Parker

EVERYDAY ZEN

LOVE AND WORK

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Beginning Zen Practice

My dog doesn't worry about the meaning of life. She may worry if she doesn't get her breakfast, but she doesn't sit around worrying about whether she will get fulfilled or liberated or enlightened. As long as she gets some food and a little affection, her life is fine. But we human beings are not like dogs. We have self-centered minds which get us into plenty of trouble. If we do not come to understand the error in the way we think, our self-awareness, which is our greatest blessing, is also our downfall.

To some degree we all find life difficult, perplexing, and oppressive. Even when it goes well, as it may for a time, we worry that it probably won't keep on that way. Depending on our personal history, we arrive at adulthood with very mixed feelings about this life. If I were to tell you that your life is already perfect, whole, and complete just as it is, you would think I was crazy. Nobody believes his or her life is perfect. And yet there is something within each of us that basically knows we are boundless, limitless. We are caught in the contradiction of finding life a rather perplexing puzzle which causes us a lot of misery, and at the same time being dimly aware of the boundless, limitless nature of life. So we begin looking for an answer to the puzzle.

The first way of looking is to seek a solution outside ourselves. At first this may be on a very ordinary level. There are many people in the world who feel that if only they had a bigger car, a nicer house, better vacations, a more understanding boss, or a more interesting partner, then their life would work. We all go through that one. Slowly we wear out most of our "if onlies." "If only I had this, or that, then my life would work." Not one of us isn't, to some degree, still wearing out our "if onlies." First of all we wear out those on the gross levels. Then we shift our search to more subtle levels. Finally, in looking for the thing outside of ourselves that we

hope is going to complete us, we turn to a spiritual discipline. Unfortunately we tend to bring into this new search the same orientation as before. Most people who come to the Zen Center don't think a Cadillac will do it, but they think that enlightenment will. Now they've got a new cookie, a new "if only." "If only I could understand what realization is all about, I would be happy." "If only I could have at least a little enlightenment experience, I would be happy." Coming into a practice like Zen, we bring our usual notions that we are going to get somewhere—become enlightened—and get all the cookies that have eluded us in the past.

Our whole life consists of this little subject looking outside itself for an object. But if you take something that is limited, like body and mind, and look for something outside it, that something becomes an object and must be limited too. So you have something limited looking for something limited and you just end up with more of the same folly that has made you miserable.

We have all spent many years building up a conditioned view of life. There is "me" and there is this "thing" out there that is either hurting me or pleasing me. We tend to run our whole life trying to avoid all that hurts or displeases us, noticing the objects, people, or situations that we think will give us pain or pleasure, avoiding one and pursuing the other. Without exception, we all do this. We remain separate from our life, looking at it, analyzing it, judging it, seeking to answer the questions, "What am I going to get out of it? Is it going to give me pleasure or comfort or should I run away from it?" We do this from morning until night. Underneath our nice, friendly facades there is great unease. If I were to scratch below the surface of anyone I would find fear, pain, and anxiety running amok. We all have ways to cover them up. We overeat, over-drink, overwork; we watch too much television. We are always doing something to cover up our basic existential anxiety. Some people live that way until the day they die. As the years go by, it gets worse and worse. What might not look so bad when you are twenty-five looks awful by the time you are fifty. We all know people who might as well be dead; they have so contracted into their limited viewpoints that it is as painful for those around

them as it is for themselves. The flexibility and joy and flow of life are gone. And that rather grim possibility faces all of us, unless we wake up to the fact that we need to work with our life, we need to practice. We have to see through the mirage that there is an "I" separate from "that." Our practice is to close the gap. Only in that instant when we and the object become one can we see what our life is.

Enlightenment is not something you achieve. It is the absence of something. All your life you have been going forward after something, pursuing some goal. Enlightenment is dropping all that. But to talk about it is of little use. The practice has to be done by each individual. There is no substitute. We can read about it until we are a thousand years old and it won't do a thing for us. We all have to practice, and we have to practice with all of our might for the rest of our lives.

What we really want is a natural life. Our lives are so unnatural that to do a practice like Zen is, in the beginning, extremely difficult. But once we begin to get a glimmer that the problem in life is not outside ourselves, we have begun to walk down this path. Once that awakening starts, once we begin to see that life can be more open and joyful than we had ever thought possible, we want to practice.

We enter a discipline like Zen practice so that we can learn to live in a sane way. Zen is almost a thousand years old and the kinks have been worked out of it; while it is not easy, it is not insane. It is down to earth and very practical. It is about our daily life. It is about working better in the office, raising our kids better, and having better relationships. Having a more sane and satisfying life must come out of a sane, balanced practice. What we want to do is to find some way of working with the basic insanity that exists because of our blindness.

It takes courage to sit well. Zen is not a discipline for everyone. We have to be willing to do something that is not easy. If we do it with patience and perseverance, with the guidance of a good teacher, then gradually our life settles down, becomes more balanced. Our emotions are not quite as domineering. As we sit, we

find that the primary thing we must work with is our busy, chaotic mind. We are all caught up in frantic thinking and the problem in practice is to begin to bring that thinking into clarity and balance. When the mind becomes clear and balanced and is no longer caught by objects, there can be an opening—and for a second we can realize who we really are.

But sitting is not something that we do for a year or two with the idea of mastering it. Sitting is something we do for a lifetime. There is no end to the opening up that is possible for a human being. Eventually we see that we are the limitless, boundless ground of the universe. Our job for the rest of our life is to open up into that immensity and to express it. Having more and more contact with this reality always brings compassion for others and changes our daily life. We live differently, work differently, relate to people differently. Zen is a lifelong study. It isn't just sitting on a cushion for thirty or forty minutes a day. Our whole life becomes practice, twenty-four hours a day.

Now I would like to answer some questions about Zen practice and its relation to your life.

STUDENT: Would you expand upon the idea of letting go of thoughts that occur during meditation?

JOKO: I don't think that we ever let go of anything. I think what we do is just wear things out. If we start forcing our mind to do something, we are right back into the dualism that we are trying to get out of. The best way to let go is to notice the thoughts as they come up and to acknowledge them. "Oh, yes, I'm doing that one again"—and without judging, return to the clear experience of the present moment. Just be patient. We might have to do it ten thousand times, but the value for our practice is the constant return of the mind into the present, over and over and over. Don't look for some wonderful place where thoughts won't occur. Since the thoughts basically are not real, at some point they get dimmer and less imperative and we will find there are periods when they tend to fade out because we see they are not real. They will just wither away in time without our quite knowing how it happened. Those

thoughts are our attempt to protect ourselves. None of us really wants to give them up; they are what we are attached to. The way we can eventually see their unreality is by just letting the movie run. After we have seen the same movie five hundred times it gets boring, frankly!

There are two kinds of thoughts. There is nothing wrong with thinking in the sense of what I call "technical thinking." We have to think in order to walk from here to the corner or to bake a cake or to solve a physics problem. That use of the mind is fine. It isn't real or unreal; it is just what it is. But opinions, judgments, memories, dreaming about the future—ninety percent of the thoughts spinning around in our heads have no essential reality. And we go from birth to death, unless we wake up, wasting most of our life with them. The gruesome part of sitting (and it is gruesome, believe me) is to begin to see what is really going on in our mind. It is a shocker for all of us. We see that we are violent, prejudiced, and selfish. We are all those things because a conditioned life based on false thinking leads to these states. Human beings are basically good, kind, and compassionate, but it takes hard digging to uncover that buried jewel.

STUDENT: You said that as time goes on the ups and downs, the upsets, begin to dwindle until they just peter out?

JOKO: I am not implying that there will not be upsets. What I mean is that when we get upset, we don't hold onto it. If we become angry, we are just angry for a second. Others may not even be aware of it. That is all there is to it. There is no clinging to the anger, no mental spinning with it. I don't mean that years of practice leave us like a zombie. Quite the opposite. We really have more genuine emotions, more feeling for people. We are not so caught up in our own inner states.

STUDENT: Would you please comment on our daily work as part of our practice?

