

CAMBRIDGE ZEN CENTER

AN AFFILIATE OF THE KWAN UM SCHOOL OF ZEN

THE EASTERN GATE

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DHARMA TALK

by Zen Master Bon Yeon

Question: As a flight attendant, my whole career is destroyed. I'm not able to stay in the present. I keep going back to fearing the future, and then I get so rattled, and it's like a roller coaster...how do I get a new career at 57? Should I just sit and not be attached to that frenetic mind, and then let the universe come to me and guide me in a new direction?

ZMBY: It's a really good question. We're all struggling with different aspects of heightened fears, heightened emotions, challenges with unemployment, fear of sickness. When the Buddha left the palace, he noticed birth, sickness, old age, and death. Before he left the palace he had been shielded from those things, and when he saw those four things, he saw that suffering was inherent in our life, and so he set about on his path and the dharma was born, or his version of the dharma was born, and is helping us now. And so in a way, the situation that we're in is not really different from what we're always faced with. We're always faced with these things, where our outside situation is always changing, changing, changing, and what we want to do as human beings- and it's our nature- is to hold on and not have things change, and that's when we suffer. So where the practice



Zen Master Bon Yeon (Jane Dobisz) on Zoom

comes in, where I found it to be most useful and constructive, is coming back to the present moment: *What is this?* So when you're feeling anything, whether it's fear of change, fear of job loss, fear of getting sick, fear of losing someone who could be getting sick, we come back to what is true. The future is not here, the past is gone; all we have is this one thing which is true, which is what are you doing now and just do it and it's the single most empowering teaching that I've ever come across in my life. It levels illusion- it brings you back into what is true.

Continued on next page

SANGHADHARMA

Zen Master Bon Yeon Dharma Talk, continued

What we're here for is just to keep reminding each other, because sometimes we forget; sometimes we get stuck in whatever emotion or mind-state that we're in, and we have one another to remind us. We have the teaching to remind us: what are you doing now? And when you keep this mind over and over and over and return to it as much as possible, somehow or another, things have a way of working out. Your mind becomes clear, your choices become clear, your direction becomes clear, and then life becomes clear.



Life at CZC under lockdown: Tim Jones working in the quiet reception room

So we say, if this moment is clear, your life is clear, and then anything that comes - you'll be clear enough to perceive that and go with it, but if we get trapped in the what-if scenarios, we can get stuck and we get frozen, and then things don't work out. So I'm just reminding you, and I know the day will come when you'll remind me, and that's what we're here doing together - what are you doing now?

Question: Could you tell us ways in which you feel like this situation, this lockdown, has affected you personally? How do people with lots of practice experience navigate this rather challenging situation?

ZMBY: It's all about how we keep a perspective. Many people here in this virtual room tonight, we've all done a lot of retreats. On a retreat we're sort of depriving ourselves of a lot of activities. We deprive ourselves of going out and being with friends and talking and doing all the stuff that we do, and we're really depriving ourselves to just sit down on that cushion, and breathe in, breathe out. We do that by choice so we can see what's going on. I find that when we move - and I mean literally physically move - all of that is usually driven by moving away from the moment or away from pain, away from discomfort and towards pleasure; even the slightest movements that we make all day long are like that. We're always coming out of the moment.

In this particular situation, I'm sure all of us have moments - either we're lonely, maybe we're sitting in our house all alone and feel very isolated, or we're with our family and everyone's tearing their hair out and you wish you were alone, and everything in between, right? And there are the challenges of trying to work in this environment and being cooped up and in a small space with people, but I find that the retreat experience and the Zen experience has helped me so much. I used to wish I had more time and that life wasn't so fast, and that we didn't have to rush around, and now... It's not a gift in that so many people are suffering and getting sick and dying, and all these people are under so much stress and hardship and losing jobs

Zen Master Bon Yeon Dharma Talk, continued

land everything, but this bad situation is really a good situation because it forces us back to this retreat mind, it forces us back into our Zen practice - into becoming really, really simple. When we find ourselves like a horse kicking the stall, wanting to get out, we realize where it's coming from is up here. *[Points to head]* You make, you get. So when I find myself like a horse kicking the stall, I take that deep breath and ask, "What can I do?" or "What is this? Don't know..."

