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Lessons for Life

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Lessons for Life

ANDREW BECKER

REL 2320: Nonwestern Religions, Spring 2018

Nominated by: Dr. Sharon Showman

Andrew Becker is a first year student on the WSU-Lake Campus. He is majoring in business with a focus on finance and is preparing to be a financial advisor.

Andrew notes:

This reflection results from a lengthy process of reading, reflecting, writing, and revising. Working through the process of writing this paper helped me to comprehend the ways in which biases and prejudices can impact my interpretation of the truth. This understanding helps develop respect for myself and others. I hope the readers will find this reflection helpful in their own journeys of self-discovery.

Dr. Showman notes:

Andrew's paper is well structured, and it clearly shows his interaction with the material he chose to read and displays his beginning personal journey in understanding Zen Buddhism. The rewrites and editing of the paper he composed brought him closer to what he was trying to say. The final version of his writing and editing process exhibits the discipline a first-year student can master. Those who research the brain tell us that when a student makes the type of personal connection that Andrew has with the academic material the student remembers the material studied long after the class has ended.

Lessons for Life

The mind is very complex and not something that can be mastered without practice. It is easy to fall into the trap of false knowledge. Everyone has opinions and predispositions about a multitude of topics. Often it is hard to find actual truths while being blinded by these biases. I chose to read the book, *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen*, by Shunryu Suzuki and edited by Edward Espe Brown due to my new-found interest in Zen Buddhism. This book contains many of Suzuki's lectures on the practice of Zen Buddhism. Previously it had never occurred to me that I could be missing out on so much truth because of my own stubbornness. Putting personal beliefs aside, and being able to accept being wrong, is very difficult. Entwined with the idea of having an open mind comes having respect for all things, and seeking truth for oneself. I find that showing respect for everything and everyone makes it much easier to be open to learning. These concepts are taught heavily in *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen*, and they can help me and others improve our compatibility, knowledge, and overall happiness in life.

A good place to start--and a core concept in Zen Buddhism--is the idea that biases and prejudices can completely skew one's perspective on truth. In Western society there is a sharp divide that has grown over time. People believe that everything is either black or white, and right or wrong. Buddhism would say that the object of debate is neither black nor white. This prior belief of what something must be inhibits people from seeing what is truly there. Suzuki provides a good picture of this by saying "It is like drawing something on white paper; if you do not use clean white paper, you cannot draw what you want" (43). When people come into conflict with each other often it is because their paper isn't white. In other words, it is impossible to see what someone is saying while still being stuck in the mindset of having to be right and proving a point. I find this insight to be extremely powerful. Early in my high school career, I had problems with many people. It was very difficult for me to see their side of an issue and to have an open mind to differing opinions. Over the past few years I have tried to be more thoughtful and patient. The difference this effort makes is astronomical. Suzuki emphasizes the importance of this lesson even more when he says, "When you are brave enough to accept your surroundings without saying what is right and what is wrong, then the teaching that was told to you will help" (98). When entering a discussion without having a desired conclusion, it is then possible actually to benefit from the discussion.

Having a predetermined idea of what is right and wrong and being close-minded makes the interaction pointless. Everyone has different views based upon their different walks in life. Rather than looking at them critically, it is best to just listen and consider what it is they are saying. I used to feel my heart-rate jump when someone had a disagreement with me. However, now that I am able to hear what people have to say and respect it, I have become happier and more relaxed.

This idea of respect goes much deeper than just listening to people and what they have to say. In Buddhism, people are meant to respect everything in all walks of life. It is important to have respect for all things and not just those that someone deems as deserving. Disrespect can become a habit just as anything else can, and it is detrimental to the coexistence of everything on this earth. Suzuki speaks of a time when he heard the noise of chairs being pushed around from above him and says, "To push the chairs across the floor is very convenient, but it will give us a lazy feeling. Of course this kind of laziness is part of our culture, and it eventually causes us to fight with each other" (81-82). This quote really highlights the importance of having a respect that is portrayed through mindfulness. The person pushing the chairs thought nothing of it and did not intend any disrespect. However, it is the laziness to not think of how it could bother someone or how it is not a kind way to treat even an object that makes it disrespectful. This idea spoke to me because of how I feel it translates to current time. Disrespectfulness by being lazy is evident in today's society. Companies pollute the air and dump their garbage freely. Forests are torn down and nature is ruined to build new places to live. These things happen without any disrespectful intent. People don't do these things because they intend to be disrespectful, or because they are bad people. Once again, these decisions are made based upon people being too lazy to think of an alternative way of doing things and taking the necessary action. On a much smaller scale, I can apply this teaching by not acting out of convenience. Whether it is finding a trash can rather than littering or staying quiet while the people I live with sleep, working on my mindfulness and respect could have a positive impact on who I am as a person.

