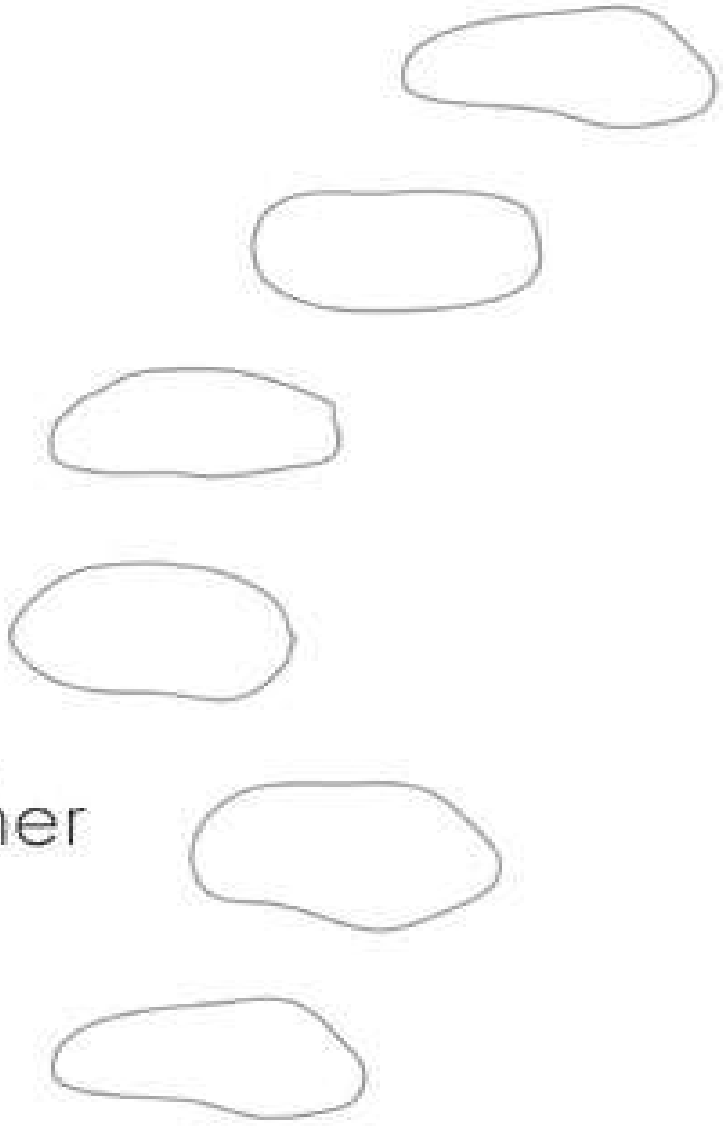
What Is Zen?

Plain Talk for a Beginner's Mind



Norman Fischer
Susan Moon

“This book is pure Zen, pure Norman, pure Sue, and pure poetry in spite of being in the form of prose: refreshingly down-to-earth, modest, razor sharp, and subtle. Zen can’t but come alive for you in the reading, and even more, in coupling your reading with practice.”

—Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of *Coming to Our Senses* and *Mindfulness for Beginners*

“This is the book I will give to those who ask about Zen. Not just beginners, but practitioners of all levels, will find in it a timely, limpid distillation of the wisdom and kindness of contemporary Zen.”

—Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara, author of *Most Intimate: A Zen Approach to Life’s Challenges*

ABOUT THE BOOK

The question-and-answer format makes this introduction to Zen especially easy to understand—and also to use as a reference, as you can easily look up just the question you had in mind. The esteemed Zen teacher Norman Fischer and his old friend and teaching colleague Susan Moon (both of them in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki, author of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*) give this collaborative effort a playful tone: Susan asks a question on our behalf, Norman answers it, and then Sue challenges him. By the time you get through their conversations, you’ll have a good basic education in Zen—not only the history, theory, and practice but also the contemporary issues, such as gender inequality, sexual ethics, and the tension between Asian traditions and the modern American reality.

NORMAN FISCHER is Senior Dharma Teacher at San Francisco Zen Center, where he was abbot from 1995 to 2000, and he is currently the director of the Everyday Zen Foundation,

which is dedicated to bringing the Zen perspective to the world outside Zen, including to Christian and Jewish religious settings. He is a highly regarded poet and translator, and his numerous books include *Opening to You: Zen-Inspired Translations of the Psalms, Taking Our Places: The Buddhist Path to Truly Growing Up*, and *Sailing Home: Using Homer's Odyssey to Navigate Life's Perils and Pitfalls*.

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NORMAN FISCHER & SUSAN MOON

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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PREFACE

When Shambhala Publications asked me to write a book about Zen for beginners, I was delighted but stymied. How could I write such a book? I wouldn't know where to start.

But then I remembered an article I'd recently written (co-written, actually) for *Inquiring Mind*, a Buddhist magazine. Sue Moon was guest editor. She wanted to do an issue on "God" and asked me to write something. "I have a lot of thoughts about that," I said. "But I wouldn't know where to start."

So Sue suggested she write some questions and I write answers to her questions. I knew her questions wouldn't be theoretical questions; they would come out of her own need, her own thoughtful experience, and out of her knowing me well. And they would be down-to-earth questions that would invite my best possible responses. It sounded like a very good idea to me, so we did it, producing what seemed like an interesting article.

So when I was stumped by Shambhala's offer to write this book, I thought of Sue and her questions. I knew that if Shambhala would agree, Sue and I could produce a much better book than one I might dream up on my own. The book you have in your hands is that book.

It turns out it is not necessarily a book only for beginners. Sue has a way of asking questions that are so simple and to the point that they cause me to say things I'd never say otherwise—livelier things, with more depth and thoroughness than I might have thought to include on my own. Also, her questions are often personal, causing me to answer more personally than I otherwise might. In this book Sue asks her own questions, questions of a Zen person with forty years' experience. She asks them on behalf of a beginner, and with a beginner's mind, but her questions are more frank and fearless than most beginners' questions would be. So this book is probably

more frank, more personal, and more fearless than Shambhala planned on.

As she says in her introduction, Sue and I have been friends for almost forty years, practicing Zen together. I am also friends with her sister Francie Shaw, who is an artist, and with Francie's husband, Bob Perelman, one of my oldest and dearest poetry colleagues. So Sue and I are Zen friends, writer friends, family friends, old friends. And that friendship pervades, I believe, the pages of this book.

This in itself is Zen. All the old texts are like this too—intimate dialogues between good friends.

INTRODUCTION

Susan Moon

This book is a conversation between old dharma friends, but it's not symmetrical; it's a question-and-answer conversation. I'm the Q and Norman is the A. And this makes sense. We are old dharma friends, yes, but Norman is also my teacher.

We have been practicing together for a long time. I've known Norman for almost forty years, since he was a gardener and I was a struggling single mother, and we were both practicing at the Berkeley Zen Center. We also know each other through the world of poetry and Buddhist writing.

We have the same first teacher—Sojun Mel Weitsman, founder and abbot of the Berkeley Zen Center, without whose steady guidance it's likely neither of us would be doing what we're doing today. Sojun, and thus both Norman and I, are in the lineage of Shunryū Suzuki Roshi, beloved founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. Our Sōtō style is simple and straightforward. It emphasizes sitting—just sitting, just being present and alive. We call this our "family style." Even those of us who never knew Suzuki Roshi, like me, feel as though we knew him through the many stories about him. People who knew him well are still among us. The books of his talks —*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* and *Not Always So*—are essential teachings with his essential voice. Both Norman and I are steeped in these teachings.

But although we have both practiced in the same Zen family for about the same length of time, our lives have embodied the practice in different ways. Norman embraced Zen full throttle from the start and entered residential practice, living first at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center and later, at Green Gulch Farm. He married a

fellow practitioner, Kathie (also now a Zen teacher), and their children grew up in the various venues of the San Francisco Zen Center. He was ordained as a priest, he received dharma transmission, and he served as abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center. I was at the ceremony when he “ascended the mountain seat” to become abbot, and what I remember most vividly is how, sitting on the traditional platform high above us, he declared, “I’m just a Jewish boy from Pennsylvania. I never expected to find myself here!”

During all these years of practice, Norman wrote and published poetry and, later, dharma essays and books. He became a sought-after teacher in spite of himself, drawing students to him through his talks and mentoring at Green Gulch. When their children were grown, Norman and Kathie moved out of the fishbowl life of community living at Green Gulch and into their own home at Muir Beach. A few years later, in 2000, Norman left the employ of SFZC, with its emphasis on residential training, and founded Everyday Zen, an international *sangha* without walls, which he continues to lead as the central teacher.

My path has been different. I have always lived in “the world.” (An odd expression, as if monasteries and practice centers aren’t in the world. Where else would they be?) When I became a Zen student, I was the single parent of two young children, so residential practice was not a practical possibility for me. And although Tassajara seemed beautiful and exotic when I first visited it, the monastery and I probably wouldn’t have suited each other back then. (That chance came later, happily for me.) I was raising my children in a noisy, semicommunal house in Berkeley that was not at all like a Zen monastery. I taught school; I worked as an editor. I questioned authority, as my bumper sticker urged.

I came to Zen out of a powerful longing to understand this life. Why did I feel so separate and alone? How could I be ready to die when the time came? There was a terrible urgency in my questioning: What’s going on here?!? I found my way to the Berkeley Zen Center, and I began getting up very early in the morning for *zazen* (*Zen* meditation), while my kids were still asleep at home and in the care of housemates. I struggled through *sesshin* (meditation

retreats). I started by signing up for the shortest kind, a one-day sitting, and even so I only lasted through the morning. But gradually I worked up to weeklong sesshins. Both the silence and the words of Zen touched me and held me—like Dōgen Zenji's *Genjōkōan*, assuring me that "the whole moon and the whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew in the grass." Maybe I wasn't so separate after all. Maybe I was connected to the whole universe. The Zen path felt like the right track.

And still, I was ambivalent, as is my wont. "I don't know if this is the religion for me," I thought to myself. "It's so patriarchal, and you have to do everything a certain way. How could I commit to something so authoritarian?" Still, I kept practicing. Finally, after nine years of this "ambivalent" devotion to practice, I had to admit that apparently I *was* committed already. Zen was in my bones. And so, in 1985, I received lay ordination: I sewed my little blue bib, called a *rakusu*, and took the precepts. I vowed to save all sentient beings.

I practiced at Tassajara, too, and at Green Gulch Farm. In 2000, when Norman started Everyday Zen, I signed right up, and my old friend became my new teacher.

For many years, I worked as the editor of *Turning Wheel*, the magazine of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and I was grateful to have work that wove together my Buddhist practice with my commitment to "work in the world." I didn't want to ordain as a priest. I didn't want to make a distinction—by special robes or lack of hair—between myself and all the other laypeople walking around in my world.

Twenty years after I took the precepts, I wanted to find a way to deepen and freshen my commitment to Zen practice, and Norman suggested I receive *lay entrustment*, a rite of passage that had just been developed by senior teachers in Suzuki Roshi's lineage, as the last marking point on the lay path. I can't practice the rituals of priest craft or lead certain ceremonies. I don't ordain students of my own. But I am now "entrusted"—by Norman—to teach Zen as a layperson.

Norman and I have an unusual and precious relationship. I have been his editor; he is my teacher. The older we get, the older our friendship becomes. Because we are contemporaries and because I knew him for so long before he became my Zen teacher, I don't put

him on a pedestal as I might if I had come to him as a beginning Zen student. I know he's a remarkable teacher, and I respect him enormously; I also know he's a regular person.

So, teacher and student, friend and friend, we offer our lopsided conversation. We are each speaking in our own voices, from our own experience.

I have always had questions about Zen practice. What's the point? Why do I have to sit in pain? Is there something the matter with me that I haven't had a transcendent experience of enlightenment while sitting zazen? Some of the questions that I ask in these pages are questions that I really *have* asked Norman, some are questions I asked of various teachers early in my practice, some are questions that have been asked of me, and a few are questions that I never dared to ask before now.

Dialogue is a good format for a book about Zen. Almost all the teaching stories or koans in Zen are in the form of dialogues—between monks, between master and student, between pilgrim and tea shop proprietress, between Buddha and his disciples. And in the forms of our practice, during our retreats, or at other times, we have dialogues. There is the tradition of *dokusan*, a private interview between teacher and student. There are also public dialogues that happen in particular ceremonies, like the *shuso* ceremony, a rite of passage in which the shuso (head student) takes a seat at the front of the *zendo* and responds, one by one, to the questions of each person present, pounding a staff when finished with each questioner. And there's the formal *shosan* ceremony, in which a teacher does the same. In these pages, thankfully, Norman does not dismiss me by striking his stick on the floor when he is finished answering a question.

In Zen dialogues, the questioner and the answerer need each other and respect each other. No question is ever finally answered; every answer cannot help but leave something out. Sometimes the teacher is the one who asks the student a question, to help the student in his or her practice: "Who is it?" "What is the leading edge of your practice?"

In these pages it's the other way around—the student asks the teacher. Whether you are the one asking or the one being asked, questions wake you up. They help you explore beyond your assumptions. They encourage "don't-know mind." Even if you receive a wonderful, inspiring answer to your question, you can't be completely finished with the question. There's always more to discover.

Before we begin our dialogic discovery, here's some historical background.

What we call "Buddhism" originated with Siddhārtha Gautama, who taught in India in about 500 B.C.E. Over the centuries, the dharma spread through Asia, and east to China, where Ch'an Buddhism developed, and on to Japan, where Ch'an became Zen. The Zen Buddhism Norman and I practice came to the United States from Japan. Norman speaks more about this history in the following pages.

Buddhism changed in each country it came to, as it adapted itself to a different culture. So, too, it has changed here in the United States since the 1950s, when Westerners went beyond an intellectual and philosophical interest in Zen and began to take up the practice itself in earnest. (One of the first places this happened was at the San Francisco Zen Center, under the guidance of Shunryū Suzuki.) Perhaps the most important change, and one I want to highlight here, is regarding the inclusion of women as equal partners in practice. In the long life of Buddhism, this is very recent history.

The first generation of Suzuki Roshi's dharma heirs were all men. Now there are many women who are teachers, maybe even more than men, not only in our own dharma family in the San Francisco Zen Center lineage, but throughout the West. (In Asian Zen, as well, women are moving toward equal opportunity, to teach and to ordain as priests.) In many Zen centers in the United States, some of the noninclusive language in our chants has been revised. We now chant the names of women ancestors along with the names of the men in the lineage. The wisdom of women Buddhist teachers of the

past, both recent and distant, which was previously hidden in the shadows, is being brought forward and published.

I believe that the inclusion of women has been good for the practice, helping to make it more open, more flexible, and more welcoming to people whose primary commitments are to family and work in the world.

There have been changes in the forms of our practice, too, as Zen has adapted to American culture. These tend to be slow, evolutionary changes, as the animal that is Zen learns to survive in a new habitat. For example, many of the chants have been translated into English. In the pages that follow, we wonder: how much change is the right amount?

At the same time—and I think I can speak for Norman, too—we love the practice we have learned, and we are faithful to it. Our conversation here honors the traditional forms and ceremonies of our Sōtō Zen family style. Some of the chants we do are in medieval Japanese. The robes our priests wear are not particularly practical; they are difficult to sew, and it takes a long time to learn to put them on properly. Yes, we have adapted many of the forms to our culture, but adapting them is different from getting rid of them. We use the same instruments—the various bells and clackers, the big drum, and the stylized wooden fish-drum called a *mokugyo*—that have been used in Japan for hundreds of years. Why do we still do these things? This is one of the questions we'll take up.

There are already a number of basic guides to Zen for Westerners, some written decades ago, others in more recent years reflecting contemporary developments. Our book differs from the classics of an earlier period—so influential for the first generation of Western practitioners—like D. T. Suzuki's essays on Zen, Philip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, or Robert Aitken's *Taking the Path of Zen* and *The Mind of Clover*. These books were more reflective of traditional Japanese Zen, since they were written when Zen had only recently been imported from Japan and hadn't had time to evolve; they are still valuable and important. Our dialogue here is more personal, and probably more frank than the more recent books written by single

authors; we are speaking in our own voices, as our individual selves, living in the United States in the twenty-first century.

We also turn our attention here to how Zen relates to contemporary issues in our world. The technological context for our Zen practice is radically different now from how it was even in the relatively recent past of Suzuki Roshi's time. Digital and communications technology is affecting the way human beings think. It changes the way we process information. It may make it harder to pay attention, to concentrate on a long-term project. I don't think I'm the only one who has become more distractible. Our sense of time is different. Everyone (including me) seems to be in a hurry. Everyone seems to be overextended. (Again, I include myself.) And all of this affects one's ability to sit still and be quiet. Is stillness possible now?

The social and environmental context in which people practice is different from what it was in Buddha's time and brings up new ethical challenges. The Buddhist precepts take on new meaning in the globalized economy. Zen has always emphasized a sense of place and taking care of the environment; there's a lot of cleaning and sweeping and raking in Zen. Layman P'ang, a Zen adept in ninth-century China, famously said that Zen practice was all about chopping wood and carrying water. Zen has always valued simple living and what we have learned to call "sustainability."

But to practice nonharming toward other human beings and the environment is more challenging now than it was in Buddha's time, when it was possible to know who had grown your food and woven your clothes, and what trees were cut down to build your house. How do we chop wood and carry water now? How do we live simply and sustainably now?

How does Zen practice still include taking care of the home place, now that we understand that the home place is the whole planet?

How can Zen help us jump right in—with whole body and whole mind—right into this place and this time? Right into life as it is?

1

WHAT'S THE POINT?

What is Zen? The word is much bandied about. Is it an interior decorating style? A way to drink tea? Does it mean simplicity? Paradox? Inscrutability? Earthenware pottery?

What is Zen? Good place to begin.

A simple answer is that Zen is Zen Buddhism, an Asian religion now practiced all over the world. Broadly, there are three forms of Buddhism: Theravada Buddhism, which emphasizes the earliest scriptures that seem to be mostly about individual liberation; Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes compassion and social concern as much as or more than individual liberation; and Vajrayana Buddhism (the Buddhism of Tibet), which adds detailed, esoteric, ritualistic practices.

Zen is a form of Mahayana Buddhism developed in China about fifteen hundred years ago (more than a millennium after the time of the historical Buddha) and exported to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam centuries before it came to the West. In China, Mahayana Buddhism met Chinese culture to make a new form of Buddhism that was both intense and formal, and at the same time simple, even poetic and funny in its literary style. Like all religions, Zen Buddhism has clergy, ritual, scripture, hierarchy, and so on.

That is the simple answer. As your question implies, the word *Zen* has been appropriated in our contemporary culture to stand for a whole host of ideas, some of which come from essential ideas and practices of Zen Buddhism. The word *Zen* implies presence,

calmness, simplicity, profound acceptance, and fully living in the present moment. These are all values implied in Zen Buddhist practice and teaching.

The quintessential practice of Zen is zazen, sitting meditation (as we'll discuss further in a while). So the word *Zen* usually carries an aura of silence and the ineffability associated with silence. Layman P'ang, a legendary figure of ancient Chinese Zen, famously said that his miraculous practice was to carry firewood and draw water. So that's "Zen" too, full attention to all activities of everyday life.

Given all this, it's easy to see why the idea of "Zen" has become so popular and so plastic.

What's the point of Zen practice?

Yes, the nitty-gritty. Zen practice refers to the various spiritual practices of Zen Buddhism: sitting meditation, retreats, talks, ceremonies, meetings with teachers, textual study—all the stuff that constitutes formal Zen practice. This is a lot of work. So yes, why would anyone want to do all this? What's the point?

Maybe people go to Zen places because Buddhism or meditation practice is fashionable (all that research about meditation and brain plasticity!). Maybe they go because they read some intriguing, puzzling, or inspiring Zen book. Maybe because they think it will make them calmer, happier, more present. Maybe for the promise of enlightenment experiences. Or maybe it's the aesthetic pleasure of simple and beautiful Zen forms and meditation halls.

Whatever the apparent reasons, I believe that there are also other reasons. There's an old Zen saying: "The fire god comes seeking fire." In other words, the buddha in you comes seeking the buddha in the practice, whether or not you realize this at first.

And what does that buddha seek? Life is impossible! We are all suffering. We will all die. And we are clueless about the real nature of this sad, beautiful, immense human life. This cluelessness is a big problem that causes us a lot of pain.

We all have some suffering. Maybe we have been successful in putting it to one side, somehow distracting ourselves or denying it. But it's there in the shadows, in the background, and we know it.

Why practice? To relieve suffering. Not that Zen practice makes us immune to suffering, cheerful all the time, but Zen practice does help us to understand our suffering, disentangle ourselves from it, and even appreciate it, so that we can cope, and thrive.

Zen practice helps us to be more present with the actual life we are living. And the more present we are, the more we see through our many projected delusions and illusions and enjoy our lives, seeing our difficulties as intriguing challenges rather than sad failures. Being alive is a gift and a responsibility. Practice helps us see and live it like that.

I've heard that you shouldn't practice with "gaining mind," that you shouldn't practice in order to get anything for yourself. Yet you've just pointed out that there are benefits to the practice. What about this idea of "no gaining"?

You often hear in Zen places (especially Sōtō Zen places, our tradition) that you shouldn't practice to get something. You should practice just to practice. For people who stay with the religion they were born into, this issue doesn't come up. Those people commonly do their practice because it's a family commitment, an identity. It's what they are used to; it's simply a part of life and always has been. You don't think of getting something out of it. You're a Christian, so you go to church. This is how people in Asia view Zen and other Buddhist traditions. They're not looking to get something out of it. It is simply their tradition, their culture, their identity.

But most Western people who come to Buddhism are looking for something. That's good. Yet looking for something stands in the way of getting what you are looking for. This is an odd paradox: you get what you are looking for but only when you stop looking for it. And what you get may not be exactly what you thought you were after in the beginning. It will be what you were really looking for but didn't know you were looking for. The fire god doesn't know fire until he finds it.

If you think about this for a moment, it makes sense. When you desperately press for some goal or aspiration, your very pressing

becomes an obstacle. You are tense, you try too hard, you are impatient, you get discouraged easily, and this hampers you.

If this is true in ordinary endeavors, how much more so in spiritual life. The liberation we seek—the relieving of suffering, increased participation and depth in our actual life—is, ultimately, liberation from ourselves, from the tyranny of our own habitual point of view that has kept us small and unhappy. When we press to "get something out of the practice," we are reinforcing everything in us that is crabby, needy, and self-centered. When we let go of our need and just relax and enjoy our practice, we begin to see its benefit.

As we go on with our discussion, we are going to see many such paradoxes and contradictions. Zen is full of them. But that's because life is full of them. And I think we are going to find that almost all these paradoxes come from our natural, but unexamined, obsession with our descriptions of things, which turn out not to be the way things actually are. On the level of concept and description, something might seem paradoxical ("to get what I am looking for I have to stop looking for it"), but on the level of living, it makes sense.

Zen practice helps you to live your actual life, not your descriptions of it.

2

ZAZEN

What is zazen and how do you do it?

Zazen is basic Zen meditation. It is radically simple and easy to do. You can practice it whether you are a Zen practitioner, a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a secular humanist, or none of the above. No matter what you believe or think, this simple practice of sitting down in silence and feeling the present moment will have a powerful impact on your life. Practicing zazen twenty or thirty minutes a day will be enough. Less can also be OK. It's best to practice in the morning, before your day begins and your mind's wheels have started spinning, but other times of the day can also be OK.

In Zen monasteries and temples, zazen is practiced formally several times a day. In sesshins (retreats) it is practiced all day, for many days in succession, from early morning till nighttime.

To practice zazen, simply sit up straight on a chair or a meditation cushion or bench while paying attention to your sitting posture, your breathing, and your mind.

If you sit on a chair, it is best to keep your feet flat on the floor and to sit evenly on the seat without using the back of the chair for support, if possible. It is easier if the chair is not too soft.

Several types of meditation cushions are available; a traditional Sōtō Zen meditation cushion is round and filled with buckwheat hulls or kapok. On a cushion, you fold your legs in one of several positions: full or half lotus (both feet or one foot in your lap);

Burmese (both feet on the mat or floor in front of you); or crossed ankles (tailor style), though this is not quite as grounded because your knees tend to float in the air and having both knees on the mat is more stable. You could also sit in a kneeling position, with the cushion set on end (tall-wise), sitting as if the cushion were a horse, with your legs to either side of it, knees and shins on the mat or floor. Or you could use one of the many meditation benches now on the market at yoga stores or online. The bench will enable you to sit with your calves and feet tucked underneath the seat.

Once you have figured out the best way to arrange your legs, sit up straight on your cushion or chair. (Unkinking and lengthening the spine is an important factor in promoting alert awareness; relaxing too much makes you sleepy.) Sitting up straight puts you in a posture of full human dignity, which in itself will promote awareness and a sense of your own nobility.

I think of this sitting upright as “allowing yourself to be lifted from within.” Rather than willfully imposing a rigid posture on yourself, you are allowing your body to be uplifted, letting this natural opening occur. To help this along, gently rotate the pelvis forward, which will arch the small of the back slightly inward. Let the crown of your head float up toward the sky; let the shoulders be square and the heart area open. This should feel like a gentle lifting, not a martial rigor. Tuck your chin in a little so that the vertebrae in your neck are not crowded.

Once you have found a balanced, upright posture, begin to pay attention to how your body feels as it sits. First, feel the pressure of your rear end on the chair or cushion. Notice the feeling of being supported from below—literally. The chair or cushion supports you, the floor supports the cushion, and the earth supports the floor: you are literally being supported by the earth when you sit. Now you can feel that support and entirely release your weight to it. Your weight connects you to the earth. (In outer space you don’t weigh anything.)

Next feel other parts of your body sitting: notice your neck and head and facial muscles; notice your shoulders and arms, your hands, your spine, your chest, your heart area. The classical Zen hand position (mudra) is left palm on top of right palm, gently curved, with the palms held in the lap, thumb tips gently touching. The upper

arms are loose at the sides, not rigid or tight. Hands and arms form an oval. Holding the hands and arms in this way gives an alert, gentle focus, awake and yet relaxed.

Now begin to pay attention to your breathing as it rises and falls in your lower belly. There's no need to create a special breath. Just be attentive to whatever breath appears—in, out, rising, falling. Usually just paying attention changes the breath slightly, making it a little slower and deeper. If it helps, you can count each breath on the exhale, lightly, from one to five, beginning again at one when you are done or when you lose count. If you don't want to count or if you get tired of it, you can just follow the breath as it comes in and out at the belly. If you get dreamy or lost, counting again will help.

Zazen is, fundamentally, sitting with the basic feeling of being alive. What constitutes the basic feeling of being alive? Being embodied, breathing, conscious—this is what it feels like to be alive. Every moment, your life and all your feelings, thoughts, and accomplishments depend on the fact that you are embodied, breathing, and conscious, but most of us hardly ever notice these experiential facts. In zazen the task is just to be present with this basic human experience and nothing else—simply sitting in awareness of the feeling of being alive.

Of course a lot of other things are going on when you do zazen—thoughts, physical sensations, emotions, memories, dreams, complaints. None of this is a problem or a mistake. The important thing is simply to return the attention to the breath and the body as soon as you notice you have forgotten about it. It's good to notice what has drawn you away, to appreciate it, and to remember that it is just exactly what had to be happening in that moment. But then, without further ado, come right back. No tears and recriminations—just come back to the feeling of being alive in the body and the breath.

And there you are.

In addition to this basic practice, and as a special application of it, Zen is also famous for a style of zazen that involves the contemplation of a koan—a Zen story, phrase, or theme. Perhaps the koan or theme might be something that arises from your life. Here the technique is to come to attention as I've just described and

then to introduce the object to be meditated on, usually by reducing it to a word or phrase that you repeat with the breath. You concentrate on it, not ignoring but not grabbing onto all your various thoughts and speculations about it, until it is reduced to its nub. Staying with that, you break through finally to release and insight.

There are many colorful stories about this practice, of students coming to teachers to present their responses to their koans and being summarily "rung out" (the teacher rings a little bell signifying the end of the interview), until some time later, after heroic effort, they finally answer the koan properly, according to the tradition. In our Sōtō Zen style of practice, we have our own gentler, more impressionistic, and less regimented version of working with koans. But mostly in Sōtō Zen we just sit with the feeling of being alive, as I have described.

How is zazen different from Christian or Jewish contemplation? And how does it differ from other forms of Buddhist meditation?

As I said, zazen practice can be and often is done by Jews, Christians, secular humanists, or anyone who feels it would be beneficial or enjoyable. For Christians and Jews, the feelings and ideas surrounding the practice usually include some reference to, and some feeling about, God or, in Christianity, Jesus. There may also be some words or prayers added to the basic sitting from time to time. For Zen practitioners there are also feelings and ideas surrounding the practice that have to do with Zen teaching and respect for the Buddha. In Dōgen's classical formulation (Dōgen is the thirteenth-century Japanese founder of Sōtō Zen), to do zazen is to actually *be*, in some ineffable way, the Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree at the moment of enlightenment. While Dōgen cautions us not to think such a thought (that would be a little arrogant), his teaching does remind us that there is something inherently sacred and profound about sitting this way.

I have been referring to the many Jews or Christians whose contemplative practice has been influenced by zazen or other forms of Asian meditation. There are also many contemplative practices native to Judaism and Christianity that may be quite different from

zazen—music for one. Chanting, singing, or meditative reading of scriptural or liturgical writings is probably the main contemplative practice of Judaism and Christianity. But both traditions also have more esoteric concentration practices that sometimes, like zazen, employ silence.

How does zazen differ from other forms of Buddhist meditation? On one hand, not much. Western Buddhism is comprised of, very broadly, three traditions that come from the three Asian forms of Buddhism I mentioned in the beginning: the Vipassana movement, which comes from Theravada Buddhism; Tibetan Buddhism, with its many schools and teachings; and Zen. Each of these three main traditions has branches and sub-branches. And within any particular branch of any tradition there will be individual differences between teachers. In short, if you go to different Buddhist places to learn meditation, you might find slightly or even widely divergent details in instructions—even within one school or even within one center with several teachers.

Still, the meditation practiced in all three traditions is pretty much the same. No matter where you go to practice meditation, it is likely that you will receive basic instructions similar to those I have given: sit still, pay attention, breathe. Details and emphasis might differ, and certainly the way the practice is presented or understood might be different, but the basic practice is not so different.

For instance, Vipassana meditation halls are usually informal; people wear casual clothing and may come in and out during a sitting. In a Vipassana retreat, you might be encouraged to examine or to purify your mind. There might be guided meditations on loving-kindness.

In Tibetan Buddhism there is often quite a bit of talking and chanting that goes along with the meditation—maybe more explanation than meditation. You might be taught to do detailed visualization exercises when you are studying particular texts—all this in a meditation hall that is probably highly decorated with colorful *tanka* (sacred paintings) and large Buddha statues.

Zen meditation halls are austere, intense, and formal. People usually (but not always) wear dark, subdued clothing. In Zen meditation you might be encouraged to be present each and every

moment, not only when sitting but as soon as you enter the hall, as you take your seat, as you leave. There will be specific instructions about how to stand, sit, and walk in the hall. No one comes late and no one leaves during a sitting.

One of the most important historical facts about Western Buddhism is that in the West for the first time all the various Buddhisms are operating side by side, and many practitioners and teachers will have significant experience in more than one kind of Buddhism. Because of this, there is a lot of mixing and matching, so the differences between the styles and schools are probably less important in the West now than they have ever been in the history of Buddhism.