JOKO: Work is the best part of Zen practice and training. No matter what the work is, it should be done with effort and total attention

to what's in front of our nose. If we are cleaning the oven, we should just totally do that and also be aware of any thoughts that interrupt the work. "I hate to clean the oven. Ammonia smells! Who likes to clean the oven, anyway? With all my education I shouldn't have to do this." All those are extra thoughts that have nothing to do with cleaning the oven. If the mind drifts in any way, return it to the work. There is the actual task we are doing and then there are all the considerations we have about it. Work is just taking care of what needs to be done right now, but very few of us work that way. When we practice patiently, eventually work begins to flow. We just do whatever needs to be done.

No matter what your life is, I encourage you to make it your practice.

Practicing This Very Moment

I'd like to talk about the basic problem of sitting. Whether you've been sitting a short time or for ten years, the problem is always the same.

When I went to my first sesshin many years ago, I couldn't decide who was crazier—me or the people sitting around me. It was terrible! The temperature was almost 105 degrees every day of the week, I was covered with flies, and it was a noisy, bellowing sesshin. I was completely upset and baffled by the whole thing. But once in a while I'd go in to see Yasutani Roshi, and there I saw something that kept me sitting. Unfortunately, the first six months or year of sitting are the hard ones. You have to face confusion, doubts, problems; and you haven't been sitting long enough to feel the real rewards.

But the difficulty is natural, even good. As your mind slowly goes through all of these things, as you sit here, confusing and ridiculous as it may seem, you're learning a tremendous amount

about yourself. And this can only be of value to you. Please continue to sit with a group as often as you can, and see a good teacher as often as you can. If you do that, in time, this practice will be the best thing in your life.

It doesn't matter what our practice is called: following the breath, shikan-taza, koan study; basically, we're all working on the same issues: "Who are we? What is our life? Where did we come from? Where do we go?" It's essential to living a whole human life that we have some insight. So first I'd like to talk about the basic task of sitting—and, in talking about it, realize that talking is not it. Talking is just the finger pointing at the moon.

In sitting we are uncovering Reality, Buddha-nature, God, True Nature. Some call it "Big Mind." Words for it that are particularly apt for the way I want to approach the problem tonight are "this very moment."

The Diamond Sutra says, "The past is ungraspable, the present is ungraspable, the future is ungraspable." So all of us in this room; where are we? Are we in the past? No. Are we in the future? No. Are we in the present? No, we can't even say we're in the present. There's nothing we can point to and say, "This is the present," no boundary lines that define the present. All we can say is, "We are this very moment." And because there's no way of measuring it, defining it, pinning it down, even seeing what it is, it's immeasurable, boundless, infinite. It's what we are.

Now, if it's as simple as that, what are we all doing here? I can say, "This very moment." That sounds easy doesn't it? Actually it's not. To really see it is not so easy, or we wouldn't all be doing this.

Why isn't it easy? Why can't we see it? And what is necessary so that we can see it? Let me tell you a little story.

Many years ago I was a piano major at Oberlin Conservatory. I was a very good student; not outstanding, but very good. And I very much wanted to study with one teacher who was undoubtedly the best. He'd take ordinary students and turn them into fabulous pianists. Finally I got my chance to study with *the* teacher.

When I went in for my lesson I found that he taught with two pianos. He didn't even say hello. He just sat down at his piano and

played five notes, and then he said, "You do it." I was supposed to play it just the way he played it. I played it—and he said, "No." He played it again, and I played it again. Again he said, "No." Well, we had an hour of that. And each time he said, "No."

In the next three months I played about three measures, perhaps half a minute of music. Now I had thought I was pretty good: I'd played soloist with little symphony orchestras. Yet we did this for three months, and I cried most of those three months. He had all the marks of a real teacher, that tremendous drive and determination to make the student see. That's why he was so good. And at the end of three months, one day, he said, "Good." What had happened? Finally, I had learned to listen. And as he said, if you can hear it, you can play it.

What had happened in those three months? I had the same set of ears I started with; nothing had happened to my ears. What I was playing was not technically difficult. What had happened was that I had learned to listen for the first time . . . and I'd been playing the piano for many years. I learned to pay attention. That was why he was such a great teacher: he taught his students to pay attention. After working with him they really heard, they really listened. When you can hear it, you can play it. And finished, beautiful pianists would finally come out of his studio.

It's that kind of attention which is necessary for our Zen practice. We call it samadhi, this total oneness with the object. But in my story that attention was relatively easy. It was with an object that I liked. This is the oneness of any great art, the great athlete, the person who passes well on the football field, the person who does well on the basketball court, anybody like that who has to learn to pay attention. It's that kind of samadhi.

Now that's one kind, and it's valuable. But what we have to do in Zen practice is much harder. We have to pay attention to this very moment, the totality of what is happening right now. And the reason we don't want to pay attention is because it's not always pleasant. It doesn't suit us.

As human beings we have a mind that can think. We remember what has been painful. We constantly dream about the future,

about the nice things we're going to have, or are going to happen to us. So we filter anything happening in the present through all that: "I don't like that. I don't have to listen to that. And I can even forget about it and start dreaming of what's going to happen." This goes on constantly: spinning, spinning, spinning, always trying to create life in a way that will be pleasant, that would make us safe and secure, so we feel good.

But when we do that we never see this right-here-now, this very moment. We can't see it because we're filtering. What's coming in is something quite different. Just ask any ten people who read this book. You'll find they all tell you something different. They'll forget the parts that don't quite catch them, they'll pick up something else, and they'll even block out the parts they don't like. Even when we go to our Zen teacher we hear only what we want to hear. Being open to a teacher means not just hearing what you want to hear, but hearing the whole thing. And the teacher's not there simply to be nice to you.

So the crux of zazen is this: all we must do is constantly to create a little shift from the spinning world we've got in our heads to right-here-now. That's our practice. The intensity and ability to be right-here-now is what we have to develop. We have to be able to develop the ability to say, "No, I won't spin off up here" to make that choice. Moment by moment our practice is like a choice, a fork in the road: we can go this way, we can go that way. It's always a choice, moment by moment, between our nice world that we want to set up in our heads and what really is. And what really is, at a Zen sesshin, is often fatigue, boredom, and pain in our legs. What we learn from having to sit quietly with that discomfort is so valuable that if it didn't exist, it should. When you're in pain, you can't spin off. You have to stay with it. There's no place to go. So pain is really valuable.

Our Zen training is designed to enable us to live comfortable lives. But the only people who live comfortably are those who learn not to dream their lives away, but to be with what's right-here-now, no matter what it is: good, bad, nice, not nice, headache, being ill, being happy. It doesn't make any difference.

One mark of a mature Zen student is a sense of groundedness. When you meet one you sense it. They're with life as it's really happening, not as a fantasy version of it. And of course, the storms of life eventually hit them more lightly. If we can accept things just the way they are, we're not going to be greatly upset by anything. And if we do become upset it's over more quickly.

Let's look at the sitting process itself. What we need to do is to be with what's happening right now. You don't have to believe me; you can experiment for yourself. When I am drifting away from the present, what I do is listen to the traffic. I make sure there's nothing I miss. Nothing. I just really listen. And that's just as good as a koan, because it's what's happening this very moment. So as Zen students you have a job to do, a very important job: to bring your life out of dreamland and into the real and immense reality that it is.

The job is not easy. It takes courage. Only people who have tremendous guts can do this practice for more than a short time. But we don't do it just for ourselves. Perhaps we do at first; that's fine. But as our life gets grounded, gets real, gets basic, other people immediately sense it, and what we are begins to influence everything around us.

We are, actually, the whole universe. But until you see that clearly, you have to work with what your teacher tells you to work with, having some faith in the total process. It's not only faith, it's also something like science. Others before you have done the experiment, and they've had some results from that. About all you can do is say, "Well, at least I can try the experiment. I can do it. I can work hard." That much any of us can do.

The Buddha is nothing but exactly what you are, right now: hearing the cars, feeling the pain in your legs, hearing my voice; that's the Buddha. You can't catch hold of it; the minute you try to catch it, it's changed. Being what we are at each moment means, for example, fully being our anger when we are angry. That kind of anger never hurts anybody because it's total, complete. We really feel this anger, this knot in our stomach, and we're not going to hurt anybody with it. The kind of anger that hurts people is when we smile sweetly and underneath we're seething.