More practice is necessary at a time like this, that's for sure; more bowing, more sitting. Walking meditation has been really nice, to just go out and do quiet walks outside and appreciate the little things that in our busy, busy lives we lose sight of. So now we can return to retreating at home and recognizing how we make everything in our mind, how we're moving away from the moment all the time, and how to return back to it. For me in many ways it's a gift, a great gift. It's how you look at it.



Original Drawing by Ying Yao

IN MEMORIAM



The Logic Of The Species

A Poem by Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel) in memory of Bob Jay (pictured), a long-time and beloved CZC sangha member.

It's time
To return
These borrowed bones
To the land of
My ancestors
For my descendants

They were there
Before the first
Grain of sand
Before the first
Grain of sand

And will last
Til the last mote
Of dust after
The last mote

Of dust
This I keep
In mind keeps
You humble

Nothing Missing, Nothing Extra by Mark O'Leary

Like everyone, I am practicing social distancing, and that includes not visiting our prison groups. The last prison group we had was in Framingham on March 9. After that, it was clear to me that the situation was getting bad, and I wasn't comfortable putting myself, the other volunteers, or the inmates at unnecessary risk. So I emailed the administration and told them that we were suspending our programs until the emergency has passed. The next day, the state cancelled all volunteer programs in the Department of Corrections.

From the very beginning of the prison work, which I have now been doing for about 10 years, my thought was that I would go into these terrible places and I would find these people who were suffering, and I would help them. I would teach them, and they would learn from me. Today I think of that, and it reminds me of the old joke: What's the first thing that a good horse trainer needs to know? Answer: More than the horse. My problem was, I thought I knew something. There's a reason that our teaching uses the phrase, "Don't know."

We think we know. We think we have learned something about the universe and the way it works. And if we think we KNOW, then as teachers it sets up an expectation, a desire, a kind of pressure for the teacher to impart some sort of wisdom, and an equal expectation for the student to absorb it. When this expectation is met, then we have "good" teachers and "good" students; and when it is not met, we have "bad" teachers and "bad" students. So that mindset—for me at least—sets up this chain of dualism that just traps me in my thinking, my expectations and desires, and in thoughts of "good" and "bad." "Don't know" tells us to put that all



Mark O'Leary zooming his intro dharma talk

down. An expectation is a desire for something that is not here-and-now. And that's where suffering comes from, the desire for something to be different than it is. We think this moment is not good enough. We fail to recognize the truth that this moment right here has everything it needs, nothing missing, nothing extra. It took a long time for that understanding to begin to sink in after I became a prison volunteer, and I forget it all the time and need to be reminded of it over and over.

Fortunately, I have some great teachers. Some of them are here tonight. but many of them could not because they are guests of the state and do not have Zoom, or even internet access. Some of them will *never* have this kind of access. Some of my best teachers are never going to take another free breath in this life.

Our situation during the current emergency is not analogous to being in prison, but when

SANGHADHARMA

Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say that a bad situation was a good situation, this is what he meant. There's no such thing as a bad circumstance. Or a good one.

People come to prison from dangerous situations of abuse, of gang life, of drug addiction. And some of them will say, "Coming to prison saved my life," and when I hear those conversations happen, I often ask, "So, is prison a good thing?" "No," they say. "It's a bad thing." "But it saved your life. Was that a bad thing?" "No—it's a good thing."

So very quickly it becomes clear that words like good and bad are meaningless. Or at least slippery concepts. And they are for us as well. Bad situation - good situation. I don't know what those are any more.