How important is it to do zazen in full or half lotus? Does it really matter what position you sit in?

As I said, it does matter that you sit up straight, with full human dignity, spine lengthened, head on straight, body open and relaxed. Sitting in full or half lotus facilitates this and is worthwhile to master if you can, especially if you intend to practice Zen formally and with some intensity. But you can also sit up straight on a chair or bench. Sometimes people with injuries can't sit up straight. If so, then you sit in whatever way you can. Zazen is very much a physical practice: the body is never an insignificant detail, as if meditation were a matter of mind and spirit apart from body. Zen practice understands mind, body, and spirit as being one experience, one activity. So whatever your posture, you pay attention to it as it is.

How much pain should you sit through? Why should you sit through any pain at all? Isn't pain a signal that something is harming your body? When you touch a hot stove, it hurts and you pull your hand away to keep from getting burned.

This is an important question. To talk about it maybe we should make a distinction between easygoing everyday sitting and the more intense sitting practiced in a sesshin.

Intense sitting in a sesshin is essential for someone who wants to devote significant time and effort to Zen practice. With intense sitting

there can be a lot of challenge and insight, moments of awakening, transcendence of the usual constraints of personality, powerful development of faith, and understanding of the teachings. But intensely sitting still for long periods of time will likely involve some physical discomfort, if not pain. This is why working with pain is such an important part of classical Zen practice.

You work with pain by simply committing yourself to sitting still no matter what. I sometimes encourage practitioners in sesshins to literally take a vow at the beginning of each period of meditation that they will sit still and not move until the bell rings to end the period, and to establish a powerful connection to the breath so that when pain arises they can breathe through it, feeling the breath equally with the sensation of pain, while feeling the whole body, not just the painful part.

One of the most powerful things you learn from sitting still in the midst of pain is that pain is two things. It is of course primarily a physical sensation. But it is also the psychophysical aversion to the primary physical sensation. This aversion appears as a cacophony of resistance in the body to the pain, as well as painful emotional thinking, including blame of others (“The timekeeper forgot to ring the bell!”), self-blame (“I’m such a wimp!”), fear (“What if I can never get up again?”), despair, anger, and so on.

If you can sit still for all this and keep breathing, eventually you discover that it is the aversion, much more than the primary sensation, that hurts. Eventually you can cut through and—usually all of a sudden—drop the aversion. In that moment, astonishingly, you realize that the physical sensation itself is not so bad. Once the resistance of the mind (and the body, your tensing up to avoid the pain) dissolves, the pain is far less than it seemed to be.

Sometimes pain miraculously disappears completely, and you feel light and full of ease. But even if not, you experience that the sensation of pain can be present but that you don’t mind it. It’s just there. You accept it and it is OK.

This is a liberating experience that you will quickly begin applying to other pain in your life—spiritual pain, psychological pain, emotional pain.

So, yes, working with pain is important. On the other hand, you can't be foolish. If it seems like your sitting still too long is causing damage to knees or to nerves, then you need to back off. Notice how you are when you stand up after sitting. If there is persistent numbness or pain after you get up, that's a sign that you should back off. For the next period, you can sit still till it seems to be too much—and then sit still for five breaths more. It is unlikely that you will hurt yourself in that amount of time. After the five breaths, you can change your posture to a resting position while continuing to pay attention to your breathing, and then come back to some other posture for the remainder of the sitting. The challenge in all this comes less from the body than the mind—all the thinking and emoting. The trick is to keep things simple, take care of your body reasonably, and leave it at that. Studying your mind—your fear, your self-doubt, and so on—will make whatever pain there may be worthwhile. I am sure that doing zazen (with some basic common sense), even quite intensely, won't have any bad effects on your body.

All this is about intense sitting. In ordinary everyday sitting, pain is not an issue. If for some reason it becomes one, it is perfectly OK to move the body to a more comfortable posture if you want to. This can be done while continuing to pay attention to body, breath, and mind. Of course you can also move your body during sesshin too. Most people do when they feel they have to.

Logically, one would think that if everyday sitting is good, intense sitting must be better and more serious. But I think this isn't the case. The two are just different. Plenty of people do Zen practice without sitting sesshins. But sesshins add another dimension to your practice, and doing them will affect the feeling of your everyday sitting.

It would be nice if pain were entirely avoidable. It is easy enough to avoid it in meditation. But in the rest of our lives, pain is not avoidable. So learning to work with pain in meditation is well worth the effort.

Sometimes I get really sleepy during zazen, and I nod off constantly, over and over again. As hard as I try, I can't keep

myself awake, even if I dig the fingernails of my left hand hard into my right palm and stretch my eyes wide open. I feel ashamed, but it's not really my fault, is it? So why not accept the situation and take a nap right there in zazen?

First of all, sleepiness is just a fact, not a matter of fault. And yes, maybe you are tired and need a nap, but then you should take it on your bed, not in the zendo. But sometimes you got a good night's sleep, your day has been easy enough, yet you fall asleep in zazen anyway. In that case there must be another reason for your sleepiness. Maybe you are avoiding yourself or avoiding stillness because it is scary, or maybe you are bored with your practice or your life. Then it is better for you to go on sitting even if you have to wake yourself up again and again. I know this is unpleasant. But eventually you'll understand better what's going on with you, and you'll be able to stay awake. Or maybe you won't, and you'll keep on falling asleep for years. If that's the way it is with you, then you just have to accept that it is that way, not some other way.

There are some tricks you can try to keep awake in zazen. In a break you can take coffee, tea, or water, or you can splash cold water on your face. Sitting, you can remind yourself that life is brief and you can't afford to waste precious meditation time. In some settings, certainly at home, you can meditate standing up. These things might help.

In any case, there is a powerful virtue in simply adhering to the discipline of regular sitting, even if it doesn't seem to be doing you any good. Having a commitment to a spiritual path, expressed by your sitting, makes a big difference in your life—even if you are sleepy and feel like you're not getting anywhere.

Why do we sit facing the wall? Why not sit by a stream and look at a beautiful view, like the sages in old Chinese scrolls?

Sitting outdoors is wonderful; sitting by a stream or a mountain is wonderful, feeling the air, sensing the presence of other living beings, hearing the natural sounds. In particular, I have always appreciated the everyday contemplative practice of gazing out at a

view. What's so great about a view? Theoretically, nothing. Yet gazing out at a long, open vista is profoundly satisfying, expansive, and calming. It literally gives you perspective and a feeling of spaciousness. That's why property with a view is always more expensive!

But that practice isn't exactly the same as zazen. Zazen is simply sitting with the feeling of being alive—beyond self and other, beyond inside and outside, beyond enjoyment and lack of enjoyment. Just being alive. For that it is best to minimize external distraction, however pleasant, so it makes sense to sit looking at a wall. This is how we practice in Sōtō Zen. In Rinzai Zen practitioners usually face the center of the room.

Why do you keep your eyes open? Can I sit zazen with my eyes closed if it makes me feel more contemplative?

It's fine to sit with your eyes closed if you want. I often do. Most Vipassana and Tibetan meditators do. But if you have the problem of being sleepy in zazen, maybe sitting with closed eyes is not so good for you. The point of sitting with eyes open, the classical Zen style, is to remain present right here where you actually are.

One of the main points to be appreciated in zazen, as I noted in my last answer, is that there's no inside or outside. In Zen we typically do not speak of meditation as "going within," withdrawal from the noisy disturbing world to a more peaceful inner realm. What is "world" anyway? World is perception of world, action in world. For a person, there is no world outside of being a person. When you sit in zazen, you sit in the middle of the profound fact that outside and inside are conventions, not fundamental realities.

Take hearing a sound for instance. Is the sound outside or inside? Of course it's outside. The truck is rumbling by on the street, not in your brain. But of course it's inside. Your ear and your brain produced the sound you are hearing. But there wouldn't be a brain or an ear if there were no outside, no sounds, no air, no planet. Your whole life is like that: inside-outside. Even your breathing, your life force, is inside-outside, air coming in from outside, going out from inside.

When you close your eyes, you tend to withdraw, to go within. Forms of meditation that emphasize or assume a distinction between inside and outside will instruct you to sit with eyes closed. But in Zen, we always say to open your eyes. Don't look around; don't gawk (because then you lose the inside). Keep the eyes downcast, half open, and softly focused, so you're not looking at anything. Anyway, there's not much to see facing a wall. Still, open eyes will keep you grounded here, in an environment. As long as you are alive, you are grounded in an environment. But if you have the feeling for inside-outside pretty well, and don't get dreamy, otherworldly, or sleepy when you sit with closed eyes, then sure, close your eyes if you like.

Is it better to sit in a zendo with other people than to sit alone at home?

The best thing is to sit where and as you can. The idea that it is better to sit in a zendo with others can be quite unproductive if it results in your excusing yourself from sitting at all since the zendo is inconveniently far away.

I am always dubious about "better." It's usually a trap. Yes, it's very good to sit in a zendo with other people. The sense of community, of shared practice, is powerful and important. It can inspire you to sit with more intensity and focus. Sitting with others is a beautiful gift others are giving to you and you are giving to them. They encourage you; you encourage them. Sitting alone doesn't have these advantages.

On the other hand, sitting alone is simple and peaceful. If you can do it regularly, it gives you a powerful sense of self-respect and independence. You feel good that you are capable of such discipline in such a noble undertaking.

But sitting alone can also become too self-referential. It can be insular, isolating. It can be distorting. So I recommend a daily practice of sitting, alone if that's the way you have to do it, and sitting with others as and when you can, recognizing that sitting with others really is important. I myself, after living in Zen monastic settings for decades, now sit alone (or with my wife) on a daily basis but sit with others several times a week as well. I recognize that there are

people for whom sitting with others is impossible because they live too far away or, for some reason, simply can't get to a sitting place. In that case, it is important to listen to talks online, so you have a sense that you are not just doing this on your own, as a private matter, that there are others involved, even if you only feel them through their voices.

In maintaining a home practice, is it all right if I sit for just ten minutes every morning? What about five minutes? How long do I have to sit for it to count?

Again, I resist the idea of one way being better than another or one way being officially sanctioned while another way is not. All practice is serious and important, if the intention is sincere. I think it is good to sit for about a half hour, twenty-five minutes maybe, twenty minutes maybe, as I said earlier. In that amount of time, usually most people will settle and experience some degree of calmness or concentration. But if my saying that provides an excuse not to do it at all (because twenty to thirty minutes does not seem manageable), then yes, sit for ten minutes, five minutes. Remember that Zen practice is a spiritual or religious practice, not an exercise program. The point is not how good your performance is but simply that you are committed to doing it faithfully, regardless of how well. As I said in response to your question about falling asleep in zazen, you do make an effort to try to wake up, but if sleepy zazen is your practice, then that's just the way it is. So, yes, sit for half an hour, but if you can't, if sitting for ten minutes is your practice, then that's the way it is, and it's OK. The way it actually is, is always better than the way you think it is supposed to be. Practice is always a matter of the way it actually is, not some other way.

Can you be a Zen practitioner without sitting zazen?

This question raises another question: what's a "Zen practitioner"? And immediately we are talking about definitions. Definitions matter; otherwise, this question wouldn't arise.

Most people who practice zazen and are members of Zen sanghas would say that Zen practice requires that you do zazen.

Otherwise, you are interested in Zen, have read books about Zen, think about Zen, maybe even live what you consider to be a Zen life, but you aren't really a practitioner.

On the other hand, maybe this is too small a view of Zen practice. I feel that people are entitled to their own self-descriptions, their own senses of how they live their lives. Who am I, or any other Zen practitioner, to tell others that they can't assign the label "Zen" to their life if doing so feels right to them and inspires them in some way? I think it is entirely possible that someone could have a powerful Zen understanding and live a powerful Zen life without ever doing zazen.

Then there's the person who has spent long years sitting in zazen but no longer feels the need to sit. Such a person may be quite embedded in the Zen community, have a deep and sincere appreciation and understanding of the teachings, be moved by the rituals, but maybe now, at a later stage of practice, feels like sitting is no longer for him or her. In fact I have known practitioners for whom this has been the proper course of things.

Then too, zazen is not the only practice in Zen. Zen practice includes many other activities: chanting, prostrations, textual study, sewing robes, making offerings, and other acts of devotion and service. For some, one or more of these might be their primary practice. This was—and still is—commonly the case in Japanese Zen.

> *When I sit zazen, my mind refuses to settle. I've been told, "Let the thoughts go, and just return to the breath." I try, but I can't. The thoughts won't let* me *go. If you were inside my head, you would see what I mean. Are some people's brains better suited to Zen practice than others'? Could my difficulty be physiological?*

The instruction to "let the thoughts go and just return to the breath" is good. Even if, as you say, the thoughts won't let you go, that's OK. Just keep on letting them go, gently, persistently, and that will be zazen. You don't have to not think to do zazen.

People definitely differ in all ways, so, yes, it's possible that the way your brain works—which is partly a matter of habit, not just physiology—makes it more difficult for you to focus in zazen. Some people can sit still and focus easily; others find this almost impossible; most of us are someplace in the middle. But if you carefully consider the way Dōgen presents zazen, it turns out that these differences are not so important, because for Dōgen (and Sōtō Zen) zazen per se is being, presence itself, regardless of the particular form that presence takes. Yes, when you sit, it is absolutely essential that you make the effort to return to the breath, to stay still, present, focused. But as long as you make your best effort, it doesn't matter what happens. Maybe you are focused and still, maybe not. The important thing is you show up, you keep trying. The virtue of zazen is there. In Sōtō Zen, as I have been saying, zazen is a religious act, not a skill to master. There's no such thing as "good, better, best" zazen. I never think of it like that, and most experienced Zen people I know don't think of it like that.

What if, during zazen, I start having a lot of creative ideas about a book I'm writings? Why not follow the thread of my thoughts and take advantage of the muse's visit while I have a chance?

As a writer myself, I can appreciate your question. But zazen is for zazen's sake, not for the sake of your creative work. I seldom have ideas for poems or writing when I sit. And if I do, I quickly come back to the breath and let them go. I have no regrets about this because I have faith that when it is time for me to have an idea for writing, I will have an idea. If the idea I had while I was sitting was worthwhile, I am confident that it will come back to me when it is time. If not, then something else will come. I think this attitude is very good for my creative work. It helps me to be loose and relaxed.

I feel that zazen is essentially creative. It clears the heart, returning it to presence, to zero, to emptiness, which is the ground of creativity. In a famous metaphor, Suzuki Roshi, the Japanese founder of our lineage in America, compared zazen to turning the soil. When you sit, you're turning the soil, preparing it for planting. Turning the soil adds light and air to it. If you practice turning the soil,

your plants will grow easily and flourish. I am quite convinced that my zazen practice is essential to my work as a writer, but not in the direct way that you are suggesting.

On the other hand, it is no sin to get up from zazen (assuming you are sitting alone and won't disturb others) and write something down if you feel compelled to. Buddha probably wouldn't mind. But that doesn't mean you'd sit every day with a notebook and pen by your seat. That would be going too far.

Why do we walk so unbelievably slowly during walking meditation? I can hardly keep my balance each time I take a step.

There are fast styles of walking meditation too. The point is to pay close attention to body, breath, and mind when you are walking, just as when sitting. Walking slowly promotes this. I know what you mean about balance. So maybe walking slowly is also a good chance to develop better balance, physically as well as spiritually. If you find you just can't keep your balance no matter how hard you try, then you can skip the walking periods or go out and walk on your own, at a pace you can manage. There is always a way to practice, no matter what shape you're in.

Walking slowly is most inclusive of everyone, young and old, and, as you know, in our style of practice, we do everything together, walking in the meditation hall in single file, like a line of dignified buddhas.

But it is a style, just a particular way to practice. There are other ways as well. When you do a particular style for a while, you usually come to love it and prefer it to other styles. Or maybe you take it for granted and get tired of it and are interested in other styles, which may seem better because they are different and novel.

What if there is a distracting noise outside, like a leaf blower? Or what if the person next to me keeps clearing her throat, and it drives me nuts? If there's a mockingbird singing in the plum tree, I listen with joyful concentration. Am I being a bad Buddhist to enjoy the song of the bird and not the song of the leaf blower?

These are interesting questions. You mention annoying noises while you are sitting zazen, but this question could be extended to other sorts of activities and other sorts of annoyance, and there are so many—so many that it would be very useful for living to have a better strategy for dealing with annoyance. If small things drive you nuts, your life is going to be pretty frustrating and stressful. If you are not so bothered by small (and even larger) things, you will have more peace.

When you sit, there are always some sounds, and, if you are not sitting at a retreat center deep in the countryside, then yes, sounds of trucks, leaf blowers, car alarms, loud passersby will be part of your experience. If your mind is pretty still, sounds don't bother you much. If your practice is regular and steady, this composure can pervade, more or less, the rest of your life.

If you are doing zazen in the country, you will hear the sounds of birds or wind. These natural sounds are pleasant and support the calmness of your sitting. If enjoying natural sounds when you are sitting makes you a bad Buddhist, then the world is full of bad Buddhists. Chinese and Japanese Buddhist poetry is rife with bad Buddhists!

We were talking earlier about aversion to pain when you are sitting. The same applies here. Once you are unhooked a bit from your aversion, you can hear the silence in the middle of every sound. I'm not kidding. There is a kind of peacefulness in the middle of the leaf blower's roar, once it's just a sound, absent the aversion. When you hear it like that, you don't mind it so much. The unpleasant sound is just there. The silence is there too.

Doing zazen helps you to notice and appreciate that everything passes. When you are sitting still doing nothing, you can't help but notice that everything is coming and going all the time, moment by moment. When you don't like it that things continually and relentlessly pass away, this fact of life can be very annoying, even dismaying. But when you accept it and are willing to let it be as it is, you experience impermanence as peaceful. This is connected to the sound of silence I was just talking about. What you hear in the silence at the heart of the leaf blower's sound is that sound's passing. In any sound, you can hear the true nature of that sound—

that it arises and passes. This is inherently peaceful, if you allow it. You can actually hear it.

Sitting with composure is sitting in the middle of impermanence. I have always been surprised at how quickly, when I am sitting in zazen, sounds melt away, pleasant ones as well as unpleasant ones. Car alarms, leaf blowers, birdsong, wind sounds—all might last for a while but never that long. They go away, and you are still sitting there, the silence now that much deeper.

As you point out, we love some sounds and are annoyed by others—preferences. Sitting definitely helps us to develop patience with preferences. When you have patience, it is possible to live free of preferences.

But could I really learn to live with no preferences? To listen with no preferences? What would that do to my enjoyment of chamber music?

I think we always have preferences. That's life: one prefers to live, not die, and beyond this there are many other preferences. So we won't have no preferences, but we can be free within our preferences, free to enjoy them, free to let them go, as the occasion dictates.

Being bound to and by one's preferences is not a good thing. At the extreme we call it "obsession," "addiction." Being free from preferences, you can enjoy even something you don't prefer.

There are degrees of this. If you are more or less free of your preferences, you can enjoy the chamber music fully, because a mistake in the performance doesn't detract from your enjoyment: you aren't comparing possibly unfavorably this performance to others you have heard; you can appreciate the music, maybe even more because of the imperfection and the particularity of the occasion. And then you can go outside after the concert and also appreciate the nighttime sounds.

This doesn't really answer my question about chamber music. A little mistake in the performance is fine, but why would I get a ticket to hear the Juilliard String Quartet playing Beethoven

rather than spend the same amount of time sitting on a bench at a busy intersection and listening to the traffic? I mean, there's something really wonderful, to be valued and appreciated and enjoyed, about beautiful well-executed sounds.

Yes, I agree. But what I've said doesn't obviate your appreciation of the Juilliard String Quarter playing Beethoven. It does mean that you might also appreciate the sound of traffic, though of course you'd see a difference between the two. If you are saying that in order to appreciate excellent music, you must also be annoyed by or be indifferent to other less excellent sounds, then maybe you are right. Maybe Zen practice is bad for your art appreciation. Come to think of it, over the years my Zen practice has made me see art and nonart as less different from one another. I actually like Beethoven string quartets quite a lot. But maybe since I can also appreciate other less artistic experiences, I am less motivated to attend concerts.

Preferences are a double-edged sword. The stronger your preferences, the stronger your antipathies, the more you will dislike things you do not prefer. The only people I have ever met who dislike flowers are gardeners. I know gardeners who say, with passion, that they hate—actually hate—certain flowers. How can you hate a flower? But when you have strong preferences and passionate aesthetic commitments, you can actually hate certain flowers.

3

FORM AND RITUAL

What are the basic rituals and ceremonies in Zen? Do you have to bow a lot?

Zen practice places around the country differ quite a lot in their practice formats. So the rituals you are likely to experience at a Zen place will differ depending on where you go. Some places I know have more ritual at some of their meetings than at others—so the ritual you'll experience might depend not only on where you go, but when you go.

In most Sōtō Zen practice places, you will find two kinds of ritual. First, basic zendo etiquette. You'll probably be shown a particular way to enter the meditation hall, particular ways to walk in the hall, to bow to your cushion and sit down, to stand after sitting, to do the formal walking meditation (the slow walking we were talking about a minute ago). You'll be instructed about the various bells that will be sounding to begin and end periods of meditation. If there are to be formal interviews with the teacher (held in a separate room) during the sitting practice, you will be given instructions on this practice too. The details about all these things can seem elaborate when you first hear about them, but once you do them for a while, you realize that actually they are simple and natural and provide a way for everyone to comport themselves with a sense of calm and mutual respect. The strong feeling in Zen meditation halls is in no small part due to the care everyone takes with these basic rituals.

Most Sōtō Zen places have services after sitting. These services involve making several prostrations (full bows to the floor)—usually three at the beginning and three at the end. In between, the group will chant texts. The services are focused on an altar with a Buddha statue in its center, and some flowers and candles. Incense may be offered, usually by an officiating priest, and the service is regulated with temple instruments—a large and a small bell and a drum for keeping time during the chanting. The texts are mostly in English but sometimes in Sino-Japanese. Meals usually take place after services, and these, too, involve some ritual: usually brief chanting before and after the meal, which everyone begins and ends together.

Generally in Zen meditation halls people are instructed to wear dark, subdued clothing. Some people may wear formal sitting robes, and some who have received precepts either as lay or priest practitioners will wear ceremonial robes appropriate to their ordinations. (We are going to say more about all this later.)

If you go to a sesshin, there will be more detail to the ritual, even including *oryoki* (Zen eating bowls) meals, a formal style of eating that involves many details about the handling of bowls and spoons (which, again, may seem intimidating at first but once you learn them are quite natural and smooth).

There are also rituals for special occasions, like Buddha's birthday or enlightenment day, precepts ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and so on. For Zen practitioners who have been around a while, the study and skillful practice of these various rituals become an important part of the practice. It's a way of extending the calmness and focus of the sitting practice into activity—the striking of a bell or a drum, the loving care in preparing an altar for service, the offering of flowers, incense, and candles.

What is the meaning of the service?

The simplest answer is we inherited this service from the people who transmitted the practice to us, and out of respect for them, we continue it.

The next simplest answer is that the service has a lot of meaning and benefit as a practice. We chant texts (at least some texts) that

orient us to the teachings. To chant such texts again and again, till we eventually have them “by heart,” is inspiring and edifying.

We make prostrations, which, while countercultural for us (and maybe beneficial for just that reason, for overcoming cultural prejudice), is a good way to cultivate humility and devotion, positive qualities in short supply. And we do all this together, joining our voices and bodies, which creates a sense of community, as all ritual does.

In most Buddhist services, the positive spiritual energy fostered by the bowing and chanting is dedicated to ancestors, teachers, community members who are sick or have died, and others in need. To intentionally remember others this way helps us to develop gratitude and compassion, also positive qualities in short supply. Although it is commonplace in our culture to complain about religious ritual, in fact, ritual is a good practice because it helps you to develop these qualities I have been mentioning—gratitude, devotion, humility, concern for others—once you get over your theoretical antipathy to it.

All of this is a rational defense of ritual. Then there are the less rational defenses: that ritual has power we can’t account for, power we can’t make reasonable sense of. I don’t completely discount this possibility, given the enormous emphasis placed on ritual in virtually all ancient cultures. Possibly not all of our ancestors were deluded.

> *Yes, and ritual is also healing. I know I have experienced it that way in rough times. Just to chant can help me sometimes. And, for instance, a memorial service brings people together in their grief and gives them a way to express themselves and feel their connectedness. Weddings and precepts ceremonies are moving; they create a strong community bond and are real rites of passage. They make a difference in people’s lives. They certainly have in mine*.

Yes, you are right. Like a lot of people, I didn’t particularly appreciate the ritual side of Zen when I first began, but now I see how important and moving it is. On the other hand, lots of people practice Zen without participating in a service or any other form of

ritual. I do myself in some of the settings in which Everyday Zen operates.

Is it important to memorize the chants?

If you keep attending service, eventually you'll learn most of the chants. There is no need to try to memorize them, but good if you want to do that. When you are familiar with the texts being chanted, you feel at home with the practice community, which is a very good feeling. In the beginning the chants seem foreign and strange, which makes you feel slightly uncomfortable. Later you have a feeling of belonging that you will have earned. This is a natural process that everyone goes through.

Why do we still say a lot of the chants in Japanese? In Japan, they do the chants in Japanese because that's their language, and they understand the words. Are we pretending to be Japanese?

If we are pretending to be Japanese, we are failing miserably at it!

One good reason to chant in Japanese is, as I said, out of respect for our Japanese teachers. Zen exists in several Asian cultures, and each Zen is different. (I am using the Japanese word for the tradition, Zen, to stand for all the Zen traditions of Asia, each of which has its own name in its own language. I do this not to be disrespectful of Chinese, Vietnamese, or Korean cultures, but simply for the reader's convenience.) Our Zen comes from Japan, where it is profoundly embedded in the Japanese ethos and spirit, so to chant in Japanese is to honor and remember this. Japan is part of our history, and it's important to remember your history, although in America a sense of history tends to be rather thin. Of course we can't be Japanese or anything like Japanese, but it grounds us and humanizes us to remember where our tradition comes from.

Interestingly, there is an unexpected side benefit to chanting in Japanese. In Japan, Buddhist scriptures (which are translations and often transliterations from the Chinese) are standardized. Wherever you go in Japan, you will be reading or chanting the same words. Standardization is a benefit of hierarchical power structures. The

bishop or emperor decides which version of the Heart Sutra will be chanted. So wherever you go in Japan, you will chant the same Japanese Heart Sutra we chant here. This is a good feeling if you go to Japan. You feel connected. The text will be in your bones.

In the West, Buddhism is in many languages. If I go to Germany, I don't understand the German Heart Sutra, but when we chant in Japanese, I feel a strong connection. Same thing in France, the Netherlands, anywhere.

It's the same in the United States, Canada, or any other English-speaking place. Virtually every Anglophone Zen place has a different translation of the Heart Sutra. So when I go to another temple, I feel like they are chanting the wrong Heart Sutra! Why do they say it this way, not the way I am used to? But when they chant it in Japanese, I feel solidarity.

Funny. Religion is so intimate. It goes deep into the soul. This is good and bad: good because you feel so deeply for your tradition, bad because that very good feeling can make you uncomfortable in other traditions. For instance, when I go to other English-speaking Sōtō Zen places and chant an unfamiliar Heart Sutra translation, I can feel a little alienated or off balance. So maybe it would be good to standardize the English Heart Sutra. It might bring all the Sōtō Zen groups closer together. When I was abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, I participated in efforts to bring this about, but they weren't successful. Too bad.

On the other hand, when I go to other Sōtō Zen places and hear variants of the Heart Sutra translation, I usually learn something new. It makes me see the sutra slightly differently. So maybe it's good for me and all of us to challenge our traditional prejudices and practice with other forms and traditions.

Why do we put so much emphasis on doing everything a certain way? What difference does it really make whether you sit zazen with your right or left hand on top? Whether you rest your spoon in your first or second bowl during a formal oryoki meal? Isn't Zen kind of obsessive-compulsive?

Maybe Zen can be a bit obsessive. I like to soften that and foster a relaxed feeling about how we do the forms—maybe even simplify. After all, the forms are to facilitate practice and transformation; they are not eternal rules.

But there is a point to doing things a certain way. In fact, one always does things a certain way. There is never no way. There is always some way. And there is always a degree of flexibility and creativity in how you interpret or apply the way you do things. In music there are scales to learn and practice—very rigid. Why not just pick up the horn and toot in the way you feel like tooting? But no, there won't be music that way, or anyway there won't be Beethoven or Verdi.

There's nothing absolute about left hand over right or where you put your spoon on your bowl. It could have been some other way. There's also nothing absolute about the chromatic scale. It just happens to be the way our music works. Zen forms make sense; they have a feeling, an integrity, a history, a depth. They facilitate spiritual development in certain directions. But yes, it's also very important not to get so stuck on them that they become counterproductive, which can happen.

What would "counterproductive" look like?

It would look like a very uptight, crabby Zen practitioner constantly complaining about everyone not doing it right, and closed off to his or her own joy and creativity by a slavish attachment to Zen forms.

Back to bowing for a moment: some people might object to it as idolatrous. Have Christians or Jews or others who've practiced with you had this objection?

In fact I had this question myself when I first came to practice. As a person who'd grown up a practicing Jew, I didn't particularly appreciate or understand the idea of bowing to statues. So I asked my teacher (who, probably not accidentally, was also Jewish) why this was necessary and what it meant. He took me up close to the altar, which enshrined a particularly small Buddha statue. He pointed out to me that the statue's hands were in bowing position. "You bow

to the Buddha; the Buddha bows to you," he told me (or words to that effect). The idea was, I think, that when you are bowing to the Buddha, you are not bowing to an external power—there are no external powers in Buddhism. You are in fact bowing to yourself, your true self, which is identical to the Buddha. So, in a sense, your bowing is conditioning you to respect what is deepest and truest within you—and in everything and everyone else. Somehow this explanation was sufficient for me, and from then on I was able to bow without any problems. Apparently, my objection didn't run very deep.

But the question of idolatry does run deep in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It really means, don't put anything in your life above God in its importance to you. This is symbolized as not bowing down to statues, but it is a much deeper prohibition than that. Money, power, success, sex, prestige, psychological dominance—all can be, and these days probably are, more important to most people than religious commitment. Bowing or not bowing to a statue, especially when you don't take the statue as representing a god, is a minor thing compared to this. So it could be that a Christian or a Jew might well practice bowing to a Buddha statue as an antidote to idolatry!

On the other hand, sometimes Jews or Christians have come to practice with us and prefer not to bow during services. People in our groups understand this and don't think anything of it. One of my dear fellow practitioners is an Orthodox rabbi. When he comes to sesshin, he leaves during Buddhist services and goes outside to say his Jewish prayer service. To me this is a beautiful thing—that he can feel comfortable doing this, and the rest of the people in the sesshin can enjoy seeing him praying, all wrapped up in his prayer shawl. We pass him, still in prayer, as we walk to the dining hall.

Why is Zen so strict? Couldn't it soften up a little, be more fluid? Like water, take the shape of the bodies and the cultures that it flows into?

Yes, gentle, flexible, relaxed, not strict, is better. Structure, form, but not obsession. I agree: let's soften it up a bit.

No doubt Zen has always taken, will always take, and is now taking the shape of the bodies and cultures that it flows into. But this is a sensitive matter, and it takes time. It's not something you just decide and figure out according to your idea of Zen or your idea about your culture.

