

16 April 2011
Olympia Zen Center
Eido Frances Carney

Procrastination

The topic that I picked for tonight I was very aware of when I went down in the Bay Area, it is something that I noticed in myself that I'd been working with, and this is also something that everybody, everybody deals with, without fail. Everybody in the world has a little bit of this in them. So I want to talk about this in the most kindly way, it is not directed toward any particular person at all. I see it as something important for us to work with and I see it as becoming a little bit more pervasive in our society, actually globally. So I want to talk about the psychological aspects of procrastination, about its effects globally, its effects on Sangha and then turning that and moving it into spiritual practice. Psychological issues are hindrances to our practice. When we turn them into the wish to move forward with them, then we spiritualize them, they become spiritual practice. But in order to do this, we have to take action with them.

So for me I know there are some aspects of my life I procrastinate with, and some I don't, and I think that's true of most of us. We have areas of our lives where we see things we don't want to deal with. Emptying the dishwasher, and a whole bunch of household things that I just do not want to do, but when I went down to the Bay Area I knew I had three months, and I knew that I had to do the things that I wanted to do, and I couldn't let them pile up, and then suddenly in the last couple of weeks do them. And I was also faced with, not always knowing where I was going, not understanding the geography of where I was, not knowing any of the people, where to shop...all of these things I was faced with. So, I had to address that very soon, otherwise I would maybe not go out, not eat, just not leave the house. I can be very much like a hermit at times. So if I were going to be at peace with myself, I was really going to have to address that.

Coming back to Olympia, I can see, how many things I have done in my own life around this matter of procrastination. Some I begun to investigate it a little bit more deeply, looking at the psychological aspects of it. It's just very helpful to do so. I feel a little bit more healthy about myself - and not to mention the fact that I have an awful lot to do in these next few weeks – procrastination is one of the really very difficult things to overcome. It requires real behavioral attention, it has psychological foundations. It's something that we learned in growing up, it became habitual, and for one reason or another in our growing up, we captured the ability to procrastinate. We have a very kind society, and our society tolerates it to a great degree, and our friends tolerate it in us. They don't tell us! For most things in our

friendships we're not particularly accountable for the things that we might have in a committed or family relationship.

So, I am just going to talk about psychological aspects right now. Very often we suffer from it because we have a self-critical nature. We might be perfectionists, and we don't want to do something because either we will fail, or we will succeed, but often some people who are very self-critical (me, I'm critical of my own self) we just don't want to do something. We might worry about what people think of us, and we'd rather have people think we lack effort than actually that we can succeed. There are ramifications, if we are able to do something. If we are able to do something, and we do it well, we might turn into a workaholics. Because we don't want to turn into alcoholics...I mean workaholic - actually it is sometimes related to people who might fall into drinking too much, because, they might not have enough self-regulation. It requires some self-regulation to not engage in procrastination. We might have the fear of failure and not doing the thing avoids the very fear about failing in something by not doing it.

We might avoid doing something because of fear of success. Once again, if we stop procrastinating, we'll do better and then we'll increase other people's expectations of us. Therefore the pressure gets higher, because we have to perform more.

For some of us, we may have adopted this for fear of losing autonomy. We became rebellious in teen-age years. Loss of independence, "you can't tell me what to do!" I also recall students in the classroom who would be determined to fail, and what they would do - there was an authority issue with them - but essentially what they were doing was saying, "I'm going to show you what a stupid teacher you are, I am going to fail!" And so they would fail, to show me what a stupid teacher I was in a class of totally capable wonderful students. But this was an authority thing for them in which they were going to do it as they wanted to: "You can't make me study!" In doing so at least we think that we are in control, and this happens when we are procrastinating around an authority issue.

We might have a fear of attachment. We might procrastinate in order to create a barrier between ourselves and another person. We just don't want to attach, so we stand back, we just avoid doing something. But we can also keep our lives in some kind of state of chaos, and keep others at bay by maintaining some chaos. It's not actually doing anything, it's just creating a chaotic looking life that avoids having to do a whole bunch of things.

