

"Five Expressions of Zen: A Path to Service"

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**Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara
Village Zendo, New York**

Thank you for inviting me here for this lecture. Let me extend my gratitude to President Tom Coburn and The Department of Religious Studies, especially John Weber for his work organizing the weekend course. And, The Office of Academic Affairs - especially Stuart Sigman, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Jessica Bowser from Extended Studies, for her work behind the scenes. And of course, my gratitude to The Lenz Foundation, represented here tonight by Norman Oberstein, for the commitment to the study and practice of Buddhism in America and for their support of the Distinguished Speakers program. Finally, thanks to Elizabeth Garfield for her intimate help all along the way.

Tonight I'd like to talk about a vital issue for everyone who holds spiritual beliefs, and particularly, Western Buddhists, who are confronting the twin demands of spiritual clarity and service. We face three koans:

- Our first koan, what the Buddha so brilliantly announced, is how to live in world in which dukkha, suffering, or unsatisfactoriness, or dis-ease, is a persistent reality.
- Our second koan is that many of us are drawn to a contemplative life, a way for us to stop our own suffering, to find the joy and peace of boundless space, and yet we also see that there is individual pain and suffering, and institutionally generated suffering in our world.
- The third koan has two forks: for those actively engaged in social change, we seek balance and wisdom that comes from sustained practice, and those of us not actively engaged seek a way to express the compassion that naturally arises out of spiritual wisdom. Both seek a balanced path of service - a path to wholeness, inside and outside, expressing the great body of the Buddha, the great body of life itself,

We seek to not deaden ourselves, to not be overwhelmed, or fearful, to not despair but to have the courage to go forward in our lives, as active stewards, mothers and fathers, musicians and healers, business people and crafts people, artists, teachers, farmers and social activists.

All three koans, expressing this urge to be of use, to serve, are perfectly embodied in the Bodhisattva Vow: **I vow to save all sentient beings.**

In the Lotus Sutra it says

Those who have not yet crossed over I enable to cross.

Those who do not yet understand I cause to understand.

Those not yet at ease I put at their ease.

Those not yet in nirvana, I enable to attain nirvana. (Lotus Sutra, chapter 5)

These are impossible vows! The only way to solve our koans is to enter them completely as a Bodhisattva.

The notion of a Bodhisattva is commonly associated with the Mahayana, but actually one can see its marks in the early Jataka tales, and in the teachings of the Buddha. There is a Jataka tale of the Buddha in a previous lifetime that illustrates our present dilemma of how can a Bodhisattva not become overwhelmed, defeated, by the enormity of the task?

When we look at our new President and consider the courage required to take on these enormous problems of our world, we can ask our selves, how does one not become discouraged or defeated?

Walking into Sing Sing Prison, seeing the brutality of the structure, the suffering of the guards, stuffed into their uniforms, frightened and unhappy, or the inmates, trying to not get hurt, to find a way to survive in truly violent circumstance, then I ask myself, what can this one lady do to make a difference?

Watching someone die a horrible death, one that could have been different, because medical directives were not offered, one asks, how can I make a difference? And, you may ask yourself the same question about poverty, war, the earth itself.

Let me tell you a story from the Jataka Tales. Once the Buddha was born as a little parrot who lived in a lush and delightful forest. The parrot enjoyed flying through the leaves, watching the other birds and animals and insects at play. One day there was a terrible storm and lightning started a fire. Before long, the whole forest was in flames, trees and branches were falling, burning the grass and bushes. The deer and squirrels and chipmunks and groundhogs and all manner of life were frightened and howling, trying to find an escape from the flames. It was a horror to witness! The little parrot was frightened, but wanted to do something to stop the fire. So, she flew over to the river, immersed herself in the water, wetting her feathers. Then she flew over the forest fire, and flapped her wings so that drops of water would fall on the fire. Then she flew back to the river, and back and forth, over and over again. Her whole body was blackened with soot, and she was greasy from the smoke. And yet she carried on. Far above, there was a feast being held by the heavenly beings and as they watched the little parrot on her seemingly futile task, they all had a good laugh: “how silly and impossible, how ridiculous is that little parrot, Ha! Ha!” But there was one heavenly being who felt badly for the parrot, and transforming himself into an enormous eagle, he flew down to the parrot and said, “Little parrot, this is not doing any good, give it up, you are just wearing yourself out!” The parrot said, “I can’t stop, this fire is out of control and there are so many plants and beings that are suffering!” Hearing this, the eagle began to cry because he was so touched by the parrot. His big tears flowed and flowed, coming down like rain, huge floods and floods of tears that fell on the flames, and finally quenched them all. The fire was out. The animals came back, the plants replenished themselves and the forest was again a paradise with the little parrot flying around it all.