Actually, any attempt to define or figure out "Zen" or "American culture" will always be a failure. Both are works in progress—fluid, various, complex, without an inherent essence that anyone can put a finger on. Who can decide what is American or what is Zen? So we practice carefully, respectfully seriously over time, doing our best to figure it out. Little by little it happens. Somehow there is Zen, and it is here, in our place and time. It may look more Japanese than you think it should, but believe me: it's not Japanese. Just ask a Japanese Zen person!

4

AWAKENING

Will I have an enlightenment experience, a breakthrough of some kind, if I keep practicing?

Everyone has a breakthrough of some kind, probably more than one. People don't continue to practice unless the practice has moved them in some important way. Otherwise they would drift away, as some do. So you can assume that anyone who continues to practice Zen has been profoundly affected by the practice and has had important experiences that have altered the course of their lives.

I am skeptical of the various early Zen books that describe satori or *kensho* experiences as if such phenomena were specific, particular, one-size-fits-all "enlightenment experiences" that you could write home about and that are the goal of the practice. I am sure the people who wrote those books had such experiences and believed in them as absolute signs of correct Zen. I do not doubt them at all. What I doubt is that all "correct" or spiritually effective Zen practice has to look like that.

In fact, spiritual experiences are conditioned by spiritual methodologies. Classical Rinzai Zen koan practitioners have classical Rinzai Zen koan breakthroughs just like in the books. Theravada Buddhists pass beyond the conditioned to nirvana, the unconditioned. Christians see Jesus or feel his love ineffably even if he remains invisible to them. In Sōtō Zen, dramatic experiences of awakening are not emphasized, so they occur less often. But we have many kinds of deep experiences and realizations, which can

sometimes loom up all of a sudden. And for some practitioners, transformation of character and view is gradual, with almost no drama, which may be better, more solid.

The books that talk about breakthrough often don't give you the follow-up, what happens five, ten, twenty years after the big moment. Breakthrough without ongoing cultivation in practice could be negative, destabilizing your life without offering an alternative and therefore messing you up. In Rinzai Zen it is explicit that satori or kensho (which in my vocabulary are synonymous) marks the beginning of real practice, to be followed by much further work. For Dōgen and Sōtō Zen, enlightenment is practice itself. With ongoing practice, enlightenment experiences become an everyday matter: small experiences, large experiences, loud ones, quiet ones—many experiences, many challenges.

Your phrase "enlightenment experiences" can be confusing to a lot of people. The word *enlightenment* is used variously in spiritual contexts. It seems to imply an ultimate spiritual or mystical state, a state of transcendence. But in Zen, it may be that kensho or satori is the equivalent of what's called in Mahayana Buddhism *bodhicitta*, the initial dawning of the "thought of enlightenment"—a watershed experience, but not an ultimate one.

Bodhicitta is the desire, which gives rise to a vow, to continue to practice on and on for the benefit of others. Bodhicitta is an important step in practice. When bodhicitta dawns, you see the depth of the practice and its importance for your life. You see that you have no choice but to continue. But there is still a long way to go!

Are some people more enlightened than others?

Here again is the word *enlightenment*, which we haven't clearly defined. Maybe we can't define it. What do we really mean by it? Is it a psychological state? Is it a state of being? Can you backslide? If you are enlightened, are you a buddha, just like the historical Buddha? Do you still have regular human experiences? As you can imagine, these and many more questions about spiritual states and

metaphysical realities have been debated over the centuries in Buddhism's various cultures.

The idea that enlightenment is a substance or a state that some people can possess more than others just doesn't make sense to me. It doesn't sound right. My study and experience in practice (and, to be honest, my own predilections) lead me to the feeling that enlightenment amounts to nothing more or less than being fully and deeply human. If this is how you look at it, then it must be that we all share equally in this. If enlightenment makes you a sacred, special individual—a buddha—then I would have to say, as Dōgen does, that all of us are buddhas; all of us are enlightened. This is what Mahayana Buddhism teaches with its notions of buddha-nature and original enlightenment.

But there is no doubt that some people are more spiritually developed than others, having realized more fully the potential we all share. They have not crossed some magic line in the sand called "enlightenment," kept on going further, and then later looked back at us poor fellows so far behind them—not like that. I think we are all standing in the same place on the sand, facing the sea. No one is ahead or behind. And there are no magic lines in the sand to cross. (Of course someone, if they wanted to, could draw a line in the sand for good or bad reasons, but the ocean would soon wash it away.) But, simply, some people either by effort over time or some good or bad luck or natural inclination have developed wisdom and a good heart.

Can you tell when a person is "more spiritually developed"? Does it show?

I guess I have just defined an enlightened person as someone with wisdom and a good heart. By "wisdom and a good heart," I mean what anyone means. But also, more specifically, wisdom in Zen means the capacity to see that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," as the Heart Sutra teaches. There is a vast literature about this *prajnaparamita* ("wisdom beyond wisdom," the wisdom that cognizes the empty nature of all phenomena), and I can't really say much about it here other than that it implies a special sort of wisdom

that understands, even directly perceives, that things are not the way they ordinarily appear to be. They are more fluid, more evanescent than we think they are. Knowing that, we see and live radically differently—with more kindness and compassion. A good heart is the fruit of this special form of wisdom. One cares, in a profound way, for all life, with a love that isn't encumbered by attachment and self-interest—because there is nothing to attach to and no self to be interested in.

Practically speaking, what would this "wisdom and good heart" look like? Probably like the spiritual qualities that all our great traditions have always prized: humility, kindness, love, patience, forgiveness, understanding. Mahayana Buddhism lists six perfections—generosity, ethical conduct, energy, patience, meditation, wisdom (with wisdom having the specific meaning I just mentioned). Dōgen lists four activities of enlightened people—giving, kind speech, beneficial action, and identity action (meaning always acting in accordance with, in identity with, others).

The lists go on. But the basic sense behind them is clear. An enlightened person is awake and present, caring and open, practical, grounded, and wise. And these personal qualities are apparent in the person's words, deeds, bearing, and personality.

There is also something else—charisma. And charisma is *not* enlightenment, though the two are sometimes confused. The word is variously used, but I think we know what it means: a kind of personal power, almost an aura, that attracts and influences others. People with charisma are noticeable. I suppose some enlightened people have charisma; others, not. Charisma can also get in the way of what we think of as enlightenment. A charismatic person can confuse his or her natural or acquired charisma with spiritual development, and even more to the point, perhaps, the person's students can confuse their teacher's charisma with spiritual development. When this happens, problems ensue for all concerned.

After all this, though, maybe we can declare a moratorium on the use of the word *enlightenment*. It isn't a word I like that much, and I think it usually creates more confusion than clarity. And it is, after all, just a word!

Do you believe that it's really and truly possible to be liberated from suffering in this life?

I do. But this is another question that we have to think carefully about.

I don't think anyone can eliminate from his or her life all the things we would subsume under the category of "suffering"—physical pain, loss, adversity, failure, and so on. Bad things can and do happen to anyone. Buddha himself had backaches and an upset stomach, according to the early sutras.

The question is not what happens but how you receive what happens. Death could be suffering, but death could also be liberation, final freedom, if your lifetime of practice inspires you to see and experience it that way (though I am not sure the word *experience* applies to death). We could have a lot of pain and suffering, we could be moaning and groaning, but if we are fully merged with our practice, if our life is nothing but practice, we could also be liberated even in the midst of our moaning and groaning. We can feel OK to be in the condition we are in, whatever condition that is. We can accept it and make use of it to appreciate our life. Maybe the way to say this is something like, "We can suffer and yet not suffer"—another paradox. That would be liberation from suffering.

I often say, "Zen practice comes down to this: just don't make things worse." I know this doesn't sound very attractive or compelling, but I think there is a lot of truth to it. What makes suffering suffering is our aversion to it, our desire to escape, our childish sense that this shouldn't be happening, that we shouldn't be suffering, and that we should be able to figure out how to make it stop. That attitude makes the suffering worse. But when we are willing to suffer when it is time to suffer, when we don't mind, when we know that suffering is and was always built into being alive in a living world, and that this is the beauty and the privilege of living, then we can take on the suffering, and it isn't really suffering.

Two of our great Zen abbots died of cancer—both at age sixty-seven, a pretty young age these days. Suzuki Roshi died in December 1971. He had a lot of pain and suffering, but, as people who knew him then tell me, he didn't lose his practice; he didn't lose

his way. Myogen Steve Stuckey died in December of 2013. He had pancreatic cancer and suffered terribly, with tremendous pain and weakness. But he also maintained his happiness, kindness, and good spirit. I would say both these Zen men suffered and did not suffer. I would say they were liberated not *from* suffering but *within* suffering.

The suffering of pancreatic cancer is bad suffering. Most of our suffering isn't that bad. Most of what makes us unhappy in our human lifetime can be avoided. I really don't need to suffer so much over my reputation, my possessions, over whether or not somebody loves me or validates me, or whether or not I get my way and get to enjoy my preferences all the time. If I know how to appreciate what comes no matter what, I can save myself a lot of suffering. In this sense, yes, I can be liberated from my suffering. I can not suffer.

One more question on the subject of enlightenment. Are you enlightened?

I guess my effort to declare a moratorium on the word *enlightenment* was a failure. But, since you asked, no, I am not enlightened. I can't imagine being enlightened. But I am definitely committed to continuing my practice, come what may. As far as I can tell, there are no other options.

5

HISTORY

When did Zen start, and where does it come from?

Dōgen thought that Zen was essentially Buddhism, and I agree with him. Historically, Buddhism started with Buddha, the “awakened one,” Siddhārtha Gautama, in northern India in the sixth century before the Common Era. Over a lifetime of teaching, Buddha developed his initial insight. Eventually his words, practices, and community came to be what we now call Buddhism. Buddhism was a radical reformation of the traditional Indian spiritual point of view. Eventually it died out in India, but not before it was exported to virtually all the surrounding Asian cultures.

In China, Buddhism was introduced in the first century of the Common Era. Chinese culture was already quite developed by then, and there was ambivalence about this strange foreign religion. Throughout the next two thousand years, until today, Buddhism in China was alternately embraced and rejected as alien. By the sixth century it had been thoroughly sinicized. The most characteristically Chinese form of Buddhism, which eventually became the only form, including all the others, was Ch’an, which found its way to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, where it was called, respectively, Thien, Seon, and Zen.

Of course Ch’an changed considerably as it developed, and the tradition has had unique courses of development in other Asian cultures, though all the various forms of Ch’an are easily recognized as the same tradition. All the forms of Ch’an are now practiced in the

West. Though initially introduced at the end of the nineteenth century, interest and practice didn't begin to accelerate until the midtwentieth century. (Note that, as I've mentioned already, to make matters simple I am using the word *Zen* to cover the tradition in all its forms and locations, partly because I practice Zen that sources from Japan and partly because the word *Zen* has become common usage in English, as the other names for the tradition have not.)

Is Zen separate from the rest of Buddhism? Can you be a Zen practitioner without being a Buddhist?

Zen people might differ on this question. Early on in its introduction to the West, there was a claim that Zen wasn't really a form of Buddhism, that it was a sort of hybrid combination of Taoism and Buddhism that was not really a religion at all. But this view has mostly been discredited by historians of religion, and today almost all serious Zen practitioners consider Zen to be completely consistent with all other forms of Buddhism, though there certainly is some influence in attitude and expression from Taoism and Confucianism.

At the same time, since Zen, like all forms of Buddhism, is nontheistic and does not require fealty to a belief system or a deity in order for it to be effectively practiced, it is certainly possible for someone to practice Zen without being a "Buddhist." I put quotation marks around this word because it is difficult to say, especially in the modern Western context, who is or is not a Buddhist. There are many who not only practice Buddhist meditation but also access and accept Buddhist teachings, and even practice in Buddhist communities (Zen or otherwise), who do not identify as Buddhists. In the Zen groups I practice with, there are many regular students who identify as Christians or Jews (so far I am not aware of any Muslims) and attend church or synagogue. And there are others who feel shy about being affiliated with any religion and would identify as "secular." This is less the case in Asia.

We have to distinguish between three kinds of people involved with Buddhism or Zen—Asians living in Asia in traditional or nontraditional communities, Westerners of Asian descent who remain strongly connected to their Buddhist roots, and Westerners

who have taken up Buddhist practice as adults and are sometimes called “convert” Buddhists. Many Westerners of Asian descent who identify as Buddhists may not practice in the same way the Western convert students do; they may not meditate or go on retreat but may participate in traditional activities in their family and their Buddhist temples. Or they may have a cultural identification with Buddhism without practicing, just as many Westerners may identify as Christian or Jewish even though they don’t go to church or synagogue.

What’s the difference between Sōtōand Rinzai Zen?

In China, Vietnam, and Korea, Zen had several different lineage families that are often referred to as “schools.” In Japan these eventually reduced to the two dominant lineage families, Rinzai and Sōtō. There was a time in Japanese history when these two groups had a strong rivalry and found it compelling to distinguish themselves from one another.

Rinzai Zen was the Zen of the samurai and cultured classes. It emphasized the production of satori experience through contemplation of Zen koans. Rinzai Zen considered itself to be dynamic, creative, active. Sōtō Zen, which was, historically, the Zen of farmers and village people, emphasized faith and careful, simple everyday practice. This distinction between the schools was carried over to the Western Zen groups that came from Japan. In Western Buddhism these days, however, there doesn’t seem to be as much contrast or rivalry between the two schools as there once was. There are Sōtō groups that practice koan introspection and Rinzai groups that do not. There are also Sōtō lineages, like ours, that continue to practice in a simple, ordinary everyday way, without much emphasis on satori experiences.

Since koans are the main literature of Zen, all Zen schools pay attention to them. The difference is whether or not there is a systematic curriculum and introspective methodology. Classically, Rinzai Zen has such a methodology, and Sōtō does not, but, as I say, this is mixed in the West. Sōtō usually has a strong focus on the study of Dōgen, whose intense and unique religious texts are based on the Zen koan literature. Since one of Dōgen’s main points is the

nonduality of enlightenment, practice, and everyday life, daily tasks like kitchen work and other forms of everyday labor tend to be emphasized in Sōtō Zen. Our practice is to “chop wood, carry water.”

> *Why is the lineage so important? Why do Zen practitioners chant a list of men’s names down through the ages, men who supposedly passed the teachings along from one to the next, even though it’s not historically accurate?*

Lineage is important, and many groups do chant the lineage every day, from Buddha to the present, and, yes, those names are, by and large, the names of men. There are scholars who point out that a strong emphasis on lineage came into Buddhism in China, where the idea of family lineage and honoring ancestors is a bedrock cultural form.

This is true. But there are also religious reasons for Zen’s emphasis on lineage. Zen emphasizes face-to-face interaction. For Zen, Buddhism only comes alive when it’s expressed on the occasion, in particularity, between us. In other words, Buddhism must be *transmitted* in order to be Buddhism. Zen teaches that transmission is practice, and transmission is interaction.

So lineage is central because transmission is central. Lineage is like family. Every lineage has its own flavor, its own family style. As with any family, there is an emotional element in this, an affection, a warmth. Lineage also implies respect for the past and gratitude to people of the past who have handed the teaching down. All these ideas and emotions are important to Zen’s style of practice.

Since Buddhism, like other world religions, has been embedded in patriarchal social systems, the lineages have been, until now, patriarchal. But in the last decade or two, we have been correcting this. We have begun chanting, alongside the traditional lineage (which, as you imply, is only more or less historical), a list of woman ancestors from the past and present. In our lineage, and many others, this effort to address the unfairness of the past is paramount.

In contemporary Western Zen, the dominance of males is no longer the default mode. Women can become priests and teachers as easily as men, and today in the West, there are probably as many

or more women Zen teachers, leaders, and abbots as men. As I write this, the San Francisco Zen Center, the largest Zen institution in the United States, has three abbots. Two of them are women.

This emphasis on the lineage reminds me of the Daughters of the American Revolution or the American Kennel Club. Such lineage documents may be interesting to some, but how do they encourage the faith that each of us has buddha-nature?

Your examples are pretty funny, although I guess it would be impressive to be an actual lineal descendant of the earliest American immigrants or, if you are a dog, to be able to show some other dogs papers that certify your pedigree. But your question implies there is something objectionable and snooty about lineage, something inherently elitist and undemocratic.

Possibly so, but the point of lineage in Zen has nothing to do with how important or impressive your ancestors were. (At least, ideally it doesn't.) It's about your family connection to a group of people who are directly related to the Buddha. In Zen, when you receive lay or priest ordination, you receive a Buddhist name and a lineage document. On the document are all the Buddhist names (in my generation there are ninety-two names including mine) of every teacher in the lineage from Buddha to the present, ending with yours. In the ordination ceremony, you also vow to follow the sixteen bodhisattva precepts, which are considered the heart of the practice, and you put on for the first time a Buddhist robe ritually and painstakingly sewn by you. Most people find the ordination ritual powerfully meaningful—it feels like a rebirth of the spirit, a permanent transformation. Receiving the lineage document is an important part of that identity shift. These days we have started to give, along with the traditional lineage document, a "dharma heritage" document that includes the names of the women ancestors I mentioned above. The two documents together constitute for us a "complete" lineage.

Who brought Zen to the West?

The first Japanese Zen master to come to the West was Soen Shaku, a Rinzai master who attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. He returned to America in 1905 with his disciple, Nyogen Senzaki. Senzaki never returned to Japan. He spent the rest of his life in San Francisco and Los Angeles, doing odd jobs and teaching Zen in what he called a “floating” way.

D. T. Suzuki, who was another important early Zen pioneer, was also a disciple of Soen Shaku. He was a lay student who had spent a little time in monastic training but was mainly a scholar who wrote influential books, many of which were translated into English. In the early 1950s, he taught at Columbia University for a year or so, and his classes there were famous, attended by many important people in the arts. He influenced Alan Watts, a former Anglican priest, who was a popular writer on Zen. Watts’s books and workshops introduced many people to the basic ideas of Zen.

In 1959 Shunryū Suzuki Roshi came also to San Francisco, initially to be abbot of the local Sōtō Zen temple that served the Japanese-American community. A few years later, Taizan Maezumi came to work at the Sōtō temple in Los Angeles. Both Suzuki and Maezumi were interested in teaching zazen to Western students, and both started sittings groups largely for Westerners in their temples, groups that eventually outgrew the temples and moved out to become the first independent Western Zen centers. There were soon many other groups and teachers, among them the Japanese-trained English Sōtō Zen priest, Jiyu Kennett Roshi, the first Western woman teacher of Zen in the United States.

By the mid-1960s, there were many Zen groups and teachers in the United States and soon after in virtually every country in the Western world.

Japanese Zen was the first to arrive in the West, which is why we now know the tradition typically as “Zen,” rather than “Ch’an” or “Seon.” Traditions from the other countries came soon afterward.

Is Western Zen the real thing?

If *real* means conforming closely to Japanese or Asian standards, then no, Western Zen isn’t real. Much of what we do is, by

comparison with Asian Zen traditions, rather ad hoc. It takes quite a lot of money to establish an official monastery with all the proper buildings arranged in the proper ways, and then you need a cadre of monastics who know how to run it.

The Asian teachers who came to establish Zen here were in some sense renegades and visionaries in their own cultures—otherwise, why would they have made such a difficult cultural leap? They could have stayed at home, where practice was well established. But they were seeking something more vital than the formal Asian styles they'd been brought up in, which had become overly encrusted with tradition and conventionality. They had enormous confidence in Zen and wanted to return it to its vitality. They hoped that the United States would be a place to do that. Many of them said as much. Certainly for these early Zen pioneers, the practice they established here was real.

Let's imagine two Japanese Zen monks answering your question. The first one is an old guy, maybe a person of high position in the Japanese Zen hierarchy. To him our Zen is admirable for its enthusiasm but not yet entirely real. To be real it has to conform in many key details to the traditional Japanese way of doing things.

In Japan, Zen isn't a lively cutting-edge cultural intervention; it's the ancient Japanese way. Things we do here—for instance, men and women practicing together—are absolutely impossible! Laypeople practicing side by side and equally with priests, zendos open to all, democratically elected boards of directors—these and so many other important things would appear "off" to this monk, who couldn't help but feel that we Western Zen people, who run our own Zen places in our own ways, without taking much direction from Japan, are arrogant and foolish. Just because Americans throw our weight all over the world—with our rock 'n' roll, our movies, our money, and our armies—doesn't give us the right to assert parity, much less superiority, in the Japanese religion we have borrowed. To this Japanese priest, we Western Zen people think we are practicing Zen when in fact we are only aspiring to practice Zen. Our practice is not yet real.

The second Japanese monk is also well trained in monastic ways. But he is younger and critical of his own tradition (though probably

not vocally). He is tired of its conservatism, its fetishization of the past, its constant need to pay attention to Japanese cultural details and etiquette, its fundamental constriction. As a young person, looking to the West for a cultural vanguard, he is predisposed to admire what he has heard of Western Zen practice, and he longs to visit and find out for himself. For him Western Zen might seem more real than the Zen he has been brought up in.

Probably both these monks are right.

Neuroscientists are now discovering that meditation has measurable beneficial effects on people's brain functioning. Meditation programs to improve health, like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, are being widely taught, in medical and business settings. Such programs can lower blood pressure and help people deal with chronic pain and illness. These meditation techniques are based on Buddhist teachings, but they are completely secular. Is it OK to get rid of the spiritual side of Buddhism in order to create a self-improvement program? Is it OK to throw out the monk with the bathwater? What do you think about this?

I am a great believer in these programs. The people who invented them are sincere and creative dharma practitioners who wanted to find a way to extend Buddhist practice beyond the small group of individuals who would be drawn to Asian wisdom traditions. In addition, they saw social problems (like the medical world's inability to treat chronic pain) that they felt dharma practice could address, and they figured out how to do that. So I have enormous respect for the many secular meditation programs out there and for the individuals who created and teach them.

I myself have been involved in many kinds of secular applications of practice. I've worked with businesspeople, tech people, lawyers, conflict resolution professionals, caregivers for the dying, and others, to share basic Zen practice and apply it to work situations. And many of our Everyday Zen teachers work in stress reduction meditation and other secular programs. So I am very supportive of these efforts. I think they are important.

But, yes, in the beginning I had the same question you had: isn't there something wrong with "watering down" the Buddhist teachings and offering them to people in need who have no serious interest in Buddhism? So I went to the stress reduction clinic of the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester to observe Jon Kabat-Zinn's program in action. I was enormously moved by it and by John's big dharma heart. He really loves people and wants to help! And he has managed to communicate his heart and skill to many others. He is a great Buddhist teacher, even if he doesn't call what he teaches Buddhism.

So it is good to apply Buddhist-style meditation to areas of life where help is needed. Since so many people have been wounded over the generations by bad religion and since religion has become, especially in recent decades, such a painful bone of contention all around the world, there are many who are, quite understandably, "allergic" to religion in any form—even nice, gentle, open-minded Buddhism! For these people a secular form of the practice is necessary and important.

In that case, if secular forms of practice work so well, why bother with the religious part—the ritual, tradition, and so on? Isn't all that just extra?

No, it's not extra. There's an important dimension to the practice that can't be appreciated without ritual and all the other usual religious "trappings." As we've said, religious ritual isn't just empty form, cultural baggage. It moves and transforms us. Ritual is a practice. A religious funeral or wedding, as we know, makes a difference. Daily chanting and dedication of merit to the sick, dying, or recently deceased influences the heart. Ordination ceremonies and other observances provide a sense of historical continuity and appreciation of the past that is part of what makes us human, and the opportunity, in ritual, to express and deepen our commitment to the practice is powerful. Altars, iconography, music, chanting, studying spiritual texts—all of this is powerful stuff that forms a context of meaning and an imaginative aura that enhances and deepens basic meditation practice.

Included in all this is the larger context in which all religion exists, a context that includes the depth of meaning and sense of human purpose that we all need—especially in times of grief, despair, and crisis. Religion engages the large questions: Who are we? Why are we born? Why do we die? What is death? What is the good life? Religion provides practices (like vowing, bowing, and ceremonies) that help us cement our hearts to such questions, giving our lives a sense of ultimate grounding. Religion cannot actually give us answers to such questions; rather, it gives us ways to grapple with them together, in communities that include not only living friends, but practitioners from the past, whose words and deeds still inspire us. Secular forms of practice can certainly improve our lives psychologically and physically, and they can even help us to develop qualities like compassion and kindness. But as soon as you begin to engage ultimate (and unanswerable) human questions, you are in the field of religion. Science and secular ideologies by definition don't deal with any of this. Nor should they.

So religion per se is certainly worthwhile; it adds a world of meaning, practice, and imagination not included in mindfulness programs. I am not saying that you need it or that without it you will be missing something essential. Nor is it a question of deep or shallow, authentic or less authentic. Practicing Buddhism as a religion is simply different from practicing secular or scientifically based mindfulness. And every difference has advantages and disadvantages. The important thing is to find a way to share the human treasure of Buddhism as generously, as thoroughly, and as widely as we can. And secular mindfulness practices can certainly widen the circle of those for whom Buddhism can make sense and be useful.

In recent years there have been scientific studies claiming to prove the efficacy of meditation practice; there has also been criticism of this claim. It is true, as has been pointed out in some recent articles, that many of the scientists who have studied the effects of meditation are Buddhists with a predisposition to find what they are looking for (though *most* scientists are probably predisposed to find what they are looking for). In any case, I don't need studies to tell me Buddhist practice can change your life; I already know that from my own

experience and that of many other people I know—not to mention the millions of Buddhists throughout history who have apparently found great value in Buddhist practice.

6

BELIEFS AND ETHICS

What do Zen Buddhists say about rebirth? Is it OK if I don't believe in rebirth?

As you probably know, some forms of Buddhism, like Tibetan Buddhism, do, classically, insist on the truth of rebirth. To what extent the Buddha explicitly taught rebirth as we would understand it is unclear, and there are debates about this. The Buddha's culture did include a commonplace belief that we are born again and again, and he certainly referred to this as if he accepted it, but his precise teaching on this point isn't clear. There is no doubt though that Buddha taught non-self, *anatta*—that is, the nonexistence of an abiding self or soul that carries on beyond death. If so, then what is it that gets reborn?

The classical metaphor is of an acorn. An acorn becomes an oak tree. When the oak tree is here, the acorn is not, and no part of the acorn can be found in the oak tree. One simply has succeeded the other, just as one moment and one life succeeds the previous moment or life. I notice that when the Dalai Lama talks about his past lives, he never uses expressions like "When I was the fifth Dalai Lama." He refers to the fifth Dalai Lama as "the fifth Dalai Lama," another person.

For me, the important thing about the teaching of rebirth—the part that seems true and that matters a great deal—is that life continues. That is, there is more to our lives than the little span of time between birth and death. There is more to our lives than what happens

between these two key moments. And that “more” doesn’t just “exist” in the mysterious spaces before birth and after death—it is also here, right now. There is more to our life right now than we can see, than we can know or be conscious of. That’s the religious part of the practice, the part that ritual and tradition evokes.

The teaching of rebirth tells us that our life and death are significant beyond their appearances, more significant than we know. Being born is important. Dying is important. Death is definitely a hugely important transition, at least as huge as birth. Every moment of life is an important transition. To me, this is what the teaching of rebirth comes down to.

For Zen the question of rebirth presents no problem. Zen handles the question in the way it handles everything—by deconstruction, by paradox. (The Buddha, by the way, also handled most metaphysical questions by either deconstructing the question, asking further questions in response, or remaining silent.) What is “rebirth” anyway? What do you actually mean if you say you believe in it or don’t believe in it? Do you really know what you are talking about? Of course not!

The classical Zen story is of Kuei-shan Ling-yu, who tells his disciples that when he dies he will be reborn as a water buffalo on the side of the hill. The disciples will know it’s him, he says, because the buffalo will have emblazoned on its side the Chinese characters for “Kuei-shan.” He then poses a question for them. “If you say it is a water buffalo, you will be wrong. But if you say it is Kuei-shan, you will also be wrong. What is it?”

This story isn’t a joke. Kuei-shan is pointing out that life, death, and rebirth are ineffable realities not subject to our facile black-and-white conceptual framework.

I would never question anyone who told me he or she is sure there is rebirth. Nor would I question someone who is sure there is no rebirth, that the whole thing is bunk, mere superstition. I myself don’t know. That doesn’t mean I don’t have a feeling of certainty about rebirth. I do. But anything I say about it is going to be wrong.

For me the question isn’t one of doctrine or belief. The question is, can I live my life now, and up until the end, with full respect for life’s

deepest dimensions? That's a question for all of us, regardless of our beliefs. That's the question Kuei-shan is putting to his disciples.

You ask whether or not it is OK if you don't believe in rebirth. Certainly! Most Western Zen practitioners don't. It's also OK if you are not particularly interested in engaging the question of rebirth. It's OK to practice Zen with whatever ideas you happen to have or not have in your head about your life. Just sit down, pay attention to your body, breathe, and see what happens.

What is the law of karma in a nutshell?

A difficult question! I guess I deserve it: I put on the robe; I opened my mouth. What would I expect?

The simplest formulation of karma is actually quite straightforward: if this, then that. In other words, actions have consequences.

It's a kind of moral physics. Good action produces good consequence; bad action produces bad consequence. To some extent this is common sense; to some extent it is a matter of faith. When you practice zazen for a long time and observe your mind, you see how true it is. Positive wholesome thoughts create a positive wholesome world for you. And the reverse is also the case. Say, do, and think nasty, and your world will be nasty.

Of course I can't guarantee that good things will come my way if I say, do, and think good things. That's because what happens to me involves the entire world and the causes and conditions of many beings. I am not living in a self-enclosed bubble. But if I practice wholesome karma, even if bad things do happen, I will be able to receive them with equanimity and make use of them for my path. In that sense they won't actually be bad things, though they may seem quite unfortunate to an onlooker. The popular notion of karma simply as fate, over which there is no control whatsoever, is not a Buddhist idea. Buddhist karma is all about action and its moral power. And it involves subjectivity, not only what happens or doesn't happen externally. Intentions matter a great deal.

The point of the idea of karma in popular Buddhism is, like the idea of heaven and hell in popular Christianity, to encourage people to act kindly and morally. So it is a worthwhile social teaching. Do

good and you will have good rebirths (go to heaven); do bad and you will have very uncomfortable rebirths (go to hell).

Rebirth and heaven/hell both have the advantage of being unprovable in this lifetime. That is, I may be a saint and have all sorts of trouble in this life (as many saints do). But certainly I will be rewarded in heaven after my life is over (or achieve nirvana in my next life). Such an idea may seem childish and crude—a rationalization—to the sophisticated person, but it has worked fairly well for the mass of people for thousands of years. Most people want to be good and try to be good. Popular religious teachings encourage them in this and give them strength to do it.

That's popular Buddhism. The technical discussion of karma in scholastic Buddhism is complicated. I have tried to study it but haven't gotten very far. It is very hard to appreciate, involving a lot of difficult philosophical terminology, even more difficult if you don't know the original languages and the histories and subtle implications of the words. I have been impressed with it, insofar as I have been able to penetrate it.

Simply put, in Buddhist practice, karma means "do good action, avoid bad action." Action includes all acts of body, speech, and mind (thoughts). Follow precepts. The reason to do this isn't to be nice. You do it because you are suffering, and you want to understand your suffering, so you can stop being victimized by it. Also, you would like to be of service to others and to know how to love and be loved. In order to accomplish these things, you need to clear up your conduct, straighten out your mind and heart. For this, doing good and not doing bad are essential.

