

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Virtue of Vice: An Interview with Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Hello, welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today I spoke to Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara. Enkyo O'Hara is the abbot of The Village Zendo in New York City. She received her priest ordination from Maezumi Roshi and her Dharma Transmission from Bernie Glassman. The work that Enkyo does is an interesting combination of Soto priest training as well as a focus on social engagement and peace making that underlies much of her vision of what Zen practice truly is. Enkyo is the founding teacher of the Zen Peacemaker Family, a spiritual and social action organization, and their focus is on the expression of Zen through caring, service and creative response. Her five expressions of Zen from the matrix of study at the Village Zendo – meditation, study, communication, action and caring – are the heart of the work that Enkyo O'Hara does. It's just been a wonderful conversation with her, we talked about the virtue of vice, we talked about the importance of the shadow and we talked about the traps of self-righteousness that are very easy to fall into on the spiritual path. It's great to talk to her and I hope you enjoy our conversation, thanks a lot. ~ Mark

Mark Matousek: Hello, it's my great honor and joy to welcome Enkyo O'Hara to The Seekers Forum. I have been a great admirer of hers for many years. She is one of the most grounded teachers I know.

One of the reasons I wanted to talk with you today is because you have always seemed to be someone who connects the spiritual and the worldly with unusual grace, having been a professor and now, of course, a Zen Roshi. You seem to bridge the worlds of popular culture and activism with spirituality, Enkyo. Welcome. I'm so happy you could take the time to talk to me today.

Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara: Well, thank you Mark and thank you for asking me. It's a pleasure to connect with you again and to connect with your listeners.

MM: Thank you. So I'd like to start with a memory I have and a lesson I got from John Daido Loori many years ago when I was very new to the spiritual path and I happened to be up at Mount Tremper sitting with them on a Sunday morning. After the teaching was over, I went outside and I saw him get into his golf cart, light up a Benson and Hedges cigarette and zoom off. I was so struck by the contrast between him in his robes giving his talk and then by the very human man who emerged afterwards. I felt like what he was saying to me was, "This is what it's like to be a human being."

EO: Yes.

MM: It sort of got me off my high horse about a lot of things. Could you talk to me about how Buddhism bridges the world of spiritual practice and being a human being in terms of self-indulgence, vices and that kind of thing?

EO: Absolutely. It's wonderful that you mentioned John Daido Loori because he was an American Zen Roshi. I want to put the emphasis on both American and Zen, in the sense

that not all Buddhist practices focus so much on the ordinariness of our lives and that, THAT is where we express our spirituality and not in terms of some other realm. It's in our ordinary coffee, tea and Benson and Hedges cigarettes that we express our lives, and that's a very Zen thing. When Americans took up Zen, or Westerners took up Zen, that's what they were attracted to. We have kind of made that an even stronger element: the humility and ordinariness of the spiritual practice. You could say that most of the koans that you hear about, most of the stories are about just that, the student coming with an idea that it's going to be some other-worldly experience and they're being told to wash their bowls, to sweep the floor.

MM: Right.

EO: So, I think at that point, your experience there was Daido's wonderful way of teaching just what you said, "Look, I'm just an ordinary man. And yet, I have these very profound experiences, experiences of myself as an individual and the individual teachings of the Dharma, of spirituality."

MM: And what does the Dharma teach about desire and self-indulgence, for want of a better term?

EO: Well, Buddhism in general talks about greed, and anger and ignorance as the three poisons that creep into our lives and prevent us from really experiencing a joyful and responsible life, responsible to the whole world. And so, self-indulgence is this kind of quality of not noticing that what I do affects those around me, so the focus is only on me. That happens to many spiritual seekers when they first begin. It's all about me getting something, indulging myself in something, and it's only later that they begin to realize that it's not about that at all.

MM: Right. And, what about sort of *cleaning up our acts*, is that something that is emphasized in Zen?

EO: It happens. I have the great honor to observe it in people that study with me. Maybe there is some chaotic aspect to their lives and it straightens itself as they become more comfortable with the kind ordinariness and humility of their lives, they are no longer stretching for some idealized self; they are coming to be who they are and therefore, when you are who you are, you begin to take care of your life.

MM: Yes, yes. And is part of taking care of our lives, allowing ourselves the desires, the pleasures that more puritanical folks might judge as non-spiritual?

