

Practicing for the Planet: Julia Fiedorczuk Interviews Zen Master Bon Shim

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The world is in a deep crisis: I am thinking primarily of the ecological crisis, which is progressing at such a pace that it is difficult not to feel despair. I would like to talk about how Zen practice can help us overcome despair and react adequately in this unprecedented situation.

We possess great power that we are not aware of. This mind of ours is really powerful, especially when you practice, because dharma is a strong thing. In Zen practice there is no room for joking around. As we observe, this mind can either free us or destroy us. As Zen students, we do not train in mindfulness to feel a little better. Zen practice reaches far more deeply, which is why it is a great method to watch out for.

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Sometimes we experience something that can cause despair. It is essential to accept it; we cannot pretend that it just doesn't exist. We do not want to feel despair; we have a tendency to run away from unpleasant experiences. But running away from the reality won't solve anything.

Despair that we feel now is a great force that we could use to do something positive. We should shift it to look into ourselves and then implement in action—for the good of others. We cannot give in to despair.

We should also realize that tough experiences—times when we don't succeed, crises, all the painful experiences—they all have their good side, because this is what awakens us. It is sad that human beings need such strong signs—otherwise, we dwell in our habitual thinking, actions, and reactions—that we need some kind of a shock to knock us out from our fixed patterns and closing oneself off. It is unpleasant, but it's just the way it is. We need a shock.

Could ecological crisis become a stimulant to awakening?

Indeed, as with personal crises, the process is the same, but the scale of the problem is huge. It's no longer about individual awakening. Most people have to wake up, at least to the extent of what needs to be done. Everyone should be involved. Only then can we dispel and avoid the crisis. We ought to listen to the scientists—after all, these are all serious people that talk about climate change, and not some lunatics spreading unnecessary panic. Scientists from all over the world are putting out hard facts, evidence, and calculations.

No other issue has such unambiguous scientific consensus as anthropogenic climate change.

We can observe how many forests have been burned, what weather anomalies have happened. We cannot just turn our back and pretend that nothing wrong is going on. We cannot pretend that it's going to get better, because it won't. Unless we take responsibility for the human race and the crisis of our existence, it will be much worse. It's a special situation. Maybe we need such a strong stimulant to wake up to reality. In this moment we need to change our bad habits. That is extremely hard—no one wants to give up self-complacency.

Usually in life first comes the shock, and after, the awakening. What's happening right now is shocking for everyone who is showing even a little bit of interest in it. What is happening is simply horrifying.

Paralyzing at first . . .

Indeed, because the catastrophe has already begun. The worst is yet to come, which is why people are constantly trying to turn around and choosing not to know, but ultimately this knowledge cannot be ignored.



Photo: Damian Porter

The crisis is affecting our mental health—psychologists are talking more and more about mental disorders caused by climate change. Other beings also suffer—animals whose living space is shrinking dramatically. We live in the age of the sixth great extinction.

More sensitive people feel the magnitude of the suffering that is already happening. This is also felt by children who are experiencing severe global imbalances. But no one can completely cut themselves off from reality. This cannot be done, since we are all connected with each other and with the environment. This is not a Buddhist principle; it is a universal truth. Since animals experience fear and panic, it also reaches us. People who practice every morning repeat the vow, reminding us that we practice for all sentient beings. Now we must really put this vow into action, implement it in every field. Everyone must do whatever they can. Everyone has some skillful means; everyone can do something. Now it's time to use that to wake people up. There is no time to lose. Maybe my generation will live through the rest of the world in a fairly stable condition, but our children will experience terrible things happening—we don't even know what will happen. We only know that changes are progressing faster than science assumed until just recently.

How can we divert this shock into action, when we cannot look away from it anymore?

Nothing will come of despair. Despair is human, so we must survive, accept, and recognize it, but we cannot stop at that. We must act while we can, even to the smallest extent. Everyone knows that one of the biggest sources of pollution is cattle breeding. You can read the scientific reports. To feed only one person on a carnivorous diet for a year, you need a piece of land the size of two football fields. From the same piece of land, we can feed several thousand people on a plant-based diet. We should strive to give up eating meat. It is not easy for everyone, but you can at least reduce the consumption of animal products. Changing habits is extremely difficult; I know that. But there is no other way. People must understand that they are hurting themselves. People must see that they are the cause of what is happening in the world.

You talked about taking responsibility for the fate of other beings. Can you say how to do it so that this responsibility does not paralyze us, that it won't turn into a feeling of guilt, which is not helpful anyway?

We have to start with the smallest steps, look closely at our life. How can I live more ecologically friendly? What can I change? These are basic and simple things. First you have to feel it in your heart—understand that it is really bad, feel the need—the necessity—to join together to save the earth. And it needs to start from our own life. Interestingly, people now intuitively feel that practice is needed. Lots of people meditate these days. It doesn't have to be Zen; it doesn't have to be any religious path. People are

just looking for a moment of focus during the day. It is worth taking advantage of this trend. Look at ourselves as just one of many beings living on this planet. We are all connected. If the effects of this catastrophe haven't reached me yet, they will very quickly. It will happen. You have to make an effort to see what world we live in, even if it is painful to realize. Responsibility for this also falls on me.

Part of this responsibility is to know the truth—not to look away from reality, to become familiar with the state of knowledge about the climate and the effects of progressive changes.

Yes. Hopefully we will be shocked awake before it is too late and nothing can be done. Unfortunately, human beings tend to be guided by ignorance, anger, and greed—until we make the effort to change it, open our eyes, see the suffering of others. We look narrowly: this is my life, my situation. We wander through life guided only by our selfish motives. Fortunately, at the moment a lot of people are already recognizing the seriousness of the problem. It's mostly young people and even children who feel that adults have let them down, falling into a dream of ignorance.

