

An Appropriate Response: A Zen Approach to Coaching by Pamela Weiss

Introduction

If you ask a dozen coaches what they do and how they do it, you will probably get a dozen different answers. These days you can hire a coach for just about anything—from finding a job to finding your voice; from balancing your checkbook to creating balance in your life; from losing weight or finding a mate to finding your purpose or deepening your relationship with God.

The rapid growth of the coaching field over the past ten years reflects a hunger and yearning for new ways to address the deep, perplexing issues inherent in human life. How can we respond with kindness and skill to the constant, rapidly changing flux of circumstances in our lives? How can we reduce rather than contribute to harm and suffering? How can we live in ways that are not just productive and efficient, but are also meaningful and fulfilling?

Our hunger can never be satisfied by better, faster, increasingly efficient ways of doing more of what we've been doing all along. It can only be fed by addressing its source: the deep human longing to be fully who we are.

My intent here is to offer a coaching framework based on the teaching and practice of Zen Buddhism. As a practitioner of Zen for the past fifteen years—immersed in the rich tapestry of life offered by this tradition—my hope is to introduce language, stories, and imagery to invite you into the heart of a tradition dedicated to helping us understand and embody what it means to respond appropriately—to ourselves, to others and to the world.

Zen Buddhism

The aim of Zen is simple and profound: to alleviate suffering by waking up to who we really are. Zen is a living tradition, passed warm heart to warm heart, from teacher to student, over three continents and thousands of years. Stories of many Zen ancestors describe wild and woolly characters with bushy eyebrows, bald heads, robes with long, draping sleeves and words that point directly at the strange, perplexing dilemma of being human.

Some people think Zen is esoteric and unavailable. Actually, it is very practical and down to earth. Beyond philosophy, Zen offers a practice for studying what it means to be fully human. Zen practice is about developing the capacity to observe things as they are, moment to moment.

Zen teaches a meditation practice, called zazen, which is a way to study what it means to be alive. The instructions for practicing zazen are simple: Sit down and breathe. That's it. Stop for a while and observe what's happening; observe your real life, your actual humanness as it arises. It's almost ridiculously simple. But because we humans are complicated, we find this kind of bare-bones simplicity very difficult.

At the heart of Zen is the bodhisattva. The term *bodhi* (enlightening) *sattva* (being) is often mistranslated as an “enlightened being.” But this translation misses the point. Bodhisattvas are beings who specifically forgo their own personal enlightenment to stay in the world and work for the benefit of others. Bodhisattvas are not afraid to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty. They are devoted to doing whatever it takes to ease the difficulties and confusion in human life.

Bodhisattvas are onto our deep connectedness. They are awake enough to realize that we are all in this together. They know that no one can wake up and be free until everyone wakes up and is free. They are committed to finding ways to interact with beings that inspire awareness, reduce conflict and reveal the liberating truth of our interdependence and shared humanity.

This is the essential work of a bodhisattva. I propose that it is also the essential work of a coach.

The Coaching Field

As a coach and trainer of coaches for the past eight years, I see two major camps within the coaching field. There’s the “I’m-the-expert-let-me-fix-you” camp. And there’s the “you-are-perfect-and-whole-and-have-all-the-answers-within-yourself” camp. The first camp is largely populated by consultants used to getting paid for their expertise. The second is an amalgam of new-age, self-help, human-potential enthusiasts, eager to spread their inspired, feel-good motivation. On the consultant side, the assumption is: I know and you don’t. On the new age side, the assumption is: if I just ask the right questions, I will awaken the infinite wisdom within you.

There is nothing wrong with experts. We need experts to inform and advise us. But coaching is not about providing expertise; it’s about human development. This means we have to help the *person* learn and grow. As coaches, our job is to leave our clients better off without us. If we merely give advice or work in ways that create dependence, we may get results, but we fail to develop the person. Or worse, we may develop people who become less competent through their dependence on us.

Implicit in the notion that “you have all the answers within you” is that if we just tap into those answers, we can “create” (or manifest) any life we want. There are two fundamental flaws with this. First, it isn’t true that we can have or create anything we want. That’s magical thinking. We have a role in determining what happens in our life, but we don’t control it. We are participants, not dictators. Second, the flip side of the belief that I can create whatever I want is that if things don’t turn out, it’s my fault. I just wasn’t trying hard enough or thinking enough positive thoughts. The dark underbelly of control is blame. It’s the logical extension of the assumption that we are in charge. If I control my happiness, it only follows that I am to blame for my unhappiness.

Both perspectives—expert and new age—represent horizontal styles of intervention: attempts to assist people to get better, faster and more efficient at doing what they (think they) want or what they are already doing. Both focus on addressing issues rather than developing people. In order to develop people, we need to move beyond horizontal accommodation toward vertical transformation.

Three Levels of Coaching

The diagram below depicts levels or styles of coaching intervention. The levels are nested, which means the lower levels include the levels above them, but the higher levels do not include the levels below them. Moving down, from doing to learning to being, represents vertical transformation.



