

## **Practicing Zen in a Hard Time**

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Given what is going on in our world – and in our country – let us not forget that we each have the power to do something about it, something fundamental. Fundamentally, we can each work at the practice of waking up, embodying bodhisattva Vows, and doing our level best to realize selfless wisdom and compassion.

There is no need to get frantic or to throw off personal responsibilities or personal joys, but by committing deeply to the practice of lessening self-centeredness we actually affect and benefit not just ourselves, but many others – whether we see this or personally realize this or not. For as much as the world affects us, as much as evil and self-centeredness spread into and disorient us, so, too, every bit of awakening, as well as every smidgen of simply lessening the grip of egotistic self-centeredness equally moves out from us into the world. We, and the so-called, “world” are “not-two.” Roshi Kapleau used to say to light a match in a pitch-black room totally changes the quality of that darkness. Likewise, every little bit of realization and steadiness we may realize has its effect in brightening the darkness of the world, and most importantly, creating space for the possibility of less self-centered, deluded, and self-aggrandizing thinking and acting. Zen practice and Zen realization will not solve our problems for us, but they will give us the tools and increase the odds of our successfully facing the challenges of our times.

Many (perhaps all) indigenous peoples feel that their rituals and ceremonies sustain the world, that without the kiva, the vision quest, the seasonal communal rituals the world would destroy itself. I feel the same and very deeply so about our own ongoing zazen, dokusan, teisho, zazenkai, sesshin, ceremonies, and services. They, too, sustain the world, helping establish more hopeful possibilities for all.

So, let us commit to the precepts, take vows, sit regularly and sincerely, focusing fully on each breath of practice, each koan point. Zen practice will not give us the kind of knowledge we might expect from a good course in philosophy. Rather it has the very real potential to help us grow beyond the habitual and childish self-centeredness that underlies all the terribly, now seemingly common disasters of our world, and it can help us realize in this very life, in our own ordinary moments, the reality of the selfless, undying Self. By doing our best we participate in

healing our own fragmented selves and our world. As grandiose as this might sound, it is ordinary and true. And whatever we may realize is just a beginning.

Committing to a life of practice does not mean doing practice and not doing other things to help alleviate suffering, things like donating, signing petitions, protesting, speaking out and so on. But sitting in zazen, letting self-centeredness go, practicing realization sincerely is fundamental and deeply, deeply important. Whether this is immediately visible to us or not, let us not lose sight of its reality.