

Paul Gerstein, Zen Teacher, part 2

This article is the concluding piece of an interview that I conducted with the YMCA of Greater Westfield's Zen teacher, Paul Gerstein, MD.

Can you tell me, what is Zen? How is it different from other forms of meditation practice?

All forms of meditation practice have one thing in common which is the process of attending—focusing the mind on the object of the meditation. The uniqueness of Zen is the manner in which that attending is done: with intensity and alertness. Rather than visualizing higher states of mind, seeking states of bliss or simply withdrawing from one's surroundings into a soporific state, *zazen* (seated Zen meditation) involves being very connected with and plunged into the *actual* present moment of your experience.

One of the basic tenets of Zen practice is that I am already whole and complete—that from the very beginning, fundamentally, my deepest inmost self is entirely free of even an iota of lacking. In Zen, this self is called one's "true self". It is only our thinking processes that lead us to feel separated from others, apart from the world around us, seemingly inadequate in fundamental ways and, therefore, wanting to achieve a state or quality very different from the one we observe ourselves to be.

One result of this faulty thinking process is that we feel stuck on a kind of hamster wheel, chasing after things that we believe will bring some permanent happiness, some new-and-improved self, but never finally do. Instead, we can end up feeling trapped between the world that confronts us and the one we hope will come as a result of all our efforts. Zen teaches that this whole approach is at the very root of suffering, of "the human condition". We emerge from this "thinking trap" not by opposing it but, rather, by intently observing its momentary reality. The paradox of Zen meditation is that we wholeheartedly embrace that which we had been perpetually fighting against.

Another way that Zen is unique among meditation practices is its emphasis on undermining "false thinking", pulling the rug out from under our most cherished, unquestioned beliefs—the one's that aim to make us feel safe, affiliated and protected but unconsciously trap us in a rigid, unchanging world view. Certain *zazen* techniques work with a process called "doubt" through which we get out from underneath the thought structures by which we are, in fact, imprisoned.

How do you employ Zen in your everyday life?

Zen properly speaking *is* your actual life; it's not something apart from your life. When you practice it deeply and devotedly, Zen becomes the very clarity of your own actual experience. So whatever you are called upon to do, you do it fully and unreservedly, with attentiveness and wholeheartedness—nothing held back!

So, to an accomplished Zen practitioner does the world look any different from the one confronting someone who doesn't practice Zen?

Really there isn't any *fundamental* difference aside from our ever-changing momentary perspective at any given point of the fabric of life. One might even say it's exactly the same. The world we all live in is truly *one* world—a continuous and edgeless fabric. Science and physics tell us this is true. It's unnecessary to “believe” this. Just observe.

But if there is any difference, it's that without Zen training it's all too easy to lapse into habitual thought patterns—becoming engrossed in an internal battle with a make-believe reality in a kind of waking dream state. All of us—as intelligent, thinking human beings—are prone to this kind of dreaming. By unsticking ourselves from the *attachment* to dream-thinking, we gradually, and ultimately suddenly, are brought to a clear apperception of the world as it actually is. In Zen, this is called waking up—“awakening”. When we're awake, we feel connected to our lives—our whole being gets wrapped up in our ever-changing activities. The old world, we can then see, is simply the habit of standing apart from ourselves while watching, judging and comparing.

What would be your advice to someone who is interested in exploring meditation?

I would encourage, especially early on, to practice with others in a group on a regular basis. Also, it's key to set aside time everyday to do some practice on your own. It doesn't have to be a long sitting period—even 10 minutes if you don't have more time—just to keep a continual connection with this new way of operating. Finding a teacher you can relate to is, of course, very helpful.

Any final thoughts?

This practice is, really, for practically everyone, regardless of the particular background and beliefs they may have. It's really about tuning our precious human mind into the “channel” of the present moment, freeing that mind from all the static of obstructive thinking and feeling. Zen isn't something special and incomprehensible. It's a practice that can help one live life more effectively and compassionately.

The YMCA meditation program meets twice a month on Thursday evenings from 7:00-8:30PM and is offered to the community free of charge. For more information, please contact the writer at rscalise@westfieldymca.org or 413-568-8631 ext 302.

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