JAMES ISHMAEL FORD

The INTIMATE WAY of ZEN

EFFORT, SURRENDER & AWAKENING ON THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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“This book is about the messy path of Zen as lived and taught by James Ford. It tells no lies. Nothing linear or logical, no quick ecstatic fix, only a lifetime of longing and steadiness, of pilgrimage. If your life, too, is a pilgrimage, take *The Intimate Way of Zen* as guide and rudder. It will steer you through the vastness of Zen practice and show you how to live a life that isn’t just spiritual, but real.”

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“The Intimate Way of Zen is a marvelous combination of stories, teachings, and practices that is part memoir and part storytelling about Zen, spirituality, philosophy, and life. It is such a well-rounded work because its author has tested his understanding against more than a half-century of life and practice that has shorn away both the illusions of this world and the illusions of an oversimplified view of Buddhism. To be savored, like fine wine or, if one prefers, fine tea.”

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“A gateway to awakening to be returned to and gnawed at the way a dog worries a bone, *The Intimate Way of Zen* illuminates Buddhist teachings in a quiet but compelling way. Reading it was like sipping bourbon around a fire with a beloved mentor who spoke intimately to my inner life with a depth and loving kindness that both comforts and disturbs. James Ishmael Ford opens readers to profound insight, and his hard-earned understanding shines from every page. Ford roams among wisdom traditions with spiritual fluency, maintaining their

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"The many spiritual transmissions and empowerments that Ford has received in his lifetime come through his words, and his words are wisdom. In *The Intimate Way of Zen*, his spiritual walk as a priest in the Buddha Way and a pilgrim in the Jesus Way inspires religious oneness and multiplicity. His love for both Christianity and Buddhism lands directly in the realm of faith. With this book, Ford, skillfully and with integrity, removes the illusionary gap between the teachings of ancient prophets and awakened ones while reminding us of our capacity for wholeness and interrelationship."

—Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, author of *Opening to Darkness* and *The Shamanic Bones of Zen*

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James Ishmael Ford

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INTRODUCTION

> It's like an ox that enters through a latticed window. Its head, its horns, and its four legs, they all pass through. So. Why is it that its tail cannot pass through?
>
> —*Gateless Gate*, case 38

I'm not exactly sure when it happened. I was thirteen. Maybe fourteen.

Prior to that time, I felt clear on the world and how things worked. Within my small fundamentalist Baptist community pretty much everything was explained. It was part of God's great, if mysterious, plan. I even had some kind of starring role in it.

> Are not two sparrows sold for a dollar? And yet not one of them falls to the ground without our Father's knowing. God knows the exact number of hairs on your head. So fear not, you are of more value to the Father than the sparrows of heaven.[1]

I sensed that my starring role would have something to do with calling others into the fold. I knew the men in our poor people's church fell into two types. There were those who on a Sunday during church services sat in the cars smoking or in a bar drinking—my father, James senior, among them.

The others were the men who showed up at church: the preachers and some of the Sunday school teachers. After a

missionary family visited our little church, I knew I wanted to go to Africa or China or someplace as a missionary. I wanted those jewels that would be placed in my crown, one for each soul saved.

But then it happened: I began to doubt the whole thing.

There was the hell my father was going to. We all knew it, we all dreaded it, but we never spoke of it as a specific of his particular future. Yet there was the preacher, railing on Sundays about those who would end up in hellfire—and, well, the person the preacher described also described my father. The drunks didn't go to heaven. Nor did the rich. Not that that included my father. But it was a subject that loomed large from the pulpit. We were poor people, and we knew heaven did not include our oppressors, which, by a later calculation, I figured probably meant anyone from middle management and up.

This was my mother Barbara's religion. More importantly, I realize now, it was my grandmother Bolene's religion. She was the anchor of our small family. Bolene was spirit-filled, and she picked the churches we attended. I learned to read from a large, illustrated King James Bible resting on her lap.

But what if those illustrated stories just weren't so? What if the Bible was just a cut-and-paste operation, put together by who knows who, over however long? And that had less coherent meaning than one of my mother's Agatha Christie novels? Or, even more, what if the Bible was really just like a volume of my father's preferred reading, science fiction?

And right to the heart of it, the question forming somewhere in the depths of my being: Is God real?

The alternative to a Christian faith for me was my father's view: religion is hogwash. Born in 1919, James was orphaned as a child, passed around among relatives for a while and then into an orphanage in New Jersey, from which he fled to the streets of Manhattan. He hawked newspapers. From there he moved into petty crime.

When the Second World War began, James was in a California prison. In the last year of the war, he was released into the army, where he served as a medic. He was blasted near to the kingdom, lost the use of his right arm right to the shoulder, and would sprout shrapnel in various parts of his body right up to the week he died. James was a will-o-the-wisp, following an uncertain star, which always presented as some new opportunity; usually it was a scheme, and when it was, always badly thought through. Sometimes it led to jail. Usually it led to a quiet nighttime move to a new town.

He knew religion was a scam. He knew God was cooked up by the men in charge to frighten the sheep. I realized he might be right. I found my faith ebbing away from me, draining out through that simple question: “Is God real?”

I had no idea at the time, but this question would launch me on a life journey.

—

Across decades now of considering that question—Is God real?—I watched it shift and mutate. I found myself exploring the mysteries of the human heart. And those deeply burning wonderments: Love. Meaning. Purpose. Salvation.

The Unitarian minister and poet Lynn Ungar put that to words for me.

By what are you saved? And how?
Saved like a bit of string,
tucked away in a drawer?
Saved like a child rushed from
a burning building, already
singed and coughing smoke?
Or are you salvaged
like a car part—the one good door

when the rest is wrecked?
Do you believe me when I say
you are neither salvaged nor saved,
but salved, anointed by gentle hands
where you are most tender?
Haven't you seen
the way snow curls down
like a fresh sheet, how it
covers everything, makes everything
beautiful, without exception?[2]

I've contemplated that salvaging and that salving. More, I've lived it across several varieties of quests. First came a brief period emulating my father's atheism. But as a person who came of age in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1960s, I found myself exposed to the kaleidoscope of human religious identities. I discovered Vedanta and drank deeply from the variations of that tradition presented by Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, and Gerald Heard. I thought briefly that psychedelics would save the world and that Huxley and Timothy Leary and Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac opened doors not only to perception but to what God might actually be.