In Buddhism, mindfulness does not apply solely to respect and taking care of all things. Mindfulness also applies to the idea of karma. What seems like a small decision or bad choice can grow to be much worse in its effect if not carefully thought through. Suzuki states, "Karma starts from small things, but with neglect your bad karma will accelerate" (21). Suzuki is

alluding to the fact that people are faced with many decisions in life, many of which have a morally right and wrong alternative. While making the wrong choice on a minor issue might not seem like a big deal, it can grow into much more. If making the wrong decision is okay in some circumstances, then it is hard to figure out where to draw the line. If there is no definitive line, then that allows people to keep pushing farther in farther in the wrong direction. In Buddhist teachings, this push in the wrong direction will provide bad karma and prevent enlightenment. I can apply it to my life when it comes to being the person I want to be. There are so many opportunities as a young person, and throughout life, to make the wrong decision. At first the decision could be just to call off work for no reason or say something rude to a peer. While this might not seem like a big deal, the line of what is “okay” to do can just keep getting pushed back farther and farther. Without mindfulness and self-awareness, it is easy to fall into that trap. *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen*, gives me something to think back to when presented an opportunity to make the decision. Whether the objective is enlightenment or just being a good person, this lesson is extremely important to take to heart.

It is easy to unintendedly inhibit myself when it comes to doing the right thing and the same goes for obtaining knowledge and wisdom. The easiest option is to be spoon fed information and ask someone what they think. However, *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen* provides a great deal of context as to what human habits are common and why it is important to break them. Suzuki exuberates on the laziness of people while trying to obtain knowledge by stating, “Usually you will try to solve your difficulty in the best way as soon as possible. Rather than studying for yourself, you ask someone why you have a problem” (72). Suzuki is illustrating the fact that people are more prone to get their answer the easiest way than to actually search for it themselves. I had a time in my life when I was trying to decide whether I wanted to continue playing baseball. I had played for fifteen years and my decision was not easy. The natural choice for me to make was to talk to my friends and teammates and see what their perspective was on the situation. Most of them were urging me to keep playing and their reasoning made sense. However, despite all their reasons and advice as to why I should play, I was not content and eventually decided against it. I can draw significant ties to the teachings of Buddhism when it comes to how I made this decision. Suzuki states, “If a Zen master drinks sake, you may think the best way to obtain enlightenment is to drink sake. But even though you drink a lot of sake, as he does, you will not obtain enlightenment” (73). He really does an amazing job of portraying the fact that the only way to find what is

being searched for is through personal experiences and thought. I was never going to find the answer of whether I should keep playing baseball from someone else. As Buddhism teaches, my own experiences and thought could guide me to the right choice *for me*.

Finding personal truth is certainly a key to enlightenment and happiness in Buddhism, but living in the moment is just as important. Buddhism addresses the fact that people spend so much time worrying about tomorrow, next week, or even next year that they let so many present moments slip by. It is not hard for me to think back and recall the many times that I couldn't truly enjoy what I was partaking in--strictly due to being worried about moments in time far ahead of me. Suzuki enlightens people on the importance of moments by saying, "we say, 'Even in a snap of your fingers there are millions of instants of time.' This way we can emphasize the feeling of existing in each instant of time. Then your mind is very quiet" (5). It is important to remember that the ultimate goal in Buddhism is to achieve enlightenment. This quote stresses the fact that it is impossible to keep a quiet mind while worrying about things in the future. Without a quiet mind Buddhists cannot acquire the self-awareness and the knowledge it takes to reach enlightenment. Whether or not the goal is to reach enlightenment, the premise of the teaching doesn't change. If there are thousands of moments within a snap of the fingers, it is crazy to imagine how many moments slip by because of an overly active mind. I use this mindset when it comes to school and work. Recently I have been trying not to stress about having to complete work by certain due dates and about what job offer I am going to receive after college. The only way for me to obtain the best results for myself in this regard is to clear my mind so that I can give my best at what I do now rather than waste my energy worrying.

It is sad to think that people overlook the lessons of religions such as Buddhism due to having different beliefs. Buddhism provides a gateway to not only personal knowledge and happiness but even to improving the world. Practicing Buddhists' deep respect and ability to seek their own truth could have a great impact on the western world. Rather than having a dualistic point of view and trying to solve everything through conflict, Buddhism teaches that having an open mind is important. During a time when respect and virtue seem to be fading away, it is quite possible that everyone needs a bit more Buddhism in their life.

Works Cited

Suzuki, Shunryū. *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen*. Edited by Edward Espe Brown, Quill, 2003.