

Koshin Paley Ellison and Robert Chodo Campbell
Week 1, Caring in the World: The Eight Awarenesses
Freedom of Desire and Satisfaction
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Koshin: Hello everyone, my name is Koshin Paley Ellison, I'm one of the founders of the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care.

Chodo: And I'm Chodo, I'm the other founder of the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care.

Koshin: And the New York Zen Center is an organization dedicated to direct service and education and meditation and one of the ways that we do that is through our direct partnerships with Beth Israel Medical Center, New York Presbyterian Medical Center, Visiting Nurse Service Hospice of New York, as well as the Hospice and Palliative Care of Westchester, the Robert Mapplethorpe Treatment Facility and a community organization called Sage. It's really through those clinical partners that we do direct care and our clinical education programs as well as our really great partnership with New York Theological Seminary creating a master's program in Buddhist studies. And undergirding all of our work is our meditation practice and our community. Where are we?

Chodo: Right now we're here in the Rubin Museum, in New York City, thank you so much to the Rubin Foundation for allowing us to film here; so we'll be with you, as Koshin said, for the next four weeks and we're looking forward to it.

Koshin: And one of the ways that we're going to be together is looking how spiritual practice or in our case, Zen, really infuses with care-giving and how we care for the world and ourselves and not separating them. We'll be doing this by looking at something called the Eight Awarenesses which are one of the Buddha's last teachings and in his last teaching he really focused on these eight pieces that we'll be reflecting on

together. So we'll explore two each time and then during the week we will engage you in conversation online. What's the first one?

Chodo: The first one. So in his book, The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment, Taizan Maezumi Roshi with Bernie Glassman talked a lot about actually what we're going to be covering in the next four weeks. This is from Maezumi Roshi, "Our life is always filled in just the right way. We have this life; we live it and this is enough. In the best sense, having few desires is to realize this; yet somehow we think something is lacking, and so we have all kinds of desires."

I recently was companioning/journeying with a friend of mine who after 23 years of a wonderful relationship, was dying. This friend when I first met him had a beautiful home out in Long Island, and an apartment here in New York City, a beautiful, beautiful garden, full practice as a psychotherapist and had a really, really special relationship to his partner of about 30 years; his partner died 10, 15 years ago and so our relationship since then— he was a mentor of mine, you know, he was my sponsor in the 12 step program; our relationship as the years passed became more and more beautiful, that's probably the right word, beautiful. In the last six months of his life, he died in January, his life got smaller and smaller and it was actually beautiful to watch how someone could move from a home with a beautiful garden— I'm using the word beautiful a lot— move from his home to being in the city apartment full time, giving up the car, then eventually being unable to walk, so having to move out of the apartment that he'd lived in for maybe 35 years into assisted living and then that total loss of independence, and finally to die in one small room in his assisted living complex. To watch John be fully present to his life and everything that surrounded him, diminishing daily and to witness his acceptance of that, was an incredible teaching for me. At this point in my life where I have so much, maybe not a house in the country, but I certainly have everything that I need; to watch him just let it all go. And the last few days of his life, in his room, we were playing Bach constantly, the flowers were just abundant— as I said, he was an avid gardener— and at one point, Koshin and I were there with him practically every day taking care of him, at one point, he looked at me and he said, "you know this must be what heaven looks like.

This music, the sunlight pouring through the windows, the flowers, this is heaven.” And it really shook me that there was not a thought of all the things that he’d lost that he’d let go of but right here in this moment in this tiny room, this was heaven. This for me is the truth of having few desires; this is the life we have. This is it and it was so, so touching.

Koshin: You know, for me that’s what the work is about and what the practice is about is really allowing ourselves to realize that having few desires is really just being where we are, you know, the second of the eight awarenesses of that if we can really be free of desire, that we can really allow ourselves to experience satisfaction with just what is.

Chodo: Are we ever free of desires?

Koshin: Well we’re constantly working with them, right?

Chodo: I think, <laughs> I’m always filled with desire; it’s my battle I think. <laughs>

Koshin: I think you know it is a battle and I think that’s why at the end of each evening of practice we vow these impossible vows— that we say, you know, desires are numberless; I vow to put an end to them. It’s like it’s hopeless on one side and the other side is that we can really keep moving towards that because it’s actually what’s most important and one of the things that John taught us, in those moments is it’s actually all the things that we are craving, craving, craving that are not actually what give us satisfaction.

Chodo: Right.

Koshin: It shows us how crazy we are.

Chodo: Right.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: At the end of the day, nothing was going to actually keep John from moving on to the next place and he was totally at home; just totally at peace with this tiny room and flowers and sunlight. I had lunch with someone on Saturday, a very successful businessman on Wall Street who actually gave the whole Wall Street gig up about 10 years ago; he's one of our students, Chaplaincy students. And we were talking about this very subject of how do you transition from making so much money in your life to now really devoting yourself to practice.

Koshin: And to care.

Chodo: And to care. And he's this incredible, incredible caregiver, an incredible chaplain and to think that he's chosen this way to fulfill his life right now, to not be worried about the boat, or to be worried about the new Mercedes, or to be thinking about, where am I going to spend or make the next million dollars. I asked him, I said, "How did you get to this point?" And he said, "Simply, I had to realize what was enough for me, and the answer was my wife, and my children, and my apartment, and a very, very simple way of being in the world." And I thought it was really beautiful; that he just...