Then I discovered Alan Watts and at the same time Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps. They seemed to describe truths that were both ancient and made sense for today. Then friends told me I didn't need to just read about that stuff, that there was an actual Zen master who lived across the Bay in San Francisco: the Japanese Zen missionary, Shunryu Suzuki, and his San Francisco Zen Center, which had affiliated groups all around the Bay Area. Including in Berkeley.

My quest would lead me to learn the arts of Zen meditation at that Berkeley affiliate led by one of the roshi's senior students, Mel Sojun Weitsman. In essence it was a practice of presence. I then

had the opportunity to explore deeply during nearly three years in that Japanese-style Soto Zen monastic training under another Zen teacher, an English woman, Houn Jiyu Kennett.

From there I fell into another period of wandering. A short sojourn among the Episcopalians and not much longer among the independent sacramental movement, branches of the Liberal Catholic churches. I also spent a time studying with universalist Sufis in the school of Hazrat Inayat Khan and his American disciple Samuel Lewis.

Finally, I found what has worked for my life for the past four or so decades. I joined a Unitarian Universalist church, eventually going to seminary and then spending a quarter of a century as a parish minister. At the same time I began to practice Zen under the direction of a lay teacher in the Harada Yasutani school, Dr. John Tarrant. A successor to the American Zen master Robert Aitken, theirs was a reform Zen movement that emphasized the practice of koan Zen as taught by the eighteenth-century Rinzai master Hakuin Ekaku. I would eventually be made a teacher in that line of Zen.

There's an old story about the sixteenth-century Catholic priest and Enlightenment philosopher Desiderius Erasmus. Once, some friends came upon him eating a sausage on a Friday. When chided, he responded that while he truly had a Catholic heart, his stomach was Lutheran. With a grateful tip of the hat to Erasmus, I claim a pluralistic physiology of faith. My brain is Buddhist; I am convinced of the basic analysis of Mahayana Buddhism, especially the so-called marks of existence and the two truths. But my heart is Christian. I dream of Jesus and Moses and the Marys. While at the same time my general disposition, my stomach, is pretty rationalist and this-worldly. And this blending—sort of a Unitarian Zen, or, perhaps more accurately, a Universalist Zen—has been my life.

I'm writing this book from that vantage point contemporary sociologists call "middle old age." I offer here a reflection of what I've found over these years walking a spiritual path in some ways deeply

rooted within Zen and in others between traditions, especially between Buddhism and Christianity. It has been a sometimes painful, often beautiful, and always rich path.

As a parish minister and a Zen teacher I've also been gifted with accompanying others on their paths into the mysteries of the heart. With that, here and now, I hope to share what I think might be useful to others who feel the tugging of their hearts toward the great mystery. And perhaps even for those well into the path.

Is God real? The question at the center of my own heart's tugging will likely not be yours, at least not exactly. But I have found that nearly all seekers on the spiritual path are pulled by some such question: Who am I? What is this longing? So many questions. But all, it seems, are personal variations on the deepest questions: Why was I born? Why do I die? What is this? That question, your question, may start small. But if attended to, cultivated, deeply asked, well…

> The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which someone plants in the ground. Although it is the smallest of things, when it grows, it becomes like a great bush. And the birds of heaven take shelter in its branches.[3]

Often our personal shape of the deep question begins—changing metaphors—to boil down from a question, to reduce. It might reduce to a single word. God. Jesus. Amida. Om. Hu. Mu. It may shift or reframe. It might not even take shape as a phrase or a word but simply arise as a feeling, a longing. A wordless word. A sense that informs every encounter. This question, this inner sense, can become a constant companion to our lives.

Those of us blessed or cursed with a question about the deepest meaning find ourselves on an ancient quest. The path may be found by going deep into the religion into which we were born. Although, and especially in our time and place, sometimes we find a different

tradition works for us. Or, and this is perhaps the most common path in our time and place, we begin to cobble something together from the wrecks of the world's traditions—finding a path between. Such has been my story.

The constant touchstone for me is the Zen tradition. It does seem we need some sort of touchstone, even if we're cobbling things together. The way is almost always found within a tradition that, however tentatively, provides us with a sense of direction. What initially appears as pointers might later become like rafts in a raging sea.

Of course, to have a touchstone, a raft, can also be problematic. Sometimes that raft may become waterlogged and simply drag us down. We need to be careful. And this is why maps and guides are important. We need to keep our hearts open. But we also need to keep our eyes open. These traditions can be wildly different, and their differences aren't just superficial. We humans have any number of images and stories for this movement of our hearts. Just like those questions that birth us into our spiritual quest.

This journey we undertake, each of us on our own and in our own way, guides us into the deep. The exact geography seems very personal. And at the same time, not. Walking the path, however rocky, sometimes wide, often quite narrow and steep, at turns joyful and terrifying—it is our human way. Up the mountain or down into the depths—the specific terrain is not universal, but following along a path is universal.

As you've picked up this book, I can only assume you are a fellow traveler. You've felt some urge, maybe named, perhaps only felt. Perhaps you sense a way, maybe even have a good sense of that way, but are looking for some clarification, maybe even a few pointers.

I'm much taken with what might be called primary metaphors. They include things like standing and sitting and lying down. For those with a sense of a call into the mystery, the primary image or

metaphor is path. That path of a hundred leagues, as the old Taoist saying goes, with its single step. The word *path* seems to come to us from that hypothetical Indo-European. It means something like “to go,” “to tread,” “to pass.” Possibly it even circles around to that word of such resonance in East Asian traditions—Tao, the *way*.

—

Having written of both the particular and the universal as qualities of spiritual seeking, I feel a tugging toward the question of *goal.* Where do our paths lead—to the same place? To different ones? What is the destination?

In the Christian tradition heaven is the goal of our quest. It certainly is the language of my childhood experience. Often it is taken to be a place found after death. But there are those who say, whatever happens after the dissolution of our bodies, heaven is something to be found here. If they say “here,” they usually add in “and now,” as if time and space are completely intertwined: here and now, fully within the midst of this messy world.