Right now we all probably feel like we're in a bad situation. Even though we know this teaching, and we think we have taken it to heart, we might feel like there are better ways to have our character built. Couldn't I awaken some other way that doesn't involve "social distancing" and a collapsing economy?

But this moment, right here on this Zoom call, with just these people in just this situation - this moment has everything it needs, *nothing missing, nothing extra.*

There's a framed print on the wall at the Cambridge Zen Center, or there used to be, that said something like, "*Breathe, it'll be OK.*" Which always sounded to me like good advice. But one time I overheard someone looking at it say, "That's wrong!" Someone else asked, "What do you mean?" To which the first person replied, "It already is Okay."

This is where the people in prison have something to teach us. Now, not everyone in prison is skillful in how they deal with their life situation, but some of them are. Some of them deal with it, and they have managed to acquire great wisdom. Some of them have gotten past the point of demanding that their experience be different than it is. How did they do it?



Most of them have paid a very high price for their wisdom. Imagine a young person who gets a long sentence - even a life sentence - for some terrible crime. Their natural tendency from the start is to push back, to feel anger, rage - and to lash out. Fight the administration, fight the officers, fight other inmates. This person gets in trouble, gets put in solitary - "The Hole"- and spends a lot of time beating their head against a wall. Sometimes literally. Sometimes for years. But for some of them, maybe gradually, maybe suddenly, some wisdom appears. And this person develops an insight that the pain they experience, everyone around them is also experiencing - that everyone has pain, but that their suffering is self-induced. And as we know, so is ours.

[So] what can we do? Whenever we find ourselves suffering, take a couple of mindful

Grocery Store Dharma by Jody Blackwell



Jody Blackwell (left) with Martin Klasek (right), becoming a Senior Dharma Teacher.

It was strange to feel competitive in the grocery store before the looming statewide COVID lockdown. I felt myself tense up as the woman crouched near me at the frozen foods aisle grabbed the last bag of frozen spinach on the bottom shelf. Trying to be a good sport I said, “Wow, there's not much left, is there?” She smiled nervously and shook her head, then quietly said “good luck” as she walked away.

I found two overlooked bags of mixed veggies crammed at the back of the freezer, and feeling relieved I grabbed them both and put them in my cart. But then it hit my mind: if I took both bags of veggies, there would be none left. In a sudden moment of self-awareness, a story came back to me about a Zen master who would walk to the river every day to fill up his bucket with cooking water. For every ladleful he scooped out of the river, he poured a little back. Scoop out, pour back, scoop out, pour back. This simple act was his practice: respecting the interconnectedness of all beings who relied on the river water to survive, and practicing

what in our tradition we call “enough mind.” How much do you really need right now? Is what you have right now enough? And so overriding my animal-brain urge to stockpile, I took out one bag of veggies and put it back on the shelf. For the rest of my shopping trip I resolved to practice “enough mind,” however unnerving it felt. What does it mean to take only enough? It means I am practicing together-action with all beings in the grocery store. It also means that maybe I am rendering myself a little more vulnerable, so that others have a chance to care for themselves. I felt ashamed at how hard it was to take only enough soap, only enough bread, only enough toilet paper. I felt panic rise in me when I passed shoppers reaching for the same things I wanted. I also found that it helped to smile at everyone I passed, to cut through the tension and acknowledge our shared nervousness. I discovered that people were actually eager to smile back. We were not competing after all, we were all in this together and sharing one mind. No separation.

I'm just feeling incredibly grateful for our practice during this global pandemic; how in any setting, under any condition no matter how stressful or mundane, our life is the perfect vehicle for waking up, understanding our true selves, and saving all beings. May we all use this difficult time to honestly embrace our own experiences, whether noble or fearful, and use that insight to connect with others who are experiencing the same mind. And may we all feel gratitude for the food, water, shelter, warmth and friendships that are sustaining us right now. Is it enough?

