

Sensei José Shinzan Palma

*How to Be Selfless in a Selfish World*

Week Four: Discovering our Deep Connection to Life

September 23, 2019



Hello, friends. Thank you for joining me for this series of four Dharma talks on exploring how to be selfless in a selfish world. This is the fourth and last talk, which I have called "Discovering our Deep Connection to Life."

Today we are going to explore why a spiritual practice such as meditation is so important for these times. In these modern times we have a lot of crises, and our practice really matters. Your practice produces significant benefits, and not only for yourself but for others too. In the beginning, it looks like it's only for ourselves. But when we find that connection between all beings, we realize that others are also benefiting from our practice.

One of the insights we receive from the practice of zazen meditation—when we're paying attention, resting in wholeness, and learning to connect with the breath—is that we're connected with life. When this body stops breathing, it's dead. But in the meantime, while we are still breathing, we can experience being alive. We start building a level of intimacy, connecting with life both within ourselves and the whole of existence.

There are times when we really struggle. There is so much going on. I recently saw an interview with the American psychologist James Hillman. He asked, "What happened to this country? What is the soul of this country?" I'm not trying to be negative, but sometimes we're not conscious of where we're placing our attention. One of the biggest crises we face is that we are moving away from it means to be human. What does it mean to be human?

In this society, we are shifting our focus from what it means to be human to numbers. We are more concerned with numbers than people. We really need to be aware of this, because what we place importance on in our lives defines our happiness. This is where we need to consider our values. What do we really value in life?

For me, this meditation practice has tremendous value, because peace of mind is important to me. If I have peace of mind, I can be more in tune with what I need. I can more easily face the challenges in my life, take care of myself, and take action when necessary. With peace of mind, I can make better choices. I value peace of mind. It's important for me to create my livelihood cultivating the value of peace of mind.

It's important for us to look at our values. What do we value as a society when we are all so individualistic? I don't want to go into politics, but at the moment it seems like we're so



individualistic. Everything is about me, me, me. We are quite disconnected. We are in a value crisis as a society.

By being so individualistic, we create division and polarity. With this separation, the whole can't be there. We are not taking care of each other. We are suffering. We really need to pay attention to the consequences of being so self-centered and individualistic. This practice can help us to reevaluate our values and see what is really important. What is important are our virtues, these beautiful qualities of a human being. These include compassion, love, generosity, patience, and even attention. Where is our attention now? This is something that we really need to recognize and be aware of. Where are we now, and where do we want to go?

It seems that we're in a crisis of a lack of deep listening and attentiveness. We spend so much time on other things that we are forgetting what it means to be engaged, to really give our presence to somebody. I noticed this in my experience working with teenagers. It's very common for them to want to spend more time in relationship, to wish that their parents would spend more time with them. It's about the quality of attention.

We think that material things will really satisfy our needs. And yes, we're addressing our material needs but we also have other needs. We need to care for ourselves on a relational level, and we need to care for our relationships. There's an example that used to strike me. Here in the United States, you will never see street dogs, but we can often see human beings in the streets. What values are evidenced there? Does a dog have more value than a human being? Both have different needs, but we can take care of both. We cultivate this practice based on wisdom. There is a connection. By deeply connecting with life, we acquire wisdom that comes from compassion. Compassion is about taking care. First we take care of ourselves, and in the same way, we can take care of others.

It works together, like two sides of the same coin. When you are developing your mind in practice, don't think that you are not benefiting society. You are offering a great benefit to society. Your mental sanity is so important. When you do zazen, you're taking care of your mind. You take care of yourself, and then you go out into the world and interact with people. When you interact, your peace of mind and contentment are going to transmit to other people. People are going to be affected. No matter your relationship to others, whether you are managing employees at work, or a parent, those around us don't want to experience our anger or stress. When we are stressed, we can react strongly, and even cause suffering to others.



When we are happy, peaceful, and loving, we behave differently. We connect better. One of the reasons our practice is so important is because it helps with our relationships, and that sanity then goes into the world. This practice starts at home. It starts where you're at right now, in taking care of your current relationships. If you live alone, maybe you have plants, so take care of your plants. If you have pets, you can take care of your pets. If you have a partner or children, you can take care of them. The practice starts at home.

What makes a society is family or community. There's value in family. Now, we only think of our family at Thanksgiving, but it shouldn't be like that. We need to pay attention. There are certain things that we cannot change.

How often are we spending lunch by ourselves? Previously, we would wait for the family to arrive to have lunch or dinner. Now we might only do that once a year. It's not something that we should make some kind of judgment about because this is the practice. This is where it's important.

When we are waking up, the first step is waking up to this body, to this “me.” We start to think about how our bodies work and understand that we are full of many systems and different parts. They are totally different, but they work together in harmony. When those systems are out of balance—if just one system goes off—we become sick and we are not in harmony. When we wake up to this body and understand its wholeness, we can understand that we also need to wake up to our connections and our relationships, and to all the different systems in our society. When even one of the systems in the world is unbalanced, it creates disharmony and suffering arises. It's only by creating balance that we can have harmony. Starting by waking up to this body, we are beginning to wake up to the whole world.

I'd like to finish with a personal story about paying attention that might be helpful to you. Over a year ago, my father passed away. My family lives in Mexico, and when I received the news that my dad was sick, I flew back home to Mexico. My dad was diagnosed with cancer. They said, "It's a terminal illness. We don't know how long he's going to live." I decided to take care of him.

I stopped my career as a teacher and I went to provide my father end-of-life care. I spent one month with him and asked him questions about his life. He was almost 86 years old when he passed away. One of the things that he told me was, "I worked too much." Another was, "I was too preoccupied. I worried a lot, but it doesn't help at all." The last thing that he said that stuck with me was when he was in bed and I asked him, "What do you need?" He told me, "I need

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love." Wow. "How can I offer that?" I said, "How can I do it?" He said, "Just hold me." So I just held him.

I spent a lot of time with him, just holding him, and he felt love through just that act. What I'm trying to say is really look into your life. What is the most important thing, really? What is the most important thing in your life? We are human, and as human beings, our lives are very, very short. We would be fortunate to live even 100 years. We don't need to waste time finding the most important thing. Looking at my father's story, he found the worry wasn't important. Overworking wasn't important. He had the courage to ask for what he needed. It was love.

This is what this practice is about. Everything we are doing is about finding that connection of love, and we start with ourselves. That way, we can love others. I think that is awakening. We need to create more harmony in this society. Our humanity is being lost. Right now, families are being separated. We are creating division. Right now, we are prioritizing numbers over people. Don't undermine your practice. Your practice is so important in these times.

To end, I would like to say that we have the choice to be optimists. We have the choice not to lose hope and to really understand what it means to be a human being in this world.

Thank you for joining me in this series. I hope that what I shared with you is helpful, that it can inspire you or nourish your practice. That has been my experience in doing this practice. Being selfless in a selfish world is a big topic, so thank you again for joining me. Please take care of yourself and enjoy life. Thank you.