This story illustrates a vital point for all of us:

- Although seemingly impossible, the parrot’s effort inspired the eagle. It is our example that often makes the difference.
- The selflessness of the act: it is not about what “I” can do, but about what is done and how it inspires others.

In the Zen tradition we honor various archetypal images of the bodhisattva that inspire us. Chief among them are: Manjusri, Avalokitesvara, and Samantabhadra: wisdom, compassion, and service/action. Manjusri sits with a great sword and cuts away our delusions. Avalokitesvara, with all her hands and eyes, hears the sounds of the suffering and finds ways to care for them. And Samantabhadra vows to save all beings, and serves as the archetype of service.

And what about our own lives? In my community, I see the struggle to realize oneself, to live a wholesome life, taking care of self, family and community. How to balance these?

I have seen young people overwhelmed by the great need in the world, the wars, and hunger, and disease, the state of the earth. One response is to hide, to find a quiet cave and meditate, take drugs, pull back from the flames.

Another response is to lose ourselves in activity without regard to those to whom we have familial or community ties: to become so fanatically involved that mother, father, school, work, wife, child, local community are ignored.

And when these aspects of our self are lost, we, too, lose some of our humanity, some of our strength, of our heart, of our ability to be present. I have seen chaplains and social activists lose their connections to those around them in a kind of crazed flooding of turbulence and confusion.

Because of this, and inspired by Bernie Glassman’s affection for the Five Buddha Families, and the three tenets of the Zen Peacemakers, I have designed a mandala of practice for socially engaged Buddhists that seems to address the needs of Bodhisattvas in this ordinary, saha, world. It is template, a way of understanding our path of service.

The mandala is the circle of our lives, and how we live our lives. Within this circle are five expressions, five clusters of energy that help us keep steady, to stay poised in our lives, to offer loving service to every aspect of our life.

The Five Expressions also draw from the notion that how we express is how we press out of our living being, how we elicit, the nectar, the blessing, that we are in combination with all that is, and that emanates from each one of us.

As Zen Master Dogen said, “All sentient beings ARE expression.” We come to realize that expression is our nature, is our manifesting of who we are. And also, to realize that expression is neither derived from someone else nor from one’s own abilities.

But rather it is generated from the interface of self and other. It is not something we aspire to, but rather something we recognize.

The following explanation of the five expressions, will not give you anything, nor are the expressions something you can ‘make.’ Instead, says Dogen, they arise out of the interaction of reality, your practice, and your life and the life of all beings.

The five expressions are: meditation, study, communication, action, caring/stewardship.

In the time remaining, I’ll only be able to offer you an overview instead of specific instructions, but if you are interested, there is a cd series for sale here and on our website at villagezendo.org.

1. To Meditate: To clear the mind, to meet reality, to discover peace and joy. It is the heart of our practice; it is how we come to live a life of wisdom and compassion. No matter how busy/committed we are, we must maintain a daily practice at home. And at minimum a weekly practice in community. It is amazing, how, after even a short time, our mind begins to settle, and what seemed insurmountable, becomes a situation we can see from a new perspective, often because we are willing to let go of a fixed position.

Do not neglect this expression in your social action, in your commitment to others! I am sorry to say that among Western Buddhist social activists, I often see this expression neglected.

A period of silence before a board meeting, before an intervention or confrontation, can crucially change how people interact and function. If we are grounded in our own mind and body, we are able to bring a unique quality of presence to others, and to listen, to enter in a space of mutuality. It is amazing to watch any group of disadvantaged folks respond to meditation. I have worked with young people in detox, and in drug treatment centers who have finally been able to calm down, in the presence of quiet, open presence. When faced with the dying and their families, with the youth bending towards drugs, we carry a peace that can offer healing.

Sheng yen, who recently died, wrote a short poem “xin an, ping an” “A quiet heart will bring peace.” We bring the peace without even knowing it, simply by our presence.