When you sit, don't expect to be noble. When we give up this spinning mind, even for a few minutes, and just sit with what is, then this presence that we are is like a mirror. We see everything. We see what we are: our efforts to look good, to be first, or to be last. We see our anger, our anxiety, our pomposity, our so-called spirituality. Real spirituality is just being with all that. If we can really be with Buddha, who we are, then it transforms.

Shibayama Roshi said once in sesshin, "This Buddha that you all want to see, this Buddha is very shy. It's hard to get him to come out and show himself." Why is that? Because the Buddha is ourselves, and we'll never see the Buddha until we're no longer attached to all this extra stuff. We've got to be willing to go into ourselves honestly. When we can be totally honest with what's happening right now, then we'll see it. We can't have just a piece of the Buddha. Buddhas come whole. Our practice has nothing to do with, "Oh, I should be good, I should be nice, I should be this . . . or that." I *am* who I am right now. And that very state of being is the Buddha.

I once said something in the zendo that upset a lot of people: I said, "To do this practice, we have to give up hope." Not many were happy about that. But what did I mean? I mean that we have to give up this idea in our heads that somehow, if we could only figure it out, there's some way to have this perfect life that is just right for us. Life is the way it is. And only when we begin to give up those maneuvers does life begin to be more satisfactory.

When I say to give up hope, I don't mean to give up effort. As Zen students we have to work unbelievably hard. But when I say hard, I don't mean straining and effort; it isn't that. What is hard is this choice that we repeatedly have to make. And if you practice hard, come to a lot of sesshins, work hard with a teacher, if you're willing to make that choice consistently over a period of time, then one day you'll get your first little glimpse. This first little glimpse of what this very moment is. And it might take one year, two years, or ten years.

Now that's the beginning. That one little glimpse takes a tenth of a second. But just that isn't enough. The enlightened life is see-

ing that all the time. It takes years and years and years of work to transform ourselves to the point where we can do that.

I don't mean to sound discouraging. You might feel you probably don't have enough years left to do it. But that's not the point. At every point in our practice it's perfect. And as we practice life steadily becomes more fulfilling, more satisfactory, better for us, better for other people. But it's a long, long continuum. People have some silly idea that they're going to be enlightened in two weeks.

Already we are the Buddha. There's just no doubt about that. How could we be anything else? We're all right here now. Where else could we be? But the point is to realize clearly what that means; this total oneness; this harmony; and to be able to express that in our lives. That's what takes endless work and training. It takes guts. It's not easy. It takes a real devotion to ourselves and to other people.

Now of course, as we practice, all these things grow, even the guts. We have to sit with pain and we hate it. I don't like it either. But as we patiently just sit our way through that, something builds within us. Working with a good teacher, seeing what she or he is, we are slowly transformed in this practice. It's not by anything we think, not by something we figure out in our heads. We're transformed by what we do. And what is it that we do? We constantly make that choice. We give up our ego-centered dreams for this reality that we really are.

We may not understand it at first; it may be confusing. When I first heard talks by teachers I'd think, "What *are* they talking about?" But have enough faith to just do your practice: Sit every day. Go through the confusion. Be very patient. And respect yourself for doing this practice. It's not easy. Anyone who sits through a Zen sesshin is to be congratulated. I'm not trying to be hard on you; I think people who come to this practice are amazing people. But it's your job to take that quality you have and work with it.

We're all just babies. The extent to which we can grow is boundless. And eventually, if we're patient enough, and work hard

enough, we have some possibility of making a real contribution to the world. In this oneness that we finally learn to live in, that's where the love is; not some kind of a soupy version, but a love with real strength. We want it for our lives, and we want it for other people's lives. We want it for our children, our parents, our friends. So it's up to us to do the work.

So that's the process. Whether we choose to do it is up to us. The process may not be clear to many of you; it takes years before it becomes clear, so that you really know what you're doing. Just do the best you can. Stay with your sitting. Come to sesshin, come to sit, and let's all do our best. It's really important: this total transformation of the quality of human life is the most important thing we can do.

Authority

After years of talking to many, many people I'm still amazed that we make such a problem of our life and practice. And there is *no* problem. But saying that is one thing, seeing it is quite another. The last words of the Buddha were, "Be a lamp unto yourself." He didn't say, "Go running to this teacher or that teacher, to this center or that center"—he said, "Look—be a lamp unto yourself."

What I want to discuss here is the problem of "authority." Usually we're either an authority to others (telling them what to do), or we're seeking someone to be an authority for us (telling us what to do). And yet we would never be looking for an authority if we had any confidence in ourselves and our understanding. Particularly when there is something in our life that is unpleasant or baffling or upsetting, we think we need to go to a teacher or authority who can tell us what to do. I'm always amused that when a new teacher comes to town, everyone goes running to see him or her. I'll tell you how far I'd walk to see a new teacher:

maybe across the room, no farther! It isn't because I have no interest in this person; it's just that there is *no one* who can tell me about my life except—who? There *is* no authority outside of my experience.

But you may say, "Well, I need a teacher who can free me from my suffering. I'm hurting and I don't understand it. I need someone who can tell me what to do, don't I?" No! You may need a guide, you may need it made clear how to practice with your life—what is needed is a guide who will make it clear to you that the authority in your life, your true teacher, is you—and we practice to realize this "you."

There is only one teacher. What is that teacher? Life itself. And of course each one of us is a manifestation of life; we couldn't be anything else. Now life happens to be both a severe and an endlessly kind teacher. It's the only authority that you need to trust. And this teacher, this authority, is everywhere. You don't have to go to some special place to find this incomparable teacher, you don't have to have some especially quiet or ideal situation: in fact, the messier it is, the better. The average office is a great place. The average home is perfect. Such places are pretty messy most of the time—we all know from firsthand experience! That is where the authority, the teacher is.

This is a very radical teaching, not for everyone. People often turn away from such a teaching; they don't want to hear it. What do they want to hear? What do *you* want to hear? Until we're ready (which usually means, until we have suffered and have been willing to learn from the suffering) we're like baby birds in a nest. What do baby birds do? They open their mouths upward and wait to be fed. And we say, "Please stuff your wonderful teaching into me. I'll hold my mouth open, but you put it in." What we are saying is, "When will Mommy and Daddy come? When will a great teacher, a supreme authority, come and stuff me with that which will end my pain, my suffering?" The news is, Mommy and Daddy have already come! Where *are* Mommy and Daddy? Right here. Our life is always here! But since my life may look to me like discomfort, even dreariness, loneliness, depression, if I actually

were to face that (life as it is), who would want that? Almost no one. But when I can begin to experience this very moment, the true teacher—when I can honestly *be* each moment of my life, what I think, feel—this experiencing will settle itself into "just this," the joyful samadhi of life, the word of God. And that *is* Zen practice, and we don't even have to use the word "Zen."

This Mommy and Daddy that we've been waiting for are already here—right here. We can't avoid the authority even if we want to. When we go to work, it's right there; when we're with our friends, it's right there; when with our family, it's right there. "Do zazen constantly; pray constantly." If we understand that each moment of our life is the teacher, we can't avoid doing that. If we *truly* are each moment of our life there is no room for an outside influence or authority. Where could it be? When I am just my own suffering where is the authority? The attention, the experiencing *is* the authority, and it is also the clarification of the action to be done.

There is one final little illusion that we all tend to play with in this question of authority, and it is, "Well, I'll be my *own* authority, thank you. No one is going to tell *me* what to do." What is the falsity in this? "I'll be my own authority! I'll develop my own concepts about life, my own ideas of what Zen practice is"—we're all full of this nonsense. If I attempt to be my own authority (in this narrow sense), I am just as much a slave as if I let someone else be the authority. But if you are not the authority and I am not the authority, then what? We've already talked about this but, if it's not understood clearly, we may be floundering in quicksand. How do you see it?

The Bottleneck of Fear

The limitations of life are present at conception. In the genetic factors themselves are limitations: we are male or female, we have

tendencies to certain diseases or bodily weaknesses. All the genetic strands come together to produce a certain temperament. It's evident to any mother carrying a child that there is a tremendous difference between babies even before birth. But for our purposes we may begin with the baby at birth. To adult eyes a newborn baby seems open and unconditioned. In its early weeks of life, a baby's imperative is to survive. Just listen to a newborn baby scream—it can easily run the whole household. I can't think of anything else that has the riveting quality of the screaming of a newborn. When I hear that sound I want to do something, anything, to stop it. But it doesn't take long for baby to learn that, in spite of its strenuous efforts, life isn't always pleasant. I remember dropping my oldest son on his head when he was six weeks old. I thought I was such an expert new mother, but he was soapy and. . . .

