

Julie Nelson

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

Week Two: “Zen When Sick and Useless”

July 9, 2018



In my first talk, I spoke about the mind of non-attainment: how we tend to set up projects in our life, and how *zazen* invites us to unhook from those. It turns out that the universe finds other ways of getting us to unhook from our projects even when we resist that unhooking. I’ve witnessed this, as I’ve been somewhat forcibly removed from my projects recently.

Two and a half years ago, I came down with a virus while traveling. When I got back home, I started to recover from it, but then got hit with something else and have never fully recovered. I’ve spent two and a half years dealing with a lot of fatigue and frequent malaise. On better days, I look like I’m fine. On worse days, I feel miserable, have low energy, and feel generally crappy. It became difficult to keep up with the responsibilities of full-time work, so this past year I began working part-time. How does Zen practice speak to this?

I had been practicing Zen for over a dozen years at the onset of this illness. I had a chance to see how my mind works. What I’ve discovered is that I have two favorite projects—two favorite lines that my mind is running on when it’s hooked onto things and racing away. First, I have a project about wanting to *feel* good, and, second, I have a project about wanting to *be* good. When I’m in the feel-good mode, particularly in *zazen*, I often feel bored: my breath is boring, the room is boring. In this mode, I want to think about the movie I saw last week or about the plot of a book. I often think, “Wouldn’t life be better if this particular personal relationship was better?” Or, “Gee, I really would like some chocolate, a glass of wine, something ‘out there.’ I want something that’s going to make me a little happier than I am right now. I want to feel good.” While I’m sick and feeling malaise and fatigue, it’s easy for me to say, “If only I had some more energy, if only I didn’t have this headache, if only my gut worked properly—then I’d really be able to live my life to the fullest. Instead, all of this malaise is getting in the way.”

There’s nothing wrong with finding joy in good things when they arise. However, when I get into this project of wanting to feel good, I’m filtering everything I see and feel through this project of

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“Does it serve feeling good or not?” This filter prompts me to reject many things that are a part of my life by saying, “Nope, not a part of the project, so go away.” At the same time, I grasp onto other thoughts that are out there saying, “If I could just get my health back—then I’ll really be living my fullest life.”

In sitting zazen, though, I am able to notice some of the times when these feelings are coming up as a project. I recognize that movie plot running through my head. I say, “That’s just another feel-good project.” I recognize that the glass of wine or the chocolate I see in my head is just another instance of grasping for something that’s not there. All of that—that pushing away of the headache, the gut pain—is a form of saying, “This can’t really be it; my real life has got to be somewhere else.” In zazen, there are moments when I can see this grasping and aversion that comes with the feel-good project. Zazen allows for the opportunity to recognize that.

This feel-good project can get more insidious. Not only does this project work in trying to get rid of a headache or get something to eat, but a lot of us are drawn to Zen itself because of a desire to feel good and to relieve our suffering and misery. That’s not bad, but it’s possible to start thinking of Zen as just another part of our feel-good project, using it only as a tool for our personal goal of feeling better.

My other project is to *be* good. I’m aware that I have a lot of privileges and have been given a lot: I have a U.S. passport, I’m of a race that doesn’t wake up in the morning and worry about being shot, I have a good education, I have a healthy family, I live in a place that has heat in the winter and fans in the summer. It’s a comfortable life and I know that I want to pay it, if not back, at least forward. To counteract the debts I’ve racked up for all of these privileges, I want my life to mean something. I want to be helpful to others and I want my work life to contribute to making the world better. I want to use my roles, not only as a worker, but as a friend, citizen,

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community member, and family member to do something about the suffering of the world. I want to change things for the better.

Responding to the suffering of the world is not a bad aspiration, of course. But when I practice zazen and I notice this “I want to be good” voice present itself, I’m aware that a lot of “me, me, me” thinking could arise. I could turn wanting to respond to the cries of the world into a subtle variant of the feel-good project. In other words, I could turn it into, “I want to feel good about myself, I want to be on the good side, I want to be productive and effective so that I can feel good about myself.”

A lot of us come to Zen or other Buddhist meditation practices from a feeling that somehow we—ourselves—need fixing; we come from a deep desire to be fixed. We hope that Zen will rid us of those bad parts of ourselves. We think that those faults make us somehow—perhaps uniquely among humans—incapable of being as loving, vital, peaceful, or wise as we think we should be. We want Zen practice itself to serve as our fix-it project to make us more productive and effective. We want Zen practice to move us toward some ideal “better self.” Zen, then, becomes lumped into our project of trying to be good, which actually is trying to feel better about ourselves.

Zen tells us over and over that it’s not about getting somewhere else. This is it. Zen tells us that the basic constructions are to sit down, shut up, and pay attention. We achieve this simplicity through the practice of following or counting the breath, or by practicing *shikantaza*, “just sitting.” In these moments, there’s absolutely no room for a feel-good project and no room for a do-good project. If you sit long enough, your knees are going to hurt, your legs are going to hurt, and your nose is going to itch. Sitting quiet and unmoving is a practice of unhooking from that feel-good project. We’re unhooking from all the do-good projects. We’re not sending any emails. We’re not marching on any lines. We’re even invited to unhook from composing those emails in

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our head. “What good is it to sit down and sit still?” your projects may ask. From the point of view of our projects, Zen practice looks absolutely useless. “If sitting quietly and still is not making us feel good, if it's not turning us into better people, then what possible use could it have? Seems like a waste of time.”