On the other hand, there is a delicate danger: our meditation practice clears up confusion and delusion - what we might call its ‘far enemies’ - and yet, there is a risk to all of the expressions, each has a near enemy, a shadow, something that

might look like it, - in this case, meditation or mindful attention - but isn't it at all, instead it is hiding in tranquility, a quality of indifference! Ignoring what needs to be seen, blocking your feelings, your insights, what wants to be seen but is ignored.

So this quality of meditation that is key to finding solutions to problems, to resetting your awareness, your presence, your ability to truly take in what is happening around you, if misused, can create its opposite, blindness, deafness to the suffering around you.

What is required is attention and courage: to use the medicine but not let it knock you out! True meditation makes you alive, not dead! Makes you present, not absent. How to insure that you will not wobble? Realize that this expression does not stand alone, the other four help to maintain equilibrium.

This requires a lifetime of study of the self.

2. The second expression is that study. Without study, we are ignorant; we miss the meaning of our lives. To study means to direct one's eagerness in a certain direction. The posture of a student is of curiosity, flexibility and an inquiring mind.

To investigate the teachings of freedom from suffering, we study the self - through classical Buddhist texts, through the humanities and science. And we study, question and learn from the world as it presents to us. To always have that student's mind is to be open and alive to the world, to be able to serve because you are not stuck with one idea. And that stuckness is of course the near enemy of study: an angry attachment to a particular view, or reliance on only one mode of knowing. A fundamentalist or literalist approach to life.

Study the Buddhist teachings of interdependence, of Indra's Net, of emptiness, of ethical conduct. Always keep studying the sutras, songs, and parables, the great teachers of the past. Keep them close to you but do not cling to them. Allow your study of texts to inspire you to go deeper, to realize for yourself who you are. And study contemporary expressions of Buddhist practice; listen to today's teachers who have studied, and those who are engaged in the world. Read western psychology, western social and political analysis, and philosophy! This will keep you alive and receptive to new ideas, new expressions of Buddha mind. In his Genjokoan, Zen Master Dogen said,

When the Dharma does not fill our body and mind, we think we have enough.
When the Dharma fills our body and mind, we realize something is missing.

What is missing is what is “up” right now: is it a “12 Step” program or a skillful way to involve disputing groups, or a new translation of an old sutra? Nothing is left out of a student mind!

3. The third expression is communication. If we go back to the roots of the word, we uncover some helpful aspects: communication from the Latin literally means “to make common” and “to share together.”

To communicate, thus is to make possible a sharing by all, to make common our thoughts, feelings, wisdom, our understanding. And we do this through our words, our speech, our writing, images, gestures. We share through honest expression and through the visual arts, through singing and dancing, allowing imagination and ingenuity to flow. This is communication.

In some definitions of communication, like biology, we find the element: to effect change. Implicit in this idea, is that whenever we exchange information, change occurs. Within the process of communication, there is exchange; there is union, commonality, mutability, transformation. Too often in our families or in our activist world, we seem to think that there is a fixed way that must be followed, and so we slow or even stop communication.

We don’t see that in this instant, reality is being co-created moment to moment in communication. When dealing with challenges, our realization that communication is the Buddha Way can stimulate change in our approach.

And, just as in meditation and study, there are challenges to this domain: its opposite is withholding, concealing, creating blockage and stagnation. And, there is also a near enemy of communication: it is the seductive, charming quality that stops critical inquiry, and that controls rather than allows flow of communication.

In our work in the world, it is crucial for us to be aware of that tendency, or our projects will fall into delusion and self-aggrandizement. It is to meet issues wholeheartedly, honestly, with grace and kindness.

To meet someone you want to call the enemy, someone who opposes your view, and to value the common thread that you find, the place where you can begin to work, is the virtue of communication skillfully accomplished.

4. To act is to set something in motion. It is to make a difference. When we act we serve the world, community, family and self. The far enemy of action is laziness, fear, paralysis; the near enemy is mindless activity.

This is a really tricky expression because we can hide in busy-ness and never actually enter into meaningful activity. And we can also become paralyzed by the enormity of the tasks ahead of us, and falter. How do we find our way in the world of activity?

When we act with awareness of our whole being, there is a quality of vigor, of youthful zeal that freshens us. It is a way of being aware to what is needed and just responding effectively. It helps us and other people and communities and our families move out of lazy, ineffective, disorganized ways. A clear action stimulates and inspires self and others!