Very early we all begin our attempt to protect ourselves against the threatening occurrences that pop up regularly. In the fear caused by them, we begin to contract. And the open, spacious character of our young life feels pushed through a funnel into a bottleneck of fear. Once we begin to use language the rapidity of this contracting increases. And particularly as our intelligence grows, the process becomes really speedy: now we not only try to handle the threat by storing it in every cell of our body, but (using memory) we relate each new threat to all of the previous ones—and so the process compounds itself.

We are all familiar with the process of conditioning: suppose that when I was a little girl a redheaded, big and tough, five-year-old boy snatched my favorite toy; I was frightened—and conditioned. Now every time a person with red hair passes through my life I feel uneasy for no obvious reason. Could we say then that conditioning is the problem? No, not exactly. Conditioning, even when often repeated, fades in time. For that reason, the person who says, "If you knew what my life has been like, it's no wonder I'm such a mess—I'm so conditioned by fear, it's hopeless," isn't grasping the real problem. What *is* true is that—yes—we all have been repeatedly conditioned and, under the influence of those

incidents, we slowly revise our ideas of who we are. Having been threatened in our openness and spaciousness, we make a decision that our self is the contraction of fear. I revise my notions of myself and the world and define a new picture of myself; and whether that new picture is one of compliance or noncompliance or withdrawal doesn't make much difference. What makes the difference is my blind decision that I now must fulfill my contracted picture of myself in order to survive.

The bottleneck of fear isn't caused by the conditioning, but by the decision about myself I have reached based on that conditioning. Fortunately, because that decision is composed of our thoughts and reflected in bodily contraction, it can be my teacher when I experience myself in this present moment. I don't necessarily need an intellectual knowledge of what my conditioning has been, although this can be helpful. What I do need to know is what sorts of thoughts I persist in entertaining right now, today, and what bodily contractions I have right now, today. In noticing the thoughts and in experiencing the bodily contractions (doing zazen), the bottleneck of fear is illuminated. And as I do this my false identification with a limited self (the decision) slowly fades. More and more I can be who I truly am: a no-self, an open and spacious response to life. My true self, so long deserted and forgotten, can function, now that I can see that the bottleneck of fear is an illusion.

I'm reminded at this point of the two famous verses about a mirror (one by a monk who was a fine student of the Fifth Patriarch, and the other by an unknown who would become the Sixth Patriarch). These verses were composed so that the Fifth Patriarch could judge whether or not the writer had true realization. The monk's verse (the one that was not accepted by the Fifth Patriarch as the truth) stated that practice consists of polishing the mirror; in other words, by removing the dust of our deluded thoughts and actions from the mirror, it can shine (we are purified). The other verse (the one that revealed to the Fifth Patriarch the deep understanding of the man he would choose as his successor) stated that from the very beginning "there is no mirror-stand, no mirror to polish, and no place where dust can cling. . ."

Now while the verse of the Sixth Patriarch is the true understanding, the paradox for us is that we have to practice with the verse that was *not* accepted: we do have to polish the mirror; we do have to be aware of our thoughts and actions; we do have to be aware of our false reactions to life. Only by doing so can we see that from the beginning the bottleneck of fear *is* an illusion. And it is obvious that we do not have to struggle to rid ourselves of an illusion. But we can't and won't know that unless we relentlessly polish the mirror.

Sometimes people say, "Well, there's nothing that need be done. No practice (polishing) is necessary. If you see clearly enough, such practice is nonsense." Ah. . . but we *don't* see clearly enough and, when we fail to see clearly, we create merry mayhem for ourselves and others. We do have to practice, we do have to polish the mirror, until we know in our guts the truth of our life. Then we can see that from the very beginning, nothing was needed. Our life is always open and spacious and fruitful. But let's not fool ourselves about the amount of sincere practice we must do before we see this as clearly as the nose on our face.

What I am presenting to you is really an optimistic view of practice, even though at times the doing will be discouraging and difficult. But again the question is, do we have a lot of choice? Either we die—because if we remain very long in the bottleneck of fear we will be strangled to death—or we slowly gain comprehension by experiencing the bottleneck and going through it. I don't think we have a lot of choice. How about you?

II. PRACTICE

What Practice Is Not

Many people practice and have strong ideas of what practice *is*. What I want to do is to state (from my point of view) what practice is *not*.

First, practice is not about producing psychological change. If we practice with intelligence, psychological change *will* be produced; I'm not questioning that—in fact, it's wonderful. I am saying that practice is not done in order to produce such change.

Practice is not about intellectually knowing the physical nature of reality, what the universe consists of, or how it works. And again, in serious practice, we will tend to have some knowledge of such matters. But that is not what practice is.

Practice is not about achieving some blissful state. It's not about having visions. It's not about seeing white lights (or pink or blue ones). All of these things may occur, and if we sit long enough they probably will. But that is not what practice is about.

Practice is not about having or cultivating special powers. There are many of these and we all have some of them naturally; some people have them in extra measure. At the Zen Center of Los Angeles (ZCLA) I sometimes had the useful ability to see what was being served for dinner two doors away. If they were having something I didn't like, I didn't go. Such abilities are little oddities, and again they are not what practice is about.

Practice is not about personal power or *jōriki*, the strength that is developed in years of sitting. Again, *jōriki* is a natural byproduct of zazen. And again it is not the way.

Practice is not about having nice feelings, happy feelings. It's not about feeling good as opposed to feeling bad. It's not an attempt to be anything special or to feel anything special. The product of practice or the point of practice or what practice is

about is not to be always calm and collected. Again, we tend to be much more so after years of practice, but it is not the point.

Practice is not about some bodily state in which we are never ill, never hurt, one in which we have no bothersome ailments. Sitting tends to have health benefits for many people, though in the course of practice there may be months or even years of health disasters. But again, seeking perfect health is not the way; although by and large, over time, there will be a beneficial effect on health for most people. But no guarantees!

Practice is not about achieving an omniscient state in which a person knows all about everything, a state in which a person is an authority on any and all worldly problems. There may be a little more clarity on such matters, but clever people have been known to say and do foolish things. Again, omniscience is not the point.

Practice is not about being "spiritual," at least not as this word is often understood. Practice is not about being *anything*. So unless we see that we cannot aim at being "spiritual," it can be a seductive and harmful objective.

Practice is not about hightlighting all sorts of "good" qualities and getting rid of the so-called "bad" ones. No one is "good" or "bad." The struggle to be good is not what practice is. That type of training is a subtle form of athleticism.

We could continue our listing almost endlessly. Actually anyone in practice has some of these delusions operating. We all hope to change, to get somewhere! That in itself is the basic fallacy. But just contemplating this desire begins to clarify it, and the practice basis of our life alters as we do so. We begin to comprehend that our frantic desire to get better, to "get somewhere," is illusion itself, and the source of suffering.

If our boat full of hope, illusions, and ambition (to get somewhere, to be spiritual, to be perfect, to be enlightened) is capsized, what is that empty boat? Who are we? What, in terms of our lives, can we realize? And what *is* practice?

What Practice Is

Practice is very simple. That doesn't mean it won't turn our life around, however. I want to review what we do when we sit, or do zazen. And if you think you're beyond this, well, you can think you're beyond this.

Sitting is essentially a simplified space. Our daily life is in constant movement: lots of things going on, lots of people talking, lots of events taking place. In the middle of that, it's very difficult to sense what we are in our life. When we simplify the situation, when we take away the externals and remove ourselves from the ringing phone, the television, the people who visit us, the dog who needs a walk, we get a chance—which is absolutely the most valuable thing there is—to face ourselves. Meditation is not about some state, but about the meditator. It's not about some activity, or about fixing something, or accomplishing something. It's about ourselves. If we don't simplify the situation the chance of taking a good look at ourselves is very small—because what we tend to look at isn't ourselves, but everything else. If something goes wrong, what do we look at? We look at what's going wrong, and usually at others we think have made it go wrong. We're looking *out there* all the time, and not at ourselves.

