

Practice Never Ends

After over 40 years of Zen practice I find two things notable: the relatively constant evolution of awareness and the constant need to keep practicing. The ego is steadfastly on-guard to preserve our identity, the Story of Me. And there's a lot of depth and breadth to our identity.

The early years of developing awareness, for me, shed light on depression. The practice made for a widened perspective on the workings of the self-centered mind (the-idea-of-me mind) which was making a habit of buying into negative thinking. As I learned that there's more to life than this mind would have me believe—namely our Being—the depression moderated.

Then an anger that was likely underlying the depression began to surface. My propensity for evaluation was turning into righteous, angry judgment. Increased awareness seemed to be doing little to abate the matter. In fact, getting a bit more sure of my "self" over those practice years probably had a role in convincing me my righteous anger was justified. It seemed to say, "How can I be any other way, given the way life is and people are? I'm really aware of what's going on so I must be right."

Slowly I was becoming more conscious of a need for change, but the ego was not a fan of this change. The ego said I was right about the anger, that I should be angry. People should wake up, or at least get out of my way. Another perspective, more subtle, felt a hardness, tasted a bitterness, lamented the lack of the warmth and meaning of relationship with fellow human beings.

I noticed this sense of separation would lessen in attending a Sesshin (a three- or five-day practice intensive at the Center). I liked it. Then it occurred to me what's going on here. Putting oneself through the rigors of Sesshin is turning down the self-centered mind, and turning in the direction of the Heartmind. The lessening of separation is a matter of the heart. These feelings of connection, warmth, and satisfaction were in distinct contrast to how I usually felt. There was a rightness to moving in this direction but I had some questions in how to go about it.

Developing the Heartmind is an important part of the practice at ZCSD. I decided I'd delve into it more formally. At one point I



April Sesshin Applications are still being accepted for the 5-day April Sesshin (April 3–8). If you can't come for the full five days you can apply for the first or last three days.

Questhaven Enrollment for the June Questhaven Retreat (June 7–10) will open on April 8. This retreat tends to fill up quickly. If you'd like to attend, we recommend you apply right away.

Announcements

Sesshin Application

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wondered if doing the heart practice would stall the development of awareness, which had been a kind of cornerstone of my practice. My experience is that awareness develops alongside the heart intelligence—they are not separate.

In retrospect, three things were contained in the practice: intention, energy, and the body. These were sort of “aimed” in the direction of the heart. An intention had taken root in consciousness to do this. This is what happened to me as I saw, over time, that awareness wasn’t enough, and I more often experienced the feelings of connection. Second, an energy, or force of change, was being utilized. I was willing to apply myself—sitting a Sesshin or going through the steps of a loving-kindness meditation. And third was the involvement of the physical body—breathing into and out of the heart area of the body (the center of the chest), experiencing the physical sensations. I should add that perseverance could be added as a fourth component—a recognized need to keep at it and have some faith.

I find the silent repetition of certain phrases to be valuable in initially settling into a heart practice. When I make contact with the body—in this case the physical heart area and the sensations of breathing—I find myself going into silence, openness, and allowing more than just using phrases. Ideally, I let myself just be there—experiencing the inside-outside heartspace, which doesn’t exclude anything. This aspect of the practice, like a lot of my practice over the years, is individual, and one finds out what works best for them.

The expression of gratitude and appreciation is part of my heart practice and I often start out the day with two or three phrases that are reminders of my aspiration, like “Grateful for this new day.” “May I dwell in the open heart.” “May I recognize my many blessings,” while breathing into and out of the physical heart area. This tends to give way to an attentive silence that includes not only breathing sensations but those of the whole body. This can also be extended to the environment.

My aspiration is to daily add more of a heart orientation to my practice. I don’t push it, but rather kind of feel it out, intend it. The practice effort seems to be absorbed, processed, and can emerge when least expected. It may be a new empathy for someone’s difficulty, someone I know or don’t. Maybe an empathy for all human difficulties, including my own. Or an appreciation for how well someone is doing despite sizable challenges. It’s a distinct and tangible occurrence that seems to say the world is OK.

But the reality-check of self-centeredness, of clinging to my conditioned identity, is ongoing and energetic. Here I am reminded of one of my favorite phrases, “Awareness heals.”

As we practice, specifically heart practice or otherwise, we can be conscious of the larger context of experience. There is a sizable inertia to my righteous judgment and its justification. These things are deep within the self-identity employed by the

ego. Patience, perseverance, and self-forgiveness are in order. We are a creature of at least two minds—separation but also unity. Which mind am I feeding now (feeding separation begets more separation, and vice versa)? Is there self-judgment for my failure? Am I justifying my angry judgment? How does life feel when judgment (separation) holds sway? What is the difference in the way life feels when the heart (unity consciousness) is allowed its say?

How am I reinforcing my self-image with what's happening now? Identity-maintenance (the prime directive of the ego) is almost constantly engaged. My number is usually about knowing what's going on, being in control, being right. If I can see this and get some objectivity around it, I'm less thrown off balance. Righteousness can carry a big charge. It can feel like I'm being neglectful if I surrender the righteousness because I'm surrendering identity.

I don't want to understate the challenges. Ego is fundamental to being human. It's hard-wired and persistent. Everything seems to carry more energy these days. Reading, watching the news, looking around at the world, puts evaluation and judgment to the test. There can be a real force behind these evaluations and judgments. They can seem to have a life of their own.

Often the ego's strength seems to match increases in awareness, energy, and vitality. In my experience the manifestation of heart-intelligence in life grows slowly, in accord with a slowly evolving maturity level. Patience.

I stand back and consider what the best way forward is. It seems to warrant a committed, daily, well-grounded (body-involving) practice that also involves the heart. Persistence—practice is worth it. A liberal sprinkling of good humor. Last but not least, being part of the practice community (Sangha)—close by and far and wide.

Chuck Sweet