I am interested in the relationship between Zen practice and ecology. Sometimes people have the impression—I know it is wrong—that meditation is a kind of escape and is contrary to any action, and now the time has come to act.

Yes, I know that there is such impression about Zen practice; it is not correct. It's exactly the opposite. You meditate to see reality clearly. Hear, see, think, feel, and act clearly. This is Zen practice. To see clearly means to see things as they are, not to live in some dream or fairy tale, not to create wishful scenarios. The role of a Zen teacher is to wake people up from sleep—it's difficult because people live in deep ignorance and don't want to wake up. The Buddha already said that this world is like a burning house. There was no ecology problem back then, but there was always a problem with the ecology of the mind. What pollutes it? Ignorance, lust, and anger. If we get rid of ignorance and see in reality what is happening in the world, then we will want to help—this is a natural reaction. Everyone has this natural good in themselves. That's why you meditate: that the veil of ignorance will fall, or at least become thinner, so you can see the situation as it is. You don't have to sit on a cushion for twenty years to feel this compassionate impulse to want to act. Zen meditation is not a pleasant path, because it strips us of delusions, for example, the illusion that we live in a pleasant world. We want to feel good; we want to see what is beneficial to us—it is a very strong defense mechanism that blurs our perception.

I think that consumer culture also works like a dumb drug. Recently, there has been more and more talk about sugar addiction. But I think that we're also addicted simply to consumption, to buying, to enjoying ourselves, to the rich market

offer of products and services that are to further increase the comfort of life.

Yes. Consumption dulls and numbs us. The market works to enslave people. Everyone has such experience—you go to the store, do some stupid shopping, then you just ask yourself—what was it for me? Unfortunately, we are in a deep sleep, and awakening is difficult. Even Zen practice does not guarantee that we will wake up.

The problem with consumerism is that it turns everything into a commodity—even meditation and ecology. There is currently a trend for wellness. You can choose the right meditation from a whole range of options. We are told that freedom is free use of whatever the market has to offer, which also includes various spiritual practices and ecological products, and even—this is the biggest paradox—zero-waste products. So, to be eco-friendly I should replace my toothbrush with a bamboo one. So again: buy, buy buy.

This is not freedom; it is a trap. It's very easy to get caught. People often have the impression that they live properly, because they use only organic products. In this way they calm their conscience, thinking that further changes are unnecessary. Meditation helps us to be vigilant, not to be manipulated, not to be deceived by offers that seem to provide us with ethical well-being, such as zero-waste products. I don't know another way. If people don't put effort into working with their mind, which is the source of everything, then it's really easy to be fooled, because marketers are very intelligent people. As for the meditation offer—very fashionable now—mindfulness meditation can be used in various contexts. For example, soldiers practice mindfulness to be more effective on the battlefield. The Buddha talked about “wrong mindfulness”—wrong, or practiced for incorrect reasons.

Corporations encourage employees to practice mindfulness to be more effective corporate drones.

Yes. It's all true. But if a person really focuses and actually maintains mindfulness, then consciousness begins to awaken—and a question about the direction of this practice. Direction, motivation is the absolute basis. We do not practice for ourselves. Sure, at first you need to work on yourself, but proper practice is directed to the good of all beings. This is human work: caring for others, caring for this world. And mindfulness is just one aspect of the eightfold path described by the Buddha. The eightfold path is a basic science, fundamental, leading to freedom from mental enslavement—from every kind of it. The path consists of (1) right understanding, (2) right intentions, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right life, (6) right effort, (7) mindfulness, and (8) proper meditation. Zen meditation is not about inner peace, about some nice form of relaxation. The effort is put into understanding yourself and your mind, along with the question of direction. Why do I want to feel better? To take responsibility for this world and help others. It's not for me.

Although, in essence, whatever I do for others, I do for myself.

Yes, but it requires some insight—after all, only by helping others can you really help yourself.

And what does it actually mean: the right direction, the right understanding?

A lot of people have an issue with this term, *right*. It is not about any dogmatism or Buddhist ideology, about proclaiming that we know exactly what is right. Right means simply not selfish. Not entangled in my personal calculation. It is difficult to explain in an abstract way. To understand it, it takes experience.

Only by helping others can you help yourself—it is a deeply ecological principle.

Two years ago, we had the conference, “The Whole World Is a Single Flower,” dedicated to ecology, and we had scientists participating, working in teams. The next one in Singapore will also be devoted to the ecological crisis. The crisis often shows us that we can do more than we think. It releases resources and forces that we would not have suspected.

Is crisis a chance to transcend yourself?

On a really large scale. In fact, this situation never happened before—a global crisis that affects absolutely everyone.

As you said, the first step is to overcome ignorance . . .

Yes. In general, our thinking, acting, and feeling are distorted by prejudices, preferences, willingness, and unwillingness. Such distorted perception is ignorance. Someone could have a lot of knowledge and at the same time sink into ignorance, not understanding their self and their relationship with the world. Understanding oneself is a great matter. Understanding others is wisdom. Understanding oneself completely is enlightenment. We think we know what we are doing and why. But unfortunately we usually don't. Clinging to your worldview is ignorance. With age, this clinging often becomes stronger, unless we make the effort to work on ourselves. It's easy to see that our mind is changing quickly. Let's say you get up in the morning and you feel great—you will see the whole world in bright colors. After a bad night, if something bad happened to you, you couldn't sleep, you are tired, you feel bad—you will see the same world in a completely different way. You can't rely on it. A clear mind reflects exactly what it is.

Now it doesn't reflect a joyful image.

No, it does not. But it shows us that we are facing a huge challenge. This is the biggest test humanity has ever faced, which is why this practice—understanding our job—is so important now.

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