Enlightenment, another old word for the goal of this quest, puts the finding here in this life. This term from the dharmic religions formed in India is commonly used in Zen. Some of my wiser friends point out the word has lost some of its power with overuse. Sometimes I find *endarkenment* might be more helpful at this moment.

Words are very important. They can point true, and they can entangle, trap, or mislead. Often the very same word ends up doing both. All words have their limitations. With those cautions, I’ve found the word *awakening*, rich in meaning, most helpful for me in evoking the goal of the spiritual path. It will be the word I most use in what follows.

By its many names—heaven, enlightenment, endarkenment, awakening, and still others—this book describes the path and its

goal. In that sense, I intend it to be a map. Some maps are old and venerable, having stood the test of time. Some can be the very exact right thing for someone, while not for someone else. Some are good for a moment in time but then lose their usefulness.

Indeed, it's important for me to underscore that there is no perfect map of the awakened life. There are many maps, and all are the work of people, as in human beings, with all that that means, including how they are all subject to error. Still, if they've gained any sanction over time, they almost certainly offer truthful angles on the deep. Few are completely wrong.

Possibly among the oldest strata of stories that help us mark out a spiritual path is the "Hero's Journey." I'm especially fond of the sixteenth-century Chinese *Journey to the West*, which some see as a classic version of the journey. Here in the modern West, the life of Jesus, turned into a cycle, becomes a map. Other spiritual maps of world historical significance include the *Zohar*, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Tao Te Ching.

On the Zen way there are a couple of traditional maps of the spiritual path. An ancient one is the Five Ranks, a collection of poems attributed to the ninth-century Chan master Dongshan Liangjie. These poems are wonderful and oblique, and they present a relentless call into the mystery framed by two aspects of the same truth. One aspect is our wild uniqueness in this world of causes and conditions. The second is our commonality within the great empty, in that kingdom of God, heaven, nirvana, in the place beyond distinctions and differences.[4]

The second traditional Zen map, the one I've found most useful over the many years, is the ten oxherding pictures. The image of a bull or ox to represent the hidden longing of our hearts is ancient. Possibly the oldest inspiration for this image traces to the *Mahagopalaka Sutta*, or *Greater Cowherd Discourse*, from the Pali canon.[5]

The version that has captured most of us on the Zen path, who find in it a true representation of our way, was formulated by a twelfth-century Chinese Linji master (the school known as “Rinzai” in Japanese), Guoan Shiyuan. It became wildly popular, and eventually it made its way to Japan. And, by way of the early translator and interpreter of Zen to the West, D. T. Suzuki, it was first introduced in English.

Today there are numerous commentaries on the text, starting with those from Guoan. Rummaging around my bookshelves I find five by contemporary teachers, Chinese, Japanese, and American. It’s a perennial on the perennial way.

These ten pictures will be touchstones as we proceed in this exploration of the spiritual path. Seen another way, they can be the latticework upon which we will find the various vines and flowerings, as well as a few thorns, to be found in pretty much anyone’s spiritual journey.

So what does this look like as we put it all together? In that wonderful twelfth-century Chinese spiritual masterwork *The Book of Serenity*, we find gathered as the twentieth case:

> The master of the way Dizang asked the monk Fayan, “Where are you going?”
> Fayan replied, “I am wandering about.”
> The master pushed, “What do you think of this wandering?”
> Fayan replied with all his heart, “I don’t know.”
> Dizang smiled and said very softly, “Not knowing is most intimate.”

There are two truly important things to notice. The first is *not knowing.* This opens the secrets of the way. Our deep curiosity, that longing in our hearts, becomes a way of vulnerability, of simplicity, of openness. And this invites that other phrase, *most intimate.* On this

way we discover our path is one of ever-deeper *intimacy:* Intimacy with each other. Intimacy with ourselves. Intimacy with the cosmos.

The Buddha once said that friendship was the whole of the spiritual life.[6] The word *intimacy* points us to the experience of our friendships and indeed all our relationships within the mystery of rising and falling and that great dazzling darkness.

The great gift within the ruin of religions.

PART ONE

BEFORE THE FULL MOON

A student of the way said to Zhaozhou, “I have just entered the community. Please teach me.”

The old abbot said, “Have you eaten your morning meal?”

The student said, “Yes, sir.”

Zhaozhou replied, “Wash your bowl.”

The student had a glimmer of understanding.

—*Gateless Gate*, case 7

1

Entering the Intimate Way (Oxherding 1)

Blessed are they who cease to grasp, who let go of hatred,
and are no longer swayed by siren songs of certainty.
Who now find delight in the flowing currents of their lives from
dawn and through the night.
They are like trees planted by deep springs, they bear fruit in
season.
Their lives evergreen, their words and actions healing the
world.

—Psalm 1:1–3[1]

I used to have strong views about what it takes to establish a Zen meditation practice.

For many years when I led introductions to Zen or taught Zen meditation classes, I'd ask people why they came. A lot of them had heard meditation was good for their mental health. People wracked with anxiety heard that meditation could lower their blood pressure. All in all, meditation was said to lead to a general sense of wellbeing. And indeed, Zen meditation and similar practices of silence and presence are associated with some physiological shifts, including lowering blood pressure. Additionally, these practices can prove a valuable adjunct to psychotherapy. Over the years I have

encouraged any number of people to seek the potential complementary benefits of therapy and meditation practices.

And a simple cost-benefit analysis suggests that practicing Zen to improve your health isn't necessarily the smartest way to go. For instance, I'm pretty sure one can achieve similar results to a half hour of meditation by playing with a cat, petting a puppy, or taking a long walk. Which, frankly, sounds an awful lot more fun than witnessing the rising and falling of one's thoughts and feelings. A friend once observed how "there could even be a Zen teaching somewhere along the line in playing with that cat." All without the sore knees.

As the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn once said, "Zen is boring." Hard. Boring. Sore knees. Sore backs. Some very unpleasant inner psychological encounters. When we're just looking to feel a little better, perhaps Zen isn't the best thing going.

Or so it seemed to me when introducing people to the practice. Gradually, however, I realized I was missing a pretty important point. What I began to notice as I kept asking my question of those seeking instruction—"What brought you here?"—was that perhaps there isn't actually some "right" motivation. People presented with all manner of reasons for their presence in my class or meditation session, and I could never tell who would or wouldn't stick around. Perhaps, in the final analysis, no one actually has a "good reason" for embarking on the spiritual quest, whether Zen or any other. Or maybe any reason might be good enough.