Five Ways I'm Managing My Crazy Brain In These Time by Colin Beavan

Excerpted with permission by author from colinbeavan.com

1. Practicing Presence: When things started to go haywire and shelter in place orders were starting, I was actually first in Las Vegas and then Arizona. I was helping a family member in crisis. Stories started to arise in my mind about how it was all too much. I had to be in airports and airplanes!! I had to deal with the pressing family problems! Aaaahhh!

But if you think of your mind like a movie screen, you can see all sorts of things popping up. Movies about how your life becomes a catastrophe. Movies about every possible problem. Movies about how to solve those problems. But in a way, you could think about all of those things as previews for movies that may or may not actually become the feature.

Meanwhile, the main movie, the actual feature film, is everything that is happening in the present. Each frame unwinds on its own and you can't see what is happening in the future frames. But in the present frame, a red light appears, so you stop. A desert mountain grows into view in front of the wild shield so you admire it. A family member cries so you hug them. This is practicing presence - being present to the feature presentation which is

right now. So, when the previews of all the possible futures appear in my mind, I gently and lovingly move my attention back to where I am. And when my attention is here, I can see what to do for the next few moments. That is my practice of presence.



2. Kindly Honoring My Fears:

Finally, after the frenzied travel and family crisis, I got back to Brooklyn where I live. It was a great comfort to be home. But I had three main fears: 1. What if there was a lock down, the family member in crisis needs me, and I can't get to them? 2. What if I was stuck in my apartment by myself for months. Would I go stir-crazy? 3. What if the grocery stores ran out of food? I don't mean to say I was in a panic. I certainly was not. But I noticed those fears coming up on my mind's movie screen. One thing that kept coming up was that I wanted to be able to drive to

my family member in Arizona if I had to. But wouldn't hotels be closed? I didn't actually think it would come to that. But I kept wanting to put my camping gear in my car, just in case. Part of me thought it was crazy. But I realized that if I just did it, I would feel relief. Also, it would harm no one if I did that. So I did. I put my camping equipment in my car. I call that kindly honoring my fear.

Meanwhile, I was also a little worried about running out of food. In normal times, I just go to the grocery store every day. But I was reading that other people were hoarding food. What if there was none left for me? On the other hand, I did not want to be unkind. I did not want - myself - to hoard food. I decided to go to the grocery store and buy three pounds of lentils and three pounds of rice. That would last me a week and maybe two. I did that and it relieved my worry. But also, it felt like it relieved my worry kindly. I took care of myself but I didn't hoard so much food that other people and families would be deprived. That's what I mean by kindly honoring my fears.

Life at CZC in the Times Of Corona by Bo-Mi Choi

Our prajna ship, also known as the Cambridge Zen Center, feels like the vessel on the Parisian code of arms, the motto of which is “Fluctuat nec mergitur!” and which roughly translates to "She is tossed by the waves but doesn't sink." Like everybody else’s lives around the globe, our day-to-day has profoundly changed since March 11 when we closed our doors to the public. Since that day we don’t practice anymore together in the dharma room in an effort to mitigate the effects of this stealthy virus and to keep everybody safe. But while we, as a community, keep stringent social



Ying Yao at the dining room table

distancing protocols to protect the most vulnerable among us, we also have availed ourselves of the technological wonders of the internet to remain connected with each other by staying together apart.

At the beginning of the pandemic, both of our Co-Guiding Teachers, Zen Masters Bon Yeon (Jane Dobisz) and Bon Shim (Aleksandra "Ola" Porter), came to our dharmic rescue via Zoom: Jane by giving bi-monthly dharma talks, and Ola by zooming in every other Sunday all the way

from Warsaw, Poland, to hit our minds with kong-ans. Thanks to Ian Maher’s initiative and dedication, there have been daily week-day sittings in the mornings and evenings from the very start of the lockdown. By now, our online practice schedule has expanded to additional



Circle Talk on Zoom with Zen Master Soeng Hyang

sittings on the weekend, weekly dharma talks and chanting. Our first ever online retreat was led by Zen Master Bon Shim in June, and we were also fortunate to have Zen Master Soeng Hyang, the Guiding Teacher of the Kwan Um School of Zen, lead our second online retreat in July.