Koshin: Yeah.

Chodo: He just needs enough; and it has nothing to do with boats and cars and homes; it's about being present to exactly what is.

Koshin: Right; and to really care for actually what's right in front of you— we get so preoccupied sometimes we miss that. There's a wonderful story that I love so much about this kind of satisfaction, the second of the awarenesses, that is a story of a Zen master, Hakuin. He was a very respected and beloved teacher and he lived in a small town and one of the local people, a young woman, became pregnant and she was not

married and she didn't know what to do; she was actually in love with a fisherman and who had been the father of the child, but she was so afraid of her parents anger that she, you know, pointed the finger at Hakuin and said, "Well he did it." And so the father came at Hakuin, and was full of anger and said, "You're supposed to be this revered teacher and you did this terrible thing," and Hakuin was like, "Is that so?" You know, he just took it on. You know if this person needs this anger, okay. And then when the baby was born, the father brought the baby to Hakuin and said, "You know, you're going to have to take care of this baby," and he said, "Okay." You know, taking whatever was coming to him and he raised this little boy for 18 years and every time the young woman would see the boy, she would feel heartbroken and then at some point she realized that she had to tell the truth and that she had to confess to be with where she is and she told her father and her father was so embarrassed because he had put this, you know, Zen teacher out on a limb and who now had to leave his temple and had to live in the little shack outside of town because everyone thought he did this terrible thing. And so he was there practicing every day, raising this young boy and the father came to him and aid, "You know, I'm so sorry; I'm so sorry," and Hakuin replied, "Well.. is that so?" And the father said, "So I'm going to take the child back into our family," and Hakuin replied, "Okay." And it's this kind of equanimous way of being that is so rare, you know, this kind of quality; it's almost like an aspirational quality of contentment, of satisfaction and how we actually allow whatever's coming to be what it is and to really receive it.

Chodo: That reminds me of the story— going back to desires— the story of the monks that were returning to their monastery during the rainy season and they came upon a stream that was overflowing and on one bank of the stream was a woman who couldn't get across. So the elder monk picked her up and carried her across to the other side of the stream and put her down and she went on her way and the two monks continued on their journey to the monastery and then in the evening, the young monk came to the senior monk and he said, "You know, I'm very troubled by your actions," and the senior monk said, "Is that so? Really; what happened?" He said, "Well we're not supposed... we're monks; we're not supposed to engage with females, and we're not supposed to touch them, and you picked up that woman at the riverbed and carried her across." And the

senior monk said, “Yes.” And the younger monk said, “Well, why did you do that?” And the senior monk said, “You know, *I* left that woman at the bank of the river; you're still carrying her.”

And I think what he's pointing to here, the young monk, it's bringing into his story the desire piece, you know, how can we touch a woman; how can we be with a woman; there are rules against this kind of contact. You know it brings up all sorts of desires and the older monk is just putting it out there, it's like time, degree, condition. Yes, there are rules; there are things that we are not supposed to do and sometimes...

Koshin: Skillful means.

Chodo: Skillful means.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: Time, degree, condition and I put her down.

Koshin: Mm-hm.

Chodo: I picked her up, I carried her across the riverbed, and I put her down; end of story.

Koshin: And I think, you know, it's one of the powerful stories in the tradition about how we can really be contented and satisfied with just what it is. The younger monk was not allowing the moment to pass and I think that, you know— we see it all the time in our work in the hospital that the most powerful question that most people are asking is, “Why me; why is this happening to me?” As opposed to the tension between that and, “Yes; this is what's happening to me.” I know I experience this throughout my day, you know, like that something happens and I feel this experience of emotion like, “Oh, why is this

happening?” Or, “Why isn't that person in front of me on the sidewalk walking faster?” Or all these different things where we feel infringed upon as opposed to coming back to our breath and actually seeing that this is actually what it is. This is the moment. Not another moment. It's these two awarenesses that I think are so beautifully pointing to and encouraging us to be more present to what's actually happening. So what we'd like you to do and try out this week is to engage us and each other in conversation, and to really reflect on desire and satisfaction, right?

Chodo: Mm-hm.

Koshin: And really in a very ordinary daily way, like when you're brushing your teeth or when you're going out to work.

Chodo: Starbucks.

Koshin: Or Starbucks's, <laughs> or whatever it is, you know, to find it ordinary and see what desire and satisfaction have to do with your life.

Chodo: And to notice, you know, as I— for myself, as I said earlier, you know, my days seem to be filled with endless desires; you know, maybe if it's just another espresso.

Koshin: Mm-hm.

Chodo: Or... the day to be over.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: Things to be different. But to just be aware that I have these desires and not judge them.

Koshin: Right, but to notice them and be really aware. So the practice in some ways could be to just feel the desire coming up, because it will just arise, and feel how you work with it; what happens next is where the adventure begins.

Chodo: And where is that coming from? Is it coming from a lack of or a sense of a lack...

Koshin: Of satisfaction.

Chodo: Of satisfaction; that I don't have enough. When in fact, as John proved to me anyway, we always have enough, no matter what the situation. We always have just what we need; this is it.

Koshin: So we look forward to being with you this week and to see you again next week.