But two and a half years of living with chronic fatigue syndrome gave me a new take on these projects. When I'm feeling a lot of fatigue, malaise, and headaches, feeling good isn't an option. Because of the fatigue, which has left me not only physically drained, but often mentally less able to concentrate, doing good isn't much of an option either. I had to cut back on work due to my difficulty focusing and inability to do the things I want to do. It's hard to get much of anything done.

Beyond the physical and mental fatigue, there's also a moral fatigue. I find that it's sometimes hard to muster up a little bit of care. I read the news and it's awful; the world and our country seem to be going in very bad directions. I read my emails, and my university is going in very bad directions. I see all of this going on in the world, and if I'm feeling lousy, I can barely even get up a blip of care about it. I'll be reading the news on my phone, then maybe switch screens to give myself a few dopamine hits: play a little sudoku, play a little solitaire, and tune it all out.

Escaping through entertainment is often accompanied by a small pang of defeat. I'm not getting my do-good project very far if I'm ignoring the news and playing games. But there's also a bit of guilty pleasure in being this tired. It gives me a Get Out Of Jail Free card. I look at the insurmountable obstacles and say, “I just can't do it today.” But that's during the day time—it's usually in the middle of the night when the dark cloud of despair settles in.

I've had a lot of insomnia due to pain that keeps me awake. At 2 a.m., this black cloud will settle over me and the thoughts will capture me: “I'm miserable and my life has no meaning, both my

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projects have failed, I don't feel good, I'm not doing good, and I've attained nothing.” From the point of view of these thoughts, the universe seems harsh and cold. But this utter failure of my projects is, in a weird way, the good news. Zen was never about those projects to begin with. Zen was never about making my life more pleasant. It was never about making me into some kind of hero or moral icon. Zen practice constantly reminds me to unhook from my projects, which in some way reflects a desire to be somewhere else.

Zen invites us to come back to who we really are without any fixing. When I bring my sickness and uselessness into Zen practice, they fit just right. Doing sick zazen, I can meet my achiness by gently noting, “Just sick. Sickness is arising. Sickness is what's going on.” I'm reminded in my day-to-day life, and while sitting zazen, that sometimes paying attention is all we can do. It is the first and most important thing we can do. To the outside world, it appears we are doing almost nothing when we are practicing; but we are paying attention. Zen pulls me away from this “little me,” this “selfing”—this idea that I have a concrete self that I need to make feel good and do things—and sets them in a much vaster perspective.

I recognize that the dark of night, “My life has no meaning” is just another thought; just like the thought of lunch or the thought of the itch on my knee. “My life has no meaning” is just like those—another thought. The alchemy of Zen practice turns that 2 a.m. black hole of despair into the observation, “In this little corner of the universe, this little person in this bed right here is suffering; that's what's happening right now.”

During the day, when I sit on my meditation bench—or, on my worse days, lay on the rug—I find I don't have to dig up the energy to care. Zen practice is radical in its practice of giving up what we think is important. When I'm sitting with my busy mind in zazen, it's the projects and plans for my next teaching lesson that are important. The sound of the traffic or the light in the room, however, are not. Settling into Zen and into the reality right now is about giving up that

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judging. It's about dropping that filter of what's important and not important. It is then that I hear the cars on the street and see the light on the wood of the floor.

With that intimacy of the moment comes a calling out from my small self. When I offer some kind of pure and open attention to this world around me, even just for a moment, that attention feels like a gift. Maybe that attention is all we *can* give.

I get frustrated whenever I think of this mysterious illness as something that has taken away my real life and sapped my vitality. In these moments, it is easy to think about the full life I should be living; "If only the universe would do things my way." My practice of sick and useless Zen, on the other hand, has reminded me that this life *is* my life. This is my full and vital life. It just has some issues. It's just human.

There is a reading from Eihei Dogen that I think speaks to this. Eihei Dogen wrote, "Firewood becomes ash. It does not become firewood again. Yet, do not suppose that the firewood is before and the ash is after. You should understand that firewood abides in the dharma position of firewood, which fully includes past and future and is independent of past and future. Ash abides in the dharma position of ash, which fully includes future and past and is independent of past and future."

So, Julie-sick abides in the dharma position of Julie-sick and is not, Julie-after-healthy. Dogen also uses the metaphor of seasons. He writes, "We do not call winter the beginning of spring." It might be that further tests reveal something that can be treated, and I'll be healthy again. But Julie-sick is not Julie-waiting-to-get-healthy. Julie-sick means Julie-sick arising. It's my full life coming forth. What a relief! If Zen practice depended on us feeling good, if Zen practice depended on us piling up accomplishments, what use would it be when we really need it? Thank you.