Our motives for taking up any spiritual practice are always clouded. And those motives change over time. In our human hearts, motivations almost always have multiple causes. Some we know about. They're what we think is why we do something. But as with the proverbial iceberg, our deeper motivations are elusive, even to ourselves. A simple example is trying on Zen because of a deep spiritual longing, but also noticing that really nice-looking person

seems to go to the meditation center, as well. And even in that example, what is really the leading reason?

Many years ago, my brother and I took a hike in the mountains above Palm Springs. We met some other hikers, and at dusk we set out our sleeping bags near each other. All of us shared wine and cheese and bread and some fruit we'd packed in with us. Then in the middle of the night it started raining. It quickly became dangerous. We all scampered up the side of the gully, and no sooner than we were as high as we could get did we hear the water rushing down, a torrent. It was terrifying. Our companions began to cry out to God to save them. One loudly promised to change and to become God-fearing if he were saved.

The truth is, I have no idea what came next for him. Most likely, given my observation of humans, is that by the next morning he'd completely forgotten his loud and fervent prayer. But for some people—and I've met them—that promise is kept. They continue on. Some for a lifetime. So who's to say that a sudden, desperate plea to God to save one's life is not a perfectly good reason to start upon a path of spiritual transformation?

But if our precise stated motive for entering the path does not matter, or doesn't matter as much as we might think it would, there is something that does matter. It is as old as our human existence. In my years as a Zen teacher and Unitarian minister, I have detected a pattern underneath all that variety in peoples' stated reasons, something I now consider the most fundamental of all our motivations for spirituality or religion—noticing that there's something wrong.

Noticing a sense of wrongness is the first of three critical factors in how the spiritual path mostly opens for people, the other two being the discovery of a hope and then the setting of an intention. But let's stick with that sense of wrongness for a bit longer. We can see that "wrong" in a hundred different ways. The wrong, in fact, seems specifically cut for each of us. There are a lot of words for this sense

of wrongness: *unease, alienation, despair.* And it becomes tied up with a longing. It can be like finding a hole in the heart. Me, I felt a lack. I had the sense of wrong. I could see the hole in my heart, but I didn't have all that much faith there was a fix.

When I was thinking about entering a Zen monastery, I was—and perhaps I remain—one of those of little faith. Later there would be a finding of how doubt and faith are facets of something rather larger. Right here at the beginning, well, Thomas wanting to poke his finger into the wounds was my patron saint. But that's for later. At the time I was driven by a desperate feeling that things were not right, and so even though I was filled with doubt, it seemed all I needed was the tiniest modicum of belief that something good might come of turning myself over to Zen. Here, the verse for the first of the oxherding pictures sings to me as it has to so many seekers over the centuries:

> Wandering in the wilderness, lost, I continue searching.
> The waters rage, I wander into the mountains, following the trackless path;
> Exhausted and despairing, I don't know where to go.
> I only hear cicadas singing among the trees.[2]

I know this place. And perhaps you do as well. However we might frame it, that feeling something's not right is the spur that starts us on the way. There is no correct or incorrect choice of name for this sense. What it is we notice specifically in our lives is ours. It is my feeling or your feeling that there's something wrong in the world. Your problem, your sense. My problem, my sense. Or, perhaps, we begin to notice it's something wrong in my heart, in your heart—which is the beginning of a beginning.

That mustard seed.

And immediately with that sense of wrong, there is a rising sense there is a right. We almost certainly can't put a word to what the right

is. Only that with a wrong, a right should, or at least might, be able to follow. Call it a hunch. It's found in how our human brains work.

In the Buddhism of the great way, the Mahayana, this sense, this hunch, is called *bodhicitta*. In Sanskrit, *bodhi* means "awakening" and *citta* means "that which is conscious," so *bodhicitta* is usually translated as the mind of awakening. Whatever we call that hunch, the mustard seed begins to sprout, and thus we find the second critical factor in embarking on a spiritual path—the discovery of a hope.

Here is the most natural of all natural experiences. In the midst of our suffering, our longing, our desperation, we capture a glimpse. Or, really, something touches us. And with that, if we are lucky and really notice the movement of some spirit within us, we turn our attention to the intimate way.

And it is with this that I think of those who in the midst of some terrible fix call out to God and make a promise. In the heat of disaster, they call on God. They call on Guanyin. They call on Mother Mary. They call on their own mother.

"They." You know: You. Me. Us.

And in that crying out, sometimes a promise is made—the setting of an intention. And this is the third thing.

As I age, I find myself interested in the Pure Land. (Apparently, this broadening of focus into the Pure Land is not uncommon among aging Zen priests and teachers.) Although there have been many Pure Lands to which Mahayana Buddhists have aspired over the centuries, the most common is that of Amida, a Buddha from somewhere far away from our time and place who makes a vow to save all beings. By putting your trust in Amida's vow, you are brought to a realm where awakening is easy—to the Pure Land. Some would say the place that is given as a gift, and the place achieved by the hard work of Zen practice, are the same.

But the critical point, as I see it, is in fact the vow itself. It is noticing something is wrong, feeling there can be a right, and making

a promise to pursue that right.

This occurs in many ways in different cultures and religions. We see it ritually in the adolescent rite of passage, from Bat and Bar Mitzvahs within Jewish communities to the confirmation rites of many Christian denominations to the “adult” baptism of my childhood religion. In these cases, it is often part of a larger pattern that is more observed in the breach than as an authentic motion of the heart. But even latent, it can have power.

I think that the third step in Alcoholics Anonymous is a frank and clear expression of the power of vow. One is invited to make “a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we [understand] him.”[3] (Him, her, them, it. I gather that the range of placeholders for the mystery that works within the steps is vast.)

Among many cultures the active making of an intention, and stating it, is seen as initiation.

We in the Zen schools call it the original vow and usually frame it with four parts.