Level One: Accomplishing Tasks and Goals

At the first level, we work with our clients to help them accomplish tasks and goals. This is the level of assisting people in getting things done—and is by far the most pervasive. When we do this, we may assist people in the short term, but our assistance is always limited. We all know how our “to-do” lists go: you work down the list, checking off items, getting things done, accomplishing tasks and goals. But by the time you get to the bottom of the list, new tasks have been added to the top. It’s endless.

Coaching at this level is coaching as accountability partnership—helping our clients to clarify their goals, laying out a set of action steps to move them toward those goals, and then setting up a structure to ensure that they stay on track. Maybe we call them once a week or once a day or once an hour to keep them accountable. As coaches, we do whatever it takes to make sure they stick with the program.

This approach is based on behaviorism. Remember Pavlov and Skinner? They were early behaviorists who ran experiments with dogs, demonstrating that external stimulus (the sound of a bell) caused behavior (salivation). The basic premise of behaviorism is that, like dogs, human beings take action (behave) based on an external stimulus. Behaviorism runs deep in our psyches. We treat ourselves this way. We treat other people this way. Most management theory is based on this.

If you want to get your staff to “perform,” you can stimulate the desired behavior through incentives (more money or prestige, a pizza party, an office with windows, a promotion) or threats (less money or humiliation, a negative evaluation, a smaller cubicle, a demotion). In organizations where I have worked, I have listened to dozens of managers vehemently defend this approach. “If you don’t give people incentives, they won’t work hard.” Or, “if you don’t punish people for being late, lazy, inefficient, (fill in the blank...), they will just take advantage of you.”

Many child-raising methods are based on this as well: “If you eat all of your broccoli, you can have dessert.” Or, “If you don’t stop whining, you’ll have to go to your room.” It’s everywhere. Think about the last time you tried to “motivate” yourself to do something—quit smoking or clean out your closets or lose weight. Most of our strategies involve behaviorism—creating a set of threats and promises to move us toward the desired behavior. “If I go to the gym, then I can have a piece of cake.” “If I don’t finish this paper, then I can’t go out with my friends.” “If I lose five pounds, then I can buy a new dress.”

The obvious problem with this approach is that it is short term. When you remove the stimulus, the behavior snaps right back to the “norm.” It may work for a while, but it rarely sticks. Think about how many people lose and gain, lose and gain, thousands of pounds every year... Yet we keep insisting *this* time it will work.

When I ask potential coaching clients what they are looking for from me as a coach, the most common replies are: “I want you to help keep me on track,” or, “I need someone to help me be more disciplined,” or even, “I want you to give me a kick in the butt.” They want me to become the external stimulus they think they need. I never agree to work with people this way because it dehumanizes them. It turns them into stimulus-response machines.

Human beings are complex and mysterious. When we treat our clients (or ourselves) like lab rats, we can't simultaneously support becoming fully human. While we may get short-term results or "payoff," we never develop the person. Instead we develop well-trained rats.

The other, more insidious problem is working at this level is that it never addresses *why* a person wants to accomplish a particular task. It just creates a structure to ensure that whatever it is the person wants to get done gets done. This may be helpful, but it may not. Helping someone make more money or lose more weight may actually be harmful.

Level Two: Developing New Competence

If we want to work with people in a more humane, effective way, we need to shift down to working at the level of developing competence. At this level, we help our clients learn something new. We work with the person so they're not just able to accomplish a goal or task one time, but so that they can continuously do it on their own. We help open new possibilities, so the client is able to take new action. Our aim here is to teach them *how* to do something, rather than just telling them *what* to do. This requires more skill on our part, and it takes more time, more patience, and a deeper relationship with the client.

For example, let's say we have a client who comes to us wanting to lose weight. If we were to work with them at the first level, we would determine the goal (the target weight) and set up a diet and exercise plan. Our job as a coach would then be to keep checking in with the client to make sure they stay on track—perhaps cheering them on or admonishing them along the way.

If we were to work with this same client at the second level, we would teach them about nutrition—clarifying the difference between fats, proteins and carbohydrates—and explaining the role of exercise in weight loss and so on. We would introduce new terms so the client could make new choices and engage in new behaviors. By introducing new learning, we leave the client with new competence—able to navigate on their own, without creating dependence on the coach.

Level Three: Alleviating Suffering

At the third level, we work with our clients at the level of changing their "Way of Being." Coaching here, our focus shifts from addressing the *issue* or improving a competence to developing the *person*. Our aim is to shift their limited sense of who they are, so that they can engage in and interact with the world in entirely new ways.

At levels one and two, we may address a client's relationship with food, calories, and exercise, whereas at level three we focus on shifting their relationship with themselves—perhaps reorienting how they relate to their body or their sources of nurturance—intentionally looking beyond food, calories and exercise to include a more holistic perspective.

