

Motivations for Practice

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My motivations for practice have changed, and have stayed the same. Practice has always seemed to put me in touch with a deeper layer of reality than what was apparent; in this reality, I become more focused, more centered, less buffeted by emotions and circumstances, more able to respond to immediate situations clearly, with less cognitive equivocation. Reality seems more simple and more clear, and I am able to respond in a simpler, clearer way.

My own practice began under Christian auspices. I had a Christian conversion in a Pentecostal context. In Christian terms, I accepted Jesus and was “baptized in the spirit.” When this occurred, I felt a very deep sense of peace, as if a deep river of peace was flowing into me, forming a huge, ever-growing lake of peace which immediately dispelled the cognitive and emotional chaos in my life at the time. Others, who had not known what had happened, remarked that my whole appearance had changed, and it had indeed changed. I experienced this peace in long intervals for a couple of years, and I spent long hours in prayer and meditation. Eventually, however, this sense of peace began to change, to fade, to be replaced by other emotions. There is much more that I could say about this period, though it is of a very personal nature, and it culminated in a directed Jesuit Ignatian retreat which put this period of my life in a different context.

For many years, I searched for a more constant sense of peace to replicate my earlier experiences, always continuing with prayer and meditation to varying degrees. Eventually I was led to Zen, and began to do Zen meditation and Zen practice. Zen has changed my perspective. Its difficult for me to imagine my life without daily practice, and meditation/practice itself begins my day in a way which focuses and centers me and enables me to respond to immediate situations in a more direct, clear way. I guess I expect this to happen, and I’m aware that buddhamind is always present. But, I no longer chase after peace or after experience in the way I once did. Emotions change, and I’m aware that no matter how I feel, I’ll probably feel differently soon. Emotions no longer buffet me as they once did. My job is simply to do what is in front of me. If I’m typing, as I’m doing now, my job is just to type. If I’m working at my job, my job is just to work. I work part-time as a personal trainer, and if I’m training, I train, no more, no less. If I work in my yard, I work in my yard. If a friend needs to talk, I listen, and I talk. *Buddha lifts up a flower, I lift up a flower*, no more, no less.

In the years since I’ve practiced Zen meditation, my motivations for practice have changed, and have stayed the same. I’ve always been aware that practice, and meditation, centered me, made me more focused, helped me to respond to situations in a more immediate, clear way. When I began to practice Zen, I at times felt desperate to change the way I felt. Now, I simply begin my day with practice as a matter of course, and then let the rest of the day take care of itself. Also, I wanted enlightenment, and I guess I thought enlightenment would cure me of all my problems. It was large want-enlightenment sickness. Now, I practice, and let enlightenment take care of itself. Also, I’ve had the motivation to lessen suffering and to change karma, and practice does indeed lessen suffering and change karma. But, to lessen suffering is just to do what I’m doing now; changing karma is just to do what I’m doing, and help others.

One of my clients once asked me why I go on retreats, and I said “to attain clear direction.” Retreats, and practice in general, help me to attain clear direction. This is much better than wanting enlightenment. In an earlier time, I would have probably given her a long, involved answer about enlightenment, a long discourse on Buddhism and Zen, but my answer was certainly the result of my practice. Clear direction is doing what I’m doing right now, responding to my client’s question, typing this small discourse, eating when hungry, sleeping when tired. It’s very simple. “Try, try, try for ten thousand years, and save all sentient beings.” Saving all sentient beings is training my client, doing my job, answering my client’s question. Then, all things are OK. My motivations for practice have stayed the same by putting me more in touch with a simple, clear reality, what I now see as having a clear mind, and about dropping my small “I” expectations. My motivations have changed by not being so grandiose, and by not needing to change how I feel or to change my circumstances, but just doing what is in front of me. When I have a correct motivation, then when I meditate, I meditate; when I chant, I chant; when I work, I work; when I type, I type; when others ask me for help, I help, no more, no less. Then, no matter how I feel, everything is OK. Feelings change, and circumstances change, but when I focus just on what is in front of me, then everything is alright. This is what Zen has taught me, and what the teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn through the Kwan Um School have taught me, and I’m grateful for this simple, clear teaching. ☸