So procrastination is very much akin to paralysis, and aversion is one of the Buddhist hindrances. We spoke about it, a hindrance to spirituality is aversion. It's a kind of paralytic state with the development of anxiety around it and we either

are finally forced to do something, or we give up entirely, allowing anxiety then to take over will bring about one of those results. Some of this may be a response to a harsh parenting style that we grew up in. It's very often learned in the family, and once again it's a form of rebellion. And our friends usually tolerate our excuses, so we get along quite nicely holding on to it and we seem to function OK.

But for spiritual practice and for Zen students, it is a form of self-deception. We deceive ourselves in all kinds of ways: "Well I'll probably feel more like doing this tomorrow" or "Aiih! There's no sense in doing this today!" or "I can't actually sit down and write a poem until I clean my house" or "I can't sit Zazen without the right cushion" something like that. We find all kind of excuses about why we can't do the thing. It is a form of self-deception. Or maybe we tell ourselves that whatever it is, it isn't really important anyway, so we don't need to be bothered with it. One of our great, really difficult ones that we are working with today is email! Email may be a distraction to avoid other things: "I'll just check my email." It has become a deep habitual problematic, difficult thing for many, many of us, and we really need somehow to break the cycle because it is so deadening in some kind of way. We wind up losing the integrity in our lives by not regulating ourselves around email. OK we do need to do email, but we don't have to check it all day. We can do it for an hour in the morning, we can do it an hour in the evening, or something like that. This compulsion to be at email, is very unhealthy for us.

Sometimes, for people who are really good at things, procrastination works great, because we don't have to do something until the last minute, and we still know that when we're going to do it it's going to be pretty OK. It's going to pass, it's going to be done reasonably well. So we don't have to do it ahead of time and typically revise, because it's going to be okay! However, doing something ahead and having the opportunity to revise, or to look at it again, or to consider whether there might be some changes, allows for more open creativity, by doing it in a timely way.

So essentially three of our types altogether and maybe each of us a little one of all of them. Having some conversation with this with my daughters, one daughter says: "I'm all of these! I procrastinate in all kinds of ways!" One of course is the adrenaline type, which I just mentioned, you got to do it at the last minute: "I do my best work under pressure!" We know that if we don't have that kind of pressure, we just can't get it done. So that it is the adrenaline type, needing the pressure to succeed.

Then the avoiders, just avoiding so many things because of fear. Fear of success, fear of failure, fear of what people think of us. All kinds of different levels

of fears.

And then a decisional kind: “I can't make a decision!” The can't make a decision one, is a really interesting one that has great global ramifications to it. I'm going to say that this is not just a personal problem for each of us. By not making a decision we are absolved of the outcome of something, we don't have to be responsible for the outcome. Something will happen of course, but “I didn't decide that!” I'm going to come to global climate change because procrastination and avoidance is so much in so many of our global problems. We may over or underestimate the difficulties of what we have. We can minimize the impact of our performances on others and on the future. When we say something like, “If we want peace in the world, we have to begin with ourselves!” Truly if we want to make change in the world we have not to procrastinate within our own selves, we have to learn to understand why we are doing it. If we understand the psychological hang ups that we have, we can see them when they appear and we can be much more pro-active in terms of spiritualizing it, in terms of not allowing it to take root in us.

So, these things within ourselves have huge ramifications in our global picture. If we look at many points of disaster, if we just look at the earthquake, the tsunami, if we look at the nuclear issue – the Japanese knew for years that there were safety issues going on in those nuclear plants and nothing was done about it. There was a cooperate avoidance of dealing with safety problems. They allowed all kinds of things to happen that may have prevented the situation that we are all in now with nuclear waste – trying to deal with that. We can certainly look at climate change (our master of climate change is in the room with us tonight) I can imagine the level of suffering around our procrastination about not doing anything, the refusal to make a decision, because then we won't be responsible for it.

