

Living Zen in Life

Hang Ruan

I started practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen in 2001 with the Orlando Zen Circle, and joined the Ten Directions Zen Community after I moved back to Chicago in 2002. Since moving to Seattle in 2009, I have been practicing with the Ocean Light Zen Center with guiding teacher Tim Lerch JDPSN. He and the sangha have supported me through many big changes in my life.

Family and Zen

For the past four months, I have had a new routine each evening. At 7:30 each evening, I flip open my laptop and turn on Zoom. There, in the meeting room “Family Zen” I am joined by my father, mother, and brother to do ten minutes of silent meditation together. I am logging on from my home in Seattle, my father and mother join from their home in Brighton Park, Chicago, and my brother joins from his apartment in Hyde Park, Chicago.

This is remarkable for several reasons. First, we live thousands of miles apart, yet meditation unites us every evening for some family time and together action. Indeed, I can’t remember us ever spending time together as a family so consistently. As a family of immigrants, my parents worked long hours to give me and my brother a comfortable life. Long days and nights at work meant we got to have dinner together only once a week, on the day that my dad was off. And as my brother and I grew older, even that weekly dinner got passed up for other activities that seemed more important to us (the sons) at the time.

Second, I would never have imagined that I would one day find us meditating together as a family. When I took up Zen meditation twenty years ago, at a time when my life was filled with confusion and turmoil, my parents were skeptical, if not worried. Their perception of meditation, as individuals who came of age during China’s Cultural Revolution, is characterized by suspicion and fear. I grew up hearing them tell me stories about people who lost control of their minds and bodies because of meditation. Furthermore, my venture into meditation was a final straw of sorts, a confirmation that I may have completely given up on, or failed at, the Chinese-American dream of assimilating into American culture, completing college, and getting a secure, good-paying job. Fast-forward twenty years: I am now working as a clinical social worker and living a stable life. My parents have witnessed my journey and saw that Zen practice lifted my life out of chaos and enabled me to build a life of meaning. Over the years, as they observed the impact Zen practice had on my life, their opinion of meditation and Zen practice has shifted from skepticism to curiosity, and now they have become Zen students themselves!

Work and Zen

I have been teaching meditation at the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital since 2009. It was a gradual process of integrating mindfulness meditation into the fabric of the clinical work and environment. As we began to see more positive feedback from patients about their encounter and experience with mindfulness meditation, demand for more meditation training increased, resulting in the first mindfulness group launched in 2012.

This was an ongoing weekly mindfulness group with hands-on meditation practice and discussion. Unlike many other mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) utilized in health care settings, this group was not based on a protocol or built on a model of progression. The format of this group is heavily influenced by my Zen training, and offers a plain, repetitive structure each group, week in and week out.

My guiding teacher, Tim Lerch JDPSN, had been an important resource and mentor throughout the development and implementation of this group, and I often brought in questions and issues to discuss with him in interviews or other settings. Without his guidance and support, I probably would not have started this group, or continued with it all these years. This group has grown in popularity over the years, and now there are three mindfulness groups each week in the clinic, all based on the same format. Patients have the opportunity to show up in any or all of the groups and just practice. I left this clinic five months ago, and all three mindfulness meditation groups have continued and are now facilitated by other clinicians who share a passion for meditation.

I now work for VA VISN 20, which is in the northwest region of the country. In my new job I now have the opportunity to teach meditation for individuals as well as groups. I developed a mindfulness skills training program where patients can have ongoing support in their practice. What I’ve seen from my years of teaching meditation at the VA is that most people find it challenging to continue practicing on their own, and yet this consistent routine practice is key to our growth. Many patients have noted that this consistency has been the missing link in their meditation journey, having the ongoing support to help them sustain their routine practice.

