

## PLASTIC, ZEN, AND MINDFULNESS

by Janet Jiryu Abels

“Plastic bags” and “Zen”—in some sense, these two words might not spring to mind as inhabiting the same universe, but for me, plastic bags have become a powerful component of awakening through the practice of Zen mindfulness.

Ever since the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* roused me from my ignorance about the damage humans are doing to the planet, I have been aware how very bad plastic bags are for the environment. They take roughly four hundred years to decompose, often end up in the world’s oceans, and are made with oil. Like so many others who were educated by that 2006 documentary, soon after I saw it I began paying attention to how I carried home my groceries: trying to remember to bring reusable bags to the supermarket, and trying to remember to bring a small, fold-up bag whenever I went out for other items. I also began saving the plastic bags I did use and recycling them at the bins at my supermarket. Sporadically, I also washed out plastic sandwich bags, as my environmentally conscious daughter had urged me to do, and I even bought a wooden rack to dry them on.

However, I did not connect any of this to my Zen practice. I was simply doing “environmental stuff” that seemed unrelated to my years of practicing and teaching Zen.

This changed dramatically when, along with other members of our Still Mind Zendo sangha, I took part in the historic People’s Climate March in New York City in September 2014. As anyone who was there can attest, it was an inspiring experience. More than 400,000 people from all walks of life came together to challenge the ignorance and greed of the individuals, corporations, and governments that are largely responsible for ruining our fragile eco-system. For me, the most powerful part was to be gathered on one long, wide New York City block with members of so many local, national, and international faith-based communities.

Standing there with my fellow Buddhists and people of other faiths on West Fifty-Sixth Street for more than two hours, waiting to be able to move forward in the throngs of people, I realized for the first time that the climate crisis is a moral issue and that the Buddha’s teaching of “Do no harm” applies to it. “Not killing” is the first of the Zen Buddhist grave precepts. What else were we humans doing but killing the earth?

And, for that matter, what else was I doing? That’s when my nascent environmental mindfulness and my Zen practice came together. I knew that the way forward was the conscious application of the practice of mindfulness to my environmental awareness.

Mindfulness is one of the elements in the Buddha’s Eightfold Path of Awakening, and for good reason. It is with mindfulness that meditation begins, and meditation is the heart of the Buddha

Way. Mindfulness is an *upaya*—a skillful means for developing the staying power to remain grounded in, focused on, just this present moment. Zen teaches that the present moment—the now moment—is the only reality there is. Anything else is simply a construct of the human mind. “Somewhere else” is an idea; “the past” is an idea; “the future” is an idea. Even our thoughts about the present moment are ideas. But because the human mind creates such a vivid and seemingly unshakeable reality around these mind constructs, we believe that our thought-created ideas are real. They are not. Only through the practice of meditation, when the thought-creating mind is gradually stilled so that we can be in the present moment and not in our illusory “somewhere else,” can we begin to see the reality in front of us *as it is* and not as we *think* it is. Receiving reality as it is allows us to see into what Zen calls its essential nature. Awakening to essential nature is called enlightenment, and when enlightenment happens, we see that nothing exists by itself. Everything exists only in a vast web of interbeing. So enlightenment inherently fosters an ecological awareness.

And it all begins with being in the present moment. But the present moment, the *now* moment, is an elusive entity because the present moment is continually in flux, continually changing, moving, never still. It can’t be captured or described. It can only be experienced. Once experienced, it must be released, let go, so that one can be with the next *now* moment. All of which requires acute attention, focus, and... mindfulness. This is why the practice of mindfulness is an essential part of the Zen path of awakening, requiring a toolbox of various skillful mindfulness tools.

Plastic bags are now one of the mindfulness tools in my toolbox. They bring me to present-moment awareness because I am forced to pay attention whenever they are offered to me or when I find myself needing them.

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Walking in the People’s Climate March, another insight began to dawn on me. Although I’d started to be environmentally “mindful”—attuning to the plastic bag issue and engaging in other mindfulness practices such as turning off lights—I began to realize that I had been pinning the greed, hatred, and ignorance causing the climate crisis on people *out there*. I had conveniently left myself out. That the problem lay with *them*—the men and women of business and government, those seeking money and power—had been the comfortable story line of my conditioned mind. I’d been seeing myself as just a helpless victim. I was saving plastic bags and turning off lights because of *their* greed.

