

MOTIVATION FOR PRACTICE

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One thousand words or one word; it is too many.

Practice has been the thing that has kept me going on this path and also held me back. Moving forward on the path toward understanding the mind and compassion for self and other strengthens with my “try, try, try” in practice. Yet, there is a strange interplay between practice and not-practice. There are times when “not-practice” has dampened the “try, try, try.” This used to anger me greatly as I felt unaccomplished or lazy. This may have been true. Yet, what was also true was that this “not-practice” became a mirror—clear like space—to see the essence and beauty in practice. When considering motivation for practice, there comes the image of this “not-practice” into the mirror of mind and I remember that there is a path away from suffering again.

I asked once, “If this is a path with no traveler, then what makes it a path?” I have stopped looking for the answer to this. Practice is no longer a way out or up or through, it is just a way—nothing special, just a way. Practice became a chore when I tried to make something special of it. It became necessary when it was no longer special, but simply practice. I have observed the ways that my own life has been made too complicated and the lives of those I am close to as well. Yet with practice, we can live in a way that is harmonious and beautiful; even artfully lived. This is why I named the non-profit, arts organization that I helped to found “Living Art.” Sometimes our practice is Zen, sometimes it is mindful driving or walking, sometimes it is mindful listening or compassionate speech, but it is practice, nonetheless.

With cushion or without, we all practice something. Now is my only opportunity to practice mindfully and I will “try, try, try for ten thousand lifetimes.” Success and failure matter not. Coming to this conclusion has not been easy for me. I fought it, though realizing it intellectually.

Now I have begun to slowly put it all down. Slowly. Now opinions and ideas have less importance as I pay more attention to what it is I am choosing to practice.

One of the largest inspirations and motivations for practice that I have experienced has been at the Michigan City Prison. When with the sangha there, it is easy to forget that you are in a maximum security prison. The silence is just as expansive there. The concentration is just as engrossing there. The practice is just as strong there.

So I have no excuse for not practicing just as fervently “out here.” And I wonder about this for any of us on this path. In the comfort of our Zen centers we bow and chant, eat and sit, but what about practicing in our banks and groceries and in our community centers? What about practicing in our boardrooms and courtrooms and city halls? What if there was just as much mindfulness outside of the Zen center as inside? What is our excuse? Would that not-practicing and practicing could reconcile so that more mindful and artful living prevails.

What moves me to practice is not a sense of duty or obligation. I can admit now looking back that this may have been the case at one point. Duty and obligation to what, I am not certain, but some sense of “must do” was there. And this feeling of “duty” had a tendency to work for a time but then to backfire. The backlash was the “not-practice” time—the lull between serious efforts to form a lifelong practice in Zen. Now what moves me to practice is the practice itself: the power in its simplicity and its accessibility to various people in various places in the world and in their lives. I have changed a great deal, yet the practice remains steady in a way. Now there is a joy in practice that I can share with others. Obligation is no longer toil but a responsibility to open my life—the successes and struggles—for mindful examination as a teaching tool.

When does a path cease to be a path?—When I type and words fill the page. When does practice cease to be practice?—When its motivation transcends a need for explanation. These are just words, concepts, and ideas. Yet, they are some of the best vehicles we have for pointing to who we are beyond all of these words, concepts, and ideas. Practicing helps to clarify this, a little at a time, for me. There may be as many motivations for practice as there are people on the planet, yet there is one central question that all of these motivations attempt to address. Who we are, what we are, is such a beautiful mystery that I cannot imagine letting it pass me without stopping a moment to sit with it. This beauty is what moves me to practice, and what I believe moves us all to practice whatever it is that we feel is the path for us, to ask this persistent question about what we are beyond all thought and comprehension. What amazes me is that while the question remains answerless, there is an answer in experience. Practice, then, prepares the ground for experience—even if for a moment—of what, how, or who one may or may not be.

Practicing Zen is a beautiful experiment in answering the call to “know thyself,” as it has been echoed for ages. I can’t imagine changing so many minds as are present on the Earth with my fervent claims of “Zen for everybody!”, “Get to know yourself!” But I can imagine that, if only on my cushion, I can cease to be “I,” even for a moment, we may all get at least that small step closer to the experience of ourselves that we seek.

No attainment with nothing to attain—that’s motivation! 