Zen subscribes to all these normative Buddhist notions of karma but adds a dimension. The classical Zen story about karma is the famous story of Pai-chang's fox. It's a long story that I won't tell here, but the burden of it is that karma, like everything else, is empty of an essential, hard-and-fast, graspable, linear reality and that practice, in assisting us to see and fully appreciate this, helps us to live our lives responsibly and patiently, without too much fret over good and bad karmic actions and results. (I'll say more about this later, when the question of precepts comes up.)

I understand that beneficial actions produce beneficial results, and harmful actions produce harmful results. If I realize that I have committed a harmful action, can I lessen or even reverse the harmful results after the fact?

Yes. Although you don't hear about it much, Zen does have the practices of confession and repentance. It is not so different from what you find in other traditions. Having come to see that you have done something hurtful, you feel remorse, you confess it, and you repent, which means that you determine you will not do that action again. Sōtō Zen has regularly scheduled confession ceremonies in which a verse of confession is chanted by the community under the assumption that we all have something to confess all the time. The confession verse is followed by a recommitment to the precepts.

When you confess and repent, you lessen the harm of the original action, though you can never completely get rid of it. You have to pay the price no matter what, but the price can be heavy or light depending on subsequent action.

In Zen, as in all traditions I am aware of, sin—or, as Buddhism puts it, unwholesome action (action that produces suffering)—can strengthen your practice and wisdom when you acknowledge and clarify it. In Zen practice we recognize that being human means we will never be perfect. So there's no guilt or self-loathing, just the willingness to look at one's behavior and learn from it.

But what about making amends? Confessing to a statue on the altar doesn't help the person whose feelings you hurt. So you should also apologize, shouldn't you? And does that reverse the negative karma you created in the first place? (Maybe it doesn't count if you do it in order to reverse your negative karma.)

Yes, of course, you do all that too. The practice of apology is important. But I am impressed by the extent to which a wronged person has an unerring sense of whether or not an apology is heartfelt. Such a person is impossible to fool. An empty or merely pro forma apology is better than none, but it doesn't really repair the damage. This is where the confession and repentance practices

come in—when you take the time to reflect on what you've done and truly confess and repent it, the chances of your apology carrying weight are maximized. And an apology that doesn't include making amends, where making amends is possible, is weak. So of course you do that too. (And yes, as you imply, if you do all this with the motivation of reversing your karma—that is, for yourself alone, to get you off the hook—then probably the confession and repentance won't be genuine and won't "take.") In Buddhist practice generally, there's the kind of nuance and complexity we are talking about here—the understanding that every action has both an external and internal dimension, and that we need to take care with both.

Does doing all this "reverse the negative karma"? Yes and no. Probably you have experienced, as I have, how a hurtful action that leads to apology, amends, and genuine forgiveness can deepen and strengthen a relationship. In this sense, yes, the negative karma then turns into positive karma. On the other hand, what has happened can never unhappen. You are still the person who did that action. Its effect on you and others will never entirely go away.

Why, according to Zen, do good things happen to bad people?

Dōgen writes about this in his great work *Shōbōgenzō* (a big and daunting text, whose title is usually translated in the several available English versions as "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye"). The problem is just the same as in the Jewish and Christian traditions, where it's formulated as, "If God rewards good and punishes bad, why do good people suffer and bad people live long, healthy, prosperous lives?" In Buddhism it's, "How come people who practice good all their lives suffer while people who do bad actions get off scot-free?" You can't judge the question on the basis of this apparent lifetime only. It has to be considered in a broader scope. And you can't judge it merely externally—by what seems to happen in outward circumstances.

Dōgen's discussion of this important and perennial moral issue involves rebirth. He says, more or less (adapting his answer to accord with what I have said earlier about rebirth), that life is much wider, broader, and deeper than we can see. Reality doesn't conform

to our ideas about it, and karma doesn't conform to our linear logical thinking. There is simply more to our lives than meets the eye. What Dōgen calls "deep faith in causality [karma]" requires that we see beyond the surface of things to the depths. Maybe the bad things that happen to good people aren't really bad, and maybe the good things that happen to bad people aren't really good. Maybe there's more to the story. The apparent suffering of a good person may deepen his or her spiritual life, may bring out aspects of courage, nobility, or compassion that otherwise would not have come out. The apparent prosperity of a bad person might be masking a deeper (possibly even an unconscious) guilt or anguish. In these cases what seems like something bad happening to a good person or something good happening to a bad person might not actually be that.

I feel like this is really true in my own experience. When I've seen good people suffer, it doesn't look to me like suffering. They are often patient with what they are going through, and the wisdom and love they exhibit make their suffering worthwhile for them and inspirational to others. Conversely, when I have seen people with a habit of unkind, ungenerous, even brutal conduct receive what seem like great rewards, to me it doesn't look like rewards. I can see in their faces and carriage—actually see—their coldness, their lack of connection to themselves and others. No matter how much wealth or power they have, they seem (to me, at least) to be lacking in the greatest gifts that human beings are most capable of receiving.

> *Wait a minute. I have a big "yes but." Sometimes an unbelievably terrible tragedy happens to a good person. What if a person's whole family dies in a terrorist attack on his house, while he is out driving an ambulance? Isn't this suffering that's not just on the surface but all the way through to the bottom?*

Yes, you are right. Your big "yes but" can't ever be washed or explained away. Anyone who purports to have it all figured out, that her religion has the final answer to all the horrific things that happen in this lifetime so that all can be received with equanimity and nothing will ever challenge faith, is either kidding herself or is in some sense monstrously removed from what it actually feels like to

be a human being among other human beings. Terrible things happen that we can't explain away. All we can do is weep and stand aghast. Maybe we can't convincingly prove that the universe is just and that each and every one of us will receive our just rewards. From the standpoint of Zen practice, maybe we don't know why this or that happens to this or that person. But we do know that it has happened. What is, is. It's just like this, not some other way. And our practice is to make use of what is. This is our path, whatever happens.

Practice gives us the strength and vision not to be destroyed even by the worst that can happen. Maybe we can't explain it away. But we can endure it, transform it, and go on. Everything is impermanent, already broken inherently, and empty of any graspable reality. This we know. So we set aside our questions about whether or not the Buddhist doctrine of karma makes airtight perfect sense. Maybe the way it makes sense or doesn't make sense is beyond our ability to know. But we do know how to accept, endure, and go forth, to make use of what happens for our path. That's awakening; that's freedom.

I know that good karma is connected to keeping the precepts. So what are the precepts? Can you give us a quick review?

Yes, in Zen, as in all forms of Buddhism, precepts are an attempt to prescribe good and bad conduct—conduct that defines positive and negative karma. Of course in real life what happens is always more challenging than a simple set of rules for conduct can ever cover. But precepts are a start, and our ongoing study of them, as we live through a life in which many good and bad things happen and in which we make many mistakes, continually deepens our sense of karma and focuses our conduct.

In our Sōtō Zen tradition we follow a precepts tradition created by Dōgen. His precepts list includes sixteen bodhisattva precepts—that is, precepts for practitioners who want to practice the bodhisattva path of compassion and concern for everyone and everything. Dōgen's precepts draw on other precept lists from earlier Buddhism. The sixteen are divided into three subsets. The first set is the triple

refuge, or refuge in the triple treasure, the oldest of all Buddhist commitments—to Buddha (the teacher), dharma (the teaching), and sangha (the community):

I take refuge in Buddha.
I take refuge in dharma.
I take refuge in sangha.

Refuge means literally, "to fly back," "to return to," to commit oneself to what is already a deep natural urge of the heart. These three precepts are understood both in the narrowest sense (the Buddha as the historical founder of Buddhism, the dharma as the Buddhist scriptures, the sangha as the Buddhist community) and the widest sense (the buddha within all beings, the way of life that respects and loves everyone, the community of all beings). These three commitments are the foundation of all the other precepts. To receive and cherish them is to begin our precepts practice by returning to our most fundamental nature, our inherent desire to be good, and to identify with the best that is in us and with everything.

The next set is the three pure precepts, the broadest sense of inspired conduct, beyond particulars. They express the wish to act always for the good—avoiding what is harmful for one's self and others and performing beneficial actions for one's self and others—and doing this with a feeling of including others in kindness:

I vow to avoid harmful conduct.
I vow to do beneficial conduct.
I vow to live for and with all beings.

The third and final set is the ten prohibitive precepts, which in our groups we also state as the ten clear mind precepts, the positive side of the ten prohibitions. These precepts attempt to define specific areas of conduct to be encouraged (when stated in the positive sense) and prohibited (when stated in the negative sense):

I vow to protect life, not to kill.
I vow to receive gifts, not to steal.
I vow to respect others, not to misuse sexuality.

I vow to be truthful, not to lie.
I vow to maintain clarity, not to intoxicate self or others.
I vow to speak kindly, not to speak ill of others.
I vow to maintain modesty, not to praise self at the expense of others.
I vow to be generous, not to be possessive of anything.
I vow to be loving, not to harbor ill will.
I vow to cherish and polish the three treasures (Buddha, dharma, sangha).

Traditionally, the precepts are studied and practiced on three levels. These levels are called by various names, but let's call them literal, compassionate, and absolute. On the literal level you do your best to follow the precept—not killing, not stealing, not lying. On the compassionate level you focus more on the motivation of compassion than on the letter of the law. So sometimes compassion might dictate that you lie to save someone's life, or steal when there is an urgent need to do so to benefit others. On the absolute level—the level of emptiness, nondifference, and ultimate reality—you can't keep or break any precept. You can't kill—life always keeps on going; there is nothing that can be killed. And you can't not kill—your life, in order to continue, inevitably supplants other lives (plants, insects, bacteria, and so on). In practicing precepts, all three levels—which are one reality conceptually discussed as three—are always in operation, so conduct is never simple or one-dimensional. And yet we do try to keep precepts, and to keep them better and better as wisdom and experience increase.

One consequence of the rich complexity of precept practice is that the more you practice, the more difficult it becomes to feel morally certain or superior. We can never feel we are keeping precepts perfectly or that someone else is definitely breaking precepts. We can watch our own conduct, and question the conduct of others when appropriate, but never with self-righteousness. Condemnation of self or others begins to seem impossible.

So, how important is it for a Zen student to study the precepts, or ethical conduct, in light of all those stories about Zen masters

whacking their students and chopping cats in two? It doesn't seem like their main goal was to act ethically, but rather to blow people's minds, to help us break through our limited views of ourselves.

This question is important because it reflects an important change that has occurred in the Western Zen community over the last fifty or so years. As I said, Zen was first introduced to the West from Japan. For many cultural reasons, morality and precepts weren't emphasized in the Japanese Zen that was initially transmitted. There were important precepts ceremonies, but they were simply done as ritual, without much discussion or reflection about the precepts themselves. D. T. Suzuki was much more interested, in his English-language writings, in the metaphysics of Zen than he was in ethics. Alan Watts was also disinclined to emphasize ethics. Suzuki Roshi and Maezumi Roshi were mainly trying to encourage young people to do zazen. So the early pioneers didn't emphasize precepts. Besides, it was the 1960s, when conventional ethics preached the evils of drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll—the cornerstones of the generation of people who were interested in Zen. For them, large ethical concerns like peace and justice, which seemed to them to be lacking in our society, were salient; the personal ethics of restraint seemed far less important. Maybe they were even suspect.

But by the 1980s this had changed drastically, and by now it is typical in Zen communities that students study and reflect on the sixteen bodhisattva precepts that are taken in all commitment ceremonies. Now both global and personal ethical concerns are considered part of precept practice, and precept practice is considered central to Zen. In fact, this is something Dōgen taught, but from the 1980s on, we began focusing on these teachings much more than we had before.

It's true that Zen practice emphasizes seeing beyond constrictive views to a wider, broader, deeper, and freer sense of reality. But this doesn't necessarily involve what you'd call "blowing" someone's mind. The idea that Zen is supposed to destroy your logical mind while catapulting you into some exalted state of intuitive irrationality is overdone, probably under the influence of D. T. Suzuki (who

seemed to be saying this) and the many others following him who repeated it. Suzuki was very much aware of Western culture and its predisposition to rationality and materialism, and he was also aware that contemporary Western philosophy was beginning to question this. He wanted to startle Westerners into appreciating the contrast between their way of looking at things and Zen's, and he seemed to have an intuitive sense that emphasizing irrationality and mystical freedom would strongly appeal—as it did. The truth is, Zen is reasonable in its own way. There is a teaching, a practice, a method. Throughout its history Zen has been almost the opposite of irrationality and unconventionality. All those stick-wielding classical Chinese masters depicted in the stories were celibate monastics maintaining precepts and living according to strict monastic deportment. Some of their more drastic stories—like Hui-k'o cutting off his arm in order to study with Bodhidharma or Nan-ch'üan's cutting a cat in two—are probably apocryphal and were understood to be so throughout the centuries, although the idea of making great sacrifices in order to pursue the way of Zen was often emphasized, perhaps more than we would feel comfortable with today. And corporal punishment was commonplace in ancient times in most cultures and was in ours too, until a generation or two ago.

There's a lot of overlap between the Ten Commandments of Judaism and Christianity and the ten grave precepts of Zen Buddhism. For example, both tell us not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to commit adultery. Are they basically the same value system? Does a good Christian or Jew act the same as a good Zen Buddhist?

I think a good Jew or Christian who follows the Ten Commandments isn't much different from a precept-keeping Zen person, though in some ways the understanding of what one is doing in following commandments or precepts could differ. The Christian might feel commanded by God to be just and righteous and might feel God's displeasure if there are infractions. The Zen person would probably be focused more on his or her conduct for its own sake and would probably be just as focused on thoughts and feelings as on

actions. Just as the sixteen bodhisattva precepts begin with the three refuges, the Ten Commandments begin with a commitment to God. That is, both begin with a commitment to some transcendent, ineffable truth, wider and deeper than anything we can entirely grasp, that underlies ethical practice.

I've grown to love the precepts, but I can see how the practice of the precepts might not seem like a deeply spiritual practice. The Boy Scout oath says:

> *On my honor I will do my best*
> *To do my duty to God and my country;*
> *To help other people at all times;*
> *To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight*.

This, too, is a list of precepts. Do you think that practicing with the Zen precepts is an inherently spiritual practice? Is it essentially different from what Boy Scouts and "law-abiding citizens" are doing?

Good point. Ethical conduct is ethical conduct. The Boy Scout oath is pretty good. There are many excellent moral codes, and the effort to follow them—to be a good and an upright person—is always positive. It would be hard to say that one code is superior to any other.

But the Ten Commandments and the sixteen bodhisattva precepts are, as I said in my previous answer, grounded on deeply religious or metaphysical foundations, and the appreciation and cultivation of those foundations are part of the ethical practice. Christian practice involves prayer, scripture reading, and cultivation of the heart; Zen practice involves meditation, listening to teachings, and the many other aspects of the practice we've been talking about. In both cases the ethical conduct comes from these practices and goes back to them. That is, ethical conduct starts with faith in God, or faith in zazen or Buddha, and deepens that faith. It's part of a broader religious process. This might not be the case with the Boy Scout oath.

Some Westerners come to Zen practice as refugees from the monotheistic religion of their childhood, relieved that they don't have to believe in God. Others bring God with them into Zen practice, while continuing their Christian or Jewish practice. What do you think about this? Is this a contradiction?

As I've said, in our Everyday Zen group, we have practitioners who are committed church- or synagogue-going Christians or Jews. There seems to be no problem for them or for anyone else in their practicing Zen while keeping those commitments and observances. For many of them, it seems, Zen practice actually enhances and deepens their faith, grounding it in their experience on the cushion.

If you study Zen and Mahayana Buddhist teachings, you notice they have quite a different feeling than early Buddhist discourse. In early Buddhist teaching, there seems to be a strong insistence on nontheism and nonmetaphysics and an emphasis on personal nirvana, conceived of as a final end to the trials of this sad samsaric world. In Mahayana Buddhism, metaphysics creeps back in, and the ultimate rest of nirvana is replaced with a sense of cosmic endlessness, cosmic buddhas, and ongoing practice accomplished out of love for buddhas and sentient beings. This feeling is in many ways close to that of theistic religions. So while Buddhism is a nontheistic tradition—denying any being or entity that is not (like all beings and entities) empty of any fundamental reality—feelings of vastness, warmth, awe, and compassion are very much in evidence in Mahayana Buddhism. Zen certainly isn't organized around the idea of God or prayer, yet as a Mahayana school, such ideas and the feelings that come with them are not unknown or forbidden. In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Suzuki Roshi several times refers to God in a positive way.

How can this be OK at the same time that others come to Zen because there's no God in it?

Yes, we have it both ways! You can practice Zen as one who rejects the idea of a God, if that's how you feel, but you can also embrace the idea of God if you want to.

Sitting together in silence over time has a magical effect on people. When people practice zazen together, they tend to feel harmonious and respectful toward one another, and their personal backgrounds or ideas about things, even religion, tend to matter less.

Does Zen have doctrinal positions on things like abortion, the death penalty, birth control, economic justice, and so on?

I'm not sure about Asian Zen, but my impression is that in Asia, no, Zen is focused on supporting the tradition and the culture out of which the tradition comes, not on taking hard-and-fast stances on social issues. In Japan, Zen temples typically take care of the families that have supported them for generations—they bury, counsel, support, and help. As far as I am aware, there is not much effort to tell people how they should relate to human rights issues, other than a general encouragement to be kind.

The Western Judeo-Christian tradition, as we know, has a powerful sense of right and wrong. This comes from its theology. God is not just a nice guy looking out for the general welfare; God is absolute Goodness and Truth. So if God ordains this or that (or at least if the clergy interprets scripture and tradition to say that God ordains this or that), one must support and defend what God ordains. You can feel this powerful sense of absolute righteousness in the strong opposition to abortion that some Christians feel or in the equally strong opposition to war or the death penalty that other Christians (or maybe the same Christians) feel.

This righteous attitude is both good and bad. It's bad when it becomes what we might call self-righteousness, intolerant and aggressive. But it's good when it comes to rigorously opposing an injustice, like racial or economic inequality, where Buddhist gentleness in matters of social inequality might be a disadvantage.

In Western Zen it's a different story. Most Westerners who practice Zen were brought up with some reference to Judeo-Christian tradition or at least to what we would call the Western values of freedom, justice, equality, human rights, and so on, which probably come from our religious and cultural heritage. Although they have

also been influenced by Buddhism's general sense of kindness and tolerance, Western Zen practitioners do tend to have clear social positions. There is no universal Zen council that pronounces on social issues for all Zen Buddhists, and there is no such thing as far as I know as "the Buddhist vote." What I'm saying is based on my own impressions over the years, not on sociological studies, so I could be wrong.

7

TEACHINGS

Is Zen a religion, or is it a secular way of life?

It's a religion. Like all religions it has a clergy, ritual, scriptures, observances, precepts, and an ecclesiastical history. But, as I have said in answering many of your other questions, people can practice Zen in any way they want to. Your practice is up to you. And you may want to practice Zen in a secular way.

If by "secular way of life" you mean a normal, informal American way of life that allows you to wear whatever you want, think the way you want, go to the movies, watch TV, surf the web, have a wide variety of friends from various backgrounds, drink a glass of wine now and then, and so on, without having to restrict your way of life or thinking, or pay enormous dues to your church, then almost all American Zen practitioners are secular in that sense. They are not restricted in lifestyle or belief system.

Is it important to study Zen literature, or can you practice Zen just by meditating?

This depends on your goals or intentions for your practice. For almost everyone, practice starts with sitting. The word *Zen* means meditation, so the practice always starts here. If you go to a Zen place, they'll show you right away how to sit. They won't hand you a scripture to read or a handout about basic beliefs and doctrines. They'll just tell you to sit and see what happens.

If you attend a daylong sitting, or a Saturday or a Sunday morning event, probably you'll hear a dharma talk, which will refer to Zen or Buddhist teachings. So from the start you'll be getting some orientation about how to sit and about how sitting relates to the teachings. Probably that input is important. But you don't need to read books and delve deeply into Zen thought. In some Zen places, they'll encourage you *not* to do that. They'll tell you it will be counterproductive, which may be true, although most people who come to a Zen place will probably already have read some about Zen or Buddhism and likely come in the first place because they enjoy and feel they benefit from the reading.

In any case, after a while you may be curious to learn more about Zen and Buddhism. And if at this point (having been doing the sitting for a while, having listened to a certain number of talks over time) you read a Zen or Buddhist book, you may well find it fascinating, because it now will seem to be articulating things you have already been feeling or seeing in your living, without having a language to conceptualize them. So study will become interesting to you, as if it were biographical, not theoretical.

For someone who decides to make Zen practice a more serious pursuit, study becomes important and even more interesting. Your interest in the ins and outs of the teachings becomes personal and essential for your life. And, especially, if, as a senior member of a community, you are given the role of guiding people in the practice, then it will seem even more important for you to study and know something about the teachings (and even a bit of history).

Classical Zen appears to be almost anti-intellectual. One of its most important founders, the legendary sixth ancestor, Hui-neng, is said to have been illiterate. This hagiographical touch emphasizes that Zen is about dynamic spiritual experience, not scripture knowledge. And many typical Chinese Zen stories involve scholars who throw away their books when they finally see, personally, the truth that Zen proposes to show them. There *are* experts on Zen teachings, and I appreciate their expertise and often draw on it. But a seasoned Zen person doesn't need to be an expert on Zen teachings.

Still, I do feel that a basic intellectual grounding in Zen and Buddhism is important for any serious practitioner. We all have minds that are full of thoughts and theories, mostly unconscious, unexamined, and deeply conditioned. Studying Zen teachings is a way of challenging and examining those thoughts and theories and bringing them into line with one's actual experiences of the practice on the cushion and in living.

What about the teachings of the Buddha that came before Zen? Which are more important for a Zen practitioner to study, the basic Buddhist teachings or the traditional texts of Zen from China and Japan?

Years ago a few colleagues and I were tasked with creating a study curriculum for the San Francisco Zen Center. We consulted many people and thought about it for a long time and ultimately came up with a program that included all of Buddhism—early Buddhist teachings, Mahayana sutras, Zen texts, of course (especially Dōgen), and the classical koan collections, as well as some texts from Indo-Tibetan Buddhism that seemed important. As I've said, Western Buddhism is unprecedented in that it includes all the world's Buddhisms in one place and one time all rubbing shoulders together. So all Buddhist traditions in the West are essentially hybridized, which is a good thing. It means that it isn't enough to study only one tradition divorced from other traditions.

All Buddhism refers back to the original Pali texts (or their equivalent in Chinese and Tibetan), so you need that. And all traditions in the West now (even the Theravada tradition, which doesn't recognize Mahayana sutras as canonical) are influenced by and need to know about these sutras too. In our Everyday Zen curriculum, we have made a selection from the whole of Buddhism, a doable selection I think, of basic Buddhist, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhist teachings that it seems serious students should have some exposure to. Our website (www.everydayzen.org) publishes the curriculum, with my audio or written commentaries on all the texts we study, and links to the texts themselves.

But even those of us who have studied most recognize that our knowledge of Buddhist thought isn't very deep. In Asian countries the Buddhist canon is enormous, including large numbers of primary and secondary texts, most of which haven't been translated into English. So whole traditions of understanding and thinking about Buddhism remain unknown to those working only in English. And, typically, most Western practitioners come to Buddhism as adults, so it inevitably remains, in a sense, culturally exotic for us. This is both good and bad: bad in that we may be ignorant of some important, even basic, issues; good because we might have a fresh and lively response, seeing things invisible to those more acculturated in the tradition. Let's hope so.

What are the most important Zen texts to study? There are so many!

Yes, there are. For Sōtō Zen, I'd start with Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*) and then study the koan collections, *The Blue Cliff Record, The Book of Serenity*, and *The Gateless Barrier*, all of which have been translated into English with traditional and in some cases contemporary commentaries. Then there are a few "records" of seminal teachers that have been translated, like the "Sixth Ancestor Sutra" (of Hui-neng, whom I just mentioned), the records of Tung-shan and of Chao-chou, and a few others. The Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra are essential texts on the teachings of emptiness, and there are by now several very good translations of them, with commentaries. There are also important texts by contemporary teachers. For us, Suzuki Roshi's books *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* and *Not Always So* are basic. Charlotte Joko Beck's *Everyday Zen* is also a classic.

What are the most important teachings?

This is a hard question because it's hard to reduce any religious tradition to a few key teachings. It's a little like asking, "Tell me the most important things about your life." What can you say?

But it's great that you ask because even though any answer is going to be reductive and misleading, we do have to be able to say

something simple about our life or our spirituality. It isn't enough to say, "Too complicated" or "Too mysterious," even though both these things may be true. It isn't enough because we are human beings who need to communicate with one another and are responsible to one another to do so, and even though the communication may be misleading, it will be the beginning of a conversation.

The most important teaching for me, and for Sōtō Zen, especially those lineages of Sōtō Zen that follow Dōgen closely (as ours does), is Dōgen's teaching of continuous practice and its associated teaching that practice and enlightenment are one. This means that we are not practicing to get enlightenment, to enter a special state we do not now inhabit, but rather to express the enlightenment that is already there as our human birthright. And so we appreciate and see the depth in the practice that we do every day. And practice is continuous in that there is really nothing else but practice. All our daily activity is practice that goes on and on, even past our own life span.

Next in importance I suppose is the teaching of suchness, or "just this." A lot of the koans refer to this teaching, which means, more or less, that just being fully and immediately (a word that literally means "without mediation" of intellect, concept, prejudice, and so on) present with this moment of your life is the whole of the teachings and the whole point of all we do in practice. To recognize that there is nothing but this one precious moment and that it includes past and future and the whole of reality. You inevitably wax metaphysical when you talk about this, but in practice you feel it somehow, though as soon as you think you have felt it and begin to describe it and take credit for it, you have lost track of it.

Thirdly, as I've gotten older and practiced with more and more people over the years, I have attached much more importance to the teachings about compassion and connection.

In Zen these teachings run deep. They are saying more than, "Be nice, be kind, be decent." They are saying that if you really see your life as it is, you'll see that it's nothing but connection, compassion, and love. That's all there really is; the rest is mostly confusion and conceptual overlay. To be kind is more than a positive character trait that one ought to develop: it's the natural consequence of a full and

profound engagement with life. In Zen especially, the teachings are expressed through dialogue and encounter, person to person. The teaching arises between us in this moment—it isn't something that abides in my mind as an idea or a feeling. It's here, now, dynamically between us. So my life isn't my own and never has been. And insofar as I think my life is my own, I will suffer.

The practice of kindness is best expressed in the practice of the six paramitas: generosity, ethical conduct, energy, patience, meditation, and wisdom (the wisdom that sees how everything is "empty" of any separation, as we've already discussed). These six practices and the various teachings that go with them are fundamental to Zen. Ultimately they lead to the understanding that we are all living and dying together: there is no other way to live but to feel for one another and to do what we can to help, and the ways we can help are unlimited.

Finally, Zen is Buddhism, and there's no Buddhism without the four noble truths: first, all conditioned existence is suffering (*dukkha*, fundamentally unsatisfactory, off balance); second, there is a cause of this suffering (misknowledge: our projecting a world that isn't real and then clinging to that false world); third, there is an end to this suffering (by understanding my life and living my understanding, I can undo the cause of suffering and experience even my tragedies and misfortunes as nonsuffering); and fourth, there is a path called the eightfold path (right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration). In Zen, the eightfold path is generally expressed as zazen and precepts practice.

If I were to answer your question another day, I might well come up with a different list of "most important teachings," but this is my list for today.

Why does Zen seem to go out of its way not to make sense?

Actually I don't think Zen doesn't make sense. But it makes sense differently from our usual way of making sense. The usual way is to assume that our descriptions of our lives are accurate, that the way we conceive of things is the way they actually are. This is an

unfounded assumption. Mostly we don't have an accurate view of our lives. And yet our lives go on day by day, despite our faulty conception of them. It follows then that a teaching (Zen) that proposes a more accurate description of our lives would seem to us not to make sense—at least at first, but that later, since this description actually is more accurate, it would begin to makes sense once we get used to it. This has been my experience and that of most Zen students: at first the teachings might seem odd or nonsensical (though also at the same time intriguing, because you sense that there is something to them), but after you have practiced and studied for a while, they do make sense, and you can discuss and think about them reasonably.

Our lives include many paradoxical and contradictory elements. Things are usually not just one way—they are many ways at once. To begin with, we are definitely alive, yet at the same time we are dying. Every moment is a moment of life and at the same time a moment of death in that each moment is gone even as it arises, completely gone, never to reappear. In our usual conception of our lives, we are alive now and dead later. But this isn't really the case. Zen discourse fully recognizes and embraces this and the many other paradoxes, contradictions, and conundrums that actually do make up a true conception of our lives, and this is why Zen seems at first to willfully not make sense.

But—to back up a bit—Zen is basically a Chinese expression of original Buddhism. And no one accuses Buddhism of not making sense. Buddhism makes perfect sense: it is logical; it leads from point A to point B, from the noble truth of suffering, to the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path. You may or may not agree with this analysis of human life, but it certainly makes sense.

Original Buddhism is expressed in the Sanskrit and Pali languages, which have the same Indo-European root our languages have, so its style of communication is congenial for us. These languages, like ours, are inflected, the verbs have tenses, there are parts of speech with signs to identify them, and so on.

Chinese, however, doesn't make sense to us. It has no tenses. It has no parts of speech. It has no alphabet either, only pictographs, a completely different system of writing that includes immense

suggestibility, nuance, and paradox, much dependence on context, but very little straight-line clarity and logic.

This means that Chinese thinking and the Chinese literary tradition work quite differently than ours. This is still true today. Recently a Chinese scholar was translating a few of my poems into Chinese. He had a long list of questions for me about the poems, questions that never would have come up if he were translating into German or French. I could barely see the point of the questions and found them extremely difficult to answer.

So when Buddhism was transmitted to China, the Chinese had a lot of trouble understanding this strange foreign religion that came from a language and a set of linguistic and cultural assumptions that were utterly different from their own. It took the Chinese several hundred years to digest Buddhism and to properly translate it into their own idiom. In the process they created (naturally and inevitably) something quite different, in expression, from what they had received.

My imagination of it is that once the Chinese sages really appreciated the Buddhist teachings, they thought they were a little funny. That is, the utter seriousness, piety, and linear logic of the scriptures must have struck them as funny. So when Chinese Buddhists began producing their own religious literature (Zen literature), they emphasized this fun—they used slang, jokes, references to poetry and legends, and they emphasized and delighted in the sense of paradox they found in the Mahayana teachings (that were themselves already Zen-like in their embrace of paradox and contradiction).

So, yes, paradox and an odd use of language are features of Zen literature. This may make it seem hard to understand. But once you get used to it, it is easier to appreciate.

But, Norman, isn't Zen a philosophical/spiritual stance that goes far beyond language structure?

Yes, you are right. There's something else operating in Zen literature that has to do with the very nature of language itself. One view is that Zen is "beyond language," that it is pointing to something

—maybe an experience or sense of life—that can never be indicated in any way in language. According to this view, Zen denigrates all language as superficial and inherently un-Zen. Subscribing to this view, you would throw out all I have said above and simply assert, “Yes, Zen language makes no sense because it wants to destroy your idea of language and sense” (the “mind blowing” you referred to earlier).