When I realized that the climate crisis was also being caused by my own greed, hatred, and ignorance (what Zen calls the “Three Poisons”), my Zen practice and my environmental awareness came together even more. It was not just *them*; it was me. I was as much in the grasp of the Three Poisons as *they* were. Greed, hatred, and ignorance were a part of my life, too, and were influencing the daily choices I made as a consumer.

What had kept me from seeing this? I knew full well that nobody escapes the pull of these three ego-oriented human conditions, and I had striven to be aware of them as part of my Zen practice. Why had I not seen them operating in my eco-oriented life before? The inconvenient truth that began to dawn on me was this: *because it was so much easier*. I had donned the veil that we draw in front of our eyes when we see but we don't allow ourselves to *really* see. I turned away, unmindful, because it's so much easier to turn away. I blamed *them* because it's so much easier. Don't we do this so often with so many people and situations in our lives?

After the climate march, I became increasingly aware (and continue to be) that I was (am) a participant in the earth's suffering because of my unmindfulness of the causes of that suffering. Zen teaches that we must look at suffering directly and not turn away from it; that we must look at our addictions and not paper them over with easy excuses.

When we live in this new way, we see more clearly there is a path of release from suffering—our suffering as well as that of others, including the earth. It begins with a stronger commitment to mindfulness and deep meditation practice, through which we come to realize the delusory nature of our self-centered, mind-less habits. Eventually we come to realize that we are not separate entities but are interrelated with the ten thousand things, as Buddhism calls them, and the earth itself. We come to realize that our actions—even the smallest ones—affect the world, and we come to realize that mindful attention to everyday life choices is where the reversal of addictive destructive habits begins.

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Ever since these insights following the march, I've striven to practice mindfulness in a much more focused way in relation to eco-practice. This has expanded mindfulness practice in other parts of my life as well, so that now I continually meet my ego-oriented selfishness, so easily masked before. I meet my desire for ease, comfort, and all those other products of consumer advertising that are so seductively easy to succumb to. I meet my choice of not having to succumb.

Not succumbing, though, requires attention, focus, and moment-to-moment awareness such as I'd never quite practiced before in my everyday life. Now I not only reject plastic bags in stores or recycle them when necessary, I also recycle sandwich bags, cling wrap, and plastic of all kinds. In doing so, I continue to be amazed by how much of our life is wrapped in plastic! I also practice turning off lights left on not just by me but by others. I try to use the air conditioner only if truly necessary. I put newspapers into the recycling basket at home, and every food carton that comes my way, and every scrap of paper. And when I do these things, when I make those extra efforts, I'm being present, I'm being in the moment, I'm being aware, and I'm being awake.

By doing these things, I've also come to realize that I'm connecting more deeply to the *people* whose lives are impacted by the environmental crisis. This *felt sense* body connection, which vividly brings to life my inter-relatedness with all that is, has been the most life-giving product

of my mindfulness eco-practice. When I turn off the water faucet instead of letting it run while I brush my teeth or wash the dishes, I connect with countless others in the world whose access to water is severely limited due the droughts brought on by climate change. For me this is a moment of compassion, generated through the simple mindful action of turning off the faucet. It is visceral and powerful. When I mindfully leave no traces on my plate at the end of a meal or make an effort to not waste any food in my kitchen, I connect with countless others in the world who have little or no food because of poor crops, arid land, and the selfish choices of others—including myself. For me, this is another moment of compassion found in daily mindful attention to the items in my kitchen.

Such natural, deepening connection to others far away is, for me, the experience of Zen's compassionate "not-two": not just a truth grasped by the mind but an experience realized in the body and then acted upon. It is bringing me greater release from the poisons of my own greed, hatred, and ignorance because I'm now more aware, through my mindful eco-practice, not only how the earth but also how other people are impacted by my choices. This daily practice of compassion then opens me up to a life of greater balance and equanimity—the natural, ordinary, everyday Way of Zen.

It turns out that plastic bags and Zen don't inhabit separate universes at all. Neither do you or I.

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