

## NINE FIELDS OF ZEN PRACTICE ~ by Domyo Burk, 2021

### SEEING YOUR LIFE AND PRACTICE AS PATH

Buddhist practice is a path of training and study aimed at becoming a more awakened, liberated, wise, compassionate, and skillful person. We ennoble our lives, and benefit others, by committing wholeheartedly to walking the path – approaching embodiment of the Buddha Way as closely as we 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. For an overview, see my three-episode series *[The Nine Fields of Zen Practice](#)*.

#### ~ Wisdom ~

**Zazen - Making Space for the Absolute.** 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 completely surrender to the physical act of just sitting, letting go of 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 *[A Zazen Pamphlet: Essential \(and Brief\) Instructions for the Practice of Zazen](#)*, *[The Two Sides of Practice: Samadhi Power and Karma Relationship](#)*, and *[Zazen as the Dharma Gate of Joyful Ease](#)*.

**Dharma Study - Exposing Ourselves to the Teachings.** 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 - Knowing for Ourselves.** Buddhist teachings are most transformative 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, and liberation. See *[Mindfulness of Dhamma](#)*, *[Natural Koans: Engaging Our Limitations as Dharma Gates](#)*, and *[The Experience of Enlightenment and Why It's for All of Us](#)*.

#### ~ Compassion ~

**Precepts - Letting Go of Self-Attachment.** The Buddhist precepts are valuable at several different levels. First, they guide our ethical conduct, ensuring we minimize both the harm we do to self and others, and the mess we make of our lives. Second, 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 *[Taking Refuge and Precepts: The Significance of Becoming a Buddhist](#)* and *[The Buddhist Moral Precepts as a Practice for Studying the Buddha Way](#)*.

**Opening the Heart - Exploring Non-Separation from All Being.** We may think practice is all about us, and 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 - Remembering Our Deepest Aspirations.** 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. 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](#) and [Suchness: Awakening to the Preciousness of Things-As-It-Is](#).

#### ~ Skillful Action ~

**Mindfulness – Paying Attention No Matter What.** Paying attention to what is happening – inside us, and around us - is the essence of Buddhist practice. If we don’t pay attention, we can’t see how we are creating suffering, or how to live with greater wisdom and compassion. In addition, Zen emphasizes that 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 - Taking Care of Our Lives.** 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 - Acting to Free All Beings.** 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? See [Three Ingredients for a Generous Life in a Crazy World](#) and [Each One of Us Has Unique Bodhisattva Gifts to Offer](#).