As for me, doing this work is part of my Zen practice and training. Tim suggested that I always keep three things in mind when a patient is in front of me during a mindfulness session: (1) return to zero (that is, don’t-know); (2) don’t want anything for the person; and (3) prioritize making a connection over teaching technique. I have realized how these three things are always teach-

ing me moment to moment. It has been illuminating just how often I drift off from zero, how often I want something for the person (or, if I'm being honest, how often I want something from them), and how often I fail to truly connect with the person in front of me. I have noticed that I do all of those things all the time, whether I am in a mindfulness session or other type of clinical encounter, whether I am with a patient or a staff member, and whether I am at work or not! Approaching my work in this way has shown me, over and over again, that every moment is an opportunity to practice Zen—no matter where I am, what I am doing, or who is front of me.

While I have been facilitating meditation practice for patients since 2009, I did not begin doing that for staff until 2018. There was an interesting situation that led to my teaching mindfulness meditation to VA staff. I was the program leader for the co-occurring disorders program at the time, and often grappled with how to address provider burnout, as the work we did (treating veterans with co-occurring serious mental illness and substance use disorders) was very difficult and challenging. During each staff meeting, we would begin with a “burnout check-in” where we would go around and just give a number that reflected our burnout level that day and week (0 being none, 10 being completely burned out). As you can imagine, many staff members’ burnout check-ins were quite high at times, with some consistently around 7 or 8. Perhaps due to my Zen practice, my burnout level was consistently low, usually at a zero, sometimes peaking at a 1 or 2. One particular staff member (a senior employee who had been there for thirty years) often gave me a hard time for it, hinting that the reason I was not burned out was because I was not working hard enough.

At one meeting, she made those comments again in front of the whole team, saying that I was not working hard enough or don't have enough patients. I actually got a little angry at that moment and told her that I didn't appreciate her making those assumptions about me purely based on my burnout check-in. She then said, “I don't understand. How can your burnout check-in always be so low?” I replied, “Because I meditate for an hour every day, and have been doing so for the past twenty years.” Surprisingly, upon hearing that, her resentment and suspicion toward me immediately evaporated. She said, “Wow, maybe I should do more meditation, too!” Without hesitation, I said, “That's a great idea! And I'd be happy to meditate with you!” After that meeting, we started doing a twelve-minute silent sitting three days a week. Amazingly, her burnout check-in dropped to around 0 and 1 after two or three weeks of regular meditation. She and I have grown much closer since then, just from sitting in silence together several times a week. She loved the experience so much that she began advertising it to other staff, inviting them to join, and describing the experience as “sweet.”

Over time, other staff members started joining us, and I had to get more chairs for my office.

When I got a new job in the pain clinic in April 2020, I duplicated the twelve-minute silent sitting there. This was started during the COVID pandemic, so these sittings were done virtually. This turned out to be even better, as it provided more flexibility to include staff from anywhere in the hospital. Participants started forwarding the invites to other people, and soon we had staff and trainees attending from across service lines, and from various departments and buildings, including staff members’ homes. It was a wonderful way to start the day, with interdisciplinary staff coming together to “solidify our intent”—as one participant beautifully described—before parting ways to care for patients.

Recently, I was asked by hospital leaders to offer a weekly mindfulness class for VA staff as part of a program called Employee Whole Health Wellness. Through these different venues of meditation and together action with staff, I have come to appreciate the fact that this hospital is made of many human beings. Oftentimes, we get siloed in our work and lose sight of the bigger community of which we are a part. This myopia sometimes even results in turf-based mindsets, leading to an us-versus-them mentality among units and departments. I feel grateful to be able to come in contact with staff from all over the medical system, and to have some time set aside to appreciate their presence and to perceive our interconnectedness. In fact, we are connected with not just each other in the hospital, but in the broader community, the world, and the universe.

Work and Home

During a dharma talk in a retreat in Chicago, Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) talked about work life and home life. She said, “when I'm working, I don't think about when I get to go home, because I'm already home.” That has always stuck with me. To me, that means don't make work and home separate—wherever I am, I am already home. Furthermore, that means don't make anything separate. Don't make the Zen center separate. Don't make Yong Maeng Jong Jin separate. Of course, it's all easier said than done. I'll be the first to admit that I often find myself thinking about going home while still at work, but Zen practice helps me to continually return home each moment. When I return home, when I return to zero, there is no work, no home, no Zen center. That means I can practice Zen no matter where I am. ♦

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