In the standard translation of the Sotoshu, the official Japanese Soto Zen church, the four vows are:

> Living beings are limitless; I vow to deliver them.
> Mental afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to cut them off.
> Dharma gates are incalculable; I vow to practice them.
> The buddha way is unsurpassed; I vow to attain it.[4]

In the Boundless Way and Empty Moon Zen communities we say:

> Beings are numberless; I vow to free them.
> Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.
> Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.
> The Buddha Way is unsurpassable: I vow to embody it.[5]

The Pacific Zen Institute offers another version, one that I really love.

I vow to wake the beings of the world.
I vow to set endless heartache to rest
I vow to walk through every wisdom gate
I vow to live the great Buddha way.[6]

I have reservations about how the second line in this version, which is specifically about the source of our hurt as an endless grasping, jumps to the inevitable experience that rises from grasping. Yet I still find this version enormously compelling. It feels like a pure expression of some ancient vow.

Each of these versions, I believe, captures the essential elements of that primordial, primary vow: To notice there is hurt. To notice how that hurt is found within an incorrect appreciation of our place within the world. To desire to bring healing to the matter. And to begin and end knowing this is in fact a family matter.

It's all captured for us in that image of the oxherding cycle of someone wandering, lost. The world is confusing, haunted, and very, very dangerous. It really feels like a trackless path. At best there are the cicadas calling, maybe a crow cawing. Calling to us.

The world itself, presenting.

With this noticing and this promise made to ourselves, and on behalf of the whole hurting world, we discover we've entered the intimate way.

2

Establishing a Practice

> There is another world, and it is this one.
>
> —Paul Éluard[1]

This volume is not meant to be an introduction to Zen practice. And, as I suppose is clear by now, it's not even exclusively about the Zen way. Rather it's a description of the arc of the spiritual life. There are, it seems, deep currents of interiority that seem common to us all within the great mess of life and death. If the intimate way is authentic, it is something natural. And yet, without a practice of some kind, usually found within a specific tradition, it's very unlikely that the spiritual life takes much of an arc at all.

How spiritual practices mix or color each other within an individual's experience is unpredictable. And we need to be open to guidance with some humility, to hear good advice from any source.

So, for example, I find guidance in the Orthodox Christian classic, *Way of a Pilgrim.* Early in that book the pilgrim has a great yearning for the deep way. He is particularly concerned with the phrase "pray unceasingly," which comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, "Pray without ceasing." In my retelling:

> Everywhere he went he sought out spiritual directors, formal and informal. At some point he was told there was a merchant, one who had at the same time as being a person of

business, also devoted himself to the interior way for many years. The pilgrim went to him and found it was all true. The man had a deep spiritual life. He had built a chapel. And by this time in his life, he confined himself there, reading deeply, and praying constantly.

The pilgrim told the man that he understood him as someone of prayer and wisdom. And could he please explain the admonition to “pray unceasingly.” The pilgrim was particularly concerned with the “how” of the praying.

The man reflected for a while then said, “This unceasing prayer is the constant striving of a soul toward God. What you need to do is call upon God to teach you how to pray. You need to be constant in this and bring all of your heart to it. And then the prayer itself will teach you.”

The man then added, “It takes its own time.”

He invited the pilgrim to dinner, and to stay the night. The next day he gave the pilgrim some money, and blessed his pilgrimage.

At the time, the pilgrim did not feel his question had been answered. But the man’s words stayed with him.

Although this story is adapted from an anonymous Orthodox Christian memoir, in my reading the pilgrim has found something very like a Zen koan. A koan is one of those mysterious assertions from before the creation of the stars and planets, an assertion that contains within it an invitation into the deepest places of our hearts. For the pilgrim the koan was “Pray unceasingly.”

With this deep call from within his heart he then finds someone to help set him on his way. I love that that person is neither a priest nor a monastic, but a merchant. The merchant gives what seems a very circular bit of advice to pray unceasingly in order to find how the prayer itself will reveal itself as unceasing. The great feedback loop of heaven and earth.

The passage ends with the pilgrim being sent on his way without any further explanation. This reminds me of my koan teacher noting that after being given a koan and being told something about breathing the koan or letting the koan breathe you, “of necessity we are given insufficient instructions.” We are thrown into the koan, allowing the koan itself to instruct. Thrown into the prayer, allowing the prayer itself to instruct.

And sometimes our koan changes. Eventually the pilgrim would find the “Jesus Prayer”: “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Sometimes this prayer reduces to nothing more than a single word, “Jesus.” It is one of the great practices of the Christian way. It can be a mantra. And I believe it really is a koan. The words assert a mysterious interaction between broken hearts and some great healing. And they invite the person who prays into a new world. I believe such prayer is a complete practice. There is something else that is critical. We also need some friends to keep us honest, to help when we stray, and to guide us back.

I found a different practice, for myself. Another complete practice. Although also one that calls for those friends and companions. We need to take on our practices by ourselves. But we always need friends. We do this alone. And we do this together with others.

The complete practice of Zen meditation has three instructions:

Sit down.

Shut up.

Pay attention.

You could add a fourth: Repeat.

It’s practical. It’s straightforward. And it invites us into a place not all that different from the pilgrim’s praying unceasingly, calling on Jesus.

What is critical is our finding a practice. Something that calls out of our being. It’s an intimation, a sense. As we look we notice it probably can be formed as a question. Is there a God? Why do I suffer? Why is the world as it is? It comes as a doubt.

We might attend to this question as a problem to be solved. That could be very important. But there is another possibility. It doesn't preclude problem solving. It comes to us as the wisdom of our ancestors. It is the territory of the spiritual that we often find within religions. Here we find words like *koan.*

It is like that moment in the story of Moses, where he climbs a mountain and finds a bush that burns eternally. He is told to take off his shoes because he is on holy ground.[2]

I think of that holy ground. I think of naked feet feeling the dirt and the grass and the pebbles. It can hurt. And it can connect. There is a "just this" quality we can find. And, at some point if we are following a spiritual path, it is going to become a discipline of presence. Presence to the mystery of our rising and falling lives. Presence to joy. Presence to sorrow. Presence.

The world presents itself as a cat. As a lover. As a star. As a disease. As thoughts and feelings. In each specific thing, within that dance between presentation and presence, we find ourselves invited into some great mystery.

The world itself becomes the koan.