As I’ve been saying, I don’t subscribe to this view. My thoughts about Zen and language come from Dōgen writings. Dōgen argued that language isn’t inherently superficial: it can be useful for our living and our deep spiritual insights, provided we know how to situate ourselves within it, not merely seizing on the one-dimensional meaning of words and thinking we understand reality based on that linear meaning. To “understand” a Zen text may require more than just knowing what the words mean. It may require that you be able to see, feel, and live the meaning beyond the words, that you not be stuck on the words themselves but see that the experience of words actually goes beyond words. To some extent the apparent opacity of Zen texts has to do with this: the intention of the text is not to be “understood” in the usual sense (to grasp ideas) but rather to be felt, lived, and digested. Since our sense of a text and what a text is supposed to do doesn’t include this notion, we sometimes find Zen texts a little frustrating to read. But they are not meant to be “read” in the usual way. They are meant to be meditated on, contemplated, chewed on. This idea of text, by the way, is similar to some contemporary notions, and much has been written comparing Dōgen’s view of language to that of important Western philosophers (notably Wittgenstein and Heidegger). Not incidentally, my theory and practice of poetry also come from this view of language.

8

TEACHERS

Do you have to have a teacher in order to practice Zen?

Again, this depends on your goals and intentions for the practice and, to some extent, your circumstances. Your question raises something we touched on earlier. What do we mean by "practicing Zen"? I have a friend who runs a hair salon. She's never studied Zen and doesn't know much about it, but she often says to me, "I'm going to get my Zen on," by which she means she's going to stop rushing around and calm herself down, so she can relax and enjoy her life. A few years ago, I attended a conference on Zen and the media, in which Zen scholars and teachers discussed the various ways that Zen has been "appropriated" into our culture. I think there's a Zen cereal, a Zen fragrance, and probably lots of other products.

I don't mind this. I don't feel that "Zen" is a brand owned by the Zen Buddhist centers of the world. "Zen" might be an attitude, an approach to life, which is perhaps fostered by the practice and teachings of Zen Buddhism, but not limited to them. Maybe my friend's "getting her Zen on" is her version of Zen practice, her way of doing it. Maybe someone else reads a Zen book, learns something from it, and then feels as if she is practicing Zen by following what she has learned from the book. Maybe someone else reads the book and then starts a meditation practice on her own, practicing Zen in that way. Depending on what the person is after, any one of these things might well be enough. "Zen" is not limited to formal Zen practice with a Zen temple or teacher, all of which might

be a lot of trouble—for some people probably more trouble than it's worth, not what they are after. I am happy for "Zen" to have some positive influence on the world beyond what the teachings and practice of Zen Buddhism can provide.

But earlier you said that Zen is a religion.

Yes. In the widest sense, as I've just been saying, "Zen" is an attitude and a feeling about life that you can "practice" in any way you want. In the strictest and most exact sense, Zen Buddhism is a religion with specific practices and observances. Going to a Zen place, studying teachings, going on retreats, experiencing Zen as it has been handed down from the past and is practiced in the present by initiated adherents will deepen and broaden its possibilities for your life.

If you take up the religious practice of Zen Buddhism, at some point you will meet a Zen teacher and be inspired to establish a practice relationship with her or him. I wouldn't say you must do this in order to practice Zen. In fact, although there are more and more qualified Zen teachers all the time, Zen teachers are still not as common as, say, physicians, psychotherapists, or rabbis. Many people who are serious about their Zen practice live in places where there are no Zen teachers. And certainly these people are practicing Zen without a teacher. But if you can find a teacher you have affinity with and practice regularly with that teacher, it will make a difference.

The idea of a "Zen teacher" may be misleading. A Zen teacher isn't a person; a "Zen teacher" inevitably involves a world, a context. Zen teachers exist in the context of Zen teaching, Zen communities, a Zen practice environment, so finding a teacher means finding a community, a sangha, a teaching, a context. To have support, guidance, and friendship for your practice, to have people you can communicate with who reflect your life back to you, makes a big difference. It makes a big difference not to feel alone, not to rely only on yourself, not to feel that you are somehow making up your spiritual life out of your own head. So to study with a Zen teacher is to expand the context of your practice beyond yourself and your own ideas. Ideally the teacher is someone who can express the practice

not only through her or his words, but also through presence, conduct, and feeling.

All of this is a Zen teacher—a context, a community, a living example of the teaching, and a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. I think it is pretty clear that if all this were part of your Zen practice, it would make a difference.

The classical model is living together with your teacher in a Zen monastic community. There are a few places in the West where you can do this, and it is an invaluable and moving experience. But probably for most people this isn't possible. In the United States now there are many lay Zen communities that meet weekly or daily. Many of them have teachers guiding the practice. So finding a Zen teacher within an hour or less from where you live is becoming increasingly possible in this country. The Internet opens the possibility of listening to dharma talks online and developing a sense of a particular teacher's style and approach to the teachings. Most Zen retreats are open and accessible, so it is not that difficult to attend a retreat (sesshin) given by the teacher you've been listening to online, even if it's halfway across the country. By continuing to listen and coming back to sesshin once a year or even more, you can get to know and be known by the teacher and the community, so that it's actually possible, in our time, to study significantly and regularly with a teacher who might live thousands of miles away. In fact there are many Everyday Zen practitioners who practice in just this way.

For me, the main quality to be developed in relationship with a teacher is trust, profound trust, not so much in the individual teacher but, through the relationship with the teacher, to develop trust in the practice, in the dharma, in life, and ultimately in yourself—not as a limited, conditioned individual but as an expression of the truth of your life, of all life.

The great possibility of Zen practice is to completely trust life, to have full confidence in your life, whatever happens. Trust isn't abstract. It's more than belief or faith. It develops through living, communicating, feeling what a life brings. The relationship to the teacher is a vehicle for this profound trust, and the teacher should be trustworthy, transparent, and unselfish enough to allow that trust to dawn in you, without getting in the way.

Teachers, if they are lucky, will be deeply respected by their students. That's a good thing, and it is necessary for the process that I am talking about to work. At some stages there's a degree of unrealistic projection involved in such respect, but I think that is OK, as long as the teacher doesn't believe in those projections. I am lucky to have practiced with people who have held me in high regard. I notice that I definitely prefer this to being reviled, scorned, or ignored. But when a practitioner sees me in an unrealistically positive light, I recognize that it's not really me they are seeing (nor, if they revile me, is it necessarily really me they are reviling!). They are seeing their own noble desire to find within themselves an ultimate respect and dignity. They are seeing their own love for and hope in the dharma.

Not believing in the projections might be easier said than done. As it is now, Zen teachers aren't required to get any particular training in psychology. They might not have any understanding of transference or realize how vulnerable their students are. Is there something the American Zen community could do about this?

This is an important question. But I think it's too soon for us to to answer it. The Western Zen movement is relatively new. We're still trying to work out how traditional Zen practice fits into and doesn't fit into our contemporary Western psychology and ethos. This process of fitting goes both ways: Zen has to be different to fit us, but we have to be different to fit Zen. Practicing with a Zen teacher has its own cultural form and logic. We shouldn't be too quick to assume this spiritual relationship conforms to our own cultural templates.

In one sense, I am not a very good person to respond to this question. I have only a basic layman's understanding of psychology and have never been in therapy. Many Western Zen and other Buddhist teachers have extensive training in psychology—many are psychologists themselves—and many who are not psychologists have found it important and useful to be in therapy.

But my relative ignorance of Western psychology could be an advantage. Buddhism has its own psychology, which I *have* studied.

This psychology has parallels to but is not the same as Western psychology. It may be a mistake to assume that Western psychology has the answers that Buddhist psychology lacks or that Western Buddhist teachers need to train in Western psychology in order to be saved from the psychological naïveté of the Buddhist tradition. Maybe not knowing so much about Western psychology helps me to better see the possibilities in Buddhism for our culture.

And, yes, let's not forget the many mistakes that have been made in the Zen teacher-student relationship in the short history of Zen in the West. I have certainly learned from these mistakes, having lived through many of them—both as a student and a teacher. And I am still learning. So far I don't have any definitive answers to your question, and I would, frankly, be skeptical of anyone who says she has this figured out.

In any case, fortunately, it is not up to me or you to solve this problem. The sum total of us who practice Zen in the West, variously trained as we are (maybe my training and practice as a writer are also part of the equation), will come to some greater understanding as time goes on.

What is *a Zen teacher?* Who *is a Zen teacher? How do you get to be a Zen teacher?*

This depends on which Zen tradition you are talking about. In some Zen traditions, there is a koan curriculum, and a more or less reasonable sense of mastery of that material, as well as skill in teaching, is required. Those who pass the curriculum, who exhibit teaching skill and manage to have a successful long-term apprenticeship relationship with a qualified Zen teacher, can also, eventually, be certified as Zen teachers by their teachers.

In our Sōtō tradition, the matter is a little murkier. We don't have a specific curriculum to master or a specific sense of what a skillful teacher should be. For us the main values are faith, commitment, stability, and reliability in practice. So we think less in terms of "teachers" and "teaching" and more in terms of "fully ordained priests" or "lay entrustees"—that is, lay and priest practitioners who, having established long-term relationships with teachers and the

practice, have gone through precepts-taking rituals and have thereby made strong commitments and vows to continue the practice themselves for a lifetime and to help others to practice in whatever way they can. We trust that what the world calls “teachers” will emerge from this group of seasoned and committed practitioners.

This is not to say that we don’t have a program of study and practice. Of course we do. We expect those who are qualified to be teachers to have practiced for several decades, to have sat so many sesshins they have lost count, to have studied lots of sutras and other texts, heard many hundreds of dharma talks, and to have demonstrated, through various stages of supervised teaching, that they can encourage the spiritual practice of others with grace and compassion. After the course of many years of practice, their teachers will confer empowering ceremonies on such seasoned lay and priest practitioners, and their training will be deemed “complete,” which means they are ready to start over again trying to appreciate the practice and share it with others.

In our tradition we don’t pay so much attention to the distinction between those who are talented or not, skilled or not, knowledgeable or not. Anyone who practices faithfully for a long time can receive empowerments. Teachers are eventually chosen from among this group of qualified and seasoned practitioners by students who see teachers in them. So some qualified priests and lay entrustees become teachers in the obvious external sense. Others continue to practice simply, teaching in more mysterious and less obvious ways.

Is it OK to have several teachers, and not one main teacher?

Most people have several teachers. This is a good thing. There are so many good forms of Buddhist practice that it makes sense to study in more than one. And there are issues of practicality—which teachers happen to come through town, which town you happen to live in or have moved to after having lived for some time in another town. So yes, your life will take you to different locations, or teachers may relocate, so you will have various teachers.

Or, perhaps, as your practice changes, you may find it important to change teachers, just as in other areas in your life in which you will

have various mentors for the various interests and pursuits you are involved with.

At the same time though, studying Zen with a teacher is different. To take up committed study with one Zen teacher for a long time, even as your life circumstances and your interests change, brings an added dimension to your practice—more depth, more feeling, more appreciation of what Zen, and what life, is about.

You can see what I am getting at by reflecting on other relationships in your life. Having a lot of friendships or romantic relationships is certainly broadening and interesting, maybe even exciting, but it is not the same as having one long-term committed relationship. Longevity of commitment makes a difference in spiritual practice, just as it does in other human relationships.

Being committed to a teacher doesn't mean you have to see her or him a lot. But when the commitment is clear and the feeling of commitment strong, even distance and time can be overcome. There is the story of the Zen teacher Nyogen Senzaki (whom I mentioned earlier), who was one of the first Japanese Zen teachers in America. When World War II came, it was impossible for him to see or even communicate with his Japanese teacher for some years. He expressed his ongoing engaged relationship by making prostrations every day facing the Pacific.

But being committed to one teacher for a long time doesn't necessarily mean that you only study with that one teacher. You might also go to programs with other teachers, or if the community is large, as ours is, and has several qualified teachers in it, you might study with several of them. But it will be clear who is your primary teacher and with whom this special transformative relationship is being lived out. In a healthy community, all the teachers will respect and understand these relationships and distinctions and abide by them with harmony and understanding. In fact, it is usually a good thing, after studying with one teacher for a while, to go forth to experience other teachers, even as you remain with that teacher. This is broadening and not confusing once you have established a point of view of your own, based on your long study with your primary teacher.

Is it OK to change teachers?

Yes, and it happens all the time. Maybe your teacher dies. Or, as I was saying, maybe your teacher moves to another town, or you move, and it seems best to change teachers. Or maybe you just come to the end of your time together. When these changes happen, it is important to have a face-to-face conversation and come to mutual agreement and peacefulness about the changes that need to happen.

A commitment is a commitment however, and one doesn't change it lightly. There are often problems between teachers and students, just as there are problems in all human relationships. When problems come up, you have to figure out how to work them through, and doing this with your teacher can be a big learning experience.

Sometimes, especially in the beginning, you might say little and mostly just go along with what the teacher is proposing. It makes sense in a certain way: if you are practicing with a Zen teacher so that your life and view can be transformed, why would you reject the teacher's view because you don't happen to agree with it? Getting past your own point of view would be part of the point. So usually most practitioners are happy to take up the teacher's view in the beginning. That's how you learn.

But after a while, when you have begun to get a feel for the practice, you may have a view that differs from your teacher's, and you may feel compelled to disagree or make a fuss—or maybe the teacher will somehow feel compelled to register some complaints with you.

I have found that every teacher-student relationship is different because every person is different. Sometimes the teacher is old and the student is young. Sometimes the student is older than the teacher, with more life experience and more worldly heft. The gender of teacher and student makes a difference; cultural and personal background make a difference; education and interests make a difference. And apart from all this, one person is simply always different from another. So every student-teacher relationship is going to be different.

There are classical models in the literature for teacher-student relationships, but in fact such models hardly ever exist. I notice that in some significant way I am a different person in relation to each person I practice with. And, as with all intimate human relationships, most of what happens isn't conscious or discussable. Ultimately the relationship to a teacher is more (or less!) than a personal one.

In the end the point is to fully internalize and transcend the teacher—that is, to fully digest the teacher's approach to the dharma, be transformed by it, and then to go beyond it, to find your own way.

It's a commonplace piece of lore in Zen that the student should surpass the teacher. For years I reflected on this: if each disciple surpasses her or his teacher, and if I am the ninety-second generation from Buddha (as my lineage document says), then does this mean I have surpassed Buddha by a factor of ninety-two? I doubt it! To "surpass" your teacher means simply that you find your own way, your own expression, your uniqueness. Respecting and honoring your teacher, having a full and complete relationship with her or him, is having that same relationship with yourself—and with everyone. You are the teacher. Everyone is the teacher. To really know this and live it, according to Zen, you need to have a teacher.

I know that everybody is human, including Zen teachers, but how human is it acceptable for a Zen teacher to be? Can a person be a good Zen teacher even if he or she does what I think are unethical things? Where should I draw the line?

Yes, Zen teachers are human and do human things. Like other humans they make mistakes. Your question is very precise: "even if he or she does *what I think* are unethical things." As I said a moment ago, sometimes, especially in the beginning, you just have to trust the teacher. I have noticed that sometimes when people feel that Zen teachers, or others, do or say something they don't like, they consider such words and deeds to be unethical. But often it isn't actually a matter of ethics; it's that the teacher is behaving in ways you find offensive. It seems important that we give our teachers the benefit of the doubt. Probably we would be better off giving everyone the benefit of the doubt, even more so the Zen teacher with whose

help we are supposed to be learning something we don't yet know about life.

But of course it is entirely possible that Zen teachers could behave reprehensibly—unkindly if not unethically, and yes, sometimes unethically. Unethical conduct is always a problem. It is hurtful. It does damage. But it is an even bigger problem when a spiritual leader indulges in it. Since a spiritual teacher is the repository of our faith in the practice and the tradition, her or his unethical conduct can be enormously destructive, eroding the faith of many people, sometimes even causing despair and all sorts of irrational behavior in response. So it is extremely important for Zen teachers to follow precepts and be careful in their conduct and for students never to go along with a teacher's unethical behavior.

On the other hand, an excessive focus on ethical conduct can cause a Zen teacher to be uptight, constantly worried that one false word will ruin people's lives. That's no good either. Zen teachers also have to be examples of freedom, joy, and ease in the practice. In order to actually feel this, Zen teachers have to practice what they preach! They have to feel respect, regard, and identity with all living creatures, especially including the people they practice with, so that their spontaneous words and deeds won't be unkind or unethical. And if they fail in this, if they offend or transgress, they have to be capable of acknowledging, confessing, and repenting this, as we spoke about earlier.

You ask where we draw the ethical line. This is difficult of course. Some things are clear and these days explicit in many Zen communities that have written ethical codes. Teachers should not have sexual affairs with students, should not use sangha funds for their own personal needs, and so on. But often ethical breaches are subtle and hard to define, and sangha members will define them differently. At what point, for instance, does a teacher's asserting her or his authority become psychological abuse? When is a community, inspired by the teacher's perhaps overly exalted place in it, going off course? For me the most important safety factor is that within a Zen community everything be discussable. Anybody ought to be able to say how they feel about how things are going, especially if they feel

something is wrong. If community members feel like certain things simply are not safe to be mentioned, then I think there is a problem.

Among all kinds of Buddhist teachers, Zen teachers seem to have a particularly bad record in the realm of sexual misconduct. Why do you think this is?

I am not sure male Zen teachers (sexual offenders are almost always male in our sexist and sexualized world) are any worse than other male Buddhist teachers in this regard—or worse than rabbis, ministers, or Catholic priests. Unfortunately, sexual misconduct by men in religious or other positions of authority is all too common in all walks of life, though you don't often hear about it. But possibly you are right. In any case, a number of prominent Zen teachers have definitely been involved in sexual scandals. Why?

The basic reason is clear: people, especially men, have sexual desires that sometimes run away with them. Zen teachers are supposed to be able to deal with their desires without causing harm, but sometimes they aren't able to. Zen is relatively new and interesting in our culture, so Zen teachers may appear more attractive or exotic than other religious figures, and when Zen teachers are involved in scandals, it may make more interesting news. So perhaps Zen scandals get more press, which makes them seem, relatively, more numerous.

But there may be something, as your question implies, that makes Zen more likely to have these problems. First, Zen practice fosters a teacher-student relationship of a particular nature. As we've been discussing, in Zen, that relationship is intimate (this is the word often used), yet Zen teachers are not gurus. That is to say, Zen teachers, while often highly respected and even revered, are not considered different from or above ordinary people. So if you get very close to your Zen teacher, it might be quite easy for that closeness to slide over into romantic attachment. Our culture is so sexualized (and at the same time also repressed) that it might be quite common for people to experience the close relationship with a teacher as sexual longing. We simply don't have models for a warm spiritual relationship between two individuals, especially when one of them

(the teacher) seems to possess powerful spiritual virtue that the other aspires to. So we confuse spiritual feelings with sexual ones. This probably happens a lot, and may not be a problem, providing the teacher doesn't get confused.

But sometimes the teacher does get confused, mistaking the relationship in exactly the way the student does. Some of the Zen sex scandals I am aware of were less about evil Zen masters preying on their students than they were about smitten male Zen teachers falling foolishly and tragically in love with their female students.

In other cases, it's less a matter of tragic love than the ordinary wandering eye, male Zen teachers who have felt themselves (falsely, foolishly) entitled to the odd affair, given their (as they and their students may have felt) exalted spiritual state and all their hard work on behalf of their communities. (The same dynamic appears in almost all areas of social and institutional life in which powerful men assume larger-than-life leadership roles).

Sometimes it is still more complicated. The unfortunate truth is that being a spiritual leader can take a toll on your life. You can get in over your head and not realize that this has happened. Without your knowing it, your intense life can become a burden. Yet your faith and conviction have you trapped in it. And there's nothing like having an illicit affair to blow your life apart—one way to get out of a difficult situation, though not a very good way.

And yes, there have been out-and-out Zen sexual predators who have seen fit to use their privileged roles as platforms for the seduction of vulnerable female students. There have been some sad and terrible cases—although even here, the deeper you investigate, the murkier these situations become. I have found that very few human predicaments can be truly reduced to good versus evil, angels versus devils. Everyone, it turns out, is human, with human wounds and human needs.

Despite the fact that people need to be held accountable and stopped when they are doing destructive things, it usually turns out that everyone is a victim and everyone bears some responsibility. In several of the more public Zen sexual scandals, it was the collusion of the community—which in some cases was aware, through rumor

and sometimes even reliable reporting, of the offense but did nothing about it—that was almost as disturbing as the original events. Most Zen communities have learned from this history, so well documented by now, and have explicit ethical policies and empowered boards of directors, making this sort of thing far less likely.

How is the relationship between a Zen teacher and student different from the relationship between, say, a piano teacher and his or her student?

Maybe not so different. In both cases there is lots of dedicated practice and repetition at the heart of the relationship. So it's not just a personal relationship. There's a practice, a tradition, both parties are devoted to. Possibly in the case of the piano and certainly in the case of Zen, there's the feeling that the practice is about more than a skill to be learned, that it affects and transforms your whole life.

In fact, the more I think about it, the less difference I can see between a Zen teacher and any other apprenticeship or mentoring relationship. Every such relationship, at least potentially, brings up the whole of your life through the practice you are learning.

People sometimes speak of Zen practice as "training." Is the Zen teacher basically a trainer, like an athletic coach?

These various models of teachers and teaching that you're bringing up illustrate various aspects of this great project of transforming one another through sharing a passion for a practice (in this present case, a sport). Yes, a Zen teacher is a piano teacher, a football coach, a therapist, a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a friend ... and whatever else we can think of. But also not. A Zen teacher is just a Zen teacher.

A lot of people use the idea of "training" to describe what we do in Zen. But I have never liked this word because it focuses too much on skill. In sports you play with more or less skill, and you win or lose the game. In our Sōtō Zen tradition, as interpreted by Suzuki Roshi, we practice continuously and endlessly. We're not trying to get better at the practice or to attain increasingly powerful states or reputations.

For Suzuki Roshi, “beginner’s mind” was an ideal—to keep on going with a lively and sincere spirit, as if constantly beginning again. I can’t seem to get past that conception of our practice! So I don’t think of myself as being a coach or a teacher, and I don’t think of what we are doing as “training.” I think of it *as practice*, a word I am sure I have used hundreds of times in this book. I don’t mean practice in the sense of something we are doing in preparation for a performance, but rather practice in the sense of practicing medicine, practicing law, practicing an art. It is something we are devoted to, something we respect, study, contemplate, and apply, in a practical way, every day in our lives, hoping to become more and more established in it but understanding that we will never come to the end of it.

But I know many Zen teachers who think of themselves as more or less coaches, and of the practice they do as training. I admire this attitude, and it is the best way for many students. But I find it impossible to think like that.

To what extent should the student submit to the authority of the teacher?

I already wrote about this earlier when I talked about following your teacher’s way and giving her or him the benefit of the doubt, since the whole point of studying Zen is to go beyond your own view and sense of life. So yes, there is a sense in which to study Zen is to submit to the authority of the teacher. If you don’t see the teacher as a worthy representative of the Zen tradition that you respect and want to study and practice, what would be the point of having that person as your teacher?

I also said that at some point in your practice life, this sense of listening to the teacher without questioning much will and should change. At some point you will have become immersed enough in the teaching and practice, and close enough in your relationship to your teacher, that you will have your own views and opinions. A Zen teacher has to be wide enough and flexible enough to be capable of growing and changing in his or her relationships with students. In our tradition there are explicit teachings about the teacher becoming the

student and the student becoming the teacher—with a feeling that this is an essential part of the relationship.

But I hear something more profound in your question too. “Submitting to the authority of” is a phrase that raises hackles and inspires a certain amount of fear. What if the teacher asks me to do something that offends me or is too difficult for me? What if the teacher challenges my most deeply held assumptions and values? Must I submit? Is Zen practice with a teacher like being pushed into a dare, being forced to the edge of the abyss of what I fear most, or being asked to give up what I least want to relinquish? Getting back to the sexual scandal question we were talking about a moment ago: I wonder whether sometimes it wasn’t like that. An intimidating male teacher proposing that if the female student were really devoted, really serious, she should be willing to have sex with him, overcoming her small-minded attachment to morality and, perhaps, her marriage.

I think this is a challenging question and one not so easily dismissed. Yes, we can easily dismiss the example I just gave. A teacher shouldn’t and can’t compel a student to break a precept or commit a crime. And in my opinion any Zen teacher who is pressing a student to do this or that inappropriately or outrageously scary thing for her or his own good, to “stretch” the student, is being abusive.

And yet we do have to go into those walled-off scary areas of our heart; we do have to make peace with and go beyond what we most fear, including, and especially, our fear of death. Seeing the emptiness of all phenomena, which means fully entering without fear this unrepeatable and evanescent dreamlike moment of our lives, does involve our letting go of everything. As long as we determine that in our study of Zen we will permit this but not that, go this far but no further, we will remain imprisoned in ourselves.

So in the end, yes, we will have to surrender everything to our “teacher,” to the teacher within or to the ultimate truth the teacher represents. We will have to let go of everything, renounce everything—that is, let go of and renounce everything we think we have and believe but never have had and never really believed because there was never any real basis for that belief.

But this doesn't mean submitting to another human being's wishes for us or another human being's point of view. Suzuki Roshi once said, "When you become you, Zen becomes Zen." A good, solid Zen teacher knows that your practice is not fulfilled by your conforming to her ideas about Zen. She knows that real life involves letting go, that this is a difficult and yet a lovely prospect, and is willing to walk side by side with you as you go forth as far as you possibly can toward liberation from yourself in this lifetime.

I want to push you on this. I'm not quite satisfied. Let's say it's OK for the student to get up extra early to make the teacher tea. That's a tradition. OK. Should the student also iron the teacher's robes? What about handkerchiefs? How does the student know whether what's being asked is appropriate? How does the student know the teacher is what you call "a good, solid Zen teacher"?

It would be hard, I suppose, to compose a list of things it is OK to do for your teacher and things not OK. In any case, the list would always be contextual. For instance, in the context of monastic life, or even a sesshin, we might do things to take care of our teacher that we wouldn't do in more everyday situations (like your example of making tea before zazen). When I was the abbot of the Zen center, assistants used to do that for me. But now, in Everyday Zen, no one comes to my house to make me morning tea!

I confess that I have some prejudice about this point. I don't like people making a fuss over me. When I go to Zen places that have a tradition of making what I would consider too big a fuss over their teachers and the students there start to make a fuss over me, I usually ask them to please not do it. To me such favors are more negative than positive—they entrap both the students and me in a relationship that I find unrealistic and counterproductive. I want to be free! And I want students to be free. I don't want to be pampered, like a pet. And I believe that the more fuss students make over a Zen teacher, the more betrayed they are going to feel when the Zen teacher turns out not to be providing them with what they (probably unconsciously) imagined would be forthcoming—perfect affection,

intimacy, or approval. So I think everyone is saved a lot of trouble by a more normal and egalitarian custom of interaction with teachers. In the end it isn't so much what is done for the teacher as the spirit and attitude with which it's done. I can imagine students waiting hand and foot on a teacher who remains humble, gracious, and kind, understanding full well that what is being done isn't actually being done for him or her, that she is just a stand-in for the students' own buddha-nature. And I can imagine a teacher who is treated in an egalitarian way having a lot of pride in her or his enlightened superiority expressed in a Zen humility, while this teacher is actually lording it over the students in other probably subtler and more pernicious ways. How does the student know the teacher is "a good, solid Zen teacher"? I guess the student just feels like that's true until it's proven otherwise.

I have heard you say you don't like to call yourself a "teacher." Why is this? There are many people who are glad to call themselves your "students."

As I've been saying, I don't think of myself as a teacher, and I don't see what I am doing as teaching Zen. I am practicing Zen, and I am willing and happy to share my practice with others. Also, I like to write, give talks, and interact with people, so I'm happy to do all that. But I am not a master of Zen, or a Zen teacher. I always think of the master Ma-tsu, one of the great Zen teachers of the classical period in China, who yelled at the monastics for fawning over him, saying, "Don't you know there are no teachers of Zen!" One of them said, "Well what about you and all the others who set up Zen center?" He replied, "I don't say there's no Zen—only that there are no teachers of Zen." This pretty much describes how I feel.

Of course, as I have also been saying, so-called teachers in Zen are very important to the process of the practice—at least if you want to practice Zen in the full traditional sense. They play a role, and I am willing to play my role. I have practiced for a long time by now and have received all the ritual empowerments that allow me to, even obligate me to, play that role. So I am happy to do it. But I know that doesn't make me, personally, a teacher, an inherently wise and

special person. It only means I am willing and able to take my place in the mandala of practice, and it is the mandala itself—the matrix of teacher, students, teachings, ritual, and so on—that transforms the practitioners. It's not me who transforms anyone.

Possibly some Zen or other spiritual teachers (and this may go for other kinds of people, like artists, professors, and so on) enjoy the idea of themselves as teachers; they like the focus and the respect. I do too to some extent. As I said, I would much rather be thought of as wise and kind than vilified as a scoundrel or ignored as a nonentity. But also, I don't like being the center of many projections. Nor do I think my being the center of projections and the important person serves the practice well. Teacher-centered practice is less good I believe than practice that is student-centered. So for myself and for the practice, I think it is better for me to de-emphasize myself as teacher. Anyway, for better or worse, I can't help myself! I simply don't feel like a Zen teacher, an expert or master of Zen. And I honestly don't believe these labels fit me or describe me. And it is unpleasant and troublesome for me if other people make a big deal out of me as a Zen teacher. I would prefer to be free of all that.

Having said all this, I don't want to deny that others may actually be Zen teachers or spiritual masters of various sorts. I notice that there are spiritual teachers who seem to be enlightened masters, who seem to acknowledge that they are enlightened masters, and whom intelligent people attend with that in mind. Given that, I can only conclude that they really are enlightened masters, and I have no reason to doubt this. It's just that I am not an enlightened Zen teacher, and, frankly, I have never been interested in that as a goal. What has interested me spiritually, from the beginning, has been simply to live a fully human life, including all the good and bad that a human life entails. And I have always imagined that this is what Zen teaches—at least this is what I have always seen in it. I am sure others see other things. Besides, I am basically a poet and a writer.

You say there are people glad to call themselves my "students." I appreciate that. And I see it as a two-way street. I feel they are giving me more than I am giving them. So I am grateful and dedicated to doing whatever I can, in my necessarily limited way, to support them.

Do Zen teachers need to have teachers? Do you still have a teacher, someone to whom you go for guidance in your practices?

In Sōtō Zen every Zen teacher has a Zen teacher. In Sōtō Zen there couldn't be a self-proclaimed self-enlightened teacher, since in our tradition what makes you a Zen teacher is a relationship, ritually sanctioned, with a Zen teacher who has him- or herself been ritually sanctioned by his or her teacher through such a relationship. According to Zen mythology, even Buddha had a teacher, Kāshyapa Buddha, who also had a teacher, and so on.

So all Sōtō Zen teachers have had a teacher. Once you "graduate" (by receiving either full priest ordination or lay teacher entrustment from your teacher), you are officially a "teacher"; that is, you are ritually empowered to take your place in the lineage and your seat as a teacher in a Zen sangha (as we discussed earlier). But usually you don't abandon your teacher or cut off relations with him or her. As long as your teacher is alive, you maintain the relationship, though it will probably be quite different now that you are on your own. It's a little like being the grown child of a parent. The parent is still the parent, but the relationship to him or her is quite different (at least one hopes so!). The metaphor of a parent is inaccurate, because relationships between Zen teachers and students are between adults; no one is a child, but the metaphor does illustrate what I mean to some extent.

