

## NINE FIELDS OF ZEN PRACTICE ~ by Domyo Burk, 2019

### SEEING YOUR LIFE AND PRACTICE AS PATH

Buddhist practice is a path of training and study aimed at becoming an awakened, liberated, wise, compassionate, and skillful person. The ideals of Buddha and bodhisattva are not something most of us have any hope of achieving in this lifetime, but the idea is to think beyond our limited ideas of self in terms of both space and time. We ennoble our lives, and benefit others, by committing wholeheartedly to walking the path – approaching embodiment of the Buddha Way as closely as we possibly can. See *[Buddhist Practice as a Lifelong Path of Growth and Transformation](#)* and *[The Ten Oxherding Pictures: Stages of Practice When You're Going Nowhere](#)*. (Italics refer to episodes on Domyo's Zen Studies Podcast.)

### THE NINE FIELDS

As Zen practitioners, it's helpful to keep in mind Nine Fields of practice, so we always remember practice can permeate every aspect of our lives.

#### ~ Wisdom ~

**Zazen** – Zazen is our central practice, and works on us at many different levels. It's the simplest possible activity we can engage in and still remain alert; it invites us to surrender completely to the physical act of just sitting and let go of all of our mental discrimination and willful effort. Zazen practice and vow includes our regular daily/weekly practice, attendance at retreat and/or sesshin, and constantly deepening our experience of zazen. See *[The Two Sides of Practice: Samadhi Power and Karma Relationship](#)*, *[Sesshin: 24-7 Silent Meditation Retreats](#)* and *[all podcast episodes on zazen and meditation](#)*.

**Dharma Study** – We don't need to master or memorize every last Buddhist teaching, which is impossible in any case. However, the teachings frame our practice and experience, and inspire us to engage in the habit of profound thought. To whatever extent our life allows, it's important to gradually expose ourselves to Buddhist and Zen teachings, and wrestle with them. See *[Relating to Buddhist Teachings Part 1](#)* and *[Part 2](#)*

**Cultivating Insight** – The deep and profound Buddhist teachings do us the most good when we gain a personal, direct, experience of them. This means wrestling with the teachings and passionate investigation in our meditation, our daily life, our interactions with others, and our engagement with Sangha. Central to cultivating personal insight is learning to see each obstacle or challenge in our lives in Dharmic terms, and as an opportunity for growth in wisdom, compassion, skillful action, liberation. See *[Mindfulness of Dhamma](#)*, and *[Personal Koans](#)*, by Kyogen Carlson

#### ~ Compassion ~

**Precepts** – The Buddhist precepts are valuable at several different levels. First, they guide our physical and literal ethical conduct, ensuring we minimize the harm we do to self and others, and consequently the mess we make of our lives. Second, once we have committed to them, they serve as mirrors, reflecting to us when we are caught in self-attachment. Third, we learn to recognize when we're breaking precepts at more and more subtle levels, revealing our persistent delusion of self as a separate and inherently-existing entity. See *[How Buddhists Should Behave: Evolution of the Buddhist](#)*

*Precepts and Taking Refuge and Precepts: The Significance of Becoming a Buddhist. Also, I highly recommend Diane Rizzetto's book Waking Up to What You Do as a guide to precept practice.*

**Opening the Heart** – Sometimes we get stuck in thinking practice is all about us, or that opening our hearts – to other people, all living beings, and the universe itself – is somehow extra. However, working explicitly to open the heart not only benefits living beings, it puts us in accord with the Dharma and supports all other aspects of our practice. We do this by taking the Bodhisattva Vow, being guided by the Metta Sutta, and practicing the Brahmaviharas and Paramitas. We also work on real and personal relationships with other beings – overcoming our fears, being willing to be seen and known, and learning to be authentic as well as to harmonize with others. – See The Four Brahmaviharas, and Sangha: The Joys, Challenges, and Value of Practicing in a Buddhist Community

**Connecting with the Ineffable** – Zen is not based on a belief in God in a theistic sense. However, at its core is a strong emphasis on a reality much more profound, inspiring, significant, and hopeful than the bleak, mundane, and discouraging one people sometimes experience in their ordinary daily lives. You can call this “greater reality” anything you like – God, the divine, That Which is Greater, Other Power, the Ineffable, the Great Mystery, the Great Matter of Life and Death – but you have tasted it at peak moments of your life. Zen encourages you to explore and deepen your relationship to the Great Matter. Each individual will have a different approach to doing this. See It-with-a-Capital-I: The Zen Version of God

#### ~ Skillful Action ~

**Nyoho (acting in accord with the Dharma in everyday activities)** – Nyoho means “in accord with” (nyo) “the Dharma” (ho). In Zen, Nyoho practice refers specifically to the ways we act in accord with Dharma in every aspect of our lives – there is no activity too mundane to do with care, and nothing we encounter is unworthy of our attention and respect. Zen asks us to be “ordained into our lives” – completely and utterly embracing who and what and where we are, giving up all regret, resentment, and comparison, and seeing our path of practice as sacred work. We cultivate gratitude, respect, and appreciation, and vow to live by choice instead of on autopilot. See Nyoho: Making Even Our Smallest, Mundane Actions Accord with the Dharma, Work as Spiritual Practice and Beyond Mindfulness: The Radical Practice of Undivided Presence.

**Karma Work** – The self as we usually conceive it may be an illusion, but the self as a bundle of tendencies, habits, conditioning, and concerns is very real, and has tangible impacts in the world. As Buddhists we vow to take responsibility for our unique karma – the result of countless causes and conditions from the past – and learn to act more compassionately and skillfully for the sake of self and other. Taking care of our lives is part of the Bodhisattva Vow, but this work is also complementary to our work in the other fields; as Dogen said, studying the self leads to forgetting, or transcending, the self – and therefore to real spiritual freedom. See Taking Care of Our Lives: More About the Karma Relationship Side of Practice and Five Steps for Positive Change without Waging War on the Self.

**Bodhisattva Activity** – The Bodhisattva Vows are not metaphorical. Seeing ourselves as interdependent with all things and beings is a result of personal insight, but acting as if we're interdependent with all things and beings *leads* to insight. If we're ultimately seeking to transcend the self, there's no substitute for getting off our meditation cushion and really trying to put our deepest aspirations into action. What is ours to do in the world? How can we serve? What are our skills, or who/what are we uniquely positioned to care for? How are we already serving, and can we incorporate that service into our Bodhisattva Vow?