



Hello and welcome. My name is Ryuko Laura Burges, and we are here in the beautiful Buddha Hall of San Francisco Zen Center. I'm a lay and trusted Buddhist teacher in the Soto Zen tradition. I lecture and give classes and offer retreats here and in other practice places in Northern California.

In Zen practice, we sit in silence but I'd like to offer a brief meditation as a kind of grounding before my talk.

Let's begin by taking a few deep breaths. If you're able to sit up right, bring some strength into your lower back, lifting up through the back and through the crown of the head.

Roll the shoulders back and open the heart area. Let your breath travel to the farthest reaches of your body.

Enjoy the feeling of your breath as it enters and leaves the body. Feel the sensation of the chest and belly rising and falling as you breathe.

Pay special attention to when the in-breath turns around and becomes an out-breath and when the out-breath becomes an in-breath.

Coming home to your true nature.

Zen Practice and Recovery

I came to Zen practice in my early 20s. And I'd had a lot of wild adventures before I arrived here. I also experienced what I think of now as the heart of darkness that is alcohol. When I began to practice Zen, I stopped drinking, and I loved the clarity that came with that. Soon I was at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center.

This Zen center's monastery is in the Los Padres wilderness east of Big Sur, California. I practiced, as we say in Zen, as if to save my head from fire. Practice was a kind of antidote to the unskillful and self-destructive way that I'd been living. But Buddhism didn't cure my alcoholism.

When I left the monastery, alcohol began to creep back into my life. I came to feel that I needed to step into the rooms of recovery and find other people who wanted to stay sober as much as I did, and who could show me how. Also at the end of my drinking, I brought to mind the faces of some marvelous Buddhist teachers who had harmed or destroyed their communities because of their inability to control their addictive behavior.



I've been clean and sober for 38 years. For me, the twin paths of Zen practice and recovery are deeply intertwined and equally part of my everyday life.

I've gathered some of my dharma talks about the intersection between Buddhism and recovery in my book, *The Zen Way of Recovery: An Illuminated Path Out of the Darkness of Addiction* published by Shambhala publications.

I'd like to share a chapter of my book with you today. If you aren't in recovery, I invite you when you hear the word addiction, to think of it as a kind of metaphor for our very human craving. The craving that the Buddha taught causes so much of our suffering. This craving can lead us away from our true selves. And both practice and recovery can bring us back.

The Eight Awarenesses of the Awakened Being

A teaching that I found helpful in my early practice comes from the last teaching of the Buddha, the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. Our great Soto Zen ancestor Dogen Zenji also shared this teaching before his own death in 1253. It's called The Eight Awarenesses of the Awakened Being.

The eight awarenesses of the awakened being include eight realizations or awakenings that are available to us all. They are: (1) having fewer desires, (2) knowing how to be satisfied, (3) enjoying serenity and tranquility, (4) exerting meticulous effort, (5) not forgetting right thought, (6) practicing samadhi, a state of concentration or meditation, (7) cultivating wisdom and finally (8) avoiding idle talk.

We can easily see how these aspects reflect and fold back on one another. If we have fewer desires, we know how to be satisfied. If we know how to be satisfied, we are more able to enjoy serenity and tranquility.

If we can enjoy serenity and tranquility, we are able to exert our full effort. Part of right effort is right thought, remembering the teachings of the Buddha. With right thought we can come to meditation. And meditation helps us cultivate wisdom. If we are practicing wisdom, we won't waste so much time with idle talk, which might be gossip, or mean-spirited speech, or even the way we sometimes talk to ourselves in a very unkind way.

Let's look a little more closely at these eight awarenesses. If we have few desires, we will know how to be satisfied. Another way to think about this is that we can desire and be grateful for what we already have.

Here are the Buddha's words from the Mahaparinirvana Sutra.



Knowing how much to take of what one already has, is called knowing how to be satisfied. You monks should contemplate knowing how to be satisfied, if you wish to be liberated from suffering. The dharma of knowing how to be satisfied is the realm of riches, comfort, peace and tranquility.

Those who know how to be satisfied are happy and satisfied, even when sleeping on the ground. Those who do not know how to be satisfied are not satisfied, even when dwelling in a Heavenly Palace.

Those who do not know how to be satisfied are poor, even if they are wealthy. While those who know how to be satisfied, are wealthy, even though they have little.

Being Satisfied With What You Have

Now there's great suffering in the world: poverty, war, a lack of clean air and water, great migrations of displaced people, the sicknesses of racism, misogyny and homophobia. But I think this teaching gets right to the heart of our ordinary everyday suffering, what we might call our self-created suffering. The suffering of always wanting things to be a little bit different than the way they are.

We tend to think we could be truly happy, truly satisfied if only we could make a few little adjustments. We might think we would be satisfied if only we were married. Or if only we were single again. If only we lived somewhere else or had a different job.

Being able to be satisfied with what we already have, being able to have few desires depends on whether we take our lives for granted. Whether we take our gifts for granted, whether we can be grateful and appreciative of our lives, just as they are.

Edward Espe Brown was head of practice when I first showed up at Zen Center. Ed wrote *The Tassajara Bread Book*, which was translated into many different languages and brought a lot of people to the Zen Center in the early days. Ed has written many other books as well. One day, he said to me, "If you aren't happy with what you have, what makes you think you would be happy with more?" This is a wonderful koan for us.