I know that we all talk and get very frustrated about these things globally and politically, so these are the causes we all suffer from. It's not because decisions can't be made, it's because human beings who also procrastinate are also dealing with these problems, we all are. Our own issues are mirrored into a big picture in the world. So we have a lot of work to do. We can work on our own level in our own lives and become much more pro-active in not allowing these issues to take root in us, not allowing them to squander our own lives. We wind up squandering our own lives, we actually squander our spiritual integrity. We give away our energy, we give away the fruits of our effort, we give away so much. By that I mean squander.

There are a numerous myths in our behaviors. You know the myth of course that I can't function until I've cleaned my apartment. This is an excuse not to do

something. A myth : “I need to do more research on this!” There will never be an end to research, we will never, ever, ever, in our whole lives come to an end of research. So we can never collect all of the possible information. So it's a myth. There's a right amount of course, but there are definite hindrances going there. Then of course, as I mentioned “I do my best work under pressure!” That's an adrenaline illusion, that that's actually true. It's just not. Another that I think we mentioned in our poetry-group the other day: “I can only accomplish something if I have uninterrupted hours!” We spoke of two major poets in our society, one was a physician who wrote in between patients, William Carlos Williams (a major American poet). And Wallace Stevens was president of a major insurance company who wrote his poetry in his mind on his way home from work, and then wrote it down when he got home. So, uninterrupted hours are almost unheard of for most of us today. (I had plenty of them in those past three months.) The other thing: “I can't do this unless it's perfect!” Doing something early allows for revision time and allows us to examine it, to look at it, and actually allows the creative mind to have much more room.

If we actually look at this and we do the very thing at hand, whatever it is, without discrimination, we don't have time to develop the negative thinking that goes with it. We just do it. That is one of our aspects of practice, just doing what is at hand without questioning, without allowing the negative thought to come in. For me to just empty the dishwasher, it makes for such more peaceable kitchen.

Changing over our own attitudes about this can make for much more positive feeling about ourselves and there is accountability. We do have deadlines around many kinds of things. Most of us have developed these habits over a very, very long period of time, and we don't change over night. This is one of the most entrenched habits that we have. That's one of the most difficult things to change in ourselves. So when I look at my own self, then I work with it, I get a little bit more forgiving over the entrenched bureaucratic and political society that we have. It's not easy to make a move in it.

From a Sangha standpoint, our Sangha comes together, we work together both collectively and personally. Our personal issues are mirrored into the group that we work with, into the Sangha. We can't avoid it because we are who we are. But the work of Sangha is to accept each person as they are, allowing those mirrored aspects to come out and slowly, as we continue to work together in Sangha, those habits become polished. We polish ourselves, our character becomes polished so that we discover that some of those habits are getting washed away, so that they are not so deeply entrenched. We see ourselves mirrored continually in Sangha.

Procrastination has a high health cost for us actually. It creates anxiety, creates all kinds of issues for us physically. Maybe running high adrenaline which is not healthy at all for us. The adrenal gland is not in charge of your body. It's a bad habit to allow adrenaline to lead. All kinds of other health-issues can come as a result of just the wearing down on the immune system. So, it behooves us to take a look at this from a health standpoint.

But there is also a high cost in terms of relationship. What happens in a community or in family for instance. If we agree to do something and we don't do it, we shift the responsibility of that onto other people. Then the other people who take that responsibility begin to resent us because we didn't do what we said we were going to do. It's a really high cost in relationship that occurs and in the integrity of a family - and Sangha operates sometimes like family in many ways - that wearing down of trust is a very high cost to the spirit and the energy of the community. It's a really difficult one. We lose a sense of team work if we can't be relied upon. And once again our personal relationships suffer.

The spiritual side of this that we have in our practice is mindfulness, which is the same as cognitive behavioral change this is used in psychology. Understanding what is coming up for us moment by moment, and actually looking at it. Understanding that when something comes up, we know to act in a particular way, or to change that activity so that we are not hindered by what is arising. We have all that we need, within our own society here, because the society that we make here as a Sangha in our Zen practice is also reflected into the world - is deeply reflected out into the world. So it really behooves us to assist one another in this. To be loving kind in holding ourselves together in accountability, in a loving kind way. Not penalizing or pointing, but really understanding how we can help one another, through our healthy relations in Sangha, in family. Those of you who have raised teenagers, you have come through everything that I am talking about, or you have been a teenager yourself and you can recall your parents dealing with trying to save us from ourselves, from our own rebellious nature.