Our meditation groups – the Social Justice and Diversity Initiative (SJDI) and Millennial Zen Group (MZG) – also seamlessly made the transition to online meetings. A grateful shout-out to Tyler, Lily, Woody, Maité, and Kyle for valiantly stepping up to hosting MZG group via Zoom every Sunday. Also, a deep bow to Jen Magrone and Martin Klasek, who continue to facilitate Unpacking Whiteness, as well as Kwang Haeng Sunim of PZC and KFoo of CZC for helping with our BIPOC meditation group. In the wake of the *Black Lives Matter* protests, we’ve increased our SJDI meetings, which convene now bi-monthly on the first and third Wednesday of each month. Of course, there is no real substitute

for the awesome energy generated by sentient bodies assembled in a room together; however, the ease of connecting virtually has allowed us to meet more frequently, and in unexpected ways, has generated a new form of intimacy of seeing everybody close up on a computer or phone screen. It has also been wonderful to see sangha members, who live far away from Cambridge, take advantage of the internet to re-connect with the community.

As for life at the Zen center, we still have designated cooks to prepare and serve dinner during the week to keep foot traffic low in the kitchen. It also allows residents to eat together, albeit spread apart, either outside on the porch weather permitting or in the dining area. Personally, cooking once a week for my fellow residents is one of the remaining gifts of normalcy, especially now that most of us spend a big chunk of our times working and practicing in the confines of our own abodes.

While we refrain from any collective gatherings, we had two occasions over the summer where we came together to have a socially-distanced and masked dinner on the CZC porch: one to celebrate long-time residents Tracy and Barbara's birthdays; and the other to say farewell to our resident Bodhisattva Ariel Hu, a visiting scholar from China who lived with us for nearly a year. Also, a very first, Ariel took Five Precepts the day before her departure with Zen Masters Bon Shim and Bon Yeon officiating the ceremony via Zoom. In a time when freely meeting and interacting with other human beings have become rare luxuries, the sense of community and belonging that CZC provides feels even more precious. Every Tuesday morning at 6:10 AM, just like in pre-pandemic times, we convene communally at the House

Meeting, except now we do it over Zoom, checking in with each other to make sure everybody is okay.

In light of the advice of medical experts and scientists – and our vow to save all sentient beings – we anticipate remaining closed at least until the end of the year, continuing our practice online. These past months have felt like an enforced retreat, and just like a regular retreat, it has not always been easy or pleasant. But in unforeseen ways this strange new world of virus-related measures is offering a unique chance to take a pause to reflect, without which there cannot



Ariel Hu receiving Five Precepts via Zoom

be any meaningful transformation. As we are facing seemingly insurmountable social, political and ecological challenges, I keep reminding myself that wishing things to be otherwise is futile; instead, our practice asks us that we assume responsibility; that we remain skillfully *responsive* to any given situation, person...or virus. Yes, we are being mightily tossed in the waves, but I am pretty confident that we'll float, having excellent, well-trusted floatation devices at our hands: our sangha, our practice, and our direction.

In that spirit, may you stay safe, healthy and well until we see each other again – at 199 Auburn Street!

My Crazy Brain, continued

3. Connecting: The other thing that worried me was being trapped alone. I am the type of person who can have brunch with friends on a Sunday morning and start feeling lonely by Sunday afternoon. Yes, I am socially greedy!!

So I decided to join my co-parent Michelle and her girlfriend Maryanne in their house in Long Island. It's been great. Each of us has work to do but we have meals together and go for walks and talk. Meanwhile, we remain physically but not socially isolated from others.

I've stayed in close phone and video-conference contact with family and friends. And through Instagram and Facebook (even though I dislike the idea of King Zuckerberg), I've been identifying and reaching out to new friends - as though I was in a coffee shop chatting with strangers.

