

Sensei José Shinzan Palma

*How to Be Selfless in a Selfish World*

Week Three: Encountering Challenges in Our Practice

September 16, 2019



Hello friends. Thank you for joining me for this series of talks on how to be selfless in a selfish world. In this week's talk, we are going to explore the challenges we may encounter along the journey. These are situations that we face in our everyday lives. Although these situations can be challenging, we can learn from them, so we start to understand that there can be good fortune in our suffering.

Once we engage in the journey of our practice, there's going to be a point where we start looking for a teacher. It's so important to have a teacher, but we need to find a qualified teacher. There are some things that meditation alone cannot cure. That's when it's very helpful to have a teacher to check in with.

When I first started practicing, I thought that meditation would solve all of my problems. But I realized that was not possible, and at some point along my journey, I recognized that I needed to check in with a psychologist. I needed to do therapy. It's really important to be aware of that.

Meditation will shed a lot of light on our issues, and helps us cultivate a lot of awareness, but sometimes we need professional help to continue to develop our practice. So if it's necessary at some point, I do recommend going to therapy and asking for professional help.

Sometimes our suffering is not really spiritual, it's psychological. For example, I used to suffer with low self-esteem. That was not a spiritual problem, it was more of a psychological problem. We can address these issues as they come up, using the most appropriate technique. Using psychology and meditation together can be very useful. Psychology can be very well aligned with meditation practice.

I like to give this explanation, especially for people who are new to practice. When you are sitting in meditation, there are times you will feel peaceful, calm, relaxed—experiencing all the benefits that meditation brings. But your conditioning is still going to be there. We can't necessarily address the roots of suffering at first. You may continue to behave in a way that's causing harm to yourself and others.

An analogy I like to use is to imagine that you have a basement or a storage space in your mind. You've never turned the light on, so you don't know what is going on or what is in there. Meditation practice is like flicking the switch and having the lights come on. Then you see what's there, and you might realize it's filthy and messy. We close the door and don't want to look again.

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But we should continue to be willing to look. Meditation can help us to see what is in our minds. It's not going to fix or re-arrange the mess in our minds. But it's through this practice that we are able to take care of ourselves and do that self healing. But sometimes we also need to ask for professional help.

Getting professional help is like hiring a housekeeper to help you clean your storage space or basement. Or like asking somebody to just help you move a box. This analogy about a basement or storage in our mind works well in terms of describing how psychology can enter the path to help us further develop our wellbeing. Meditation and psychology can work together to help us see our hooks and where we get trapped in behaviors and patterns.

Our meditation practice is a way to take a pause and make space in our life. With this awareness, we can learn to see our habits clearly, especially the habits that are causing us suffering. Cultivating mindfulness is what's really important for practice outside of the cushion.

One of the advantages of zazen practice is that we keep our eyes half open and look down while we meditate. It's a useful way for us to experience what a clear mind is like.

If we practice like this, we can be really in tune when it comes to engaging in our ordinary lives. It makes the transition from the cushion to ordinary life not such a big jump. Practice simply continues throughout whatever we have to do. In that way we bring mindfulness to everything.

We want to maintain awareness. This can allow us to change our ingrained habits and patterns, especially those that are not nourishing our practice. We may have unconsciously addictive behaviors, some of which are even self destructive.

Now that the internet is so widely available and we are on our devices all the time, we are becoming more and more isolated. It even has the potential to change our personality. We should notice when we are overusing the internet, undertaking unhealthy eating behaviors, or procrastinating. Meditation can help by starting to transform us to become more disciplined.

We have to cultivate right effort, which is one of the factors that the Buddha taught in the eightfold path. With right effort, we can overcome obstacles and bad habits and become more disciplined. We start learning when to say no, when to pause, and when to change our trajectory.

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By practicing meditation, we start the process of learning about ourselves. We start seeing more of our inner wisdom and understand how to be wise.

It's important to understand that we always have choices. We can change our trajectory. In Buddhist terminology, we call this karma. We can change our karma. We can change a bad habit for a good habit. We can become more disciplined. The key is to learn actions or habits that really nourish our practice. These allow us to cultivate the conditions for awakening.

By changing our current situation, we are also changing the conditions for the future. We're bringing awareness to our habitual patterns. We might recognize that we need to put an end to certain relationships that don't contribute to our wellbeing. If we can start to bring awareness to and change our behavior, we can harmonize with what we really feel inside. We can express what we truly feel in our heart.

This is where our practice becomes more mature. We often say that Zen is the practice of relationships. From the very beginning, we learn that everything is about relationships. First, we learn, "What is my relationship with myself?" The first step to become our own best friend, and to look after ourselves. This isn't being selfish, it's about our well-being and nourishment.

We can use our practice to take a closer look at our lives. We might ask, "What is my relationship with my job? Am I happy with the job I have?" Or we realize that we have the choice to change it. "Do I want to change or build my skills, or is that too stressful? Am I too busy?" We start learning about our relationship to those aspects of our life.

We may want to check on the progress of our practice. Is our current method of practice working for us? How deep is our practice? One way to check how well your practice is going is to watch your relationships. Your relationships are going to be a good indicator of whether you are growing in your practice or not. In Zen, everything is about relationships.

Thank you for being with me for this talk about encountering challenges in our practice. I hope you've learnt about situations where you get really "hooked," and how to create a space where we can choose to change the trajectory of our lives. That's where we start learning how to relate to ourselves, and how we relate to others.

Thank you for joining me and I look forward to seeing you for our next and final talk.