

# Group Practice: Two Personal Perspectives

## *Caring for the Fragile Shoot of Lay Practice ...*

Ellen Sidor

*Ellen Sidor, a senior dharma teacher, established The Meditation Place in Providence in 1985, and is moving out of Rhode Island this summer. Here she shares some reflections on her many years of lay practice.*

Lay practice, when it begins in an individual, is like a fragile shoot breaking through hard ground: while it has a lot of vital energy and direction, it can be easily bruised or trampled. There are important conditions we need to establish in our personal greenhouse in order to nurture this tiny green shoot. Once it has grown into a young sapling, it is a lot tougher and will stand a fair amount of neglect or abuse. But at the beginning, we must take care. If we are too harsh, we will wilt it. If we are too lazy to nurture it, it won't grow.

### **Simplifying Your Life**

When we talk about lay practice, we are not talking about being monks or clergy. We are talking about living as householders in the ordinary world: going to school, earning a living, being primarily concerned with family, friends, home, and career. Lay life usually means taking care of lots of material things: living space, clothing, means of transportation, food, recreational equipment. That is one of the primary differences between monastic and lay life: lots of personal possessions.

Monastic vows usually include poverty, celibacy and obedience. For householders, there is no such set of vows. We find ourselves saddled with a complexity of possessions, without clear guidelines as to the correct relationship. In this glitzy American culture, it is very easy to go astray. The media shouts, "Buy! Buy! Buy!"—as if it were true what the ironic bumper sticker says, "He who has the most possessions when he dies, wins."

But some of us feel at least slightly sick or guilty about having lots of possessions, and this is healthy. There is something we can easily do about possessions: have less of them. Give away or sell what you don't need, and don't add to the pile you already have.

Simplicity and unclutteredness is one of the reasons why we feel calmer when we enter churches or temples. There may be a myriad of objects in these spaces, but they are harmonious with each other. Our home spaces are

often cluttered. Objects pile upon objects, gathering dust because there are too many things to which we must attend. Visual clutter is very distracting to the mind. What you must have, keep neatly.

### **A Sacred Space**

The "de-sacralization" of our planet is one of the saddest developments of the modern world, because it means we no longer treat it with reverence, we just regard it as a trash barrel. But we can "re-sacralize" our lives, and this is important work. What makes a space sacred, and why do we need it? A sacred space is a space which we treat with respect. It is an outer manifestation of the inner peace and order we hunger for. It sends signals to our nervous system to relax, it prepares and encourages us to practice.

A sacred space can be inside of our home, or outside. Where we do our regular practice should be clean and simple—a bare expanse of wall in our apartment which we face when we sit on our cushion. It can be a small altar on a bookshelf where we light incense or a candle. It can be much more elaborate. But our practice will become more easily habitual if it is done in the same space, and a space which will become loved. I've had a dharma room in my apartment for seven years, and it has become the jewel of the house. It draws me in and refreshes me. It has become a sacred space for me and others.

Even with such a space in your home, you will still benefit from regular visits to churches or temples or the great outdoors. Sacred spaces have an unusual energy for us; they make us feel better, more empowered. They inspire our awe. They show us that other human beings also practice and have practiced for thousands of years. When you are struggling alone, it is good to be reminded of this.

The outdoors is an especially wonderful place to practice. Mountains and seas, deserts and forests are all sacred spaces. Here the unity surrounds us, unmistakable, overpowering. Just sit down quietly and listen. Breathe deeply. Feel the joy of being part of the myriad things that are present. If you can, go outdoors for an extended sitting alone. Even a single afternoon can change your whole attitude toward your practice.

### **Discipline and Flexibility**

Householders are always having unexpected things come up. You have to keep a lot of things in balance that sometimes conflict. Sometimes you need to take time off from your practice schedule. Other times it's good to



maintain that discipline. If you don't want to sit because you don't want to face yourself without distraction, you definitely need to start giving yourself some other quality time alone: to stretch or read or write in a journal. Keep your sitting time for sitting.

Try to sit every day, even if it's only five or ten minutes. If ten minutes of sitting drives you crazy, do some physical exercise before you sit, or fifteen minutes of yoga, or take a walk, then sit. People vary a lot in the jumpiness of their minds and their ability to focus, even within a day. Many of us are not used to trying to calm our minds, so even a few minutes of quiet sitting can seem like torture. The night before I went on my first three-day Zen retreat, I dreamt I was driving into a large trash compactor and was going to be completely squashed! Fears like this are not uncommon.

When should you practice? Look at your daily schedule. When are your quiet moments? Trying to cram your sitting into a frazzled schedule doesn't work. If you resent your practice, you will soon drop it. Don't turn practice into a bludgeon or a jail. If you cannot find it somewhat rewarding, perhaps you should do something else.