EO: Yes, certainly. Vegetarianism for example. Zen doesn't say you have to be a vegetarian, but people who have practiced for a while are more comfortable not eating meat, but it's not a rule that you have to follow. Because, once you begin to have these rules, then there is this natural, rebellious nature in all of us to break the rules. To just be alive to what's appropriate in the moment. For instance, to go home for Thanksgiving dinner and Mom has prepared a turkey, you eat turkey.

MM: Right. Tell me, there seems to me to be a human need for transgression, for want of a better term, a need to not be as good some of the time. I wonder how you as a Buddhist teacher view that. Do you view that as a healthy part of the human experience or do you view that as a sign of ignorance or attachment?

EO: I love this question, Mark, it shows your real deep understanding. What is transgression? Are we talking about breaking some societal rules or some rules that we've set up that must be obeyed? It makes us not free. As long as we are clear about not harming others or not harming ourselves, then we are able to act appropriately in a situation which may break a particular set of rules that are around us at this time. So, yes. the Zen tradition in particular is known for its rather transgressive nature in this area, transgressive in that we don't have two hundred and fifty rules of Benaiah to follow. We don't follow rules in that kind of way. We say that WE ourselves are our own moral and ethical standard, we get to BE that and not adhere to what is exterior to us. It's what the situation demands. As long as we are in touch with our true nature, we will act appropriately.

MM: That's such a radical idea.

EO: I know.

MM: To be our own internal barometer, to be a light to ourselves, in terms of the choices we make regarding rules or not following rules. It feels like such a radical idea.

EO: I know, and it is based on the idea that you are at one with yourself, you are present to yourself. The man that drove that truck in Nice recently, he was not himself, he was not his true human self or he could not have done that. He was caught up with a set of ideas and rules, and I think that's so true of all harmful activity, when we are not present to our fullness of being. And so, when I say to be transgressive, this is an aspect of trusting yourself and being completely at one with your role in the world itself. We are not separate, but we do think we are.

MM: Exactly. What you're saying about being at one with oneself is about having a fundamentally positive view of human nature, as Buddhism teaches that we are essentially good. There is a relationship in our culture in believing that we're not good and always trying to be better all the time, almost a pathological need for self improvement. Do you know what I mean?

EO: I know exactly what you mean. I think that very often when people first come to Zen practice, they come and they are lost souls. They are carrying shame. So the desire is to show yourself as being superior, holy and very spiritual. As I said before, one of the early things we do in Zen is to try to break that down to allow people to just trust themselves as they are so that they can no longer always be in reaction to that shame we're talking about, that shame about not being good enough, not smart enough, or whatever they're not enough of.

MM: Does Buddhism address self-loathing directly?

EO: I think it's not talked about in terms that we use in Western psychology and so forth, but it's like inherent in the storytelling and the stories that you hear about the young spiritual seekers that come to see the teachers. This doesn't refer to just young seekers, this speaks of young and old seekers. They come to see that they themselves embody what they are seeking. So you have the kid that speaks up and says, "What is the Buddha?" and the teacher says, "It's the fire boy seeking the fire. Here you are a Buddha in front of me but you don't see it." So that self-loathing is that seeking outside of oneself that which is already present in oneself. And the job of the teacher and the student is to bring those things closer together so the students recognize their own true natures. They don't have to seek it outside of themselves.

MM: And do you, as a teacher, experience a lot of projection from students when they may see you as a savior, a rescuer, where they may see you as someone who will redeem them? Does that dynamic happen very much?

EO: I try to dissolve it immediately when it arises. My own community would laugh if you talked about that. I must say, in the outer world, I do see that people come to me because I'm recognizable, that is why I shaved my head. I find it a better way to communicate with the outside world about spirituality and Buddhism in this way, I'm recognizable. The downside is people do come up and do seem to think that I'm about to levitate when I'm on a subway. That ain't gonna happen!

MM & EO: (Laughing.)

MM: So, you just dissolve it.

EO: I usually do that with humor or I say something kind of shocking as a way to kind of verbally slap the student awake.

MM: Right. What would you call a wise approach to discipline? Discipline is such a loaded word, people think of it as a dictator on their backs with a whip. So then they resist discipline and of course nothing happens without discipline. What is a wise way we can think of discipline on the spiritual path?