3

Vows as the Container for the Contemplative Life

> In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.
>
> —Henri J. M. Nouwen[1]

I was in Bhutan, sitting in a downtown Thimphu coffeehouse. I'd been invited on a visit to the country for a spiritual pilgrimage. I sang for my supper, giving some talks on Buddhism and Zen as part of a larger program. And so there I was, waiting for my companions who had wanted to do some shopping.

The person sitting next to me was a Bhutanese national. We began to talk. Nearly everyone in Bhutan speaks English, as it's the official language of government and much of commerce. I quickly found the first question from a Bhutanese to someone visiting is usually inquiring what one thinks of their country, to which I easily responded by saying I'd fallen in love with it.

He asked if I were a follower of the dharma. I replied yes, but not within the Vajrayana, about which, I admitted, I know shamefully little. I thought I was inviting him into a conversation about his

version of the Buddha way. But instead, he wanted to know my Buddhist background.

I said I was a North American Zen priest within a Japanese tradition. Adding in something about my also being a Unitarian minister seemed to be too complicated for what was going to be a brief conversation. He wanted some clarification about the Zen part, and asked if I were a monk. I said no, sliding over the fact that we traditionally do use monastic language to describe our ordination model. But we're not celibate, not monastic in that commonly understood way. So no was an answer to the meta-question, was I a Vinaya monk? But I tried to get across that I was not a layperson, either.

I was someone with some monastic training and many years of intensive training. The best word I've found for what I am is *priest.* A Zen priest, someone with long years of training, a commitment and vow, an obligation of transmitting the forms and style as best I can, and empowerments to do these things within a lineage.

He smiled broadly, and said, "Ah, you're a *gomchen.* A Zen gomchen!"

I was pretty sure I wasn't being insulted. But just to be sure I asked what that meant. He replied that *gomchen* means "great meditator."[2] He explained in addition to nuns and monks, the Vinaya-ordained clergy in Bhutan and other Vajrayana cultures, gomchen or *ngapa*, are very important in the community religious life. They're not ordained in that monastic sense, but they are trained, have received empowerments, can perform critical rituals, and are spiritual leaders. They can, and frequently do, marry. Usually, they live in the village and have an ordinary trade to support themselves.

He repeated, "You are a Zen gomchen." And he put his hands together and bowed to me. I had the feeling if we weren't in a coffee shop, he would have done a full prostration. Soon he left, and my companions arrived.

I've never forgotten that exchange, and I think it points to some important things about embarking on a spiritual journey—especially in the contemporary West, where monasticism, or even an extended stay in a monastery, is difficult. For many, especially pretty much anyone with a committed relationship, it's close to impossible, notwithstanding that so many laypeople care profoundly about the deeper currents of the spiritual life.

So learning about the role of gomchen got me to thinking about the shape of spiritual life today. One of the more interesting characteristics of our emerging Western Zen practice is its heavy emphasis on lay practice. Or perhaps, given that negative connotations of *lesser* have accrued to the word *lay*, a better term might be "householder practice."

I hope this book will be helpful to anyone exploring the interior life, but it is written specifically for those whose spiritual life is bound up with ordinary life. People have been wrestling with the shape of an authentic practice here in the West for decades. And we need more descriptions of the path for those who find themselves embarked on the spiritual quest but who are not going to be monastics for life or even for a few years.

It's helpful to know that while monasticism is normative for serious spiritual practice in the East, even there it isn't as binary as some might think. There are a lot of gomchen, if you will, arising out of many different disciplines. People are finding wholehearted paths outside of the "professional" religious class. And there's a lot of room for gomchen-style practice emerging in the West.

What we're seeing now are people from all walks of life taking up a spiritual life as a significant part of who they are. The divide between professional and lay is getting thin, fraying, often not visible in any manner at all. The questions about a serious and engaged spiritual life are shifting. The questions have become not whether it can be done, or should be done, but how it can be done.

As we saw in chapter 1, a critical step toward entering the intimate way is the taking of vows—and a major reason for this is the public and communal nature of such rituals, whether undertaken as a monastic, a priest, a gomchen, a householder, or however else one identifies. Finding the right promises to frame one's intention is equally important with finding a practice and a community. These things are intertwined. So it is important to tie oneself to one's tradition with the power of vow.

Gautama Siddhartha counseled householders as well as monastics to undertake vows, and he suggested the first five of the monastic vows—which grew into the hundreds. Whether with five, ten, sixteen, fifty-eight, or two hundred precepts or vows, we find the shape of a container for our hearts—something necessary, it turns out, to step into the deep, whether as a renunciant or as someone living an ordinary life. We need such a container in addition to the calling into a deeper vision and in addition to a meditative or prayer discipline.

Vows are promises made publicly and with sacred intention; they are the latticework that allows us to grow. In the West, a vow is often made before God. For those on the Zen path or simply interested in it, I suggest specifically taking up Zen's precepts.

Japanese Zen emerged beginning in the eleventh century of the Common Era and developed ten or sixteen vows, depending on the school. These became the vows for householders and for monastics, as well as for the noncelibate clerical community that emerged especially after Japan's modernization in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the spread of Japanese Zen around the globe.

They come by way of a fifth-century Chinese scripture, the *Brahmajala* or *Brahma Net Sutra*, which features ten major and forty-eight minor precepts. The five major precepts are nearly identical with the monastic codes. Of course, the rule around sexuality is understood differently for monastics than for householders. And the

traditional framing around intoxication in the *Brahmajala* version is about dealing in alcohol, although the nuances regarding the problems with intoxication are still there.

Japanese Soto Zen, following the initiation and ordination practices of its thirteenth-century founder Eihei Dogen, has sixteen precepts. The first three are simply the traditional Buddhist refuges.

> I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.

They are followed by the three pure precepts, which are a reworking of the Dhammapada's verse 183. Here, as they're presented in Boundless Way and the Empty Moon sanghas:

> Renounce all evil, practice all good, and save the many beings.

