop demanding that they be anything other than what they are right now.

So what does all of this mean for you and your life?. Ultimately I can’t answer that….but I can ask a question that will allow you to possibly answer that question for yourself. Consider this….. Who would you be, and how would you live if you had NO fear. No fear of pain. No fear of sorrow. No fear of being hurt by other people. No fear of “not measuring up” or being “less than perfect”.

How would you live your life if you didn’t have to rely on anyone or anything to convince you that you are “okay”…and if it weren’t possible for anyone or anything to convince that you weren’t fine, just as you are?

If you want to begin to know the answer to that question, as it applies to you and your life. …..stay with the practice, and you will begin to find out.

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