

Sensei José Shinzan Palma

*How to Be Selfless in a Selfish World*

Week Two: Awakening is Not What You Think

September 9, 2019



Hello and welcome back to the second talk in this series on exploring how to be selfless in a selfish world. I've titled this week's talk, "Awakening is not what you think." Many of us come to meditation practice with the initial intention or aspiration to relieve our stress and suffering. The first noble truth is that there is suffering and dissatisfaction in our lives, so it's normal to come to this practice with this intention. We think that the goal of doing this practice is enlightenment, because when we read about the Buddha's life, we see the story of an enlightened being. We might set a goal and push very hard to have some kind of enlightenment experience. We think if we get enlightened, it's going to solve all of our problems and we're going to be cured of suffering and never suffer again.

We create a myth around the word "enlightenment." I'm not saying that awakening doesn't exist—it does—but whatever we think about it, the ideas we create around it are just going to move us further away from what it truly is. I personally don't like to use the word "enlightenment." It sets the bar too high. I like the word "awakening." Awakening is for human beings. Enlightenment sounds like something attainable for only a celestial or divine super being, somebody that is perfect. Wakening is a healthier term.

When we say "awakening," it means we've been asleep and now we're waking up. This is the message from the Buddhist teachings—that to wake up from our suffering is like waking up from a dream. We are moving away from our suffering because we are waking up to its causes.

When we do our formal practice—our sitting meditation or zazen—the first thing that we are going to experience is that the mind's restlessness and busyness. Practice makes us more sensitive, so it can seem like our suffering is blowing up and getting worse. We might think that our practice is not working or that we are not getting the benefit of the practice, but that is not true.

For many of us, as soon as we encounter a greater awareness, we're closer to our suffering and our pain, so we stop practicing and think that meditation is not helping us. But it's totally the opposite. This is where meditation practice is really working. It's true that our greater mindfulness and awareness is making us more conscious of our pain, stress, suffering, and bad habits. We are more aware of our thinking. We are more aware of our emotions and feelings. But it's just our awareness growing so we're going to see more.

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I mentioned in the beginning of this practice that we are going to touch on a very core and fundamental teaching of the Buddha called the three marks of existence. We're going to explore this teaching deeply. The three marks of existence are impermanence, non-self, and ignorance [sic; suffering]. These are not in chronological order, but one thing we can easily experience in the beginning of our practice is impermanence. When we become more aware, we realise things are changing all the time.

I'd like to use an analogy about impermanence in meditation. Impermanence is like a river. When we aren't practicing meditation and we're not so aware, it's like you're up high on a bridge in a canyon and you see a river or stream below. From the top of the canyon it looks like the river is not moving. It looks like everything is static. Meditation is like going down into the canyon to see that everything is constantly flowing from one thing to another. That's how we can experience the first mark of existence: impermanence.

In practice, we start seeing the impermanence of our thinking and our thoughts. The first insight or awakening we have is that we realize that we are not our thoughts. Thoughts are part of us, but we don't have to follow them all the time. The first "aha" moment in our practice is when we start seeing impermanence.

Another mark of existence we can explore is non-self. There can be negative connotations attached to the idea of non-self. Sometimes it's interpreted as if we don't exist, or that we are denigrating the self, but it's not that. What the Buddha meant was that the self is not static or fixed. The self is changing all the time. What we're perceiving, our conditions, and our experiences are affecting us all the time. It's affecting the elements that compose ourselves. Right now, my concept of self is changing through having this experience of filming. It's my first time doing a film. I'm going to change. I am curious what the final result will be.

It's the impermanence of the self that leads to our experience of non-self. One way to help us understand that concept is to look at how nothing can exist by itself. We can start with ourselves. We have parents, two people that needed to come together in order for us to come into this world. If we look at our genealogy, it's interesting to see so many people in our family tree, generation after generation of what we call our ancestors. Then we come to appear in this world, but we can't be separated from our ancestors that came before us. It's an illusion that there is a separation between ourselves and them. We do have a self identity for practical purposes, to navigate through life, but ultimately we are all connected. We breathe the same oxygen, and we

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cannot even control the breath. Our bodies' breathing keeps us alive. I depend on the air that others breathe too. I depend on the food that others provide. I depend on the people who make my clothes. That is the connection. This is how the Buddha talked about interbeing or interconnectedness. That is non-self.

The last mark of existence is ignorance. Ignorance is the belief in our separation. We believe in the gap that we create. A lot of the problems in this world exist because we don't feel connected. One example is the ignorance around climate change. The earth is humanity's home, and it's amazing that we think that what we are doing is not affecting the planet. We think there's a separation between the earth and us, but we live on it, it's our home. There's a clear connection, but because there is ignorance, we see separation and duality between the earth and ourselves. This is how we create pollution and contribute to climate change that ultimately will affect us all.

If we are more understanding and aware that the things we do create an effect, perhaps we would cause less harm because we see the connection to ourselves. To not see our connection, or to believe that there is a gap or separation, is ignorance.

Dogen Zenji, the 13th-century Japanese Zen master, in one of his most famous quotes from the *Genjokoan* (a Collection on the Fundamental Point) says, "To study the way is to study the self, and to study the self is to forget the self. Forgetting the self is to be penetrated or actualized by the ten thousand things." That single quote encapsulates the whole journey. First, we study the way. If you watched the talk from the first week we covered that to study the way was to have a formal meditation practice. That's how we study the way.

Now we are studying the self. We are going to ask, "What is the self? Who is driving this life? What am I? Why am I suffering?" Zazen practice helps us to answer these big spiritual questions. Through practice, we are going to experience the self, our connection to ourselves, and our connection to life.

It's important not to have big expectations in our practice, not to try completely changing ourselves or finding a magical cure for our suffering. I usually say, "Trust the process, trust the practice." Through practicing Zen meditation, we are going to find more space in our lives. Cultivating awareness creates space, and in that space a joy emerges that allows us to see that it is really not too difficult to be alive. It is challenging, but we start to see that through our breath we can transform our stress and our suffering.

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In this way, meditation practice is like building a raft or a base camp. We can see life as like climbing a mountain. As we climb that mountain, we need to have a base camp where we can nourish ourselves and really take care of our mind and our being. Then we can fully engage with life.

That's all I would like to say for our talk this week. I always tell my students or people who come to practice with me to just forget about the word “enlightenment.” Concentrate on your practice, create this new habit, and then allow yourself to be surprised. Approach your practice with curiosity and try to understand all the changes that are happening in our bodies and minds.

Thank you for joining me in this week. Next week, we will explore all the obstacles you may encounter in the journey of this practice. We will learn about how we encounter these obstacles in studying the self, and the scenarios or situations where we practice. Thank you. I look forward to seeing you next time.