The Zen priest Domyo Burk rendered her own translations of the ten grave precepts and wrote a reflection on each of them. I've always liked her interpretation a lot, as I think it's particularly clear.[3]

Do Not Kill—Cultivate and Encourage Life: Do Not See Anything as Separate from Yourself—See and Honor Every Being and Thing as a Manifestation of Buddha Nature

Do Not Steal—Honor the Gift Not Yet Given: Do Not Place Self-Interest before Consideration for Others—Trust That You Have All You Truly Need

Do Not Misuse Sexuality—Remain Faithful in Relationships: Do Not Use the Power of Sexual Attraction Merely for Pleasure, or for Building and Maintaining Your Sense of Self—Negotiate the Intricacies of Human Intimacy with Care, Respect, and Honor

Do Not Speak Dishonestly—Communicate Truthfully: Do Not Hide Your Mistakes or Your True Nature with Coarse or Subtle Lies—

Speak from Your True Heart

Do Not Become Intoxicated—Polish Clarity, Dispel Delusion: Do Not Take Refuge in Distractions—Cultivate the Clarity and Energy Required for Practice

Do Not Dwell on Past Mistakes—Create Wisdom from Ignorance: Do Not Dwell Unnecessarily on the Past or Future— Have Faith in Your Ability, and the Ability of Others, to Grow and Change

Do Not Praise Self or Blame Others—Maintain Modesty, Extol Virtue: Do Not Compare Yourself to Others—Honor Each Person's Unique Process and Manifestation

Do Not Be Mean with Dharma or Wealth—Share Understanding, Give Freely of Self: Do Not Worry about Lacking Anything—Take Every Opportunity to Be Generous

Do Not Indulge Anger—Cultivate Equanimity: Do Not Justify Self-Defensiveness or Territoriality—Do What Needs to Be Done with an Attitude of Acceptance and Compassion

Do Not Defame the Three Treasures—Respect the Buddha, Unfold the Dharma, Nourish the Sangha: Do Not Give Energy to Skepticism or Cynicism—Cultivate Faith in, and Reverence for, That Which Is Great

These precepts become a frame for one's life. When we're beginning, they serve as a container to hold us and our intention. As we deepen into the way, we see how they are in fact expressions of the deep itself. That feedback loop of the heart.

This is not unique to the Zen way. In the West, while there are older roots, it was in the thirteenth century that associations of Christian householders began to form, usually in association with monastic orders like the Benedictines and Franciscans. These "Third Orders"—that is, they are neither monks nor nuns—adapted the common rule of the monastic order to lay life. Among the most popular continuing to this day are the Franciscan Third Orders,

which have variations among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans, as well as an ecumenical order open to all Christians.

Beyond engaging seriously with the traditional Zen precepts, I encourage the creation of a personal rule of life—a more bespoke set of guidelines for how one aspires to live. Christian Third Orders do this, as well.

As an example, the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans has a "General Rule," with seventeen points. The sixteenth point calls upon the individual to "draw up and live by a Personal Rule of life based on the Rule of this Order and falling into these disciplines: Worship, Prayer, Penitence, Work, Lifestyle, Mission, Obedience, Community. We shall always be under supervision and accountable to an advisor."[4]

In some Zen schools there is a ceremony where a spiritual director and a student of the way covenant to work together on such a rule. In the schools in which I practice the covenant has eight steps, the first two turning on expectations in the relationship between teacher and student.

I encourage anyone embarked on the intimate way to sit down and write a personal rule, perhaps using the additional six points as a frame. Make a commitment to a regular practice. Think about what one can reasonably take on given the constraints of time and place.

1. Commit to doing retreats. Again, look at what is realistic. But—make a commitment.
2. Make a commitment to participate in a community of practice.
3. Study. At the very least find a reading list, and read. If you can, commit to taking classes, and try to list what they will be in the next year.
4. Find practical expressions for your spiritual life, such as volunteering at a soup kitchen or involving yourself in a worthy political cause. Do some work for others.

5. Explore creative expression. Art. Music. Dance. Something that stretches you, and is fun.

Commit to live by this rule for a year, and to help you do so, show your rule to someone and share your commitment with them. If you don't have a spiritual director, show it to a friend—ideally someone you trust and who shares your spiritual path, or at least spiritual aspirations. And then sign it.

Look at it at least once a month. Think about what you're doing. Then, at the end of the year, revise it as seems appropriate. Actually, if you see you're unable to keep some aspect of it going, you don't have to wait a year to rewrite it. But also don't be hasty in adjusting the promises: a clear intention, beginning a serious practice, making vows, and looking to find companions on the way in traditional or creative ways. Our part. Mohammed said if we take a single step toward God, God will run a hundred miles toward us.

It's like preparing the ground with rich fertilizer. Then planting a seed. Watering it. Weeding a little. And from there the sun, the world, brings everything else necessary for deep and healthy growth. Your garden of its own becomes a resting place for the birds of heaven.

4

Snakes and Ladders

It is good to sing praise to you, my heart.
To give thanks for the blessings of life,
To notice love coursing through my body in the morning
And faithfulness through the night.
I hear our human voices as music,
And silence as melody.
I delight in your world;
You make my body sing with joy.

How great is your goodness.
How unfathomable your deep currents,
Not seen by eyes
Not grasped by mind
Everything united

Everything touching.
The mess of life
Shows everything connected
Everything the eternal dharma.

The wise heart flourishes like palm trees
Grows like the cedars of Lebanon
Planted in the deep dark soil of God,

Leaves relentlessly turning to the light

Bearing fruit into old age
Living the truth
Of perfect unity.

—Psalm 92:1–5, 8–15

When Elisabeth Kübler-Ross first observed that people exhibit patterns in their grief, it was something of a revolution. She noticed how people, when confronted with the most terrible things, fall into denial, experience anger, turn to bargaining, sink into depression, and finally find acceptance. It was quickly noted that this is part of the path of dying, as well.

What was wrong, however, was how these experiences were framed as linear steps from denial to acceptance. It's a thing we do with our brains, always looking for set patterns. And soon it became clear that's not actually how it works. We can experience all five stages in various sequences in our confrontation with the hard things. They are good descriptions of our encounters, but they happen as they happen, in their own order. Sometimes a couple at once. And sometimes not at all.

In our spiritual lives, especially if we're looking at maps, we need to be clear: it is never a walk from *A* to *B*, or, in the case of the oxherding pictures, from *A* to *J*. It's convenient to have a ten-point list, but in truth it's more alive, more animal, than that. I think one lovely analogy to what we actually find in our spiritual lives, if we're careful, is the game of Snakes and Ladders.