When I say meditation is about the meditator, I do not mean that we engage in self-analysis. That's not it either. So what *do* we do?

Once we have assumed our best posture (which should be balanced, easy), we just sit there, we do zazen. What do I mean by "just sit there"? It's the most demanding of all activities. Usually in meditation we don't shut our eyes. But right now I'd like you to shut your eyes and just *sit* there. What's going on? All sorts of things. A tiny twitch in your left shoulder; a pressure in your side . . . Notice your face for a moment. Feel it. Is it tense anywhere? Around the mouth, around the forehead? Now move down a bit. Notice your neck, just feel it. Then your shoulders, your back, chest, abdominal area, your arms, thighs. Keep feeling

whatever you find. And feel your breath as it comes and goes. Don't try to control it, just feel it. Our first instinct is to try to control the breath. Just let your breath be as it is. It may be high in your chest, it may be in the middle, it may be low. It may feel tense. Just experience it as it is. Now just feel all of that. If a car goes by outside, hear it. If a plane flies over, notice that. You might hear a refrigerator going on and off. Just be that. That's all you have to do, absolutely all you have to do: experience that, and just stay with it. Now you can open your eyes.

If you can just do that for three minutes, that's miraculous. Usually after about a minute we begin to think. Our interest in just being with reality (which is what we have just done) is very low. "You mean that is all there is to zazen?" We don't like that. "We're seeking enlightenment, aren't we?" Our interest in reality is extremely low. No, we want to think. We want to worry through all of our preoccupations. We want to figure life out. And so before we know it we've forgotten all about this moment, and we've drifted off into thinking about something: our boyfriend, our girlfriend, our child, our boss, our current fear . . . off we go! There's nothing sinful about such fantasizing except that when we're lost in that, we've lost something else. When we're lost in thought, when we're dreaming, what have we lost? We've lost reality. Our life has escaped us.

This is what human beings do. And we don't just do it sometimes, we do it most of the time. Why do we do that? You know the answer, of course. We do it because we are trying to protect ourselves. We're trying to rid ourselves of our current difficulty, or at least understand it. There's nothing wrong with our self-centered thoughts except that when we identify with them, our view of reality is blocked. So what should we do when the thoughts come up? We should label the thoughts. Be *specific* in your labeling: not just "thinking, thinking" or "worrying, worrying," but a specific label. For example: "Having a thought she's very bossy." "Having a thought that he's very unfair to me." "Having a thought that I never do anything right." Be specific. And if the thoughts are tumbling out so fast that you can't find anything except confusion, then just

label the foggy mess "confusion." But if you persist in trying to find a separate thought, sooner or later you will.

When we practice like this, we get acquainted with ourselves, how our lives work, what we are doing with them. If we find that certain thoughts come up hundreds of times, we know something about ourselves that we didn't know before. Perhaps we incessantly think about the past, or the future. Some people always think about events, some people always think about other people. Some people always think about themselves. Some people's thoughts are almost entirely judgments about other people. Until we have labeled for four or five years, we don't know ourselves very well. When we label thoughts precisely and carefully, what happens to them? They begin to quiet down. We don't have to force ourselves to get rid of them. When they quiet down, we return to the experience of the body and the breath, over and over and over. I can't emphasize enough that we don't just do this three times, we do it ten thousand times; and as we do it, our life transforms. That's a theoretical description of sitting. It's very simple; there's nothing complicated about it.

Now let's take a daily life situation. Suppose you work in an aircraft plant, and you're told that the government contract is coming to an end and probably will not be renewed. You tell yourself, "I'm going to lose my job. I'm going to lose my income, I have a family to support. This is terrible!" What happens then? Your mind starts going over and over and over your problem. "What's going to happen? What shall I do?" Your mind spins faster and faster with worry.

Now there's nothing wrong with planning ahead; we have to plan. But when we become upset, we don't just plan; we obsess. We twist the problem around in a thousand ways. If we don't know what it means to practice with our worried thoughts, what happens next? The thoughts produce an emotion and we become even more agitated. All emotional agitation is caused by the mind. And if we let this happen over a period of time, we often become physically sick or mentally depressed. If the mind will not take care of a situation with awareness, the body will. It will help us out. It's as if the body says, "If you won't take care of it, I guess I've

got to." So we produce our next cold, our next rash, our next ulcer, whatever is our style. A mind that is not aware will produce illness. That's not a criticism, however. I don't know of anyone who doesn't get ill, including myself. When the desire to worry is strong, we create difficulties. With regular practice, we just do it less. Anything of which we're unaware will have its fruits in our life, one way or another.

From the human point of view, the things that go wrong in our lives are of two kinds. One kind are events outside of ourselves, and the other are things within us, such as physical illness. Both are our practice, and we handle them in the same way. We label all the thoughts that occur around them, and we experience them in our body. The process is sitting itself.

To talk about this sounds really easy. But to do it is horrendously difficult. I don't know anyone who can do it all of the time. I know of some people who can do it much of the time. But when we practice in this way, becoming aware of everything that enters our life (whether internal or external), our life begins to transform. And we gain strength and insight and even live at times in the enlightened state, which simply means experiencing life as it is. It's not a mystery.

If you are new to practice it's important to realize that simply to sit on that cushion for fifteen minutes is a victory. Just to sit with that much composure, just to be there, is fine.

If we were afraid of being in water and didn't know how to swim, the first victory would be just to lower ourselves into the water. The next step might be getting our face wet. If we were expert swimmers the challenge might be whether we can enter our hand into the water at a certain angle as we execute our stroke. Does that mean that one swimmer is better and the other worse? No. Both of them are perfect for where they are. Practice at any stage is just being who we are at that moment. It's not a question of being good or bad, or better or worse. Sometimes after my talks people will say, "I don't understand that." And that's perfect too. Our understanding grows over the years, but at any point we are perfect in being what we are.

We begin to learn that there is only one thing in life we can rely on. What is the one thing in life we can rely on? We might say, "I rely on my mate." We may love our husbands and wives; but we can't ever completely rely on them, because another person (like ourselves) is always to some extent unreliable. There is no person on earth whom we can completely rely on, though we can certainly love others and enjoy them. What then can we rely on? If it's not a person, what is it? What can we rely on in life? I asked somebody once and she said, "Myself." Can you rely on yourself? Self-reliance is nice, but is inevitably limited.

There *is* one thing in life that you can always rely on: life being as it is. Let's talk more concretely. Suppose there is something I want very much: perhaps I want to marry a certain person, or get an advanced degree, or have my child be healthy and happy. But life as it is might be exactly the opposite of what I want. We don't know that we'll marry that certain person. If we do, he might die tomorrow. We may or may not get our advanced degree. Probably we will, but we can't count on that. We can't count on anything. Life is always going to be the way it is. So why can't we rely on that fact? What is so hard about that? Why are we always uneasy? Suppose your living space has just been demolished by an earthquake, and you are about to lose an arm and all your life's savings. Can you then rely on life just as it is? Can you be that?

Trust in things being as they are is the secret of life. But we don't want to hear that. I can absolutely trust that in the next year my life is going to be changed, different, yet always just the way it is. If tomorrow I have a heart attack, I can rely on that, because if I have it, I have it. I can rest in life as it is.

When we make a personal investment in our thoughts we create the "I" (as Krishnamurti would say), and then our life begins not to work. That's why we label thoughts, to take the investment out again. When we've been sitting long enough we can see our thoughts as just pure sensory input. And we can see ourselves moving through the stages preliminary to that: at first we feel our thoughts are real, and out of that we create the self-centered emotions, and out of that we create the barrier to seeing life as it is;

because if we are caught in self-centered emotions we can't see people or situations clearly. A thought in itself is just pure sensory input, an energy fragment. But we fear to see thoughts as they are.

When we label a thought we step back from it, we remove our identification. There's a world of difference between saying, "She's impossible" and "Having a thought that she's impossible." If we persistently label any thought the emotional overlay begins to drop out and we are left with an impersonal energy fragment to which we need not attach. But if we think our thoughts are real we act out of them. And if we act from such thoughts our life is muddled. Again, practice is to work with this until we know it in our bones. Practice is not about achieving a realization in our heads. It has to be our flesh, our bones, ourself. Of course, we have to have life-centered thoughts: how to follow a recipe, how to put on a roof, how to plan our vacation. But we don't need the emotionally self-centered activity that we call thinking. It really isn't thinking, it's an aberration of thinking.

