

Julie Nelson

*Taking Vows, Attaining Nothing: A Zen Perspective on Personal and Social Projects*

Week One: “Are We There Yet?”

July 2, 2018



My name is Julie Nelson, I'm a senior dharma teacher with Boundless Way Zen, and I'm talking to you today from the Greater Boston Zen Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. You can see me but unfortunately I can't see you, which is a disadvantage, but we will do the best we can. I titled this first talk, “Are We There Yet?” about our projects and our constant desire to attain things.

Some weeks ago, I noticed I was having a really hard time in my practice. There was a struggle between my mind's tendency to go all over the place wanting to be distracted or entertained, contrasted with my mind saying, "I've got to be practicing Zen. I need to be practicing meditation." These were the mental forms of a good self and a bad self. The bad self was restless and wanted to be distracted; the good self wanted to beat the bad self into submission—to get it to cooperate and settle down on the cushion.

In Zen practice, we have a tradition of going in for individual meetings with the teachers. I brought this issue to a teacher who very quickly asked, “Who are these selves that you think are going on?” That woke me up to the fact that I had been making a project out of my Zen practice. I had been thinking about this as something I needed to attain and I had created these two little puppets—a good self and a bad self. I was very entertained by watching them battle it out.

We have lots of projects in our lives and some of them are necessary. When I talk about projects, I think of them as having three characteristics. The first is a goal. I have a goal that's out there somewhere—a goal that's something about not being here, about getting from here to some other place. Something is wrong with right now—I want to change it, I want to get to some other spot.

The second characteristic of working on a project, I find, is that I am habitually evaluating everything I see and filtering everything that comes at me in terms of whether it's useful or not. If it's useful for my project I latch onto it, and if it's not useful I push it away. I've noticed this going on in the laboratory conditions of sitting with my own mind. There are a lot of interesting

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findings about this from psychology as well. Not only do we judge things that we see according to our own goals, but what we actually see and perceive about the world is filtered through our goals and our projects.

A lot of you are probably familiar with this example, but if you aren't you can find the [video](#) online and try it out with your friends. There's a famous psychology experiment where viewers of a short video are asked to count the number of balls that a basketball team passes. There's a team in white outfits and a team in black outfits passing basketballs to each other. People are given the project of counting the number of passes that the team in white make to each other. This video goes on for a minute or a minute and a half. At the end, people are asked if they noticed anything odd and most people will say “No.” First, you ask how many balls were passed, and the answers vary within two or three of each other—people count 21, 22, or 23 passes. Then you ask if they noticed anything funny and most say “No, no, no.” They'll admit to disagreeing on the number of passes but they didn't notice anything funny. But in the middle of this video, somebody walks in from the side wearing a gorilla suit, stops in the middle, beats their chest, and walks off. Most people watching the video do not see the person in the gorilla suit. When they watch it again, they're absolutely shocked. It's the proof that our projects actually filter out what we see.

We tend to believe that what we see is reality. But really, everything that we see is colored and flavored by our projects. Obviously, we only perceive things that our human sense organs are made to perceive (the world looks quite different to your dog), but we also create our worlds when we create our projects.

So the characteristics of projects we've covered so far are that first, we have a goal, and second, we filter everything we perceive according to that goal. The third characteristic of projects that I've noticed is that I'm endlessly monitoring and judging. I called this talk “Are We There Yet?”

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because it's like the kids in the backseat of a car on a long trip asking “Are we there yet, are we there yet?” We do the same thing with our practice—“This period of meditation, was this a good one or a bad one? Did I get that special feeling I got yesterday? Oh darn, I didn't get that feeling. Maybe I'll get it tomorrow. Maybe I've got to do this better. Maybe I have to adjust something else. Have I gotten to enlightenment yet? Is it there yet?”

Projects are necessary to some extent. We can't cook a meal without a project—we have the goal of cooking a meal, we evaluate which ingredients should go in, we test whether things are done. Parts of life—getting up, getting dressed, eating—are projects. We can't completely get rid of them. But a whole life made up of projects is a life lived in delusion and stress. The projects are the content of our life, they're not the life itself.

Lately I decided to go back and read some of the ancient sutras—the texts that are supposedly the original words of the Buddha. One of them—the *Lankavatara Sutra*—has a lot in it about how the world we create is actually the projection of our minds. As I read that, it sounded like a metaphysical statement. It wasn't really resonating with me until I changed the pronunciation of the word “projecting” to “*project-ing*.” I am endlessly making projects out of my life and turning the world into the things that fit or don't fit what I want to accomplish.

When I'm totally involved in a project, the three poisons that we talk about in Buddhism are very much present. They're often referred to as greed, anger, and ignorance, but I prefer to think about them as grasping, aversion, and delusive certainty. When I'm caught up in a project, I'm thinking about a goal somewhere else. I'm thinking about trying to get to that goal as a form of grasping—I'm trying to reach out there, trying to get something. It's also a form of aversion, saying, “Things as they are right now just aren't good enough. I've got to push away what's happening right now, I've got to get somewhere else.” Of course, when I'm all taken up in one of my projects, I'm filtering the world through what I think that project needs. I'm certainly in

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ignorance or delusive certainty—I think I see the world correctly but I'm filtering it all through these goals.

