

Motivations for Practice

Scott Angilly

The world we live in provides a great source of motivations to practice. It's ironic that I'm Buddhist and want to have a career in politics. My intent is to use this practice to assist me with decision making. Whenever I'm faced with a problem or any other predicament at school I can always rely on practice to help me. It could be putting my hands in a mudra or chanting Kwan Seum Bosal in my head until I realize that it doesn't matter. The Kwan Seum Bosal chanting is being chanted not for me but for the people around me who are suffering far more than I am.

Politics is certainly something practice can help me with. I see the people in our conflicted government, and I see a great many people who are in pain and do not realize it. Everyone is suffering. It is not difficult to tell when politicians portray themselves as completely devoted to their parties, but they are human beings just like all of us. When walking in various cities one can see people who might find a small amount of practice life-changing. That is not to say that you must become a monk, go up into the mountains and attain enlightenment like the Buddha did.

Before I started practicing I thought of the Buddha as a guy with snails on his head and large ears—which is true, but since then I've begun to truly grasp his teachings. They've resonated with me quite a bit. I, like my father, have no religious background, and I don't find faith-based religions satisfying. Buddhism settled in quite well for me. All it took was one kong-an interview with no intent of starting any formal practice. Here I am now taking ten precepts at the age of 14 after having had the privilege of sitting 14 retreats with five different teachers of the Kwan Um School of Zen.

On these retreats my mind sometimes wanders and then I say to myself "Stop it!" Then I forget what I was just thinking about and then something else comes to mind. This has been something I've been working on, but luckily the wandering mind does go away after the first 30 to 45 minutes of any given practice day or retreat.

Yet another motivation is kong-an practice. Kong-ans are easily the most frustrating thing I've ever done. In school, when I'm asked a question it is so easy to come up with an answer. With kong-ans I do not get that same experience. My mind instinctively overthinks everything that comes into it. When I get the answer, I realize that it was there the whole time and I just couldn't put it in words at first. Or it had passed through my mind at one point and I hadn't noticed it. As frustrating as they are, kong-ans create a challenging motivation to continue my practice.

I will fully admit that I'm not as informed on formal teachings as I should be, but I've been making an effort to pay attention more closely to teachings rather than just the

forms, which I've always been better with than teachings. Now that I'm older it is easier to comprehend the teachings of our tradition. While typing this I've been watching various dharma talks by various Kwan Um teachers, along with some documentaries. These have given me some inspiration for my next reading selections during my free time.

The teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha now give me not just motivations for practice but motivations for going on with my life. Whenever I'm feeling down I can return to my practice and recognize that the problems I face do not matter. This world is full of hatred and bigotry, and through that, ignorance, anger and greed run in the streets every day and on every street. That is the driving force of my day-to-day, moment-to-moment practice.

My life's goal is hopefully to make the world a better place by making what I hope to be a difference. Saying I want to change the world sounds like quite the goal, but it isn't at all. Just a group of people practicing in a room changes the world for the better. At the New Haven Zen Center we usually get a decent-sized group of people, but it isn't usually a really huge group. However, it changes from 10 to 20 people from one Wednesday to the next. I am able to find the same practice by with a room full of ten people just easy as I can with a room full of twenty people. Our core practices will provide so much aid when I'm fully into my career as a politician or government official for the United States of America, a country so based upon greed, anger and ignorance.

Again, the world we live in provides a great source of motivations to practice. I haven't been shoved into taking five precepts and now ten precepts; I simply am doing it because I enjoy practice and care deeply about it. I see others suffering and say to myself that I want to save all beings from suffering, which is obviously exaggerated, but you get my point. Whenever someone sees someone my age practicing Buddhism in a dharma room they see it as some special event. But I get the same benefit from practice that everyone gets.

I can't wait until I'm older, so I can look back at my early years of practice to truly examine what an impact it will have had on me. I give most credit to my father, and the rest to everyone at the New Haven Zen Center. They have all helped to give me an excellent experience with Zen. There has never been one practice day or retreat that I haven't felt welcome. When I'm in the middle of my career I can remember all of them and the New Haven Zen Center and never forget my practice wherever I am.◆

Scott is 14 years old and lives with his parents in Meriden, Connecticut. He has practiced at the New Haven Zen Center since 2014.

[23