Zen is about an active life, an involved life. When we know our minds well and the emotions that our thinking creates, we tend to see better what our lives are about and what needs to be done, which is generally just the next task under our nose. Zen is about a life of action, not a life of passively doing nothing. But our actions must be based on reality. When our actions are based on our false thought systems (which are based on our conditioning), they are poorly based. When we have seen through the thought systems we can see what needs to be done.

What we are doing is not reprogramming ourselves, but freeing ourselves from all programs, by seeing that they are empty of reality. Reprogramming is just jumping from one pot into another. We may have what we think of as a better programming; but the point of sitting is not to be run by *any* program. Suppose we have a program called "I lack self-confidence." Suppose we decide to reprogram that to "I have self-confidence." Neither of them will stand up very well under the pressures of life, because they involved an "I." And this "I" is a very fragile creation—unreal, actually—and is easily befuddled. In fact there never was an "I." The point is to see

that it is empty, an illusion, which is different from dissolving it. When I say that it's empty, I mean that it has no basic reality; it's just a creation of the self-centered thoughts.

Doing Zen practice is never as simple as talking about it. Even students who have a fair understanding of what they're doing at times tend to desert basic practice. Still, when we sit well, everything else takes care of itself. So whether we have been sitting five years or twenty years or are just beginning, it is important to sit with great, meticulous care.

The Fire of Attention

Back in the 1920s, when I was maybe eight or ten years old, and living in New Jersey where the winters are cold, we had a furnace in our house that burned coal. It was a big event on the block when the coal truck rolled up and all this stuff poured down the coal shute into the coal bin. I learned that there were two kinds of coal that showed up in the coal bin: one was called anthracite or hard coal, and the other was lignite, soft coal. My father told me about the difference in the way those two kinds of coal burned. Anthracite burns cleanly, leaving little ash. Lignite leaves lots of ash. When we burned lignite, the cellar became covered with soot and some of it got upstairs into the living room. Mother had something to say about that, I remember. At night my father would bank the fire, and I learned to do this too. Banking the fire means covering it with a thin layer of coal, and then shutting down the oxygen vent to the furnace, so that the fire stays in a slow-burning state. Overnight the house becomes cold, and so in the morning the fire must be stirred up and the oxygen vent opened; then the furnace can heat up the house.

What does all this have to do with our practice? Practice is about breaking our exclusive identification with ourselves. This process

has sometimes been called purifying the mind. To "purify the mind" doesn't mean that you become holy or other than you are; it means to strip away that which keeps a person—or a furnace—from functioning best. The furnace functions best with hard coal. But unfortunately what we're full of is *soft* coal. There's a saying in the Bible: "He is like a refiner's fire." It's a common analogy, found in other religions as well. To sit through sesshin is to be in the middle of a refining fire. Eido Roshi said once, "This zendo is not a peaceful haven, but a furnace room for the combustion of our egoistic delusions." A zendo is not a place for bliss and relaxation, but a furnace room for the combustion of our egoistic delusions. What tools do we need to use? Only one. We've all heard of it, yet we use it very seldom. It's called *attention*.

Attention is the cutting, burning sword, and our practice is to use that sword as much as we can. None of us is very willing to use it; but when we do—even for a few minutes—some cutting and burning takes place. All practice aims to increase our ability to be attentive, not just in zazen but in every moment of our life. As we sit we grasp that our conceptual thought process is a fantasy; and the more we grasp this the more our ability to pay attention to reality increases. One of the great Chinese masters, Huang Po, said: "If you can only rid yourselves of conceptual thought, you will have accomplished everything. But if you students of the Way do not rid yourselves of conceptual thought in a flash, even though you strive for eon after eon, you will never accomplish it." We "rid ourselves of conceptual thought" when, by persistent observation, we recognize the unreality of our self-centered thoughts. Then we can remain dispassionate and fundamentally unaffected by them. That does not mean to be a cold person. Rather, it means not to be caught and dragged around by circumstances.

Most of us are not much like this. As soon as we get into our work day, we discover we're not at all calm. We have many emotional opinions and judgments about everything; our feelings are easily hurt. We're by no means "dispassionate and fundamentally unaffected" by what is going on. So it's extremely important to

remember that the main purpose of doing sesshin is this burning out of thoughts by the fire of attention, so that our lives *can be* dispassionate and fundamentally unaffected by outward circumstances. I don't think there's anyone here of whom that is wholly true. Yet our practice is to do that. If we truly accomplished this burning out of attachments there would be no need to sit. But I don't think anyone can say that. We need an adequate daily period of zazen in which we attend to what's going on in our minds and bodies. If we don't sit regularly, then we can't comprehend that how we wash our car or how we deal with our supervisor is absolutely our practice.

Master Rinzai said, "We cannot solve past karma except in relationship to circumstances. When it is time to dress, let us put on our clothes. When we should take a walk, let us walk. Do not have a single thought in mind about searching for Buddhahood." Somebody once asked me, "Joko, do you think you're ever going to achieve great and final enlightenment?" I replied, "I hope a thought like that would ever occur to me." There is no special time or place for great realization. As Master Huang Po said, "On no account make a distinction between the Absolute and the sentient world." It's nothing more than parking your car, putting on your clothes, taking a walk. But if soft coal is what we're burning, we're not going to realize that. Soft coal simply means that the burning in our life is not clean. We are unable to burn up each circumstance as we encounter it. And the culprit is always our emotional attachment to the circumstance. For example, perhaps your boss asks you to do something unreasonable. At that moment what is the difference between burning soft coal and hard coal? Or suppose we are looking for employment—but the only work we can find is something we dislike. Or our child gets into trouble at school . . . In dealing with those, what is the difference between soft coal and hard coal? If there isn't some comprehension of the difference, we have wasted our hours in sesshin. Most of us are here chasing after Buddhahood. Yet Buddhahood *is* how you deal with your boss or your child, your lover or your partner, whoever. Our life is always absolute: that's all there is. The truth is not

somewhere else. But we have minds that are trying to burn the past or the future. The living present—Buddhahood—is rarely encountered.

When the fire in the furnace is banked, and you want a brightly burning fire, what do you do? You increase the air intake. We are fires too; and when the mind quiets down we can breathe more deeply and the oxygen intake goes up. We burn with a cleaner flame, and our action comes out of that flame. Instead of trying to figure out in our minds what action to take, we only need to purify the base of ourselves; the action will flow out of that. The mind quiets down because we observe it instead of getting lost in it. Then the breathing deepens and, when the fire really burns, there's nothing it can't consume. When the fire gets hot enough, there is no self, because now the fire is consuming everything; there is no separation between self and other.

We don't like to think of ourselves as just physical beings; yet the whole transformation of sitting is physical. It's not some miraculous thing that happens in our head. When we burn soft coal, we are misusing our minds so that they are constantly clogged with fantasies, opinions, desires, speculations, analysis—and we try to find right action out of that bog. When something goes wrong in our life, what do we try to do? We sit down, try to figure it out, mull it over, speculate about it. That doesn't work. What does work is noticing our mental aberrations—which are not true thinking. We observe our emotional thoughts. "Yeah, I really can't stand her! She's a terrible person!" We just notice, notice, notice. Then, as mind and body quiet down and the fire burns brighter, out of that will come real thinking and the ability to make adequate decisions. The creative spark of any art is also born in that fire.

We want to think. We want to speculate. We want to fantasize. We want to figure it all out. We want to know the secrets of the universe. When we do all that, the fire stays banked; it's not getting any oxygen. Then we wonder why we're sick, mentally and physically. The burning is so clogged, there's nothing but debris coming off. And that debris doesn't just dirty us; it dirties everything. So

it's important to sit every day; otherwise the understanding of the burning process gets so dim and cloudy that the fires stay banked. We have to sit every day. Even ten minutes is better than not sitting at all. Sesshins are also essential for serious students; daily sitting may keep a low-grade fire burning, but usually it doesn't burst into a full blaze.