The older a teacher gets, the harder it is to have a relationship to a teacher. Quite probably his or her own teacher will have died. And when a teacher is very experienced, with many years of practice, it may be difficult to find another teacher who is mature enough.

But as teachers go on with practice, they will know other teachers in their own generation, as I do, other teachers in the same lineage with whom they will have practiced and also teachers in other lineages. Relationships with such teachers are very important, and they perhaps take the place of having your own teacher as time goes on. At least this has been the case for me. My good relationships with other Zen teachers whom I've been lucky to know over the years, to learn from and respect, have become as important to me

as my relationships with my teachers. They are different, of course, but, at this point in my life, increasingly important.

But I am fortunate. My teacher, Sojun Weitsman, is still very much alive and active, at eighty-six, as abbot of the Berkeley Zen Center, where I first met him forty-five years ago. We are still close, and I see him from time to time, mostly in informal situations. I do ask him for advice on intimate Zen matters, but mostly, when we get together, it is as good old friends.

9

STAGES OF PRACTICE

What are the different stages of practice?

In my view, which comes from Dōgen and Suzuki Roshi, practice is continuous, and we aren't getting anywhere other than just going on, with some joy and increasing appreciation. So there are no stages. In a profound sense, we are all beginners.

But we do have what you might call "stages" in *commitment* to practice. In our tradition these stages can be marked by rituals and empowerments, but the main thing is that we feel them internally. I resist the idea that people who are "serious" about their practice need to go through the normative rituals. I am always happy when an Everyday Zen practitioner feels as if it makes more sense to just keep on practicing, without benefit of any ritual or seemingly sanctioned status or stage.

Yet at the same time, our tradition does recognize and honor ritual as an important part of the transformative process. So when people choose to receive these rituals, as they go through a lifetime of practice, I am happy to participate with them and take a lot of joy in it.

The first such ritual is commonly called *jukai*, receiving the precepts. In our tradition we also call it *zaike-tokudo*, literally, "staying at home while entering the way." In our groups we usually expect someone to practice with us steadily for about three years before they do this ritual, because for most people, even people experienced in other forms of Buddhism, it takes about three years

to “join the family”—that is, to feel more or less integrated into the community and take to its particular way of understanding and its local customs. After about three years of practice, a person may ask me or one of the other teachers if he or she can receive the precepts. Usually we say yes. And we ask the person to begin to study the precepts (the sixteen bodhisattva precepts) by reading about them, listening to talks, discussing them with others, and, especially, by observing and reflecting on their life for a period of time, to see what the precepts, one by one, actually mean to them and what problems they might find in following the precepts.

After study goes on for a year or more, the student then asks to sew a *rakusu*, a small Buddhist robe that looks a little like a bib, a square cloth worn on the chest, suspended by straps hung from around the neck. This sewing practice, which is quite unexpected and unfamiliar for most people, is important in our tradition. The rakusu is considered a sacred garment embodying one’s commitment to the precepts, so sewing a rakusu is a ritual in itself. With each stitch you recite, “Namu kie butsu” (“I take refuge in Buddha”), the first precept, which stands for all sixteen precepts. So you are sewing your commitment into your rakusu.

After you are finished sewing, you are ready for the ceremony, in which, usually with a few other people, you vow to follow the precepts and receive a Buddhist name chosen by your teacher, the rakusu, and a lineage document that shows all the names of the lineage ancestors, from Buddha, through your teacher, down to you. The whole process, ending with the ceremony, is pretty thorough, and people are strongly affected by it.

While most practitioners continue on the lay path, some people choose, for inner reasons that are not always so clear, to further commit themselves by ordaining as a Zen Buddhist priest. Since there are no nationally recognized seminaries where you can train to be a Zen priest, virtually no congregations at this point who might be looking for a priest to lead them (and able to pay a decent salary), and as yet no recognized specific agreement among teachers about requirements for ordination (other than general, informal requirements), any person with sufficient Zen experience, a sense of

calling, and a willingness to continue to practice for a lifetime with others can ask his or her teacher to be ordained as a priest.

In most other Buddhist traditions, Buddhist clergy are celibate, live according to a monastic rule, and are expected to give up home and family life in order to be attached, in some way, to a monastic community or temple. But our tradition, for historical reasons particular to Japan, has what is more or less a lay clergy—that is, fully ordained priests who can marry, have money, careers, and so on. So any person with some years of committed practice can request priest ordination and be granted it.

In Asia, traditionally, a person ordains as a youth and practices for some years before taking full ordination. The idea is that you ordain as a priest at the beginning of your practice because the commitment and the rules you will be living under help you to be serious. In most Asian countries, the tradition is that only ordained people actually do the practice that leads to awakening. Laypeople give alms and receive blessings and teachings in return—which is *their* practice.

In contemporary Japan, typically a young man whose father is abbot of a temple will be ordained by his father when he is in high school or college, will spend a year or more in a monastery, after which he will receive full ordination from his father while he is still in his twenties. (Of course not all Japanese priests are typical.)

In Western Zen, people come to the practice when they are already adults, sometimes middle-aged or even older, without much of an idea about what it really involves. They then practice for some time (maybe a decade or so) before they are ready to ask for ordination. Then it can be another decade or so before their practice has ripened enough (if that time ever comes) to receive full ordination. So although most people see all Zen Buddhist priests as priests, technically they are novice priests until full ordination. In my case, for example, I started practicing in 1970, when I was in my early twenties. I was ordained as a priest in 1980 and received *shiho* (full ordination, sometimes called “dharma transmission”) in 1988. My experience is fairly typical, I believe, in Western Sōtō Zen.

Because there are no requirements to be a priest that the average person (even one who is married, with children and a career) can’t

meet and nothing—at least nothing external—the person has to give up, anyone who feels a calling can be ordained. To me this is beautiful: anyone can be a priest!

But it can also be a little confusing. What's the difference between a priest and anyone else? Why would someone want to be a priest? How is practicing as a priest different from practicing as a layperson?

In a way it is simple: being a priest means giving up everything in your life but practicing Zen, making practice your first and only priority, and seeing everything in your life as a vehicle for practice. But what does *that* mean, if your life before and after priest ordination looks more or less the same from the outside? (To be sure, I am speaking personally here. Other senior American Zen priests have their own approaches, and many have more stringent requirements for ordination than I do. But almost all American Sōtō Zen priests are lay priests; many are married, have careers other than being a priest, and so on).

Possibly the main practice of a priest, the main thing that distinguishes a priest from a layperson, is the sewing and wearing of the *okesa*. I already wrote about sewing practice. An okesa is a full Buddhist robe, much larger than a rakusu, large enough to be fully wrapped around the body and typically worn over another garment.

It takes quite a while to sew an okesa and, once you sew it, quite a while to get used to wearing it. Like the rakusu, the okesa is a sacred garment, Buddha's own robe, so the sewing and wearing of it is very significant. When you put it on, you don't exactly feel like yourself anymore. You feel like you are a disciple of the Buddha, a representative of the Buddha, and you had better think, speak, and act like it. There are many rules for the wearing of and handling of the okesa.

The priest ordination ceremony is called *shukke-tokudo*, "leaving home and entering the way." The ceremony symbolizes leaving home, leaving one's ordinary life, and becoming a cloud in the sky, without any place to land and nothing to possess or accomplish. There's a line in the ceremony that expresses this: "Only the mind of a bodhisattva [in this context, a priest] can cut through this drifting, wandering life and take the path of nirvana. This virtue cannot be defined." This leaving of the life of attachment to identity and family

is symbolized by shaving the head, which is done in the ceremony. Even though leaving home and identity is not literally the case for priests in our tradition, inwardly this is the feeling.

In the ordination ceremony, a priest formally receives the okesa she or he has sewn, along with other accoutrements of a monastic (though, as I have been saying, priests are usually only symbolically monastics): eating bowls, a cloth for bowing on. He or she also receives again a lineage document and the same sixteen bodhisattva precepts he or she will probably already have received as a layperson.

Your question is about "stages." So, yes, ordaining as a priest would be a further stage one could, but of course need not, enter.

A person who has received the precepts either as a priest or layperson (or both) is eligible to serve as *shuso*, the symbolic head of a Zen practice period (more on practice periods follow starting on page 127). This is a rite of passage that a person goes through only once. There are rituals for the shuso at the beginning and end of the practice period, the completion of which is considered a further stage in practice. Practitioners who have completed this stage are able to give dharma talks. They may, after some years, go on to receive either lay entrustment or full priest ordination (shiho, or dharma transmission), both of which would qualify the person to teach Zen.

But what does "teaching Zen" actually mean? As I said before, for me the whole idea of teaching Zen is suspect. Everything and anything is teaching Zen, and there is also no such thing as teaching Zen. Many people who receive either lay entrustment or shiho don't do much or sometimes any formal teaching. They just continue their practice as before. Some, like me, go on to teach Zen, establish communities, and so on.

I have given shiho and lay entrustment to a number of people. Many of them maintain their own communities, and several others continue to practice with me, just showing up and teaching by their inspiring example. Others just lead quiet lives, though they seem to be inspired to do things to be of service to others.

Lay entrustment and shiho would be the final stages of practice, though some count being installed as abbot of a monastery or

leading a practice period as further stages. Possibly death is the final stage. Or maybe there are more stages after that.

So, for a tradition that is founded on the idea of no steps and stages, just simple daily practice, all of this seems remarkable!

If everyone has buddha-nature, then why make these distinctions between people? Some Zen traditions don't have priests at all. Why do we even have priests?

Good question. I think the intention of all that I've just described is to give people a chance to make deep commitments to their practice and to participate in rituals that will enhance their feeling of inner transformation and deepen it. Versions of these rituals (which are themselves practices) are very common in Buddhism and virtually all other religious traditions, so there must be something to them. They must make a difference.

But again, the implications of your question are far reaching. "Distinctions": yes, whenever you set up distinctions between people, you are making a problem. To minimize problems, as a baseline, you have to ensure that there is no unfairness, that any person who feels a calling and is able to meet the requirements—regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, race, level of education, political persuasion, language, and so on—is welcome. That's basic. But beyond this, distinctions always make for confusion, jealousy, hurt feelings, possibly abuse of power, strained relationships, and so on—yet another thing for us poor human beings to fret about and hurt one another with. Naturally these various emotions and resentments and questions will arise in any community that has these distinctions. They are not unknown in our communities.

Of course there will always be problems like this in human groups, even human groups that do not have jukai, shukke-tokudo, shiho, shuso, and lay entrustment. One may well ask, since these human problems always exist anyway in groups, why make them worse by creating still more distinctions? Why add problems to already existing problems?

But I think it is not clear that adding such solemn religious rituals, and the distinctions among people they may foster, makes matters

worse. It is possible that the rituals make matters better, creating some confusion, yes, but perhaps also reducing the usual sorts of competition and social exclusion that will naturally exist in human groups. When a person who would, in ordinary circumstances and in ordinary group settings, be considered one down for some reason—being inarticulate or lacking social polish, for instance—when such a person is elevated in a Sōtō Zen sangha because of her or his longtime faithful commitment to dharma, the social dynamic in the whole group changes. And when someone who is used to being at the head of the class and quickly assuming high social status in groups is not so quickly elevated, simply because she or he has not yet felt the practice deeply enough, things shift.

The distinctions we make in our tradition are made on the basis of faith and commitment to the practice, not personality, talent, skill, or intelligence. Sōtō Zen is not a meritocracy. People "get ahead" simply by doing the practice faithfully over time, regardless of who they are. This is completely different from almost all social groups! It was something the Buddha established at the very beginning of the sangha. His rule was that monastic status was determined solely by seniority of ordination, not brilliance or social class. It was a very radical thing in the early sangha when a monastic who was the son of a prince was junior to, and therefore required to be formally respectful of, the son of a merchant or a beggar.

The question of priests brings up historical and social dimensions that also have to be taken into account. We are not living in ancient India or Japan. Our history has had a traumatic past in relation to priests and religious hierarchy. In Europe, the church and its clergy were for centuries a source of psychological and social oppression (though at the same time a place of scholarship, art, culture, and, often, comfort for ordinary people). The French Revolution was as much a revolt against the church as it was against the nobility. The United States was founded by European settlers fleeing religious persecution (though some of them were for their own part just as intolerant of others' religious commitments). Leftist politics has a deep sense, at its heart, that religion is nothing more than a mechanism for keeping the masses quiet, as Marx felt. And the opposition of Western religious establishments to scientific and

social progress over the last several hundred years still continues in some cases.

So yes, we are happy to practice meditation or Zen because it is individualistic and egalitarian, good for us, inexpensive, non-habit-forming, and doesn't require beliefs or guilt or obligation. But as soon as we see that there are priests, robes, and incense involved, we may become gun-shy, our deeply embedded but possibly unconscious cultural prejudices against priests having been awakened.

In addition to all this, many come to practice Zen in flight from their own religious backgrounds that included scary or oppressive clergy people and much unhelpful ritual or dogma. So finding all this in Zen can raise hackles.

Some of the newer Zen lineages never had priests and never wanted them, because they consider the priestly institution archaic and counterproductive. Others lineages had priest status at one time and more or less dropped it because of perceived abuses not in the distant but in the recent past. But as far as I am aware, all the Zen lineages have empowered teachers and have the jukai ritual—so there are still distinctions made and still, in effect, priests (without the robes).

Yes, as you say, it is a firm Zen notion that all beings without exception have buddha-nature, or, as Dōgen put it, *are* buddha-nature. This is the first point, the main point, and perhaps the only point. All distinctions between practitioners (or even between practitioners and nonpractitioners) must be seen against this backdrop. As soon as we lose track of this, we are sunk. But if we can keep it in mind at all times, we can, perhaps, make use of these traditional distinctions for the good.

And why would a person choose to become a priest?

Earlier I said that a person's reasons for becoming a priest may not be so clear. Suzuki Roshi once said to his Western students, "You are neither priests nor laypeople." Once he was asked, "What is a priest?" And he replied, "I don't know" (a response my own teacher loves to quote whenever he is asked to define what a priest is).

Given this from our revered founder, it is no wonder there is some murkiness around the question of what a priest is or who should be one! Usually when people in our lineage family discuss these matters, the discussion is long, deep, and very personal. Deciding to become a priest is a matter of one's inmost religious feeling—something not always easy to define.

Someone who decides to be a priest is likely to be a person who finds all the usual identities in his or her life to be insufficient responses to the largest human questions: Why live? Who am I? For such a person it isn't enough to be a man, woman, husband, wife, father, mother, practitioner of an art or profession—though the person may have many of these things in his or her life and may value them. Somehow the inner commitment to throw away all other identities and to remain simply a disciple of Buddha, wearing Buddha's clothes, eating from Buddha's bowls, lifetime after lifetime, practicing the way for one's self and others—seeing that there is not and could never be a distinction between self and others—for one who ordains as a priest, somehow all this, vague as it may seem in any ordinary practical sense, is the only way that life can make any sense.

However, I doubt that most people who decide to become priests would put it quite like that. Maybe they would simply say they want to be a priest, that this is their heart's desire, that they have a deep feeling of urgency about wanting to ordain. Maybe they have been affected by and deeply admire someone who is or was a priest and feel a need to emulate that person by ordaining. Maybe they feel some unnameable human pain that they believe can be healed only by ordaining as a priest. Hard to say. Hard to discern. And at the same time, sometimes not so hard. Sometimes a person seems to be a priest already, even before ordaining. This is the usual advice Sojun, my teacher, gives when someone approaches him for ordination. He tells the person not to wait for the ceremony—to start immediately living like a priest inside.

> *Isn't the wave of the future of Zen in the West toward lay practice? Most people who are interested in Zen want to keep on living in the world. The monastic way of life isn't part of our*

cultural tradition. Why not forget about sewing those complicated okesas? Why would you want to set yourself apart from ordinary people by wearing strange clothes and walking around with a bare scalp? What about the saying "everyday mind is the way"?

Well you have a point. American Zen is certainly a lay movement. In Asia, lay practice has traditionally been to give alms and support temples and leave the deeper religious practices to the monastics.

But here in the West, we are interested in the practice that monastics have always done—meditation, experiential wisdom, study—and we feel we can do it as laypeople. This is a radical departure, but one that seems to follow the tenor of our times. My guess is that some Asian Buddhists find this inspiring, while others perhaps find it odd or even foolhardy. But I am sure that support for this kind of lay practice as a path for Western Buddhism is universal among practitioners here, priest or lay. I don't think anyone in the West wants to exclude laypeople from the primary practice. There are, as I have said, many lay centers, and even the monasteries are generally mainly populated by lay students in relatively short-term residence.

So the question is, given this, is there any use at all in a Buddhist clergy? Certainly there is for people who want to be celibate and dedicate their lives to practice. This more traditional path of practice should be available for those who want to pursue it, and they will join lineages (Theravadan, Ch'an, Thien, Seon, Tibetan) that have the traditional celibate rule. Japanese Zen doesn't.

So what about the Zen lineages? Should we have priests at all?

Actually, I think the question is, should we have ritual? If not, then we don't need priests. But, as I've said, ritual is powerful and important for the practice. And if we have ritual, then we will need people who study and lead ritual—we will need priests of some sort.

You might say, "Well how about dropping the complication of the okesa and having laypeople be able to do all the things that priests do?" Of course that's possible, but then those laypeople would function, more or less, as priests.

And if you are going to have ritual and people who lead ritual, then why not give those people more, rather than less, traditional background and support? Ritual is an area in which efficiency isn't always the best thing. The ritual that you and I work out today and perform tomorrow can be joyful, creative, and meaningful, but the ritual that has a long tradition behind it and that we have prepared for by our performance of other rituals over time will have an additional dimension to it. The priest ordination ceremony, for instance, which we've translated from the Japanese, contains words and gestures that are many centuries old and have been repeated by sincere practitioners for generations. When we do the ceremony, say the words, and perform the gestures, we feel all that, and it adds a great deal to our experience, not only at that moment, but afterward.

The question you are raising is really, how much ritual is too much? Where do we draw the line? Because ritual can be overdone. But I find a lot of meaning and benefit in the rituals we practice now and would not want to eliminate any of them. I would need a stronger reason for doing that than preference or convenience.

So, I ask again, what about everyday mind?

Yes, all this does seem very far from everyday mind, but maybe not as far as you might think. In Zen, the phrase "everyday mind" is first found in the famous dialogue between Nan-ch'üan and Chao-chou. Chao-chou asked, "What is the way?" (This is the same question we began this book with: "What is Zen?") Nan-ch'üan, his teacher, replied, "Everyday mind is the way." Chao-chou said, "If everyday mind is already the way, how can I know it? How can I aim for it?" Nan-ch'üan said, "It's not a matter of knowing or not knowing. Knowing is an exaggeration; not knowing is stupidity. The way is vast and wide. What does this have to do with knowing or not knowing?"

"Vast and wide": usually we don't think of everyday mind, everyday activity, as being vast and wide. Usually we think we know what is going on. But do we? Or maybe, as Nan-ch'üan implies, we valorize "not knowing," a kind of romantic anti-intellectualism, as the true Zen. But ordinary mind, ordinary life, is larger than either of these.

“Vast and wide”: beyond anything we can know or understand completely, yet including within it all that we know and understand. Nan-ch’üan is saying that our lives—our concrete, ordinary everyday lives—are already enlightenment. We don’t need to look past them for some big metaphysical insights. If we could just actually *be* our lives rather than try to control them, maybe we could appreciate them.

I had a big insight about everyday life when I was a student at Tassajara monastery. I was there with my wife Kathie and our twin sons, Aron and Noah, who, at the time, were about nine months old. Kathie and I shared the monastic schedule equally, so half the time she was in the meditation hall and I was with the children: the only adult within a radius of twenty miles or so who was not in the meditation hall. (Tassajara is very remote.) I was feeling sorry for myself one day, thinking I was missing the important Zen lecture, when it occurred to me, in a sudden flash of aha insight, that if the teachings actually meant what they said, then right now, as I was feeding my sons in the wheelbarrow (they were impossibly rambunctious and messy when they ate; in the wheelbarrow they had to stay put, and I could hose out the wheelbarrow when they were finished)—at this very moment of feeding them, this *was* my Zen lecture. If the teachings were true, this must be so.

From that moment on, I never again felt sorry for myself. And from then on, my approach to practice was always grounded in everyday life. It had to be. Had I persisted in an idealistic and fancy idea of Zen, I would never have been able to survive my life.

There are places in the West where a Zen student can go on a long retreat. I went to a practice period at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, deep in the mountains of northern California, the same place where you fed your kids in the wheelbarrow, and I lived as a monk for three months, devoting myself totally to the dharma and following the schedule religiously, if I may use that word. The experience gave me a kind of faith in my own buddha-nature. Is it important for all Zen students to have the experience of going on retreat from the world?

There is something about Zen that you can only fully appreciate when you have had the chance to do a residential practice period, several if possible. But a Zen practice period isn't exactly a retreat.

In most contemplative traditions, the experience of retreat is crucial. What we call "retreat" usually means literally retreating from your normal everyday life and spending a period of time—a week, a month, or two or three months—in silent meditation, suspending all normal activity. Usually such retreats will produce powerful meditation experiences. In Zen, such intense silent meditation retreats are called *sesshin*, a word that means something like "gathering" or "unifying" the mind. Actually, a sesshin is considered more an "advance" than a "retreat." The theory is you are going more intensely into the essence of your everyday life, not retreating from it. A classical sesshin is seven days long. Sesshins are very important in Zen, essential probably.

The Zen practice period that you are describing is something different. It is usually longer than a sesshin—three months is the classical length—and its model is not silent retreat; it's everyday monastic life that includes not only daily meditation, but also work, study, discussion, Buddhist services, and so on. The key to Zen practice (as expressed in the "everyday mind" story of Chao-chou and Nan-ch'üan) is the integration of intense meditation into everyday activities, so that you can feel how "vast and wide" such activities really are—rather than withdrawal from everyday activities in order to meditate. This is why practice period, not retreat per se, is so much prized in Zen. In a typical Japanese Sōtō Zen monastery, monks spend as much time doing ceremonies and working, and especially cleaning, as they do meditating.

> *How can you call this everyday life? This certainly isn't my everyday life! The practice period was profound for me precisely because it wasn't my everyday life. Did I miss the point?*

Right. Practice period isn't like your everyday life or the everyday lives of most contemporary people. But it is more like everyday life than a meditation retreat. In practice period there is talking; there is interaction, work, laundry, housekeeping; there are human problems.

You are constantly having to switch activities—one minute meditating, then changing out of your robes into work clothes, then the bell rings and you change again to return to the meditation hall for the formal meal. As the days and weeks and months of practice period roll on, you begin to lose the sense that there is much difference between these various activities. It all becomes a blur—one seamless life, one continuous present moment of being alive, vast and wide at all points. So even though practice period certainly feels like a quiet retreat compared to busy contemporary life, in fact what you are learning in practice period is how to live all the activities of your life in the spirit of the practice.

If everyday life is a busy and stressful slog for you, a silent meditation retreat can feel like a respite, a relief. Then you have to step back into the impossible grind again. But for a Zen student—at least this is what the practice is meant to foster—ordinary life (even if very busy) and meditation are experienced as different modes of one thing: different of course, but basically the same. I know many people who, having done a number of practice periods, live their lives in this way, with this understanding and attitude. This is not to say that they feel no stress or strain. But to them life seems like one long moment-after-moment, challenging, and often joyful spiritual practice.

I suspect that when you say, “The experience gave me a kind of faith in my own buddha-nature,” this is what you mean.

What about the sincere practitioners who really can’t take time off to do a residential practice period?

Yes, that’s true of most people in our practice groups and probably most Zen practitioners these days, who have families and careers doing useful work. For them it might not be practical or possible to do a three-month residential practice period. I have been finding that if people do sesshins once a year, do daily practice at home or at a center, stay in touch with teachers and sangha, they do begin little by little to live a Zen life, even without doing residential practice periods.

In recent decades many lay Zen practice places that do not have the opportunity for a residential practice period have begun to apply

the classical template of practice period to ordinary lay practice. A special period of time is designated, a month or usually several months, during which practitioners come to the temple for special rituals and other events and commit themselves to extra meditation at home and various kinds of mutual practice support, while carrying on with their ordinary lives. This is by no means the same as a residential monastic practice period, but it is becoming a new and effective form of Zen practice nevertheless.

> *I have sometimes imagined becoming a monk and living long-term at a place like Tassajara or Green Gulch Farm. But perhaps the impulse comes from the desire to escape the complications and ambiguities of the world. I could spend my days sitting in silence, sifting incense, and weeding the garden. I wouldn't have to look for a job, pay rent, or make any big decisions. I'd be living in community, so I wouldn't ever be lonely. This is what my life was really like during my three months at Tassajara. Could monastic residential practice be a form of escapism?*

Yes, going to live in a monastery for a long time could be an escape. Maybe there are things you need to face that you can only face by dealing with your circumstances as they are in the ordinary world we live in, and avoiding that by entering a monastery might just be the easy way out. For some people in monasteries, it is like this. Elders in those monasteries will gently try to help a person see this and support him or her to eventually face what needs to be faced. But sometimes that in-between time, that temporary escape, helps a person prepare him- or herself for the challenges ahead. When this is so (and I have seen it many times), "escaping to a monastery" for a while is fruitful and positive.

But there is another way to see this. Maybe "escaping" to a monastery takes more courage than remaining in the world. Remaining in the world is at least a known and accepted path. Leaving the world to practice silence and simplicity for an extended period of time is quite countercultural. Surrendering yourself to a monastic rule in a place where you can't retreat and can't run away,

and where the conditions might not be so easy, may take some vision and courage.

From one point of view, the world seems a given. It is where we live, and we are responsible for it. But from another point of view, the world is pretty crazy, pretty destructive. We could start with the daily violence, the wars, the horrible injustices. Every day women are raped, children abused, people are starving to death while other people are sailing in yachts with a dozen crew members on permanent retainer. Anyone who remains in this world is in some sense supporting all this, keeping it going, functioning as a cog in its grinding wheel.

And beyond this, there is the simple soul-crushing everyday stress and strain of contemporary life, commuting, working at what might be a meaningless or even a destructive job, paying bills and keeping up the house and garden and appearances in general—all the boring and counterproductive activity the average person has to engage in to keep life afloat, activity that prevents deep insight, deep feeling, and any stronger sense of reality than survival and conformity.

For millennia people who have seen the horror, injustice, boredom, and uselessness of the world have felt they had no choice but to drop out, to live a life apart, a life of, as you say, purity and community, probably praying for the world, maybe caring about it deeply, but not lending their own support to its madness. Dropping out may be the ultimate gesture of protest.

In ages gone by, dropouts often became monastics. Every culture has had them. For the last couple hundred years, artists have joined the ranks of the dropouts. Many contemporary artists (by no means all) see themselves as having abandoned this crazy world for a world of the imagination, a world of protest and critique, beauty and meaning—a world apart. Remember Timothy Leary's great battle cry of a generation or two ago: tune in, turn on, drop out. Get out of this false world and join a true one where there can be some genuine encounter and some genuine fun! Leary never mentioned what one would do once one dropped out, but, in fact, alternatives were created and still are being created. Among them was the establishment of Zen monasteries in America.

Having read this, you might think this is my point of view—that the world is a terrible, destructive, boring place that you should flee from as soon as possible. In part, I do see the world like this. Otherwise, I guess I would not have spent my life as I have. On the other hand, I also love the world (just as it is, and also as it could be) and don't want to escape from it. I find this world immensely interesting and moving in a million ways. Of course the world is full of problems and challenges, but it is the only world we've got, it's the one we've made over the millennia, and it is deeply satisfying to live in it and try to be of service.

In any case, what I'm trying to say here is that perhaps escaping this life in the "world" to live in peaceful community, consuming few resources, and living a life of harmlessness isn't such a bad idea. Maybe it isn't irresponsible; maybe it isn't cowardly. If monastic life is a life of escapism, maybe more people should escape.

But in Zen, monastic life has never been conceived of as an escape from the world. It is a place to investigate life and to prepare for a life of further engagement. In old China monks traveled from monastery to monastery in order to visit teachers and improve their understanding of and appreciation of the teachings. Their goal was to be able to share the teaching and the blessing, either by helping to train others in monasteries or as residents of temples and towns where they might be of benefit to others.

This is certainly the case with American Zen monasteries. To spend two or three or four years in a monastery is considered a long time. People who spend decades are few, and those people generally become responsible, in one way or another, for running those monasteries so that others can make use of them. So long-term monastics are not escaping the world; they are providing the world with necessary shelter, teaching, and inspiration. They are providing a place where all kinds of people, in all kinds of ways, can seek spiritual renewal and refreshment.

Tassajara, like all other Zen monasteries in America that I am aware of, is an open place. Anyone can apply to spend a long or a short time there as a monastic, and during the spring and summer months, programs are offered to the public so that people with busy lives can come to the monastery to do yoga, study teachings, learn

cooking or some other useful skill, or just rest. During these months the meditation hall is open to anyone who wants to attend, as are the Zen talks.

I believe that monasteries are essential institutions for healthy societies. It's too bad there aren't more of them.

10

OVER THE LONG HAUL

How does a person change after many years of Zen practice?

People change in so many ways, and everyone is different. I don't think I could list the top ten ways people change with Zen, as if Zen were a kind of training regimen, like army boot camp, designed to produce a certain kind of individual.

Your question makes me think about Issan Dorsey, who was a Zen priest in San Francisco. Issan had a famously checkered past as a drag queen and drug addict. He had been kicked out of the navy for homosexual activity. He was a very wild individual in San Francisco nightclubs. Then he became a Zen priest. Some years after his ordination, he started one of the first AIDS hospices in San Francisco at a time when people were confused and terrified about the disease, and San Francisco was its ground zero. Issan was fearless in taking in all kinds of people, caring for them night and day, summoning a community of others to help, raising the funds to make it happen, and doing it all as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He finally succumbed to the illness himself at the age of fifty-seven, leaving this world with gentle good humor.

After Issan died, my teacher, Sojun Mel Weitsman, said of him, "Issan was very good at being himself." The statement may seem odd. Aren't we all very good at being ourselves? Maybe not. I think what Sojun meant was that Issan was fearlessly, deeply, and genuinely himself, in a way that most of us are not. He didn't have an image of himself that he was protecting or advancing. He didn't have

a notion of how he was supposed to be. He wasn't worried about looking good or looking bad. He was just himself. And as such, he was an inspiration to many.

Most of us aren't as able to be ourselves as Issan was. Mostly we *are* worried about how we look and how we are supposed to be. We really *do* have an idea of ourselves we are protecting and advancing. We are too afraid to own our human treasure, which includes our genetic predisposition, our family heritage, and our own personal history, including our failures and our wounds. We have been scarred by all that in various ways and have retreated into lives that are less than they could be. Embarrassed by our limitations, we have tried to cover them up or improve them. But in fact our scars are our treasure. Our uniqueness is an offering to the world.

The story goes that as Issan was lying on his deathbed, a good friend and fellow monk said to him, "Issan, we are going to miss you." Issan replied, "Why? Are you going somewhere?"

So yes, Issan was very good at being himself. He took what might have been a tragic and painful life and turned it into a joyful gift. He was an unusual person, but so is everyone unusual.

This is the main change that any of us who practice Zen could hope for: that we would become very good at being ourselves.

