

Paradigm Shift Joen Snyder-O'Neal

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Until the 1500s Western people thought that the earth was the center of the solar system. Copernicus's theory that the earth revolved around the sun was a new paradigm—a completely different way of imagining the structure of the way things are. It was very hard for the people of that time to change their way of thinking. (They were still adjusting to the idea that the earth is round!) Embracing the practice of Buddhism also involves a paradigm shift. It is a shift away from egocentric thinking to an awareness of ourselves as part of an interconnected whole. It is a shift away from the pain of a clenched heart to openheartedness as an appropriate response to the way things are.

Sometimes people come to this practice because they realize that life as they've been living it is not working; they want to turn their life around 180 degrees. However, many people actually want to spiff up their present paradigm, to make it a little more bearable, rather than to make a true shift in the way they see themselves and the world, and the way they live their life.

Buddhist psychology describes various realms that human beings get caught in as we contract around conditions we feel we have no control over. These realms are known as the heavenly, hell, animal, hungry ghost, fighting spirits, and human realms.

For example, beings in the hungry ghost realm are characterized by huge bellies and narrow throats, indicating an excessive longing that can never be fulfilled. When we are in this realm, no matter how many things we buy at the mall, no matter how much we have, no amount of catalog orders will ever fulfill our yearning. Thich Nhat Hanh has said that American culture as a whole is caught in this realm. To let go of the bonds that keep us in this realm, we need to make a paradigm shift—taking up the way of generosity as we reconnect with the basic richness of life in each moment. Often, however, we don't really want to let go of this endless yearning—we have a yard sale to free up some room and get some money to buy more stuff.

Another way of making a shift away from being caught in thirst-like desire and an endless feeling of lack is to change the object of our desire. Rather than obsessing over the usual objects we long for, we can cultivate an aspiration to bring lovingkindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity—the Four Immeasurables—to ourselves, to others, and to the situations of our life. This is a real transformation—letting go of narrow selfcenteredness and opening to a much larger sense of our world. It is making a 180-degree turn.

Zen Master Dogen said that we are walking on the floor of the ocean at the same time that we are swimming in the waves. The floor of the ocean is the source of spiritual security and our deep nature. The waves are the constantly changing challenges of daily life. Both aspects are our true self. Our task is to realize this truth about who we are, and

live our lives on this basis—not just being tossed away by the waves.

The practice of mindfulness, the practice of wisdom and compassion, the practice of less suffering and more happiness, the practice of waking up from our usual deluded dreamlike state, is available. We can choose to cultivate this way, or not. It's up to us!