Finally, I am part of the recovery movement and also my Zen community, so I have been connecting with those groups by video conference. It is wonderful. It is not as good as meeting in person but still good. That's my tool of connecting.

4. Embracing Mystery: What will happen to me? What will happen to you? What will happen to our world? What will happen to loved ones?

Those questions all flash across my mind's movie screen followed by previews of potential outcomes. I get tense about the bad previews and happy about the good ones. A bad one: it all turns out like Mad Max. A good one: We all realize what is really important and when the virus subsides we change direction and save our planet.

The thing is, when I try to cling to the good story, when I constantly look for the silver lining, I notice

that I still have a background anxiety. Because, how can I know that the good story will come true? Silver linings, I notice, don't help me so much. They give me temporary relief but then I start worrying about whether they will come true. What actually helps me is not bad stories or good stories but not attaching to any stories.

*Life is like a floating cloud which appears
Death is like a floating cloud which disappears...
But there is one thing which always remains clear.
It is pure and clear, not depending on life and death.*

Then what is the one pure and clear thing?

Something is. There is is-ness. If this was nothingness then how could I say nothingness? At the same time, there are no words to describe what all this is. No words to describe the one pure and clear thing. If we ask what it is, we simply don't know. Yet it is unfolding as I click these computer keys. As I hear the leaf blower outside. Not knowing is the truth (at least as I experience it). Not knowing what will happen is truth (again, at least for me).

When I embrace that truth of not knowing and mystery, I find that I relax and can be in awe of even the painful parts. That is my tool of embracing mystery.

5. Being of service: The other day, I was working on a social media post about dealing with anxiety. I didn't do it looking for clicks or to get more follows. I did it because there seems to be a small community of people who are supported by things I say and write.

I felt so grateful. I thought, I don't want to die right now but if I do die soon, I'd like to die like this

SANGHADHARMA

Mark O'Leary Dharma Talk, continued

breaths, and then - What can I do? Not as a rhetorical question, as a way of throwing up our hands and saying, "I guess there's no hope." But honestly ask ourselves, "What change can I make right now that will allow me to move forward?" And then do that. And you know what the next question is, right? What *else* can I do? Now, here's the amazing thing: This teaching works for anybody in any situation. It works for prison inmates who want to stop beating their heads against the wall, and for Zen students who want to stop doing the same thing. This responsibility - this ability to respond in the present moment - is a powerful tool for ending our suffering. And it comes right out of the same place as Don't Know. Don't Know is right-here-right-now, "What is this?", "How can I help you?", "What can I do?" Fleet Maull calls it Radical Responsibility. "Radical" in the sense of "thorough, complete." Don't concern yourself with what you can't do, because that's none of your business. We just reflect the situation as it appears in front of us, not as we would like it to be.

This moment, right here.

Nothing missing - nothing extra.

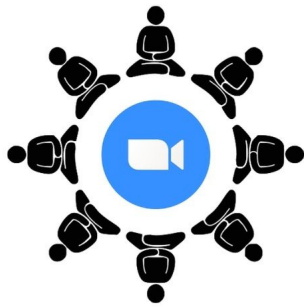
My Crazy Brain, continued

trying to be a support. How much nicer would it be not to end life with fear and anxiety but with the feeling of being of service?

Sometimes I get to lie around lazily talking with my good friend Bobby Rhodes - Zen Master Soeng Hyang. We shoot the shit about this and that and feel warm towards each other and the world. One time she said to me, "Let me give you the best advice you are ever going to get: On your dying breath, you must sincerely ask 'How may I help?'"

There is a theory in Buddhism that such an attitude will get you a good body and situation in the next life. Honestly, I don't know about next lives. I do know that I am constantly dying to this moment and being reborn in the next. If, as this moment dies, I ask, "How can I help?" I find that I am reborn into a better next moment. That is my tool of being of service.





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