When we look globally, and we look at this of one of the hindrances to our being able to act in a timely way, we can see our own behavior reflected out there.

You know when it rises in me, I try to say : "Why am I delaying this ? Why am I not doing this ?" And it's usually some stupid reason. Resistance is one of the spiritual hindrances, aversion. Now you all understand that I'm not talking about the legitimate things that we say, "It would really be wise to do this tomorrow." Those are okay. We all know that healthy difference: "It would be much better for me to do this tomorrow, because it's raining and today is beautiful, so it's better for me to go out." We're not talking about that healthy decision-

making in which we negotiate one thing and swap things. That's not what I'm talking about at all. I'm talking about the ingrained resistance to doing things, or that even may be relationship manipulative. And stepping on top of them is very wonderful for the body and the mind. It revives us and, it just brings out the true creative nature that we all have. It allows that creative nature to find it's right voice.

Don't forget we are Zen practitioners we have everything that we need in order to live a more vital life. Once again we are our own handouts. I'm not giving you a handout of these notes. You are your handout, yourself, your body, your mind is your handout. Everything you need is right there. We have the capability to be mindful to practice, actually practice mindfulness - actually make it a living continual thing in our lives. We have this wonderful, wonderful gift right at hand. The Buddha gives us this way for us to be able to see into these issues. This is very fantastic. It's a tremendous gift. Maybe you have some thoughts.

Student

You should probably charge for your therapy here ! I think you succinctly categorized ninety-nine percent of psychological stress and hundred percent of psychological therapy. I related it a little bit to last week's talk on the situation. The situation is the concrete fact, or issues at hand, but they also include the situation of one's reaction to it or self defenses to it. I don't think you can make those changes until you recognize them, and hopefully the Sangha or your family will allow to help that. I think it always comes back to awareness.

Teacher

Yes, we have to be keenly enough aware to see what's rising in us, moment by moment. And actually feel the physical experience of what is arising.

Student

A lot of people don't feel it, they may have a psychosomatic symptom that has been caused by those other psychological issues and sometimes it needs observation and help from others. The adrenaline part should be reserved for a tiger teasing after us.

Teacher

You could verify this physically, but we have become very used to adrenaline running the body, but the pituitary gland is in charge of the body, yet the adrenaline gland takes over because it becomes habitually running and stirred up, so that we think that we're not operating until the adrenaline is running. It's a bossy gland. And of course we watch fast movies, we look at wild movies that create that adrenaline rush. You know when it rises in me, I try to say : "Why am I delaying this? Why am I not doing this?" And it's usually some stupid reason. Resistance is one of the spiritual hindrances, aversion. We're not talking about that healthy

decision-making in which we negotiate one thing and swap things. That's not what I'm talking about at all. I'm talking about the ingrained resistance to doing things, or that even may be relationship manipulative. And stepping on top of them is very wonderful for the body and the mind. It revives us and, it just brings out the true creative nature that we all have. It allows that creative nature to find it's right voice.

Student

I was just thinking that often the first hint that I have that I'm resisting something is this tension kind in the middle of my belly. So I mean, if I pay attention to it, that's the mindfulness part, then I can look at it, I can see what I'm doing. A lot of times we're so habitual, you know, I don't realize I'm doing it, unless I notice what condition I'm in.

Teacher

Ya !

Student

It's very hard to come in on something, the guilty part of it.

Teacher

We all feel some sense of this. There's not a human being alive who doesn't procrastinate about something. Every body 's got some of this. Don't forget we are Zen practitioners we have this wonderful, wonderful gift right at hand. The Buddha gives us this way for us to be able to see into these issues. This is very fantastic. It's a tremendous gift.

Eido Frances Carney with gratitude to Josepha Vermote for transcription.