So let's just continue with sesshin. There's nothing you won't face before you're done with it: rage, jealousy, bliss, boredom. Watch yourself as you cling to feeling sorry for yourself; as you cling to your problems, as you cling to the "awful" state of your life. That's your drama. The truth is, we like our drama very much. People tell me they want to be free of their troubles; but when we stew in our own juices we can maintain ourselves as the artificial center of the universe. We love our drama. We like to complain and agonize and moan. "Isn't it terrible! I'm so lonely! Nobody loves me." We enjoy our soft coal. But the messiness of that incomplete burning can be tragic for me and for you. Let's practice well.

Pushing for Enlightenment Experiences

One of my favorite lines in the *Shōyō Rōku* says, "On the withered tree, a flower blooms." When all human grasping and human need are ended, there is wisdom and compassion. This is the state of a Buddha. Personally I doubt that there ever was a person who completely realized this state. Or perhaps there have been a few in the history of humankind. But we confuse people who have great power and insight with the reality of a completely enlightened Buddha. So let's look at what the process of becoming a Buddha might be, working backwards.

For this fully enlightened (and perhaps hypothetical) being, there would be no boundaries. There would be nothing in the universe about which such a being could not say without qualification, *Namu Dai Bosa*, "Unite with Great Enlightened Being." You and I cannot say this truly for everything. All we can do is to extend our ability to do so. But a Buddha would be one who could say that, who could be united without barrier or boundaries with everything in the universe.

Now before such complete enlightenment there's a state of a fully integrated person. Of course for this person there are still boundaries, limitations, so there is some place where that integration fails. Nonetheless that's what you might call mind/body integration, wonderful and rare. Most of us are in some of the stages leading up to that, which means we cannot own even our own bodies completely. Any tension in the body means that we cannot own it. We won't say that we *are* a body, but that we *have* a body. And then there's a state before that, when we completely disown the body, thinking we're just a mind. And there's a state before that in which we cannot even own all of our mind; we split some of it off as well.

Depending on what our conditioning is right now, we can see just so much, and we can embrace just so much. The last state I mentioned is so constricted, so narrow, that anything introduced beyond it is fearsome. If introduced too soon it's devastating. And this is where we encounter many of the odd and harmful effects of a practice. For this constricted person the universe looks like a little pinpoint of light. Introduce a light as bright as the sun and that person may go crazy, and sometimes does.

I've been at sesshins where there's screaming, yelling, pushing: you've got to *do it!* You've got to *die!* The women weep all night, the men weep all night, and for a few people who are ready for this amount of pressure, that's fine. Some people who are not ready, and who are good girls and boys, will concentrate and cut through, bypassing all those early stages of development to a point where for a moment they see, they have an "opening." Is that good? No, not necessarily. For those who are ready, that experience is the most wonderful thing in the world. They sense it before they have it and they're prepared to receive it. But for someone who is not prepared, it can be harmful. It produces no good results: in fact quite the opposite may be true.

A teacher may deliberately narrow and concentrate a student's vision by instructing the student to work on a koan like Mu.* But a person who is not emotionally ready for such an endeavor might do better to practice in a different way. Great care must be exercised; a premature enlightenment experience is not necessarily good. To have such an experience is to realize that we are nothing (no-self), and that there is nothing in the universe but change. We encounter this enormous elemental power which we are. To realize this when ready is liberating. But for a person who's not ready, it's annihilation. And even a person who is ready for such an experience may have to spend many years practicing with the bypassed levels of maturation, clearing them up.

Some teachers have had enormous experience with advanced states, but not with the earlier levels. Sure they see. But that very vision, when not integrated firmly, can create mischief, not harmony and peace.

We may believe that an enlightenment experience is like having a piece of birthday cake. "Exciting! I want to have that!" But someone has spoken of this experience as being a terrible jewel. Unless the structure is firm enough to support it, the whole structure may collapse. It's not wise to take just anyone off the street and push them. Some teachers don't understand that: they work intuitively, but without enough understanding of the differences in people. Years ago I asked a great pianist, "How can I improve the way I play this passage? I'm having difficulty with it." And she replied, "Oh. It's easy. Just do it like this." For her, that was clear and easy, but for me it was of no use; the difficulty remained.

What I'm asking is that you be patient. I meet people who have been sitting a long time, and who have power and some insight,

* Mu: a koan often assigned to beginning students as a means of focusing concentration. Its literal meaning—"no" or "nothing"—does not fully capture its significance in Zen practice.

but who are all screwed up because their development has not been balanced. And that balancing is not a simple thing to do. As we sit we come to know how complicated we are. And there may be various little eddies in our complicated selves where we need experts in other fields to help us. Zen will not take care of everything. When the intensity level of practice becomes too high, too soon, there's a danger of imbalance and we need to slow down. We shouldn't see too much too soon.

Why even talk about enlightenment? When a person is ready, when that urge to know is strong, it's obvious to the teacher and student what to do next. We need to work patiently with our lives, with our desires for sensation, for security, for power—and no one here is free of those, including myself. So I'm asking you to reexamine some of your thoughts about wanting to achieve enlightenment and to face this job that must be done with steadiness and intelligence. With patient practice our lives can constantly grow in power and also in integration, so that the power will be used for the good of all.

Every time we return our mind to the present that power develops. Every time we are really aware of our mental dreaming that power develops, slowly, slowly. Then there is a genuine calming and clarification of mind and body. It's obvious—we can recognize such people just by looking at them.

In this lifetime, if we practice well, there is the certainty of moving far along the path, perhaps with enlightenment experiences illuminating the way—and that's fine. But let's not underestimate the constant work we have to do on all the illusions that constantly interrupt our journey. Consider the Ox-herding Pictures,* for example: people want to jump from one to ten. But we can be at nine and slip right back to two. Advances are not always permanent and solid. We might be at ten for a few hours, and then the next day we're back at two. In retreats our minds get clear and quiet—but just let somebody come up and criticize us!

* The Ox-herding Pictures: a traditional series of drawings depicting the progress of practice from delusion to enlightenment, cast in the form of a man progressively taming a wild ox.

"On a withered tree, a flower blooms." Or, in the Bible, "Lest ye die, ye shall not be born again." And of course our practice is to die slowly, step by step, gradually disidentifying with wherever we're caught in. If we're caught anywhere we have not died. For example, we may identify with our family. Disidentifying with one's family doesn't mean not to love them. Or consider your husband or boyfriend or girlfriend—that need. The longer we practice, the more minimal this need becomes. The love becomes greater and the need less. We can't love something we need. If we need approval, we haven't died. If we need power, if we need to have a certain position, if it's not okay with us to do the most menial job, we haven't died. If we need to be seen in a particular way, we haven't died. If we want to have things our way, we haven't died. I haven't died in any of these ways. I'm just very aware of my attachments and I don't act on them very often. But having died means they're not there. In this sense a truly enlightened being is not human—and I don't know anyone like that. I've been around some remarkable persons during a lifetime and still I haven't met anyone like that. So let's be content to be where we are and working hard. For us to be as we are at this point in time is perfect.

As we identify ourselves with less and less, we can include more and more in our lives. And this is the vow of the boddhisattva. So the degree to which our practice ripens, to that degree we can do more, we can include more, we can serve more; and that's really what Zen practice is about. Sitting like this is the way; so let's just practice with everything we have. All I can be is who I am right now; I can experience that and work with it. That's all I can do. The rest is the dream of the ego.

The Price of Practice

When we find our life unpleasant or unfulfilling, we try to escape the unpleasantness by various subtle escape mechanisms. In such

attempts we are dealing with our lives as if there's *me* and then there's *life outside me.* As long as we approach our lives in this way we will bend all of our efforts to finding something or somebody else to handle our lives for us. We may look for a lover, a teacher, a religion, a center—something, or somebody, somewhere, to handle our difficulties for us. As long as we see our lives in this dualistic fashion we fool ourselves and believe that we need not pay any price for a realized life. All of us share this delusion to varying degrees; and it leads only to misery in our lives.