I discovered a few years ago that I was using the energy and calm I got from daily sitting to support an even *more* cluttered schedule. That won't work for long either. If you start to resent your practice as an intrusion into your schedule, you are too busy. See where you can cut back. Find a quiet time, or make one. Practice should be something refreshing like deep breathing, not just another chore you add to a busy life.

### Finding Your Own Rhythm

In this busy culture of ours, we need to listen to the voice of sanity within us, which may have gotten drowned out by louder voices. We need to learn our own rhythm. Our practice may start with a schedule given to us by others, but the practice that stays with us is the one that keeps us in balance. This is also true of forms and rituals. They are supports for practice. We may need at first to keep them quite strictly, but learn when to put them aside.

Don't be afraid to experiment. Making mistakes in practice can be very useful. This is *your* practice—it will not work unless it truly fits your life. When you are a monk, you follow the rules and schedules of your order. As a lay person, you must create your own order. But you don't have to do it alone; you don't have to reinvent it.

Sharing Zen practice over the years has been immensely rewarding for me. Zen is such a portable practice, you can take it anywhere with no special equipment needed. It can refresh anyone's spiritual life, regardless of their background. Just bring along your own life (as if you could do otherwise!) and plunge in. I heartily recommend it. □



### ... Without Burning Out

Anne Rudloe

In setting up a local group, the most important issue is not the mailing list or where you meet or providing a newsletter. Neither is it whether you pay for a classified ad to advertise a talk, or how to get public service announcements on your events in the local media, or whether to have childcare, or even how much to charge and who cooks if you have a retreat (although all of these are important).

The most important thing is the direction of your practice—can you be there week after week even on the weeks when only two or three people show up? When no one shows up? When you really don't feel like being there? When you've decided you're not really qualified?

Also: Can you handle the time involved without big hassles from spouses, significant others and children who may think you're shortchanging your family? Can you deal with these hassles when they happen after all? Can you provide sound basic teaching and be willing to acknowledge what you don't know? Then how will you feel when somebody who's practiced for a while and seems to be committed suddenly claims you're an egotis-

tical self-centered fraud on a power trip and stomps off for good?

No matter what happens (it will), are you willing to try? Then there are no other criteria.

Keeping a local group going is just giving, being there for whomever comes in the door—giving your time and energy to help them deal with their situation. That's all it is—giving, not receiving, just trying to help someone who's probably in pain and hurting in some private way. And maybe sometimes you do start to feel a bit pleased with yourself; maybe the person who got mad at you wasn't 100% off base. Can you see this if it happens and then work on letting it dissolve? When someone comes in hoping for help, it's obscene to turn the helping into some sort of private ego gratification.

Most of the people for whom you make this effort will come once or a few times and they won't be back no

matter how hard you try. Or they'll be very enthusiastic for a while and then quit altogether. If your energy is a function of how big the group is each week, sooner or later it will be a problem. Spiritual practice involves giving without being concerned about what you get back. Setting up a group especially involves giving without asking what do I get back—are you comfortable with that yet?

Find a level of effort that you can maintain over the long haul. Don't make it too easy, but don't decide it's up to you personally to save the world and then get burned out and quit altogether on days when it doesn't seem to happen. Saving all sentient beings is a remarkable process, after all—don't forget to enjoy it.

Anne Rudloe has been a member of the Cypress Tree Zen Center in Tallahassee, Florida for many years. She has served in various capacities, including director. □

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## Welcome Relief

*Cool night trail  
flashlight eye wandering  
(rattlesnake feeler)  
Low growl somewhere  
flushes fear bubbles  
from the gut  
coming to a chill burst  
in my forehead*

*Awakened from the nightmare  
of seeming tough*

*Jan Sendzimir  
Kitkitdizze  
foothills of the Sierra Nevada*

## just that

*behind the plop/croaking of bull frogs,  
the cycling cadences of summer birds,  
the highway's gray roar  
is more present at dusk  
than dark early morning.*

*the sharp crescendo of a car  
in the passing lane  
causes hands and feet to tense.*

*Paul Bloom*

## "life is chopping wood"

*life is chopping wood/  
hauling water,  
some such—old zen master—  
remember, running the bowen field track  
on a bright january  
sunday afternoon,  
home in time for millie's potluck  
and relax before the speed of monday work,  
thinking of  
february hiking,  
this morning's bright meditation room,  
brunch and errands,  
feel last thursday's  
dark track  
fifteen degree run  
before a late dinner  
while july was seventy-five  
high school kids  
working out  
in the summerschool track program,  
runners all over the field  
heavy with heat of summer energy,  
just now  
the pleasant loneliness  
of cold january sundays  
texture of wood and water cycles.*

*Paul Bloom*