To get up and go to a community meeting, a demonstration, to call people in government, in business, to involve ourselves sharpens our ability to act skillfully. And also, in our home. To wash the dishes with a smile, to clean up the living room, to act, enlivens self and others.

There is a story of Tetsugen, a 17th century Obaku monk who decided to print the entire sutra collection in Japanese. He collected small coins for over ten years and just as he was about to order them, the Uji River flooded and there was a famine. He spent the money on food and medicine for those affected. Then he began again to collect money. A few years later, an epidemic swept over the country and he again spent all that he had collected. And again, he began to raise money for the edition and finally after twenty years, the books were printed. The Japanese tell their children that Tetsugen made three sets of sutras, and that the first two invisible sets surpass even the last.

This story emphasizes the virtuous qualities of perseverance, and drive, and also flexibility, the re-ordering of priorities, which is the discriminating, all-accomplishing awareness of fully, realized expression of to act.

The Sanskrit word for laziness, *alasya*, means ‘not to make use of.’ What a tragedy to not make use of our lives! To not act!

5. To Care/To Steward: This last expression evokes the qualities of nurturance, generosity and compassion. It is to care for and grow the resources and assets of

oneself, one’s family, community, and the world. It carries a sense of oversight, of protection.

The idea of stewardship is to hold and care for people and resources. A steward is not someone who owns something, but someone who takes care of something for a while. Actually, that’s what we do with our bodies, isn’t it - take care of them for a while? And then they’re over and we let them go.

What is an attitude of care? It is attentiveness to the situation at hand: listening to the other, listening to the situation. And not just listening, but engaging and receptive attention.

There is such a difference between abstract caring about and active caring for. Just as we saw in the presidential election, many people were moved to care for, to make phone calls, to canvass neighborhoods, and not just caring about the election, but caring for it.

When someone is ill, it is not enough to care about them, we need to care for them, adjust their pillow, bring soup. When a neighborhood is in need, it is important to go out and care for it, even if the action is small, picking up litter, you change, and what you are caring for changes.

On a personal level, this expression asks you to care for your own resources that you are temporarily stewarding in your life. This includes your personal finances. Many spiritually inclined people fail to take care of material resources, almost as a badge of honor. But it is the resource that provides food and shelter and education for those in need. We begin by attending to our own resources and it grows out from there, to taking care of the whole world.

We could say that the far enemy is greed, stinginess, and ignoring one’s responsibilities and the near enemy is obsession or a smothering attention - it is also too much of anything: from attention to possessions.

How do you care for your self, your family, community, your eco-region, your world? From plastic bags to investments, there is a Buddha field of attention of nurturance that is crucial.

And, ultimately, caring for and stewardship feels good: An old Zen story concerns a wandering monk who was looking for a famous Zen master. As he neared the hut, he saw a cabbage leaf floating downstream. Oh no, another careless one.

Disappointed, the monk turned to leave. Just then, he saw the master racing down the hill, and fishing the leaf out of the water. Ah! He is true master!

Whether it is a single cabbage leaf, or a retirement fund, or an elderly relative, our resources call us to care for all those who are in our field of life. In this way, we take care of our life, and all those we encounter.

Each of these expressions are ways for us to be more truly ourselves...to embody the practice of interdependence, of the constantly changing self-nature that we are...the expressions are ways to live our life, with honesty and joy.

I mentioned at three koans at the beginning of this lecture: what do we do about suffering? How do we balance contemplation and action? How do we manifest the wholeness of the Buddha Way?

Of course, koans don't have answers. They have responses: Here is response written by an activist Korean monk of the last century:

Ferryboat and Traveler

I am the Ferryboat

You are the traveler.

You tread on me with muddy feet.

I embrace you and cross over the water.

When I embrace you, deeps or shallows or fast shooting rapids, I can cross over. . .

I am the Ferryboat

You are the traveler. *Han Yong-un (1879-1944) Korean Buddhist monk/patriot*

I'd like to offer my thanks again to all those who made it possible for me to travel here.... President Tom Coburn and John Weber and Stuart Sigman, and Jessica Bowser and Elizabeth Garfield and especially to Norman Oberstein and the Lenz Foundation.

Tomorrow we will be examining the four methods of a Bodhisattva! For those of you who will be participating in the Zen intensive course, I have an assignment for you:

Assignment: Contemplate how you reflect the Bodhisattva Vow in your life, consciously or unconsciously.