As our practice proceeds the delusion comes under attack; and slowly we begin to sense (horror of horrors!) that *we* must pay the price of freedom. No one but ourselves can ever pay it for us. When I realized that truth it was one of the strong shocks of my lifetime. I finally understood one day that only *I* can pay the price of realization: no one, no one at all, can do this for me. Until we understand that hard truth, we will continue to resist practice; and even after we see it our resistance will continue, though not as much. It is hard to maintain the knowledge in its full power.

What are some of the ways in which we evade paying the price? The chief one is our constant unwillingness to bear our own suffering. We think we can evade it or ignore it or think it away, or persuade someone else to remove it for us. We feel that we are entitled not to feel the pain of our lives. We fervently hope and scheme for someone else—our husband or wife, our lover, our child—to handle our pain for us. Such resistance undermines our practice: "I won't sit this morning; I just don't feel like it." "I'm not going to do sesshin; I don't like what comes up." "I won't hold my tongue when I'm angry—why should I?" We waver in our integrity when it is painful to maintain it. We give up on a relationship that no longer fulfills our dreams. Underneath all of these evasions is the belief that others should serve us; others should clean up the messes we make.

In fact, nobody—but nobody—can experience our lives for us; nobody can feel for us the pain that life inevitably brings. The price we must pay to grow is always in front of our noses; and we never have a real practice until we realize our unwillingness to pay

any price at all. Sadly, as long as we evade, we shut ourselves off from the wonder of what life is and what we are. We try to hold on to people who we think can mitigate our pain for us. We try to dominate them, to keep them with us, even to fool them into taking care of our suffering. But alas, there are no free lunches, no giveaways. A jewel of great price is never a giveaway. We must earn it, with steady, unrelenting practice.

We must earn it in each moment, not just in the "spiritual side" of our life. How we keep our obligations to others, how we serve others, whether we make the effort of attention that is called for each moment of our life—all of this is paying the price for the jewel.

I'm not talking about erecting a new set of ideals of "how I should be." I'm talking about earning the integrity and wholeness of our lives by every act we do, every word we say. From the ordinary point of view, the price we must pay is enormous—though seen clearly, it is no price at all, but a privilege. As our practice grows we comprehend this privilege more and more.

In this process we discover that our own pain and others' pain are not separate worlds. It's not that, "My practice is my practice and their practice is their practice"; because when we truly open up to our own lives we open up to *all* life. The delusion of separateness diminishes as we pay the price of attentive practice. To overcome that delusion is to realize that in practice we are not only paying a high price for ourselves, but for everyone else in the world. As long as we cling to our separateness—my ideas about what I am, what you are, and what I need and want from you—that very separateness means that we are not yet paying the price for the jewel. To pay the price means that we must give what life requires must be given (not to be confused with indulgence); perhaps time, or money, or material goods—and sometimes, *not* giving such things when it is best not to. Always the practice effort is to see what life requires us to give as opposed to what we personally want to give—which is not easy. This tough practice is the payment exacted if we wish to encounter the jewel.

We cannot reduce our practice simply to the time we spend in

zazen, vital though this time is. Our training—paying the price—must take place twenty-four hours a day.

As we make this effort over time, more and more we come to value the jewel that our life is. But if we continue to stew and fuss with our life as if it were a problem, or if we spend our time in seeking to escape this imaginary problem, the jewel will always remain hidden.

Though hidden, the jewel is always present—but we will never see it unless we are ready to pay the price. The uncovering of the jewel is what our life is about. How willing are you to pay the price?

The Reward of Practice

We are always trying to move our lives from unhappiness to happiness. Or we might say that we wish to move from a life of struggle to a life of joy. But these are not the same: moving from unhappiness to happiness is *not* the same as moving from struggle to joy. Some therapies seek to move us from an unhappy self to a happy self. But Zen practice (and perhaps a few other disciplines or therapies) can help us to move from an unhappy self to no-self, which is joy.

To have a "self" means we are self-centered. Being self-centered—and therefore opposing ourselves to external things—we are anxious and worried about ourselves. We bristle quickly when the external environment opposes us; we are easily upset. And being self-centered, we are often confused. This is how most of us experience our lives.

Although we are not acquainted with the opposite of a self (no-self), let's try to think what the life of no-self might be. No-self doesn't mean disappearing off the planet or not existing. It is neither being self-centered nor other-centered, but just centered. A

life of no-self is centered on no particular thing, but on all things—that is, it is nonattached—so the characteristics of a self cannot appear. We are not anxious, we are not worried, we do not bristle easily, we are not easily upset, and, most of all, our lives do not have a basic tenor of confusion. And thus to be no-self is joy. Not only that; no-self, because it opposes nothing, is beneficial to everything.

For the vast majority of us, however, practice has to proceed in an orderly fashion, in a relentless dissolution of self. And the first step we must take is to move from unhappiness to happiness. Why? Because there is absolutely no way in which an unhappy person—a person disturbed by herself or himself, by others, by situations—can be the life of no-self. So the first phase of practice should be to move from unhappiness to happiness, and the early years of zazen are mostly about this movement. For some people, intelligent therapy can be useful at this point. But people differ, and we can't generalize. Nevertheless we cannot (nor should we try to) skip over this first movement from relative unhappiness to relative happiness.

Why do I say "relative" happiness? No matter how much we may feel that our life is "happy," still, if our life is based on a self, we cannot have a final resolution. Why can there not be a final resolution for a life based on a self? Because such a life is based on a false premise, the premise that we *are* a self. Without exception we all believe this—every one of us. And any practice that stops with the attempted adjustment of the self is ultimately unsatisfying.

To realize one's true nature as no-self—a Buddha—is the fruit of zazen and the path of practice. The important thing (because only it is truly satisfying) is to follow this path. As we battle with the question of our true nature—self or no-self—the whole basis of our life must change. To adequately wage this battle, the whole feeling, the whole purpose, the whole orientation of life must be transformed. What might be the steps in such a practice?

The first, as I said, is to move from relative unhappiness to relative happiness. At best this is a shaky accomplishment, one that

is easily upset. But we must have some degree of relative happiness and stability to engage in serious practice. Then we can attempt the next stage: an intelligent, persistent filtering of the various characteristics of mind and body through zazen. We begin to see our patterns: we begin to see our desires, our needs, our ego drives, and we begin to realize that these patterns, these desires, these addictions are what we call the self. As our practice continues and we begin to understand the emptiness and impermanence of these patterns, we find we can abandon them. We don't have to *try* to abandon them, they just slowly wither away—for when the light of awareness plays on anything, it diminishes the false and encourages the true—and nothing brightens that light as much as intelligent zazen, done daily and in sesshin. With the withering of some of these patterns, no-self—which is always present—can begin to show itself, with an accompanying increase of peace and joy.

This process, though easy to talk about, is sometimes frightening, dismal, discouraging; all that we have thought was ourself for many years is under attack. We can feel tremendous fear as this turning about takes place. It may sound enchanting as it is talked about, but the actual "doing" can be horrendous.

Still, for those of us who are patient and determined in our practice, joy increases; peace increases; the ability to live a beneficial and compassionate life increases. And the life which can be hurt by the whims of outside circumstances subtly alters. This slowly transforming life is not, however, a life of no problems. They will be there. For a time our life may feel worse than before, as what we have concealed becomes clear. But even as this occurs, we have a sense of growing sanity and understanding, of basic satisfaction.

To continue practice through severe difficulties we must have patience, persistence, and courage. Why? Because our usual mode of living—one of seeking happiness, battling to fulfill desires, struggling to avoid mental and physical pain—is always undermined by determined practice. We learn in our guts, not just in our brain, that a life of joy is not in seeking happiness, but in

experiencing and simply *being* the circumstances of our life as they are; not in fulfilling personal wants, but in fulfilling the needs of life; not in avoiding pain, but in being pain when it is necessary to do so. Too large an order? Too hard? On the contrary, it is the easy way.

Since we can only live our lives through our minds and bodies, there is no one who is not a psychological being. We have thoughts, we have hopes, we can be hurt, we can be upset. But the real solution must come from a dimension which is radically different from the psychological one. The practice of nonattachment, the growth of no-self, is the key to understanding. Finally we realize that there is no path, no way, no solution; because from the beginning our nature *is* the path, right here and right now. Because there is no path our practice is to follow this no-path endlessly—and for no reward. Because no-self is everything it needs no reward: from the no-beginning it is itself complete fulfillment.