If there's a silver lining to going through difficult times, I think it's that when we are going through hardship, we might have the ability to find joy in seemingly small things. Just the sight of a delicate tree, decorated with cherry blossoms, a cool glass of water or a deep breath, the smile of a stranger or the laughter of a child. These things can console us. We're grateful for simple things.

The Realm of Hungry Ghosts



The Buddhist Wheel of Life pictures different realms, hungry ghosts or *preta*, are pictured as beings with huge empty stomachs. But with pinhole mouths and with necks so thin that they cannot swallow. A hungry ghost is one who is always looking outside herself for the new thing that will satisfy the craving within. Hungry Ghosts are characterized by insatiable hunger and craving, with addiction, obsession and compulsion.

In the world of addiction, we constantly seek outside ourselves for the cure for our insatiable hunger for relief. We're never truly satisfied by our addictions because though they offer an illusory temporary relief, they don't give us what we really long for: communion, peace, a sense of being at home in the world.

In fact, the longer we live in the realms of the hungry ghosts, these comforts gradually recede into the background, and we're left alone, bereft and sick. We may have come to practice and recovery after a profound experience of impermanence, or after a long season in hell. Each of us will have at some point in our life, our own season in hell.

But in practice and recovery, we find the resources to cultivate satisfaction and contentment, to find a new freedom and a new happiness. In fact, our recovery literature tells us that we'll have access to an inner wisdom that has been previously inaccessible to ourselves.

Moving Towards Happiness

Recent research into the brain has found some common elements that can help us towards happiness, satisfaction and wisdom. These things also come to fruition as we do the work in recovery. Building a strong network of relationships, this is number one in terms of brain health and happiness. A strong social connection with other beings. Taking responsibility for our actions and clearing up the past by making amends to those we have harmed, including ourselves.

We learn how to stay with difficult situations and emotions. I think this is because we're no longer in the thrall of our addiction, having to act out these strong feelings. Now we can feel those things without needing to act them out unless it's appropriate.

We find that we can help others and allow others to help us. This is a kind of generosity, when we let other people help us. Something that often doesn't come very naturally to us.

We learn HALT, how to avoid being too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. We cultivate and express gratitude. We understand that our lives matter, that we have something to offer. We find that we're able to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. These things can give us real satisfaction instead of the simulated and artificial satisfaction of substance abuse or behavioral addiction.



Stepping away from the big highs and lows of addiction, the drama, the confusion, we turn towards our own lives, we find the vital center of our life. We can meditate with others, and practice being satisfied with this present moment.

If we are torn up with bitterness and resentment—and our recovery literature tells us these are the number one offenders that might take us back into our self-destructive behavior—if we're caught in our anger and our rage, we are more likely to cause suffering to ourselves and to other beings. Our practice and our recovery offer us the sacred pause. This is the ability to wait and breathe, to commune with our inmost self to find the appropriate reaction, and then to act with sincerity, courage, and wisdom.

I taught children for many years and one day I was sitting at my desk and my student Nathan walked in front of my desk. This was during silent, sustained reading. And Nathan, he did this little dance. I called him over and I said, “Nathan, what were you thinking about right then?” He said, “Laura, do you ever forget you're alive and all of a sudden you remember?” I was so touched to be there for his moment of awakening. This was a child.

Awakening to the Present Moment

Yet this moment of awakening is always waiting for us in the present moment. Waking up to the truth of our life. At the end of each chapter of my book, I offer some reflections and practices. So I'd like to share with you some of some of these that come at the end of this chapter about The Eight Awarenesses of the Awakened Being. Let's sit quietly for a few moments and just come back to the breath.

I'd like you to think of some things that make you feel peaceful and joyful. You might make a list of these things and vow to conscientiously weave them into your everyday life.

What kind of habits pull you away from peace and joy? Too much screen time, obsessive worry, dependence on substances? Do you engage in chronic busyness at the expense of your inner life? Are you involved in relationships that are toxic or too consuming?

These are things you might want to look at in your life, things that you might need to amend in order to find the peace and joy we were speaking up today.

I hope that very soon you can take a walk, preferably in nature, but of course you can also do this in the city or in a city park. As you walk open your eyes, your ears, all your senses and let yourself be bathed in the ever available and consoling present moment.

Feel your feet on the ground. Feel the air on your face. Allow yourself to be grateful for this life. Remember that you're alive, the way that Nathan did in that little dance he did many years ago.

Laura Burges
The Eight Awarenesses of the Awakened Being
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When my stepmother was dying of cancer, she asked me for a glass of water. I brought it to her and she drank from it. And she looked up at me and she said, “You know, I never knew before how good a glass of water can taste.” What a gift to enjoy a glass of water.

Please, let's not wait until the end of our lives to enjoy and be grateful for these simple things. Thank you for listening. And I want to thank my teacher, Eijun Linda Cutts, for whom I feel boundless gratitude.

I'd like to offer the merit of our time together to all beings in the 10 directions, past, present and future.

May we wake up to the truth of this life. May all beings be happy. May they be joyous and live in safety.