I realized that when my good self was beating up my bad self that couldn't concentrate, it was just another case of grasping and aversion—of trying to get away from what was actually here, which was my wandering monkey mind, and trying to get “over there”, somewhere else. But these images of good self and bad self are both just coming from the same place. They're both parts of this project of “selfing”, of making myself the center of the universe and seeing everything from that perspective. Who is that me that I think is good or bad? Zen goes beyond the idea of a good self that is trying to shut up the bad self. There was a line in a preface to a koan that illustrates the futility of that project. The line was "Raising one's voice to quiet an echo"—the good self trying to quiet the bad self by yelling at it more.

Zen teaches that it's not a case of good self versus bad self. It's all of the “selfing” going on versus no self, the emptiness of self. The self that we think has an ongoing substance of its own is empty. This self is just part of the universe as it is “universing” right now. Since it's empty, there really is no need to defend it, to judge it, to build it up, or to get it to attain something. In zazen practice, we get the chance to unhook from all of our projects. Perhaps initially when we first sit down in Zen practice we usually start with counting our breath. Then when the counting seems like too much, we go to just following our breath. From there, we might go on to *shikantaza*, “just sitting” [a Zen meditation practice that involves simply sitting with awareness and observing what arises]. We are not even focusing on the breath, but letting whatever arises, arise.

We've always got thoughts, plans, and memories coming up that try to carry us off somewhere else. The practice is not really about seeing if we can get to ten breaths. If we stop at three or end up on fourteen, that happens. The thing we're always doing is unhooking from that project,

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whatever it was, and just coming back to something that's very simple. Something that's with us all the time, such as the breath, or the sounds around us, or the light in the room, or the feelings in our own body. We constantly get to come back and realize that this—not trying to get somewhere else—but just *this*, is it.

The old Zen teachers talk about “thusness” or “suchness”, but we can only realize that when we give up our judge—“Is this good for my project? Is this bad for my project?” To realize that just this is it. Unhooking from our projects means getting away from the “I have to do this to attain that” mindset.

There's a line in the *Heart Sutra* that says, "There is nothing to attain." There are two other texts I have found helpful on this. One is by Lin-chi Yixuan—founder of the Lin-chi or Rinzai school of Zen in Tang Dynasty [618–907] China. Lin-chi writes, "There is no Buddha, no dharma, no practice, no realization. What is it you seek in others? What is it you lack? It's as though you want to put another head on top of the one you already have. At this very moment, your own wonderful function is no different from the wonderful function of the masters and the Buddhas. It's only because you lack confidence that you seek something outside of yourself. Make no mistake: there is no dharma outside you to run after; there is no dharma within to attain. Rather than seeking, it would be better to hear these words, rest, and practice having nothing to do." Wow, having nothing to do? In my life, there are always more things to do! Yet these are the very radical, challenging words that Lin-chi has for us.

A second reading that I've enjoyed and speaks to this is by Shohaku Okumura, a contemporary Soto Zen teacher. This is from his book *Realizing Genjokoan*, a commentary on the work of Eihei Dogen: "No matter how hard we practice, our motivation for practice is always based in some amount of self-centeredness." He puts it right up front, but my commentary on this is that

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we do tend to make Zen itself into some kind of project. In some ways, it's probably somewhat unavoidable.

Right up front he says there's always some amount of self-centeredness in our motivation, even in our practice. In our busy days, we probably need some kind of intention. We need some kind of desire for enlightenment. We need some kind of goal just to get our butts on the cushion, just to take the time out, to make that quiet spot where we can sit and practice. There's no use denying that we do bring this into our projects. But then our first step when we have gotten our butts on the cushion is to face into this reality.

Okumura continues, "The act of truly seeing this self-centeredness"—the act of truly seeing how much "selfing" we have in the simple project of getting on the cushion—"is itself Buddha. To awaken to the reality of our delusion is itself Buddha. Zazen is not a method of correcting the distortion of our fabricated conceptual maps, but is rather the letting go of all maps and sitting down on the ground of reality. Letting go is at once the complete rejection of any formation arising in our limited karmic mind, and the acceptance of all formations as mere secretions of the mind. We let thoughts come up and we let them go away. We neither negate nor affirm anything in zazen." So I sit in zazen, I see the good self/bad self drama coming up, and I think of it as kind of a puppet show drama. Good self, bad self—even when I see that coming up, I can let it go.

Okumura continues, "Zazen goes beyond and yet includes complete rejection and complete acceptance of thought. When we sit in the upright posture, keeping the eyes open, breathing through the nose, and letting go of mental formations, reality manifests itself. There is no way to conceive of being a Buddha, or of being enlightened—yet without trying to be a Buddha, and without trying to become enlightened, in zazen we keep settling more and more deeply into immeasurable reality. Zen itself is immeasurable reality."

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So don't try, do nothing. Just do what you can, exactly as much as you can. Exactly as much as you can do right now, this particular day, this particular sitting period, this particular moment. If you are monitoring yourself to see how you're doing and you get into the good self/bad self story, look at it as an amusing puppet show and let that go too. One of my early teachers said, "Don't imagine that you can be the judge of your own practice." We simply don't know. It's just not our job to keep track of that, to have that project. All those stories about a good day or a bad day are just stories.