

Sensei José Shinzan Palma

*How to Be Selfless in a Selfish World*

Week One: Defining the Self and Finding Selflessness

September 2, 2019



Hello, and welcome to this series of Tricycle talks on “How to be Selfless in a Selfish World.” I’m very happy to be here with you.

I would like to introduce myself. My name is José Shinzan Palma. I am a teacher in the lineage of Maezumi Roshi and I’ve been practicing Zen for over 20 years. I started my practice in Mexico City and I finished my residential training at Upaya Zen Center with my teacher Joan Halifax, Roshi. Now I am located in San Diego, California and I have a Zen group there called the Four Vows Sangha. The title for these four talks is “How to be Selfless in a Selfish World.” In this first talk, I’d like to talk about starting our practice by finding the self. We need to define the self before we can experience selflessness. Otherwise, there’s no point in doing this.

In the Zen tradition, we understand the self through formal practice. This talk will be about what formal practice is. What do we mean when we say, “I have to do my practice,” or, “Go and do your practice,” or, “My practice is weak?” During this talk, I’d like to share with you what formal practice is.

The core of Zen is zazen, which is the name for Zen meditation or sitting Zen. It’s not just about crossing our legs and sitting on a cushion or mat, it’s more about the quality of our state of mind—a quality of being connected with life. I define this practice in terms of aligning our body, our mind, our breath, and this moment.

When we are really present and have aligned these four points, *that* is what I would call practice. We are meditating, we are present, here and now, in this moment, meeting life as it is. That’s what we call zazen.

The 13th-century Japanese Zen master Dogen gave us basic practice instructions in his writings. I want to call attention to a few key points in relation to the body in meditation. First, it’s very important to sit with your back straight. I will demonstrate.

In meditation, your back should be straight and your shoulders relaxed. In zazen practice, we don’t close our eyes, we narrow our outlook down. We tuck the chin in, keep the mouth closed, and have the tip of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth. We start focusing our attention on the breath in the lower abdomen. That is the first thing we learn when we start practicing zazen. This is where we begin until we develop our awareness further. In the end, we have just the awareness of sitting and being here. That’s the basic guidance for the formal practice of zazen.



Why do I say that it's so important to have a formal practice? These days, we're not used to formalities, or developing good habits. Meditation practice requires time. We want to relieve stress, we want to feel better, content, and more satisfied, but the first thing that we say when it comes to meditation practice is, "I don't have time."

But that's not true. We always have time to do this practice. We always have time to breathe, to connect with the breath, and to connect with the body. Every moment is an opportunity to reconnect with the practice. The formality is simply about building this good habit into our lives. Here is an example. Making the time to take a shower is not a problem. Whatever we are doing, however busy we are, we always find time to take a shower. At the same level, once we build up our practice, we create a habit. We will make time to sit because we start noticing the benefits of this practice.

We need to be aware of three things when engaging in formal practice, and I call them the three P's. The first is *practice*. Practice is our meditation method or technique. There are so many techniques in the marketplace. There are many guided meditations, and they are all fine. They each have their benefits, but the most important thing is to stick with one. I have seen people jump from one practice to another. Their practice doesn't get deep or rooted. So it's important for us to choose one practice. From the Buddhist perspective, there are several basic or fundamental traditions and techniques. The one that I just described is zazen, or Zen meditation. Another technique is insight meditation, and there are also heart practices, also known as lovingkindness meditation. Those three practices are all wonderful to develop and cultivate peace of mind, a sense of wellbeing, and the insights we are seeking.

Try to stay with just one method and maintain it for a little while. When I say maintain it for a little while I don't mean a month, I mean maybe a year or two years. Find a practice that suits you, commit to do it, and stay with the method.

Your next step may be to find a teacher, or a community to practice with. In Buddhist practice, this is what we call a sangha. It is important to practice with other people. Online tools are wonderful and offer a very good introduction to practice, but in the end we need connections with other human beings. Sitting in a group with other people really supports and inspires your practice, so it's important to find a sitting group.

When we have chosen the method or practice that we want to engage with, the next step in the three P's is *patience*. I would like to say a little bit about patience. In these times, patience is very



rare. We are so busy working fast that we don't have the quality of cultivating patience. Meditation practice requires a lot of patience. When meditating, you learn how to cultivate patience by using the method and coming back to the breath, focusing on mindfulness of breathing and mindfulness of the body. Patience is just coming back, again and again.

Patience should start when we sit. But the body may start to feel quite restless—perhaps we have an itch and we start scratching. Right there is an opportunity to practice patience. Patience is important to incorporate into your practice. One of my teachers says, "Never fight with your practice, your practice is your ally and your best friend. Don't judge, just give it time and patience." So develop patience in your practice.

The third P is *perseverance*. If we look into our lives, how many things have we started but not finished? This practice is a great opportunity to create the good habit of finishing things. In Zen, we use the forms, what we call zendo etiquette, to learn the habit of completion.

In Zen, when you finish your meal, you wash your dishes. You finish the entire process of having a meal, as well as cleaning up. Perseverance is required in this practice, and it builds up thanks to our patience, it's just about timing. If you continue to sit with perseverance, you'll reap the benefits of this practice as time passes.

These are the methods—practice, patience, and perseverance—that I call the three P's. To finish this talk, I would like to give you some homework. Try to sit it quietly for just five minutes. It doesn't matter what time of the day, just connect with your body, your mind, and your breath. For each moment, be aware of what is going on in these five minutes. Take this time to pause.

You don't have to sit on the floor, you can sit in a chair. Or you can even just pause for five minutes when you sit down to eat. Every time that you're going to eat a meal, take your seat, pause, and connect with the moment, and then enjoy your meal. When we're eating, we often have the impulse to go to our phones, or turn on the TV or the computer. But try to just eat mindfully.

I would like to give another tip for those people who have difficulty sitting in a formal way, such as on a cushion or in a chair. You can also find an activity that you really love and just bring full awareness and mindfulness to that activity. Connect fully with that activity. If you really love to walk your dogs, just do it as a practice.

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For example, I enjoy drinking coffee in the morning. I've made a ceremony of having my coffee before I go to practice zazen. I brew the coffee, then I take a sip, and I really enjoy drinking my coffee. I appreciate every aspect of that cup of coffee. Being fully aware of something you enjoy is a way you can build good habits. You might even find it helps you to do formal practice on the cushion. Try it this week and see what happens. Be curious about this practice, and fully immerse yourself in the awareness of life.