At this level, we might introduce distinctions and set up exercises for them to learn to differentiate between eating to feed biological hunger and eating to feed emotional hunger. We would introduce new practices to feed their emotional, relational and spiritual life. At this level, we address the issue systemically—shifting how they relate to themselves, others and the world. As old lines of understanding are revised and redrawn, the tight container the person has inhabited cracks open and new possibilities arise. This new perspective offers an increased sense of freedom and spaciousness, and suffering is alleviated.

Alleviating Suffering

I use the term “alleviating suffering” intentionally. First, I use it to balance the aversion in our culture to *not* talking about suffering. Because not talking about suffering or difficulty actually makes it worse. Turning away from suffering creates more suffering. There is nothing wrong with having a happy, successful, fulfilling life. The problem is that when we insist on the happy side of life and avoid the not-so-happy parts of our lives, we find ourselves in prison. There’s only room for part of us—the happy part. And the less-than-happy parts—which are the parts that most need our attention and care—get locked out in the cold.

The word suffering is also a translation of the Pali word, *dukkha*—the fundamental “dissatisfactoriness” or anxiety in human life that the Buddha spoke about when he first woke up. *Dukkha* is ontological suffering. It’s not the result of our stupidity or laziness or lack of effort. *Dukkha* is the suffering that is part and parcel of being human.

Dukkha is everywhere. Yet we repeatedly fall into the trap of thinking that it’s some kind of error. Often when we face difficulty in our lives, or the lives of our clients, we rush in to try to “fix” it. Or we run around trying to figure out who we can blame. When we do this we miss the opportunity to step into our life, or our client’s life, or the life of the world in a way that really helps.

When I learned that *dukkha* was one of the first things the Buddha taught after he was enlightened, I found that strange. He could have said anything. Yet the first teaching he offered his friends was, “There is suffering in human life.” Why would the Buddha say something so obvious? I propose that his words were not meant as description, but as instruction—that the Buddha pointed to suffering because suffering is the doorway to compassion.

The etymology of the word compassion means, “to suffer with.” *Com* means with, and *passion* means suffering—as in the passion of Christ. The paradox is that when we turn toward and are able to be *with* the suffering inherent in human life, we actually lessen our suffering; we help to alleviate it. And as we do this, we cultivate the heart of compassion, which is a ground of what it means to embody our full humanity.

The Heart of Suffering: Our Fixed Sense of Self

From a Buddhist perspective, the source of suffering is understood to be the seeming solidity of our separate “Sense Of Self.” Buddhism proposes that we suffer not because we are evil, or bad, or inherently flawed but because of our ignorance. We suffer and cause suffering because we fundamentally misunderstand who we are. It’s a case of mistaken identity.

When we ask, “Who am I?,” the first layer we uncover often is a list of roles, titles, duties, etc. I’m a daughter; I’m a wife; I’m a step-mom, coach, friend, Zen student.... We each have our own list. The roles and titles may change from time to time, but if you look at it, it’s pretty easy to see that that is not who you are.

If we look beneath the labels, identifications, roles, etc., we discover that there is still a pervasive felt sense of “me.” I may not quite be able to get my hands around it, but I have a felt sense of it. It’s the sense I have that “I” am the one writing this. It’s my internal sense of “me-ness.” We *all* have that: the person you refer to when you say “I.”

Our Sense of Self manifests and makes itself known in our tightly held, limited views and opinions. It’s as if we’re looking at the sky through a straw—blind to the spaciousness, opportunity and freedom beyond our limited perspective. Yes, that’s the sky we see, but it’s only a tiny circle of it. Yet we assume it’s the whole sky, and take it as the capital “T” truth. This is how it is that we move through the world.

Sometimes it takes bumping up against the edges of our circle to notice how uncomfortable and claustrophobic it has become. Maybe we get promoted and are faced with new challenges we don’t know how to address. Maybe we get downsized or criticized or find the same “old” issues coming back to haunt us. Or maybe we’ve reached the peak of our professional success, only to discover we’re still not satisfied. At some point we inevitably encounter the pinch of the tight little world we inhabit. We may have a vague sense that there must be another way—there must be a broader horizon out there somewhere, but we don’t know how to find it.

Our task as coaches is to help widen the circle—opening our clients to new possibilities and potential; inviting them to see and inhabit more of the sky. A coaching relationship is a place where the coach sheds light on the client’s “blind spots,” challenging and stretching their fixed views of themselves, others and the world. This is work which none of us can do alone. It’s only together that we can expand our sky.

About the Author

Pamela Weiss, MCC, is a professional coach and meditation teacher. She is the founder of An Appropriate Response and a senior course leader at New Ventures West, a coach training company based in San Francisco.

She has coached leaders and executives and designed coaching programs for a wide variety of corporate and non-profit organizations including Intel, Sun Microsystems, Oracle, Pacific Bell, Kaiser Permanente, Turner Construction, Women’s Initiative for Self-Employment, San Francisco Zen Center and Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

Pamela’s coaching reflects the integral approach of New Ventures West and draws upon twenty years of Buddhist practice, including five years of monastic training. Through An Appropriate Response, she leads classes and retreats on meditation and spiritual development. She lives in San Francisco with her husband and is an avid bicyclist.