If I had to, I suppose I could make a wish list of personal qualities I would hope that Zen practitioners would acquire. I would hope that a Zen practitioner would be kind—yet I have known Zen practitioners who don't appear to be so kind, according to conventional notions of what "kindness" looks like. I would hope that a Zen practitioner would be calm and patient with difficulties—though I have known longtime Zen practitioners who are not very calm or patient. I would hope that Zen practitioners would have a love for the practice and a willingness to share it with others—but I have known Zen people who don't like the practice at all and avoid the meditation hall whenever they can. I would hope that people who practice Zen learn how to make a situation or a relationship better, not worse. I would hope that they learn to see the beauty in whatever happens, to see that everything is empty and free already, not embattled and narrow, as the world looks to so many. I would hope that Zen practitioners are unselfish most of the time and that when they are selfish they notice this and

try to let it go. Mostly the Zen practitioners I have known really are like this. Most of them are pretty courageous people, people you'd like to have around in time of crisis. Even if they didn't have the skills to help, they'd very likely inspire you with their presence and their confidence, even if all was lost.

Earlier we mentioned the six paramitas (perfections), six practices that define the bodhisattva path: generosity, ethical conduct, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom. These also might afford a sketch of the qualities we would prize and hope for in a seasoned Zen practitioner.

How has Zen practice changed you?

In the forty-five or so years since I started to practice Zen, I have changed a lot. Some of the changes have been for the better. These changes follow the lines of the wish list I just mentioned. I am definitely more patient, less apt to fly off the handle even in trying circumstances and less easily discouraged. I am definitely kinder and more considerate of others, more willing to let go of what I think I want and to yield to another person or to circumstances. I think I am a wiser person, more resilient, calmer. I think I am less arrogant, more able to see my limitations and be humble about them.

But there is no way to tell whether any of this is due to Zen practice or just due to the passage of forty-five years, during which time I've been a husband and father and, lately, a grandfather. Maybe some of the changes have come about because I have had the chance to practice with people closely, to be responsive to and responsible for them, but I might have had that same experience doing some other kind of work. So, to be very honest, I can't say Zen practice is responsible for whatever positive changes might have happened in my life, assuming I am even right about those changes —maybe I am kidding myself. And who knows whether tomorrow something might change in my life causing me to be a much less pleasant character. I am not dead yet, so I don't know what kind of character I am going to end up being.

On the other hand, the effects of the last forty years or so have not been entirely positive. I am less good-looking, have less stamina, a

worse memory, am less thorough and energetic in my approach to things, more casual and lazy, less creative, more forgetful of others, probably less serious about my Zen practice. On balance I would not say that things have improved. Maybe I would have been better off not having practiced Zen! But, to tell you the truth, that last statement makes no sense to me, and that itself may be the most important benefit to me and anyone else who practices Zen for a long time: I understand that what is, is and what is not, is not. There is no "if only," no regret for the past being the past and the present being the present and the future being the future—a deep trust and a profound acceptance of life as life. What other possibility is there, I wonder.

Are you happier because of it?

I am happier, but whether it's due to Zen practice or some other cause I can't say. At this point I don't see the difference between "Zen practice" and my life. So I guess I could say that Zen practice has made me happier. But it is going to kill me in the end!

I've been practicing for a long time now, and sometimes I worry that my practice is getting stale. Suzuki Roshi's wonderful book is called Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind *for a reason. How can I keep my practice fresh and alive? How can I sustain a sense of discovery? How can I stay curious about the meaning of life?*

This is my question too, and I hope it's everyone's. It seems that you and I and all other human beings have a double nature. On one hand we are bright and intelligent individuals who want to live lives that are deep, kind, awake, open, useful to others. Who doesn't want this, in their heart of hearts? On the other hand, we are pretty lazy and selfish and tend to get off track—to completely lose touch with our better selves. I think everyone is like this, which is why we have always had religions, cults, disciplines, and trainings of all sorts, from the dawn of history, to try to deal with our fractious, troublesome natures.

These days there is a whole world of people who mistrust all religion and spirituality because they see that it has led not only to laziness and stupidity—as people abrogate their own responsibility

and give over their lives to the dictates and doctrines of their religion—but even to horrible abuses, intolerance, violence, isolationism.

This is not the fault of religions, I think. Eliminating religion is not going to eliminate human stupidity and destructiveness. The religious impulse will just get displaced onto other human endeavors. There will be scientific true believers, Marxist true believers, libertarian true believers, and so on—religion in another form. So religion has to include within itself its own undoing. In other words, some form of doubting and wondering, some way of renewal, otherwise it becomes stale, as any one of us becomes stale, just as you say, unless we have some way of opening up, refreshing.

This is the genius of Suzuki Roshi's idea of beginner's mind. He is saying that we should aspire to be beginners, not experts. We should be ready at all points to be surprised, to be wrong, to see that we have to revise what we think we understand about our lives and our world. This is an attitude we can cultivate. In Zen practice we have support for doing this. We have, especially, zazen, which is conceived of as the practice of beginner's mind: just sitting there in the present moment of being alive, without preconceptions, without techniques, waiting to see what happens.

In talking about zazen, Dōgen encourages us to "think not-thinking." This means to sit in a free and open space, allowing thoughts to arise and pass away, without evaluation or shaping. That in itself is beginner's mind: a mind that isn't deciding what is right or wrong, correct or incorrect, but is willing to allow whatever arises and passes away to be whatever it is. Teachers, sanghas, and the teaching itself also keep us honest and on track.

Will all this ensure that we'll never get stale, never go off, never need a kick in the pants? Of course not! Our zazen can become dry and routine, and we can get so used to our sanghas, teachers, and the teachings that we don't really notice them much anymore. But with the support of all these elements of the practice, including our own minds and hearts, when we go off, we will eventually realize it, even if it takes awhile, and then we can use our resources within and without to get back, to renew.

So maybe you could start there, with practice itself as a way to refresh you. Then there's your life. Life will wake you up. Something

always happens, something great or something terrible, to shake you out of your doldrums. If you find that things are going stale, all you have to do is wait a minute, and before you know it, something will erupt in the middle of your life to wake you up.

Beyond this, there are also many things you can do intentionally to shake things up for yourself. I have had a lifelong writing habit, as you know—poetry and other forms of writing—and I am interested in other arts too. Art is a great wake-up call. Going to a performance, a reading, or an art event can often wake you up if you pay attention to what you are seeing and hearing and let it affect you. I don't go to art events often, but when I do, I am often impressed by what I've seen and find that it makes me think, opens up my point of view.

An encounter at some depth with another human being can do this too. Really talking with someone, really listening to her or him, seeing life from her or his side, will always shake you out of your own personal dream into another wider dream. Caring for someone and being willing to take in his or her reality will always wake you up.

In any case, being stuck sometimes is normal and natural and part of the process.

I'm also wondering about keeping one's practice fresh by deepening one's commitment to the practice itself. Perhaps continuing in the same vein isn't enough. Don't you think it's sometimes good to change your practice? To up the ante? To study the precepts and prepare for lay ordination? Sign up for a practice period, start a study group, go on a pilgrimage?

Yes, of course, that too. As you know, at our own local group, we have an annual nonresidential practice period during the fall of every year. This period often serves as a time of renewal for sangha members. And yes, people do all the things you mentioned—sew a rakusu and receive the precepts, study more or organize a study group, or go on a long retreat or pilgrimage or maybe study with a different teacher or group for a while, as ways to open up and refresh their practice.

11

SANGHA

What does sangha really mean, and who gets to be in it? Is it limited to our fellow practitioners at our particular Zen center? Can it include our friends and family as well? Does it include all sentient beings? That's a nice idea, but then how can it be a community, if everybody is in it? Can the whole universe be a community?

The word *sangha* (now a word that appears in English-language dictionaries) means "community." As we've said earlier, in Buddhism the most basic form of commitment is taking refuge in the three treasures: Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Throughout most of Buddhist history, the word *sangha* referred to the community of ordained disciples, monastics who had made lifetime vows to live a Buddhist lifestyle, practicing every day and sharing their lives with others. Most widely, the word *sangha* as used in Mahayana Buddhism means, as you said, the community of all beings.

So yes, in answer to your question, sangha is all of the above. It includes of course the people you practice Zen with (whether they are ordained or not) as well as others in your life, family and friends —and all beings.

Maybe one good way to think about this is to distinguish between the relative and the absolute. In the relative sense, sangha is the people you practice Zen with. (Maybe here we could also include family and friends, people you regularly interact with.) In the absolute sense, sangha is all sentient beings. As the first of the four great

vows, regularly chanted in Zen places, says, “Sentient being are numberless; I vow to save them.” So yes, all sentient beings are sangha, and in Zen even beings we normally call insentient (Dōgen’s “roof tiles and grasses,” for example) are included in the category of sentient beings.

If you only resonate with the absolute meaning of sangha, universal and inspiring, broad, wide, and open, then maybe you love all of humanity and the whole earth, but you actually can’t stand people—especially when they congregate in groups, and most especially when they congregate in spiritual groups. I know a lot of people who feel exactly like this. They feel a part of the universal spiritual sangha but would never set foot inside a Buddhist or any other spiritual practice place.

On the other hand, if you only believe in your sangha of Zen friends (maybe extended to family and close friends), then you will quickly, like many religious people, find yourself insulated by your community’s point of view. Consciously or not you will see others as outsiders, people who just don’t get it, and this will eventually lead you down a path of exclusivity.

So clearly we have to see that these perspectives—the relative and the absolute—require one another. To really feel that all sentient beings are your sangha, you need to ground this in actual encounter with actual people, with all the dicey problems this will bring. And to really be able, in a healthy way, to be a member of a concrete sangha, you need to see that the people in the room are not limited to the people in the room: in these few are the many, and to really love one person or one group of people is in truth to love everyone. This is an impossible ideal. But it is something we always have to keep in mind and heart, and aspire to.

> *Why do we do everything together in Zen practice? We start eating at exactly the same moment; we do walking meditation in a line together like kindergarten children; we chant in unison; we bow together; we wear similar clothing*.

Yes, Zen is “together practice.” We Americans aren’t used to that and, typically, don’t like it. We affirm individuality, not togetherness.

We pride ourselves on our autonomy and freedom to do and express in our own way. So participating in a practice that seems to require full conformity—doing everything together in the same way, at the same pace, even standing and walking in prescribed postures (while wearing the same kind of clothing!)—goes against the grain.

There is certainly something valuable in our national obsession with individualism, which we understand as personal freedom, a universal human right. As an American, I share this value. But I have hung around with European and Asian people who, while perhaps admiring American individualism, also see it as a little callow, adolescent perhaps. Becoming an individual, insisting on individual expression, is in fact the job of adolescents, who are in the stage of life in which forging an independent self is the most important thing. Later in life, having forged that self, other things—like community, kindness, compassion—become more important. I have the feeling that my European and Asian friends see American culture as still young. We are just beginning. European and Asian cultures are much older, with a much more palpable sense of the past, which is present for them, literally every day, in the buildings and in the streets. American culture is an adolescent culture. Adolescents have lots of energy to try new things, impossible things. They have idealism, courage, even recklessness. On the other hand, adolescents lack depth, wisdom, probity. So it might not be a bad thing for us to learn how to temper our individualism with community, not to insist so much on our own expression, our own viewpoint, our own way of doing things.

Suzuki Roshi had a lot to say on this point. As an old-school Japanese (born in 1904) who also, apparently, had a lively sense of the new, he appreciated his young baby-boomer hippie students. They had true beginner's mind. At the same time though, they were limited by their ideology of individualism; they suffered for it. So he had to do a lot of talking to convince them that they should wear dark, plain clothing in the zendo (and robes at Tassajara), that they should learn how to stand and walk in the zendo, and how to chant and bow in the proper way. Fortunately, he was such a kind and impressive person, and appeared so exotic and enlightened, that they believed him and were willing to do what he asked. Besides,

that first generation of Zen students was pretty alienated from American culture. We were against the war in Vietnam, against consumerism; we wanted a more natural and a kinder life. And we believed that Asian cultures had figured out a better way to live and to see the world. That predisposed us to suspend our prejudices and do what Suzuki Roshi was suggesting.

Practicing together in harmonious community, without emphasizing individuality, expands your sense of self to include others. It makes you appreciate your individuality not as something unique and better than (or worse than) that of others, but rather as an expression of something fundamental and universal in human beings. And this makes you gentler and more flexible in your view of and interactions with others. It's one thing to have this idea, and another to literally train in it every day in the zendo. When you train in it, it goes deep into the body and, from the body, into the mind and heart. Suzuki Roshi once said that when he saw all of us lined up in proper Zen posture, wearing proper Zen clothing, he could then and only then see our true, unforced individuality. I have come to appreciate this. It is literally the case. Most of what we take to be individuality is conceptual. That is, we form—whether consciously or not—a concept of a self we want to advance, and then we act out that concept. In Zen practice the effort is to let go of the self concept and live from the gut, from the breath, from the body, from deep conditioning—that is, from our inmost, nonconceptual, unforced individuality: just ourselves as we are, without posturing. What a relief!

> *Yes, and isn't there something else wonderful that happens when we do something in unison? Don't we become part of something bigger than our individual selves? Doing* kinhin (*walking meditation), I've felt like part of a giant caterpillar*.

Yes, that's right. Once you get over your resistance to it, there's a great beauty and sense of belonging in doing things together. You feel the transcendence that comes from dropping your sense of separateness for a moment and feeling yourself as one part of a shared body, practicing as one. It's a wonderful feeling that must be

experienced to be appreciated. I feel it often during services when all of a sudden we begin to chant in one voice. Even though we are not necessarily practiced vocalists, there is a beauty to our chanting that is very moving.

Does Zen value each person's unique individual nature or only each person's universal nature with all the corners filed off?

It's not one or the other. Inevitably it's both. The phrase you use here—"with all the corners filed off"—reminds me of the old saying that practicing Zen in community is like putting a bunch of sharp rocks in a tumbler. As they gently (or not so gently) bump into each other again and again, they smooth off one another's edges. While there is truth in this metaphor, it implies that there is a bit of violence and forced conformity involved, that the sharpness of our personalities will take hits until we will all become docile and smooth.

There are two sides to this. On one hand, practicing Zen in community for a long time does make you a smoother character, more tolerant of others. It makes you less difficult, less prickly. And this is a good thing. Human beings are always doing things in groups, and if there is in a group someone who is in this sense "smooth," it helps make the group smoother, more harmonious, more loving.

On the other hand, my experience is that people who practice Zen for a long time become more and more, rather than less and less, themselves—as I was saying when we were talking about Issan. These days many people see Buddhism as a kind of character-improvement course. But my impression is that Zen practice doesn't necessarily improve a person's character. Zen history, and contemporary Zen culture, is full of "characters," people who while faithfully practicing all the good dharma virtues do so in their own way, with all their roughness seemingly intact. Zen's teaching of true self seems to produce adepts who are not afraid to express themselves as they are—edges and all—yet somehow to do this kindly, without excessive self-attachment. So I would say that Zen does deeply value the individual as individual, despite its seemingly unindividualistic methods. So it is very American!

But being an individual, Zen-style, isn't a matter of willfulness or arrogance. You don't separate yourself from others. You appreciate yourself as a particular expression of the buddha-nature we all share.

What if a person who is lonely, single, and lives alone without family joins a Zen center for the company, in order to feel a sense of belonging? What if she likes the sangha potlucks more than sitting zazen?

To me, the sense of belonging you refer to is beautiful and profound. We all live with people every day, constantly interacting with them everywhere, in the grocery store, on the bus, on the telephone, in our thoughts. So why should anyone, even the single person who lives alone, feel lonely, feel a need for belonging? We are surrounded by people all the time! And yet, yes, of course, we can feel very alone.

The need for belonging is one of the deepest of all human needs —maybe as deep as the need for food. It seems to me that this need goes to the heart of why human beings have always practiced some form of communal religious life in virtually all times and places. As we were saying a moment ago, religious practices and forms evoke a deep sense of belonging. If religious need is deep human need, then the need for belonging is a religious need. So the person who comes to practice not for zazen or Zen teaching but for the potluck and the sense of community is as worthy a Zen practitioner as any other; she, like everyone else, is participating with Buddha, dharma, and sangha to meet her deepest human needs.

In fact, in my years of Zen practice, I have encountered many practitioners like this, who have come for and have been healed by community. Spiritual communities, like other communities, are basically just people doing something together, but in spiritual community there is an explicit commitment to sharing life with whoever comes to do the practice. This is essential to the Buddhist idea of sangha. Whoever comes is a member of the community. "Whoever" means everyone and anyone, regardless of social class, race, sexual orientation, or acceptability of appearance, personality,

or point of view. Maybe this is an ideal that is not always realized, but it is an explicit commitment. Sangha members understand this, so they make an effort to respect everyone, however successful or unsuccessful they may be in such efforts. So when the theoretically sad and lonely person of your question comes to the sangha, she will find that she is accepted and valued for who she is.

I hope she will be warmly welcomed on the first day she shows up. But what's more important is how she will be accepted five years later, when she will have found her own place in the community. In that five years, the practice will have influenced her somehow. She will have done some zazen, she will have heard some teachings, and she will have, simply by rubbing shoulders with sangha members, absorbed much of what the tradition values. And she will be providing a very valuable teaching for the rest of the community: Zen isn't really about zazen and koans; it is about how we live, who we are, and how we treat others.

You might think I'm making all this up, that the real Japanese Zen is all about hard, long zazen and penetrating understanding of Buddhist texts, and that I am, at this point in my life, an old softy. Yes, you can find Zen places that emphasize hard zazen and sesshin practice, places where your lonely woman without a family would wait a long time before the first potluck. But remember, in Japan most Zen priests train at a monastery for a relatively short period of time, and then they return to their home temples where they have a lot of potlucks and memorial services, where they counsel members and take care of people, mostly, without much time for zazen.

When Zen was first introduced to America by Japanese teachers, it was the zazen and the sesshin training that was emphasized, because this was what young American students wanted and needed and what the teachers most valued and wanted to offer. But now, fifty years later, we can appreciate more what actually goes on in Japan. I have spent time at Rinso-in, Suzuki Roshi's original temple in Japan, where Suzuki Roshi's son Hoitsu Suzuki has been abbot for many decades. My visits there have been lovely, quiet, and simple. Yes, we have done zazen (the zendo is tiny and only sits a few people), but mostly we have cleaned, cooked, and witnessed the

interaction with community members who live down the mountain from the temple and who come from time to time for social visits and family remembrances.

There's a scene in a wonderful Akira Kurosawa film (*Rhapsody in August*, 1991), in which two old women who have lived through the Pacific War (we call it World War II) sit in a tiny country temple, chanting the Heart Sutra together. They then remain together for a long time, sitting in silence. The temple is surrounded by an open grassy field, yellow grass tips shushing in the breeze. For me, this scene expresses Zen: silent belonging, on an expressive surrounding earth, with a powerful wordless sense of the tragic human past we have all shared. This Zen fully includes your lonely woman without a family.

> *I've heard people say that they went to practice zazen at a Zen center for months without anyone ever greeting them. Some people like this because they don't have to chitchat, and after zazen they can just leave and get on with their day. But some people feel lonely and left out when this happens. Do you think Zen communities in the West have a culture of self-possession, nonintrusiveness, silent poise, letting each person face their demons on their own, which can look like unfriendliness?*

Maybe it's true that most Zen communities are as you describe; I don't know. People certainly used to complain about this years ago at the San Francisco Zen Center. It is likely that compared to the average church or synagogue, the average Zen place is as you say more subdued, less forthcoming with greetings or overt friendliness for newcomers. This makes sense. Since Zen centers uniquely offer the chance for people to be silent, to be left profoundly alone, and to be quietly supported by others in that endeavor, when you come to a Zen place, you will sense the quiet and the invitation to practice silence as much as and probably more than the offer of friendship—which is there too of course. The friendship and support generally come later, naturally, as you warm up to the place. Sitting together in silence for relatively long periods of time is something you need to want to do for its own and your own sake. I'm not sure that someone

does you a service by encouraging you to practice zazen if it isn't something you need to do. So in most Zen sanghas, people will gently guide you to the practice without much urging or fanfare. I have always appreciated that Zen places allow you to come and go freely, without pressure. You can easily be anonymous for a while if you want to. But people are friendly and helpful when you ask. Probably the sort of atmosphere I'm describing may seem intimidating and off-putting to some.

12

EVERYDAY LIFE AND EVERYDAY RELATIONSHIPS

How will Zen practice affect my family relationships? My work relationships?

Sometimes when I see the spouse of one of our Everyday Zen practitioners, I'll ask, "Well, how's her practice going?" Because spouses would know.

The effectiveness of your practice will show up at home. I believe, and have seen much corroborating evidence, that Zen practice makes you a better husband or wife, father or mother. It makes you more attuned emotionally, kinder, more patient, more caring and loving, more able to be present, even when the going gets tough, even when you have an impulse not to be. When you follow precepts and study the teachings, positive qualities become more than aspirations; they are *practiced*, developed over time, with mindfulness and patient repetition. Usually the practitioner doesn't particularly notice such changes. He or she is simply intent on going forward. But usually the family sees it and appreciates the practice for it.

The same goes for work relationships. One of Everyday Zen's long-term projects is an ongoing series of daylong retreats we call "Company Time," for people who work in for-profit or nonprofit businesses or who are self-employed. How we work, and how we are at work with others, is our focus in these retreats.

When we first started holding these retreats in the early 1990s, people complained that when they went to work, they had to leave their real selves at the door so that they could be “professional,” which meant impersonal, removed. There was a lot of pain in this for them. They assumed that real human interaction was unwelcome and impossible at work, that to survive in the work environment they had to be distant and tough. In the retreats, people spoke about this and shared the sense of alienation they felt at work.

But after some years of dialogue, people coming to the Company Time retreats realized this wasn’t actually true. That in fact you could bring your whole self to work, including your deepest aspirations, and the courage to do this was fostered by spiritual practice. If you made a commitment to do this, you’d be happier in your work, and maybe your work performance would be better. Certainly your human interactions at work would go better, and your experience of work would be more meaningful. You’d begin to see work not as an alienating necessity to be endured, but as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The foundational idea we work with at Everyday Zen is that Zen practice isn’t what happens in the zendo, the monastery, or when you come to hear teachings or participate in ceremonies. All those activities support and encourage the actual practice—which happens all the time, in your own life, in your every encounter with others, in your heart and mind. Everyday Zen means that everyday life really is your practice. And naturally this includes your work and your family life.

What if I want to practice and my partner doesn’t?

The beautiful enhancements to family life I’ve described above don’t always happen, of course. Zen practice can sometimes make a marriage or long-term relationship worse and can even break it apart. This can happen when one partner takes up practice and the other doesn’t, but it can also happen when both partners decide to practice.

Spiritual practice changes you. That’s the point, isn’t it? That’s why people go to the trouble of practicing. They seek changes in their

lives. Such changes may be deep and disruptive. If they are gradual and carefully integrated into a life that is basically sound, the changes will be positive and will enhance that life. But if there are unnoticed fissures in that life, practice can open them wider, making them obvious and painful.

If one member of a couple takes up the practice and the other doesn't, these fissures can feel scary and challenging to both partners, especially to the one who has not taken up the practice. For him the practice feels like unknown and frightening territory he has no control over. He knows his partner is entering that territory, and he may well feel threatened by this, frightened that his partner will change so much that she will no longer want to be with him. This fear can manifest as a kind of jealousy, as if the practice itself is a romantic rival. The practicing spouse will have a hard time dealing with these feelings, and sometimes there is little that she or he can do to change the situation. I have known practitioners who have had to keep their practice on a low key, or even give it up, because of dynamics like this in an intimate relationship. Ideally, the couple would be able to deal with the problem, to get help and work it through. It would seem that the practicing member of the couple is well within her rights to ask that her spouse allow her to grow in the way she needs to, and to be courageous enough to examine and overcome his fear. But sometimes there simply isn't enough trust or courage in the relationship for this to happen. And the impasse can destroy the partnership.

Sometimes, particularly when the partnership is a longstanding one, the spouse who is practicing will make the sacrifice. Just as it seems wrong for a partner to stand in the way of the growth of a loved one, so also it seems wrong for a Zen practitioner to abandon her or his dearest friend so that he or she can go to more retreats and spend more time with sangha members. If the practice really is in everyday life, then doing less formal practice and more practice at home in relationship is fair enough.

Could it also happen that the practicing partner uses the practice to get away from his or her spouse, to withdraw from

the challenges of family life, kind of like going down to the pool hall?

Yes, that could happen. It's a bit like your question about monasteries. If a monastery, which we can take to be a wholesome place, can also be a way to escape your life, I guess ordinary everyday lay practice can also function as a cop-out. But I would like to think that if someone, consciously or unconsciously, is using the practice this way, this would eventually come out in the practice itself. Relationships with teachers and sangha members would eventually show the same escape habit. Practice makes it hard (but not impossible) to avoid yourself. So eventually the escape strategy would be revealed and dealt with. The person would have to face it within the sphere of practice, which then may help him or her to face it in the relationship. Anyway, I hope it would work like this.

What about when both spouses are practicing?

Fissures can also widen and create a splitting apart when both spouses are practicing. In this case both partners have the resources and the capacities to understand the situation better, and neither one has to be frightened about the unknown nature of what the partner is going through. They can communicate, and the sangha can help them to do that. I have seen marriages be completely reconstituted for the better through the practice of both partners. But where the partnership isn't sound to begin with and should be dissolved, it will be, and practice will support the always-difficult dissolution, making it feel less lonely and less like a failure.

If it's important to me to be following the way of Zen, does that mean that my friends who are not Zen practitioners are not living a deeply spiritual life?

No. One of the things I love most about Dōgen's teaching is his insistence that all beings are buddha-nature. (The text he cites for this idea actually reads "*have* buddha-nature," but Dōgen creatively misreads it as "*are* buddha-nature," to make the point even more emphatic.) This means that everyone is living a deeply spiritual life.

The way I see it, if you have been born, if you are going to die and know it, if somehow meaning is important to you and love is important to you (however buried within your soul these concerns may be), then your life is a spiritual life. It is probably more accurate to refer to human beings as *Homo religiosa* than as *Homo sapiens*. That we, as a species, are obsessed with religion (*religiosa*) has been amply demonstrated. We have yet to prove our inherent wisdom (*sapiens*).

Although everyone as far as I can tell is living a spiritual life, some feel deeply engaged with spiritual life, and some do not. Some deny the spiritual life altogether, so when you practice Zen, it might seem that some of your friends don't appreciate it and don't want to hear about it. Just as spousal relationships may change for better or worse when a person takes up practice, so it is with other personal relationships. It's not unusual for people who take up practice to gradually change the nature of their friendships—for some old friends to disappear from one's life, some friendships to grow warmer, and new friendships to form.

> *That's true, and I have developed meaningful friendships with dharma brothers and sisters, but I'm getting at something else. My beloved family members and most of my oldest friends do not practice Zen or any other religion and probably would not describe themselves as "spiritual." Most of them have no particular interest in meditation. But they are deep, loving beings whom I trust completely and with whom I feel a soul connection. How could this be? It makes me wonder why Zen practice is so all-fired important to me*.

The same is true for me. I don't find it odd at all. As I said, I think everyone is living what I consider a spiritual life, even if they don't think so. My Zen practice attunes me to that life in myself and in everyone else I meet and know, so I can appreciate everyone more for their, as you say, "deep, loving" natures, and I can trust and love them deeply. Whether this has anything to do with Zen practice or not doesn't really matter. For me it does, but others find their own ways to it.

Friendship is enormously important. It seems to me that we don't emphasize it nearly enough. How do friendships form? What maintains them? We meet people through family, in school, through activities of mutual interest, through other friends, by chance. Why do some of these encounters develop into friendships, others not? Somehow we are attracted to some people in our lives more than others. I find this mysterious.

Friends are people with whom we seem to have a special affinity. Maybe we feel the same way about life; maybe we have the same interests, the same passions, have undergone the same trials; or maybe we have just happened to go through important experiences side by side. Most people have friends with similar backgrounds. But often we have friends who have quite different backgrounds, and yet somehow affinity is there. In Japan there's a folk saying that when we enjoy a special friendship, it's because "we have been friends in a past life." I am beginning to believe this—not in a literal sense (although why not?) but in the sense that, yes, there is something profound and deeply moving about friendship. I have been fortunate in having a lot of really good friends.

We ought to value friendship more than we do. It's been my experience that practice enhances friendship and makes you appreciate it more. Practice shows you that beyond common interests and shared history, there's something more. Through our relationships we literally create one another, and to appreciate and understand our own life, we have to appreciate and understand the lives of others, especially those of our friends.

Your question reminds me how different friendship is at different stages of life. When you are young and your life is changing fast, your friendship can change quickly, too. But as you get older, you establish more constant elements in your life. And you notice that some friendships stick, remaining strong even when the passions that first kindled them die down. And later in life, you see how some friendships have remained constant for many decades—just as you and I, Sue, have been friends for a long time—and you appreciate this. The world has changed, and you have been through those changes together.

Sometimes the most important friendships aren't with the people you like the best or have the most in common with. Somehow there's more to it than that. There's a flavor of destiny. That is, it's hard to say how or why certain friendships remain over time. But certainly practice makes you appreciate them more and see more in them.

And then comes the time of life when you begin to lose your friends to death. This becomes profoundly sad, if also beautiful, as it reminds us of the preciousness of love.

Here's a question about a different aspect of our everyday life—our diet. In the United States, we don't have to eat meat in order to get protein. So shouldn't Zen Buddhists, at least in the United States, be vegetarian, since they vow not to kill?

You'd think so. When you vow to follow the first clear mind precept "not to kill," you do feel funny eating animals, especially when you really don't have to. I feel like that myself. For decades I was a vegetarian, but after about twenty-five years, I discovered that I had a stomach ailment that made eating lots of whole grains (a staple of my vegetarian diet) impossible, so I began eating some fish and chicken, and that improved my health.

All the Zen centers I know of serve vegetarian food, and many, but not all, Zen practitioners are vegetarians. In Japan, Zen temples serve vegetarian food, but the Japanese Zen priests I know eat fish and meat (and drink alcohol) when they go out, and it doesn't seem to present a moral problem for them (though maybe it should).

I have written about the three levels of practicing the precepts: the literal, the compassionate, and the absolute (see page 70), and this is relevant here. On the literal and compassionate levels, it is clear that one should avoid eating meat, though the precept doesn't propose this as a firm rule. On the absolute level, it's less clear. I mentioned that one of the most important functions of the three-level precepts practice is to reduce self-righteousness and increase one's moral tolerance. In our culture one often finds a degree of dogmatism regarding diet: this is what one must eat; this is what one must never eat. Vegetarians can sometimes be intolerant of omnivores; they can feel a little holier than their meat-eating friends.

There is a very famous story of Suzuki Roshi (who ate meat and fish) going to a diner with a young Zen student who ate very pure food, only organic, no animal products. The student ordered a salad, and Suzuki Roshi ordered a big, bloody hamburger. When the food came, Suzuki Roshi, without saying anything, switched plates. I don't know what the student did with the hamburger in front of him. The American Zen master Robert Aitken once wrote, "If my hostess serves meat, I eat it, because the cow is already dead, and my hostess, who offers this meal to me, is still alive."

These days there are other dietary considerations besides the precept of nonkilling. It's a bad idea to eat food that takes too many resources to produce, like beef, or food that threatens species, like certain kinds of fish. The flip side of the precept "not to kill" is "to cherish and protect life," which could mean that you have a moral obligation to yourself and your family to eat healthy foods and avoid unhealthy foods. Given the current serious national problem we are having with our collective health-care costs, this moral obligation might not only be to yourself and your family: if you don't take care of your health, you end up spending more than your share of the health-care dollar.

