



Our speaker for September 2nd, 9th, and 16th is Jennifer Block. Jennifer is a longtime practitioner and Buddhist chaplain who teaches the Zen Hospice model of end of life care to the general public as their Public Education Director (www.ZenHospice.org). Her involvement with Zen Hospice began in 1998 as a volunteer caregiver, when she was seeking a way to study the Buddha's teachings off the meditation cushion. In 2004, Jennifer joined the Zen Hospice staff to create curriculum, teach workshops, offer spiritual care, and provide community outreach on the topics of death, dying and bereavement. Jennifer also teaches the Buddhist Chaplaincy Training program with Paul Haller and Gil Fronsdal at the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies (www.sati.org) in Redwood City.

Cultivating the Spiritual Path – Part 1, September 2nd 2009

This series of talks is about the spiritual path itself rather than the vehicles we use to travel on that path. Meditation and other spiritual practices are what we use to get to where we want to go.

Stop for a moment, and answer the question, “why are you here tonight?”

Let's reflect on *why* we follow a spiritual path, why we care about it. What is it you want from a spiritual path? Where do you want to go?

Jennifer explained that at one time she thought spiritual practice involved a group of people all dressing alike and going to a mountain top to chant or something. Since then, she has come to realize that a spiritual path is not about rituals or performing certain activities, but is integral to how life is lived. The spiritual path is how we wake up, how we think about our day, how we greet people – it is nothing that is apart from life itself. The spiritual path is living a life that's whole, the expression of what matters to a person, what is beautiful, and what is real.

The 13th century Zen Master Dogen warned us that we must not confuse the finger pointing at the moon with the moon itself. Our goal is the moon, not the finger that points to it. Being a spiritual person is not defined by activities. Chanting “*Om mani padme hum*” 108 times each morning is a means to an end, not an end in itself. “*To*

study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self.”
Pointing at the moon will not bring the moon within your grasp.

This Is It

*Always we hope
Someone else has the answer
Some other place will be better
Some other time
It will all turn out
 This is it
 No one else has the answer
 No other place will be better
 And it has already turned out
At the center of your being you will have the answer;
You know who you are and you know what you want.
 There is no need
 to run outside
 For better seeing,
Nor to peer from a window.
 Rather abide
 At the center of your being;
 For the more you leave it, the less you learn.
Search your heart and see
 If he is wise who takes each turn:
 The way to do is to be.
 - Lao Tzu*



Intention is more important than the action or outcome. Intention is everything.

For Buddhist practice, one of the most important inner capacities to develop is awareness of intention. Our intention is like a muscle; following through on our intention to practice-to be mindful and compassionate-during times of difficulty is an important way of strengthening it. The beauty of this is that, even if our efforts are clumsy or if we don't accomplish a particular task, the "intention muscle" has still been strengthened every time we use it, especially if it is being nourished by faith and clear comprehension. As our core motivations become stronger and we develop more confidence and appreciation in them, they become a resource and refuge in times of difficulty.

- Gil Fronsdal, "The Storms of Spiritual Life"

The value of clear intention brings to mind the story of *The Three Hermits* by Leo Tolstoy.

A Bishop was traveling by ship to a distant monastery. He heard from the crew that they were passing an island on which three hermits lived, and he prevailed on the Captain to stop for a while and let him talk to the holy men.

'How do you pray to God?' asked the Bishop.

'We pray in this way,' replied the hermit. 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us.'

The Bishop smiled.

'You have evidently heard something about the Holy Trinity,' said he. 'But you do not pray aright. You have won my affection, godly men. I see you wish to please the Lord, but you do not know how to serve Him. That is not the way to pray; but listen to me, and I will teach you. I will teach you, not a way of my own, but the way in which God in the Holy Scriptures has commanded all men to pray to Him.'

...Listen and repeat after me: "Our Father..."

The three hermits stumbled over the words, and kept forgetting them and mixing the order up. The Bishop persevered until the hermits knew the whole of the Lord's Prayer, and could say it by themselves. As the Bishop returned to the ship, he could hear the three voices loudly repeating the Lord's Prayer. The ship sailed away, and the Bishop watched the island they had left, pleased with himself for having taught the old men how to pray properly.

So the Bishop sat, thinking, and gazing at the sea where the island had disappeared. And the moonlight flickered before his eyes, sparkling, now here, now there, upon the waves. Suddenly he saw something white and shining, on the bright path which the moon cast across the sea. Was it a seagull, or the little gleaming sail of some small boat? The Bishop fixed his eyes on it, wondering.

'It must be a boat sailing after us,' thought he 'but it is overtaking us very rapidly. It was far, far away a minute ago, but now it is much nearer. It cannot be a boat, for I can see no sail; but whatever it may be, it is following us, and catching us up.'

And he could not make out what it was. Not a boat, nor a bird, nor a fish! It was too large for a man, and besides a man could not be out there in the midst of the sea. The Bishop rose, and said to the helmsman:

'Look there, what is that, my friend? What is it?' the Bishop repeated, though he could now see plainly what it was -- the three hermits running upon the water, all gleaming white, their grey beards shining, and approaching the ship as quickly as though it were not moving.

Before the ship could be stopped, the hermits had reached it, and raising their heads, all three as with one voice, began to say:

'We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. As long as we kept repeating it we remembered, but when we stopped saying it for a time, a word dropped out, and now it has all gone to pieces. We can remember nothing of it. Teach us again.'

The Bishop crossed himself, and leaning over the ship's side, said:

'Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners.'

And the Bishop bowed low before the old men; and they turned and went back across the sea. And a light shone until daybreak on the spot where they were lost to sight.

Sometimes meditation practitioners value the practice more than the result. But meditation is a means, not an end. We cultivate meditation in order to bring awareness to everything we do.

The spiritual path is not something that is only within the realm of Buddhism, or Christianity, or any other belief system. The spiritual path is something that belongs to all of us as a universal experience. The inner qualities that sustain a spiritual path are available to all of us: mindfulness, persistence, courage, compassion, humility (knowing our place in the world and fully occupying it), renunciation, discipline, concentration, faith, acceptance, and kindness.

Stop right now, and answer this question, "What crossroads are you at in your spiritual path?"

Don't plan out an answer, don't think about it, just start writing. The value of a good question is that it allows us to see things in a new way. Don't formulate a response, just start writing...

Share your answer with someone in the sangha. The sangha allows us to take shelter from the circularity of our own thinking. A spiritual path in isolation is a difficult path. By following a path with others, we exchange gifts that help us all along the path.

For next week, here is your assignment:

(1) Choose something that cultivates the spiritual path. Do a little more of it, and be mindful that you are doing it.

(2) Rest

"To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to the violence of our times."

"Some of us need to discover that we will not begin to live more fully until we have the courage to do and see and taste and experience much less than usual... There are times when in order to keep ourselves in existence at all we simply have to sit back for a while and do nothing. And for a man who has let himself be drawn completely out of himself by his activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, do nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act he can perform."

- Thomas Merton, "No Man is an Island"



West Wind #2

You are young. So you know everything. You leap into the boat and begin rowing. But listen to me.

Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without any doubt, I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me. Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and

your heart, and heart's little intelligence, and listen to me. There is life without love. It is not worth a bent penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied. When you hear, a mile away and still out of sight, the churn of the water as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting around the sharp rocks – when you hear that unmistakable pounding – when you feel the mist on your mouth and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls plunging and steaming – then row, row for your life toward it.

~ Mary Oliver ~