EO: Well, it's a great question. I've been telling you about the transgressive aspects of Zen, but we have a lot of rules. Like when you're walking into a Zendo you bow to the Zendo; when you bow to each other and you sit down and you don't move for half an hour and that kind of thing. We're actually quite disciplined within this kind of framework of transgression and we don't believe we have any rules. At the same time, we have to hold ourselves. Discipline, I guess it comes from the word 'schooling' or 'learning,' I always think of it as a kind of holding, like a dog likes to be held in a kennel, say, under stress. It's the same with people; we need a place of holding. We must meditate for half an hour every day. That's a discipline that's required, it's going to make

you feel better. Why? It's kinda like going to the gym. Otherwise, human nature is that we get lost. We have to work at it a little bit in that way, but not work at it in order to exalt ourselves or build up our sense of self, but work at it in the sense to humanize ourselves and allow ourselves to appreciate the world around us and to appreciate our own being.

MM: That's beautiful. And we can't do that unless we put ourselves into a container sometimes to calm down and get clear, is that what I'm hearing?

EO: Yes. That's why I think it's really important for people to join communities. I think the old-fashioned word for religion was a binding, a way to hold people. Even though a lot of Buddhists don't like to be called religious, what I'm talking about is community. When people come together and say, "I will bind with my people, with this community. When I can I will spend time with them. I will visit them every Friday, or every Sunday or every Wednesday and have these kind of external holdings," which become the discipline that allow us to be free.

MM: Is isolation a big problem that you see in a lot of folks?

EO: Yes. I'm amazed by the variety of people that practice in our little Zendo. We're in Manhattan, we're in SoHo, people have a lot of things they could do, but because people live alone and although they may have business colleagues and they may have a set of friends that they may associate with, still there is this sense of isolation and singleness. To join in a group where the goal is to be free, I think it's a wonderful antidote to that isolationism. Our society is so fixated about our individualism, everything is about ourselves as individuals, which is great, but we also have to recognize that there is an aspect of our being that is part of everything and that's a beautiful, pleasurable aspect for us to understand that it's part of us. When we're isolated, we forget that we partake of this greater quality. Joining a group is very helpful for this.

MM: When you're talking about that forgetting, it reminds me of depression. It sounds like a textbook definition of depression when we're forgetting that we're part of something larger than ourselves.

EO: Absolutely, yes. It's tragic when I see people who are depressed coming in. Often that's what makes the change, they then see, "Oh I need help."

MM: I'd like to get back to the shadow in terms of Jungian psychology, the fact that it's understood that there are a lot of positive things that we hide in our shadow. Does Buddhism acknowledge the gift in the darkness and the transgressive quality of things that we may suppress in our selves? Does Buddhism recognize that there is beauty in the shadow?

EO: Absolutely. It's not always just one way. That's why so many of the stories are about recognizing the ephemeral qualities of being, certainly there are qualities in the shadow that support us that we're not even aware of. The goal is to wake up, to sit and

allow all parts of yourself to come to the surface. Some of those parts that come to the surface when you're meditating are not cognitively clear. They are there and they give you strength, they give you – forgive the word – love. They give you an opportunity to see the world in a different way. They may not really go all the way to the conscious articulated level of being and yet we get in touch with that through our meditation practice.

MM: And yet, that widens our circle of acceptance, we're able to allow more of ourselves into the room. Is that what you mean?

EO: Yes, exactly. And get rid of those parts that we've just thought of, the parts we think we want, just ideas. They're not our real being.

MM: Right. And my last question, speaking of the shadow. After Nice, Dallas and Orlando, a lot of us are reeling, we're in overwhelm with grief of the world and the danger that is escalating. Can you just say briefly, where do we find hope in such dark times?

EO: Yes. We have to come back to those around us in our immediate circle and recognize that we can love and we can make a difference by the very people that we actually touch. For example, you Mark. You have a very large circle of people that you are in contact with and you are able help to see the beauty in life and the power of life and the wisdom of life. These things happen because we know about them because of the media reporting them to us, but we've always had them. They've been a part of history. I'm a very optimistic person. These things are horrid, but if you look at the vast passage of history, things are getting better. People are KNOWING more and more. I think what we need to do is make a difference in our own personal lives and if we have some public role, such as you do, we can make a difference in that way, to teach this sense of oneness and community, teaching healthy, effective ways of living.

MM: That's so great, that does give me hope. It's so good to talk to you again, thank you for speaking to The Seekers Forum. I look forward to the next time.

EO: I hope so, good luck to you, Mark.