Sometimes when I get upset about something or express a negative opinion about someone (and I admit this has happened), my non-Buddhist friends will tease me and say, "That's not very Buddhist of you!" How can I answer them?

Maybe you shouldn't answer them. Maybe you should agree that expressing negative opinions about people is not very Buddhist. Or very Christian. Or very kind. It's true that the Zen speech precepts ask us to be respectful and modest in our speech about ourselves and others. Maybe you should thank your friends for reminding you that you are not being true to your Buddhist commitments.

But maybe you are saying that there's something off about the comment "That's not very Buddhist of you," as if your non-Buddhist friends are making fun of your Buddhism as a kind of namby-pamby goody-goodyism.

No, I think they respect the Buddhist intention not to speak ill of others, and they expect that all of us Buddhist types hold ourselves to a higher standard. Their question is something like, "Hey, Sue, are you really a Buddhist, since I just heard you say that so-and-so irritates you? Are you allowed to do that?" I think they are disappointed in me, or in Buddhism itself. I sometimes tell them that Buddhists are human beings, too. Yes, I have vowed not to speak ill of others, and I keep renewing that vow, but I want my friends to know that becoming a Buddhist doesn't turn a person into a saint. Is that appropriate?

This reminds me of a social science experiment my wife has her middle-school students perform. She assigns them to watch television sitcoms, keeping track of put-down remarks and affirmative remarks that characters in the shows make, and to graph their findings. Invariably students find that there are dramatically more put-downs than affirmations. Disrespectful speech is normal in our world. It's the source of most of our humor. It may be normal, but it is not innocuous.

People hurt each other all the time with their sloppy and unkind speech. As much as we are inured to it, we are also, deep inside, hurt by it and become wary and mistrustful of one another. If I make belittling remarks about you to others when you are not around, why would I think you'll do any different with me? Maybe I can only trust my very best friends—and even, sometimes, not them! So a commitment to speak kindly and generously about others, even in casual conversation, is important. As your question illustrates, holding such a commitment doesn't ensure that you will never make negative comments; sometimes you will slip. If someone called me out for my unkind words, I hope I would say, "Oh, you're right. I don't want to talk like that. Thanks."

Of course Buddhists are human beings and make plenty of mistakes. I don't know that Buddhists hold themselves to a higher standard than others. But Buddhists do make commitments to pay attention to their conduct and to try to act as much as possible with honesty and kindness. Maybe your friends are idealizing you too much.

Zen practitioners are always cleaning and polishing things, raking leaves, and repairing little household implements. This is all very well, but isn't there a danger of getting lost in petty details and losing sight of the big picture? If you faithfully take care of what's right in front of you first, you might not have time to make art, save a forest, teach bicycle repair to teenagers in the juvenile justice system, work for wage equality, or take your children camping. Doesn't Zen imply that every activity is of equal importance? What about priorities?

I wish the premise of your question were true. I wish Zen practitioners *were* always cleaning things up, raking leaves, and repairing little household implements. If so, my house would be in better shape than it is! My teacher used to do this (though I am not sure if he still does), and that instilled in me the value of these activities. But not all Zen practitioners take care of things so well.

But I try, and I think I do better now than I used to. Before I began my practice, I would commonly leave the dinner dishes till the next morning. Now I never do. I always get things in order, at least to some conscious degree, before I go on to other "more important things." And before I began practicing Zen, I would never have put quotation marks around the phrase "more important things." I would have believed that doing dishes, raking leaves, and repairing household items actually are *not* very important things. I would have agreed that they are petty details. Now I know better. Taking care of things isn't just household maintenance. In Zen it's a spiritual practice. To clean up the kitchen is to clean up the whole world. Anyway, this is the spirit we are trying to cultivate.

How can it not be the case that everything is important? Everything is always falling apart. If you don't shore things up every day, the whole world will fall apart, and there will be nothing important or unimportant left. No one escapes the details that make up the greater parts of our lives. It has been a major liberation for me to recognize that taking care of things large and small is an opportunity to pay attention and actually live all of this precious human life, not just some of it.

Yes, washing the dishes is important—we don't have a choice on that one—and I have come to love washing the dishes, perhaps thanks to my Zen practice. But I want to challenge you on this. Do you really think everything is equally important? That we don't have to prioritize? I seem to remember you telling me once, when you were abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, that every morning you had to decide which things on your to-do list you were not going to do that day. The working parent of young children really and truly may not have enough time to clean out the gutters and rake the leaves and repair the leaky faucet if he wants to play with his kids on the weekend. The emergency room doctor treats the most urgent cases first. Could it be that in the emergency room that our planet has become, we have to make difficult choices, too? I really don't know. What do you think?

Why would taking care of details makes you less able to prioritize? The two are not incompatible. Recognizing that everything—absolutely everything—is important doesn't mean that you don't take into account that you live in a world with others and that this shared world has various sorts of practical considerations you need to pay attention to. Knowing that wiping the counters in my kitchen is an important activity doesn't mean I'm going to spend two hours on it and arrive an hour late to my meeting with a friend. No, I wipe the counters and leave for my appointment on time. If I have to skip the counter-wiping, I do.

A lot of people, especially these days, feel like there simply isn't enough time—ever. Too much to take care of, too many things to do, not enough time to do them. So details become an annoyance: we can't ignore them, so we rush to get through them and go on to the important things. We see time as a limited container stuffed full—and yet we have to stuff still more into it. So we are in a crisis of time, as many of our idioms about time suggest: *pressed for time, running out of time, wasting* or *saving time, time pressure*, and so on. We don't have time for taking care of details. Or so we think.

But time isn't a container—time is life. There is always exactly enough time.

Once Yun-yen was sweeping up the temple grounds. His dharma brother Tao-wu said, “Too busy!” Yun-yen said, “You should know there’s one who’s not busy.” Tao-wu said, “Oh, then there are two moons?” Yun-yen held up his broom and said, “Which moon is this?”

Once I gave a retreat on this story, and a lot of people concerned about time pressure and busyness attended. Somehow the retreat came to the attention of Oprah Winfrey’s producers, and they asked me to write an article about it and eventually to be a guest on her show. But I couldn’t go to Chicago. I was too busy!

Yun-yen is saying that although he is fully immersed in what he is doing, he isn’t busy. Being busy or not isn’t a matter of how much you have to do. It depends on your view, your attitude. If you insist that time is a limited container that’s nearly full and now you are trying to stuff three or four more things into it, then yes, you are too busy. You become anxious. But if you recognize that time is life, then you just do whatever you are doing when you are doing it, and when it is finished, you do something else. Maybe you don’t complete all the tasks on your list. But nothing is ever complete! We will all die with unfinished business—and, at the same time, with everything complete.

There aren’t “two moons” (important things and unimportant things, busyness and unbusyness). There’s just one moon. It includes everything. Yun-yen’s sweeping up right now is all he needs. Everything is there in it. I am sure that when Yun-yen finished sweeping, he went on to do something else, just like us. And although Yun-yen is a monastic whose tasks are simple, his lesson applies to us as well. We also sweep. But whether we are sweeping or talking on the telephone or working on a spreadsheet, it’s the same. “There is one here who isn’t busy,” who knows how to do what needs to be done.

This story reminds me of another story, about the contemporary Korean Zen master Seung Sahn, who spent much of his life teaching in the United States. (His Kwan Um School of Zen is still going strong.) He would always preach that students ought to *just do* what they were doing. They ought to do one thing and do it completely. Once a student caught him eating breakfast while reading the paper. The student said, “You teach us to *just do* one thing. And look at you,

eating and reading at the same time." Seung Sahn said, "Yes, but I am *just* reading and eating."

Taking your question one step further, it seems to me that it stands for a more general sort of question people often have about Zen practice. There's a basic contradiction at the heart of Zen. This has come up several times in answering your questions. In this case the contradiction seems to be between the need to prioritize and the idea that everything is important—which seem to be opposite and mutually exclusive. But the contradiction appears in many other ways. For instance, Zen teaches no-self or no-mind, but it also teaches true self and buddha-mind. And Chao-chou, when asked, "Does a dog have buddha-nature?" he answered yes—and then later no. Or in Seung Sahn's story, how can just doing one thing also be just doing two or three things? These and many other contradictions make people wonder about Zen. Is it some kind of joke?

No. The contradictions aren't actually contradictions. They appear as contradictions on the level of talking—that is, on the conceptual level. Either a dog has buddha-nature, or it doesn't. Either everything is important, or some things are important and others are not. Either Seung Sahn is doing just one thing, or he's doing two things.

But in living our lives, these contradictions do not appear to be contradictions. In living, we can pay attention to everything as important, and we can also prioritize; it isn't a problem. In living, we can be both Buddha and an ordinary person at the same time; it isn't a problem. In living, we can accomplish a lot quickly if we have to and still feel like we're not busy. The everyday practice of our lives eventually shows us how to live reasonably and smoothly in the midst of many things that would seem confusing if we tried to explain them. Explaining them might sound contradictory. There's a Zen expression, "Before I started Zen practice, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers; when I began my practice, I saw that mountains were not mountains, rivers not rivers; but now, after long practice, I see that mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers." Such contradictory statements are quite sensible when you actually live them. We do, as we continue to live, see things differently—and yet the same. Life, when you describe it, simply *is* contradictory.

13

ZEN AND ART

Why does Zen have such a close connection to various art forms, like haiku and flower arranging, for example?

As Zen developed in China, it coevolved with Taoism and the Chinese arts, most notably calligraphy, painting, and poetry. Zen stories like the one about Yun-yen and Tao-wu are a particular literary form that comes out of this mixture. Traditional commentaries to Zen stories always refer to Chinese poetry, and eminent Zen priests always wrote poetry and did calligraphy. Many of them were painters as well.

Some experts claim that in the West art depicts the external, while in Asia art evokes the inner sense of things, their spirit or soul. In the West art was for centuries the handmaiden of religion. Artists made pictures, statues, and architecture for the churches, and poets wrote liturgical poems, their themes dictated by religious teachings. In Asia the arts were an independent source for the spirit and, as such, had much to contribute to the development of religion. In China especially, which was receiving Buddhism from a foreign culture, the effort to make Buddhism Chinese naturally involved some connection to the already existing arts, highly developed by the time Buddhism came. So, from the start, art and Zen were close mutually influencing siblings.

I am not sure about Korea and Vietnam, but certainly in Japan the relationship between Zen and the arts was even richer than it had been in China. Japanese culture in general seems, for some reason,

to have a powerfully aesthetic bent. So under the influence of the Zen teachings and practice, Japan developed many art forms that either didn't exist in China or existed in a far less developed form. Tea ceremony is an example. It began in China as a simple ceremony to serve tea to monks in meditation retreats. But the Japanese took it to another level, developing it into a high art of rich complexity involving architecture, landscape design, pottery, painting, intense aesthetic attention to movement that is, in effect, a form of dance—and yes, tea. The same is true of the other arts, like ikebana, Noh drama, poetry, painting, calligraphy. It is impossible to imagine these Japanese arts without Zen. All of them are based on a set of spiritual principles that come from Zen. Zen has so pervaded Japanese culture that for a Japanese person, being Japanese is being Zen, regardless of whether your religion is Christianity, Buddhism, or no religion at all.

The question of Zen and the arts becomes more complicated in the West. In the Western world, art broke free of religion centuries ago and began its independent evolution, eventually becoming intertwined with the most forward-looking aspects of European and American cultures. In the meantime religious institutions began to feel existentially threatened by the changes that were taking place in the material world in the modern period, by the increasing secularization of culture, and they struggled to maintain their "traditional values." Since Western religion is understood to be mostly about belief and dogma, it has tried to hold the line on this against the tide of sweeping changes in the contemporary world. Thus art and religion have become increasingly polarized, and most artists I know are almost allergic to the idea of religion, which they see as being opposed to the sort of radical freedom of thought and feeling they think art requires.

But art and religion shouldn't be opposites! The Asian idea seems right to me: art and religion come from the same source, the same imaginative impulse to express the spirit, the inner life, some sense of living beyond the expected, the conventional, the materialistic, the mundane—even perhaps beyond the knowable. And a lot of Western art has a social intent that I believe also has a relationship to religion, expressing as it does a passion for social justice and

universal respect, opposing social forces that would favor the powerful over the common good. So it seems a shame to me that our cultural history has shaped up to make religion and art entirely separate and even antagonistic pursuits.

But with Zen it's a different story. Since Zen, as we've been saying, doesn't propose doctrines and beliefs but instead offers practices and teachings whose purpose is to open up the mind and heart, it's perfectly compatible with the arts.

From the beginning the Zen movement in the West had a strong relationship to the arts. Zen was the first form of Buddhism to be widely popular here. One of Zen's most important transmitters, the Japanese Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, said, "The arts of Zen are not intended for utilitarian purposes, or for purely aesthetic enjoyment, but are meant to train the mind, indeed, to bring it into contact with ultimate reality." (This was quoted by John Daido Loori in his introduction to *Enso: Zen Circles of Enlightenment*, by Audrey Yoshiko Seo.)

Suzuki's wide travel and teaching schedule throughout the United States and Europe was enormously influential with many American avant-garde artists, including the composer John Cage, the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, and the painter Robert Rauschenberg.

Via a separate route, Zen influenced Western art through the Beat writers, like Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg. They and their siblings and followers were critiquing American 1950s culture while committing themselves seriously to the practice of Buddhism, largely Zen. Their influence not only in poetry but in culture in general during the 1960s can scarcely be measured.

Personally, I find it hard to imagine how dedication to the arts can be sustained without some support from religious practice. Such support provides inspiration, community, and solace in what could otherwise be a lonely and difficult life path in our excessively commercialized world—unless of course one becomes famous and commercially viable, which has its own challenges. There are many artists in our culture who practice Zen or other forms of Buddhism—probably more than we know.

If I studied the tea ceremony or ikebana, would that be basically the same as practicing zazen?

For years, Green Gulch Farm Zen Center has had a tea ceremony program, on the theory that studying tea ceremony enhances one's appreciation of Zen practice. When I lived there, I studied tea. It helped me feel how Zen practice is a body practice. We're so cerebral! Even when we decide to pay attention to our bodies, we do it intellectually, studying the body as if it were a machine, figuring out how to keep it running well, measuring inputs and outputs, trying to coax higher performance levels. But the body isn't a machine run by the mind. The body and the mind is one phenomenon, body-mind. And understanding this as an idea means nothing; the body-mind has to know it. Doing zazen enacts this in us, but tea ceremony and other arts (like calligraphy) that you do with your whole body (feeling, for example, the sense of the brush) also help. I wouldn't say it's necessary for people to practice these things, and I am aware that these are Asian forms, not ours, but they are useful and satisfying practices.

Years ago at Green Gulch, we were host to a group who followed a Japanese tradition called *dento geijutsu* ("traditional arts") that practiced Zen arts as a spiritual path. They would come for about a week, during which they'd practice Noh chanting, calligraphy, tea ceremony, ikebana, and other Zen arts, which they would do in the spirit of a religious retreat, in the belief that, as you suggest, these arts are inherently spiritual practices and devotion to them would lead to wisdom and tranquility.

I can't say whether doing this kind of program or any other kind of arts program would "be basically the same as" practicing Zen, but on the theory that nothing is the same as anything, while everything is similar to everything, I would have to say it's not the same, but it's similar.

You are talking specifically about the Japanese Zen arts. But it occurs to me we have created our own Western version of Zen arts —that is, arts that are practiced not to produce products or achieve professional proficiency, but to express and develop self-understanding. There are many versions of this, and many if not

most artists these days make their living in whole or in part by teaching “workshops” not for professionals but for the edification of anyone and everyone. This phenomenon is so widespread it’s hard to say how much of it is directly influenced by Buddhism, but I am sure a great deal of it is.

More and more it is becoming commonplace in our culture to see practice of the arts not as an esoteric, demanding, and tragic profession, but rather as something we can all engage in, for our own growth and enjoyment. I find this development interesting because it is bringing Western arts into accord with the traditional Asian view of art as an expression of spirit. And as such, art can be a part of—and yes, maybe even a substitute for—a spiritual path.

You are a poet as well as a Zen teacher. Is there a connection for you between the practice of poetry and the practice of Zen?

Of course there is, though it took me a long time to appreciate this. It took me a few decades to realize that despite the fact that I seldom mention anything of Zen directly in my poetry, it’s going to come out. And since my life is pervaded by my Zen practice, my poetry will of course be a Zen poetry.

I guess that I am and have always been writing a poetry about the most unspeakable aspects of the spiritual life—unspeakable in the literal sense of not being available to language or speech. So my poetry is an attempt to explore what language can’t explain. Naturally I am failing at this.

In my practice of poetry, I am always trying to discover what the poem I am trying to write is: I am not controlling it; I am listening to it, trying to find out what it is telling me and to follow its lead. So for me every poem is a new attempt to figure out what writing is. John Cage solved the problem of ego by using chance operations. His whole effort was to get himself out of the way of his work. But I feel as if my sense of self has been so deranged by all my years of Zen practice that I don’t need to do what Cage did—don’t need to strictly protect my work from myself by adhering to structure and discipline dictated by chance operations. Besides, I am probably too lazy for that. So I let the self bleed into the poems along with everything else, whatever

else happens to be at hand or whatever else happens while I am writing. And for me there is also the inescapable fact of my being a Zen priest and all the ways that has changed my sense of life and art, so that's inevitably part of my work, however much I don't intend it to be. I now see this is probably a good thing and lends my poetry its greatest value.

14

SAVING ALL SENTIENT BEINGS

There is so much work to do about the tremendous suffering in this world—poverty, social injustice, war, environmental destruction. Isn't it selfish to spend a lot of time just sitting and staring at the wall, without helping anybody else?

A question I ask myself every day. Most of the time I conclude that I am not doing enough to help. Probably I can never do enough. I don't see how any of us—whether we waste our time sitting or waste it in some other way—can overcome the uncomfortable feeling that we are living in a world full of pain, are in part responsible for that world, and are not doing nearly enough to address it. Even someone who would appear to be devoting a lifetime to alleviating suffering can't feel satisfied, I would think, that he or she is doing enough. If we care about the world, we all have to live with (and be grateful for!) this discomfort.

I spoke to this in part (pages 130–31) when I wrote about the social relevance of monasteries as places of quiet. When we offer our silence to the world, we are offering something useful, although its form is uselessness. Another Zen contradiction: we get burned out eventually by all the important and useful things we have to take care of. To sustain our efforts over time, we have to be able to rest in uselessness. For me uselessness is the essential characteristic of all spiritual practice. If it's spiritual practice, it must be useless; that is, it won't improve your looks, your health, your livelihood, your intelligence. It won't help the world. You do it just to do it—literally

uselessly. But its uselessness is exactly its usefulness! Exactly because you are not trying to get something out of it but are doing it merely to do it, it refreshes; it changes your life. For me, a life of helping others usefully is only sustainable when I have useless spiritual practice to keep me afloat—and to remind me that in the end even the useful is useless.

The Catholic tradition understands well the importance of spiritual practice as revitalization for work in the world. Some of the most inspiring social activists I know—and I include in this group caregivers, teachers, and so on—have been Catholic religious people who are devoted to what they do as spiritual practice, as expressions of their faith, and who are sustained in their efforts by that faith and their spiritual practices. I am not of course saying that all social activists or people in helping professions need to do spiritual practice. But I am saying that I think it would help them if they did. (I do recognize that for many people a life of service to others is itself a spiritual path.)

I am saying that serving others and practicing silent meditation are not at all mutually exclusive, as your question seems to imply. It may seem logical that if you spend time sitting, you will not be spending that time helping, but in fact spending time sitting enhances your capacity to help and sustains it. Anyway, no one can help twenty-four hours a day. There has to be sleeping and eating at least. So maybe a little sitting is OK too.

Another thing: sitting helps you to be more connected emotionally, and that makes your efforts to help more heartfelt and meaningful, and probably more effective. It makes you happier, more satisfied, and less frustrated doing your work. And it gives you a wide and generous view that will keep you going longer, because it doesn't really help to be desperate about the suffering world. We all need to pay attention to the world's great problems, but, at the same time, we need to be happy, to be capable of joy; otherwise, how can we help anyone?

These days governments are rational and materialistic. They deal with social problems by spending money to alter things in the material world. In ancient times governments did little more to help people than supply military might, ostensibly for public protection.

But ancient governments did support religious establishments to send up prayers for the king or the emperor. This was considered a reasonable form of social spending! It ensured that God or Buddha would protect the sovereign, and that was understood to be good for everyone.

These days no government would do this. But maybe there is something to it. Maybe some social good comes from our prayers and spiritual practices in a way that our materialistic philosophy can't account for. Maybe our world isn't well served by the almost total hegemony of materialism. Maybe uselessly sitting and facing a wall or uselessly making artworks that no one will pay money for or uselessly feeling or thinking our lives is a way to help, somehow.

Over the centuries, women have gotten a raw deal in the patriarchal Zen tradition. But we've come a long way. In the West there are probably as many women teachers as men. What do you think we still need to work on in order to have gender equality in American Zen?

Yes, we have come a long way. I am proud of how inclusive and open the Western Zen tradition is for women and LGBT people. Our society as a whole has improved enormously in this regard, but I think the Zen movement is ahead of the curve.

It hasn't always been so. I have always felt I was open and fair, but the truth is it's taken me a long time to uncover my prejudices, face them as honestly as I can, and stretch my view. It's been a long process, and I assume I am not yet finished with it. I assume there is more to learn so that I can become more inclusive than I am now. And I assume this goes for everyone, inside and outside the Zen movement.

To some extent inclusion has meant, "OK, this is how we boys do things. We will now let you girls do things this way too." And maybe the girls, at first, are happy to do this. But after a while we all discover together that the girls don't necessarily want to do things the way the boys have been doing them. And then we all do things differently together.

So my guess is that we don't yet know how the world will look once we've collectively discovered what the feminine is when it's fully empowered to take its place in the world. My assumption is that we have a long way to go on this path of discovery and that as we go along, everything, including Zen, is going to change. I assume this will be an improvement. I also assume there will be downsides and that we will lose a lot too.

> *In the Zen sanghas where I have practiced or visited, the membership is overwhelmingly European American. What can those of us already practicing do to help our Zen sanghas become more welcoming and more relevant for people of colors? And before you respond, Norman, I want to acknowledge here that I am asking about what we can call "convert" sanghas, the only kind with which I am familiar. There are many more sanghas comprised of Americans who were born into Buddhism, who are Asian immigrants or descendants of Asian immigrants and who practice in temples that follow their various cultural traditions. We Western converts to Buddhism, latecomers that we are, owe respect to these "ethnic" Buddhists*.

Yes, most Zen and other convert Buddhist sanghas (with the exception of Soka Gakkai, a Nichiren Buddhist–influenced school that is quite diverse) tend to be populated overwhelmingly by European Americans. You don't find many African Americans, Hispanic Americans, or Asian Americans. This is gradually changing, but we still have a very long way to go. It will take time. And we can't just wait—it won't happen by itself. We have to make the effort.

The groups I am aware of that have been most successful at such efforts are those that have taken on racial and cultural diversity as a central issue. In Oakland, the East Bay Meditation Center is located downtown, easily accessible by public transportation. The group's core teachers are almost all people of color, and the center was "founded to provide a welcoming environment for people of color, members of the LGBTQI community, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented communities." The Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and other centers have had

designated retreats for people of color. They have supported these retreats financially, making them inexpensive or even free, and have run free buses into large cities to bring people to Barre who would otherwise not be able to come. I think you have to take steps like these to address the issue. Class diversity is an issue, too, and most Buddhist centers are preponderantly middle class.

Still, it is going to take a long time. When there are enough Zen and other Buddhist teachers of color, who will understand how to present the teachings and the practice to serve their communities, people of color will come in larger numbers to access the teachings. When the teacher is a person of color, it will be much easier for people of color to feel as if the group is for them—and once a few people of color come, more will come. As it is now, proactively inviting people of color to come to mostly white Buddhist groups (whiteness isn't just a color, it's a culture) probably can only take us so far. Still, we have to do it.

This is a question not only about Buddhism. Our whole culture has this question. What is real diversity that honors and celebrates difference? I am sure that as diversity increases, so does wisdom, fairness, and goodness for all of us. We are trying to figure this out, generation by generation.

The first of the four vows Zen practitioners take is "Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them." This is obviously impossible, no matter how hard you try. So isn't this a hypocritical vow?

The four great vows, chanted after dharma talks in all Zen places, in one translation or another, are

Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.
Delusions are inexhaustable; I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.
Buddha's way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.

As you say, these vows, are, literally, impossible to uphold, like other contradictions we've been talking about in Zen. To save an infinite number of beings is by definition impossible. The other three

are the same. People at Zen centers chant these impossible vows all the time. Why?

A person who is courageous enough to point out the obvious will bring up this question. So many of your questions are like this! You remind me of the Zen master Tung-shan, who, as a young boy listening to the chanting of the Heart Sutra, was puzzled when he heard “no eyes, no ears,” and so on. He pointed to his own eyes and ears and said, “Then what are these? What does the sutra mean?” You also remind me of the child who innocently pointed out that the emperor has no clothes. Most people are either too intimidated or too sophisticated to note the obvious. However, in this case, the emperor *does* have clothes. Or, to be a little more accurate, the emperor’s nakedness is exactly the clothing he needs. Anyway, let me try to explain.

Your question is specifically about the first vow: “Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.” This is a vow of compassion. It expresses that at the heart of our practice we cherish the wish to practice with a radical unselfishness—for and with others, not just some others but all others. And we vow not to rest, not to feel as if our practice is complete, until all sentient beings, infinite in number, are saved—which in this case means saved not only from oppression and outward forms of bondage, but also saved inwardly, from bondage to self. This vow expresses the understanding that liberation isn’t a solitary affair: only when all of us are saved can any one of us be saved. So this impossible vow is an expression of the infinite love we aspire to place at the very center of all our practice endeavors.

This vow and the others also refer to the teachings on emptiness that are so foundational to Zen and all other schools of Mahayana Buddhism. As we have said, these teachings emphasize that there are no separate, fixed entities: all things are empty of any actual separation; all things are fluid and free in their oneness and radical connection. So when we say “all beings,” we don’t mean those other beings out there who are not us; we also mean ourselves as those beings, and them as ourselves. And when we refer to “beings” and “ourselves,” we are referring to things that don’t exist in the ordinary way we think of things existing, as separate entities. Taking all this

into account, we might say that the vow to save all sentient beings is also a vow to recognize that all sentient beings are already saved, because their nature is already to be free of themselves, just as we are already saved and free of ourselves. So it might not be as hard to save them as it might at first appear.

I hope this explains that we are not making senseless hypocritical vows. The contradiction in the vow—like all the other Zen contradictions we have been talking about—is a contradiction in words, but in living we have to have this contradiction, and it isn't really a contradiction. If we want to be caring, loving people, whose aspiration is to be ever more caring, we need to see that there is nothing to care for, no caring, and no one to care: everything is always loved and cared for already in the arms of absolute compassion. All of reality is compassion itself. Being born and dying are compassion. The arising of every single thing is already compassion: every blade of grass, every cloud in the sky is compassion. There could be nothing at all, and yet there is something—so many things, such immense and beautiful things! Seeing compassion in this wide way, so wide that it becomes a logical impossibility—if everything is nothing but compassion, then there is no compassion!—is necessary in the end. Otherwise, our caring will always be limited and stingy, bound by our ideologies and preferences. And we won't be able to sustain it.

> *Zen is nondualistic. In the realm of the absolute, there is no difference between good and evil. Things are as they are, and the point is to be fully present in the moment. But doesn't this imply that there's no difference between killing an enemy soldier with a sword and carrying a child out of a burning house?*

We have spoken about ethics and precepts before, in chapter 6. It's clear that there is a strong sense of ethics in Zen practice, and we certainly recognize the difference between killing someone and saving someone's life. We have talked about the three levels of precepts practice—literal, compassionate, and absolute. The absolute level referred to in your question might seem to propose that there's no difference between good and evil, but actually there is

no absolute level apart from the literal and compassionate levels. Literal, compassionate, and absolute levels don't really exist separately; they are just ways of talking about one level, our actual lives in these bodies and minds, in this world.

We all know there's a difference between good and evil. But we notice that not everyone agrees on which is which (though I believe that as a human family we are getting closer to unanimity on this point). Nor can we help but notice that much evil is perpetuated in the name of combatting evil. We are human beings with tender hearts, which is to say we know what it is to be hurt. We are creatures who must practice ethical conduct because it's our nature to do so—literally, compassionately, absolutely, and in all other ways.

In Zen precepts practice, the fundamental, absolute ground of ethics is being itself. Things just are. Life just is. And in this "are" or "is," *not* being is also included. A moment of time arising is a moment of time passing. Being born is the beginning of dying. This is sad, tragic, and, in the end, probably impossible for us to fully understand. Yet we can and do feel the immensity of being itself—and the terror of unbeing. Grounding our lives in this fundamental truth, which is hard to appreciate and acknowledge, is the fruit of our practice. This is where the teaching of "no difference between good and evil" comes from. It's essential but can't be taken out of context.

When evil is perpetrated, it becomes a fact of existence. As I write this, ISIS soldiers are beheading people in Syria and Iraq. If there is any evil in the world, this would certainly seem to be an instance of it. Yet it is still a fact; it still actually did happen. It is something that *is*. We have to accept that this has actually happened, and we have to somehow take it in, difficult as that may be: it is now a part of our world, of our human life. This doesn't mean we have to condone it or that we shouldn't do everything we can practically do to prevent it from happening again. It only means that we have to accept it as having happened. This acceptance is how I understand the absolute level—we accept evil as existing when it exists, just as we have to accept that a loss that's occurred to us has actually happened, even as we grieve it. If we deny or refuse to accept reality as it is, we won't be able to cope with it. We will keep on making the same

mistakes again and again. Our losses, if we don't accept them, can destroy our lives.

You mention that Zen is "nondual." I am not sure I entirely understand the concept of nondual. Some years ago I was invited to make a presentation at a conference whose theme was nondualism. I listened to many of the talks people were giving and was surprised to find that to many of the speakers nondual meant "Oneness." I guess this makes sense—either it's dual (which means two or more, like dual headlights) or it's not dual, which means it's one, or One, as most of the speakers seemed to understand it. In your question you seem to see it that way—good and evil as separate things would be dualism, two different things. Nondual would mean that good and evil aren't different; they are one thing.

But to me Oneness is dualism. Because if you uphold Oneness, then you have Oneness on the one hand and dualism on the other hand. And this seems like two different things to me: "I agree with Oneness. Dualism is a mistake." To me this seems like dualism.

In Zen I think sometimes reality arrives as One, sometimes as More Than One. The way I'd understand nondualism is that it includes dualism. If nondualism doesn't include and validate dualism, then it is dualistic! I hate to talk like this, but it just seems true to me—in living.

Your question is about ethics. And all this applies here exactly. Oneness would be "Yes, this happened." A man was tortured to death. And yes, a child was saved from drowning. Like all that happened or ever could happen, these are true, living facts, and as such I must accept them as real—good or evil, whether I like it or not. Dualism would be "Wrong is wrong, and I am committed to doing what is good and right, not what is evil or wrong."

In actual living, I can't see any way but to embrace both of these ways of seeing life. How else could we live a reasonable human life?

What good does Zen do anyway?

Sue, after all these pages, how can you ask such a question! I'm not sure it does any good at all. Maybe in order to practice Zen, you have to be able to appreciate that and not mind.

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