You may be more familiar with Snakes and Ladders as "Chutes and Ladders," the name Milton Bradley gave to the ancient Indian board game called Snakes and Ladders. Chutes being less disturbing than snakes for the intended audience, I assume. The origins of Snakes and Ladders or *Moksha Patam* is literally lost to the mists of antiquity.

You roll the dice and find yourself near the top. Roll them again, and you slide to the bottom.

But didn't Einstein say God does not play dice with the universe? Maybe if your perspective is broad enough you can see all the near-infinite variations of the dance of causality. Laplace's demon is a famous theory about such a comprehensive view. The theory assumes if someone, his demon, knew the location and motion of all the atoms of the universe in a given moment, they could predict everything that follows. It's a classic argument for determinism. Assuming that, *chance* isn't a good word. With enough data you should be able to predict anything.

But since Laplace's time, people have endlessly poked holes in the demon theory; the ordering of the universe seems to have endless exceptions, and that should probably be noticed as well. It sometimes seems as if God is indeed playing dice with the universe. So maybe *determinism* isn't a very good word either.

In our lived lives it's all messy. When walking the spiritual path, noticing the mess and our place within it is perhaps the more important thing. We roll the dice. And here we are, right now. It is dealing with this here and now that opens the project of our sorrows and our joys, of who and what we are.

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The more important thing here is not questions of chance or determinism. The contemporary American Zen teacher Dosho Port created a spiritual map that I think accounts very well for the Snakes and Ladders quality of our spiritual journeys.

First, we are captured by a dream and imagination of what might be. *Idealization* is a very good term for this moment. We're often warned on the Zen way that enlightenment is not what we think. At the beginning, it's all thinking. Well, it's thinking driven by our heart's

longing, stories, and imagining. That longing and those stories get us started. But the opportunities to go in wrong directions are many.

Second are the numerous temptations, mostly not admitted out loud. In Zen, there's that word *enlightenment* and those stories about it. We don't really get what it is, so we project various fantasies. They can even involve superpowers, as in wanting to be spiritual equivalents of cartoon superheroes. As we mature along the way, the powers are downgraded, but some kind of "special" often remains in the mix.

Third is crabbiness. This arises when we discover we're not as far along as we think we should be. A popular variation is crabbiness about how our companions on the way don't seem to be moving along as they should. Or, alternatively, that they seem to be proceeding along "faster." Several rich traps at this place.

Fourth is finding the rhythm of an authentic spiritual life. We have mastered basics and integrated what they have to offer. We find the intimate way. But we don't seem to be graced with those, well, graces. It's just a very, very long walk. Sometimes a slog. Sometimes in the dark. Sometimes in the heat. Sometimes in the cold.

Fifth is when graces come. We are gifted with insights great and small. Scales drop from our eyes. The sound of a crow becomes an invitation from the universe itself. The smell of bread baking. The touch of a loved one. Discovering for ourselves the world, as awful as it can be—and is—is also a Pure Land.

Sixth comes falling into a well. Making some really stupid move. Discovering we aren't as holy as we thought. Or as smart. Or as in touch. Somehow despite everything we've done and experienced we find ourselves back at the beginning. This is a discovery and then a rediscovery that we're actually some kind of hot mess. This is a point that is sometimes overlooked because spiritual maps usually take us from that point A to that point B. Here we find otherwise.

And so we climb out of the well and start again. Of course, there have been changes. It's a spiral, around the mountain on our way

up, or on our way down into the deep. Some of those changes are subtle, some dramatic. This way is mysterious, sad, and joyful. Sad that it is littered with losses. And joyful in ways that words can only point toward. It is a human way. It is a way where the wise heart unfolds. Which gives us another metaphor: this way is about coming home.

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Snakes and Ladders has always been a children's game. The element of pure luck can bore adults. Although I find myself thinking of Jesus's caution that, on this intimate way, we really do need to become as children.

Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and, later, even some Christians and Jews have used Snakes and Ladders in teaching children. It's a useful tool to teach that fundamental aspect of religion expressed as the golden rule. In the oldest strata it appears to teach about desire, destiny, and the weirdness of karma. So the game becomes an invitation into the mess of life, the wildness of this roller-coaster ride, and the just plain luck that is such a large part of our material and spiritual lives.

In the original Snakes and Ladders, the ladders were associated with virtues such as generosity, grace, and success, while the snakes represented vices like lust, anger, theft, and murder. I find it interesting that success was counted as a virtue. Perhaps that's one of the little traps of religion as social control. An interesting footnote to it is how, of the one hundred squares that make up the game, more are snakes. The way of virtue is always harder.

There's a ghost story in the great koan collection the *Gateless Gate.* It turns on an ancient abbot giving a wrong answer to a burning spiritual question and, as a result, being forced to continually reincarnate as a demonic fox spirit. The obvious point is an investigation of the nature of cause and effect as part of how we

exist in this world. Another and equally important point turns on the question, “What if the old abbot gave the right answer each time? What about then?” Snakes and Ladders, with its arbitrary aspects and where an actual goal attenuates, hints a bit as to the answer to that question.

When I find myself concerned about the luck aspect of this, I recall the guidance of several of my teachers that awakening actually is an accident. As it happens, God does play dice with the universe, although accidents are rather more complicated than our use of the word often implies. Still, for us, we can’t attribute any specific cause that precipitates the great eruptions of our hearts. The spirit rests where it will.

However, and this is so important, our practices make us accident-prone. There’s the deep pattern appearing. These practices we bind ourselves to attract the spirit. So from one angle it’s an accident, while from another it’s the ascent of the holy mountain. There’s a Tibetan version of Snakes and Ladders, “Ascending the Spiritual Levels.” I like that name. And I like that there’s a Buddhist version of the game.

Practice on the Zen way includes the great disciplines of meditation. But as noted in the prior chapter, it also has a container for an ethical life via the sixteen bodhisattva precepts. Ascending the Spiritual Levels reminds us of the intimate connection between our spiritual aspirations and what we do. And how only part of it is in our hands. This is where engaging the actions of our lived lives and knowing something about our inner urges, especially the ones we don’t want to look at, needs shoring up. This can be critical for those walking the intimate way.

Whether we know the deepest truths or not, we’re still living the life we were given within the play of causes and conditions. That’s why I consider the fox koan one of the most important of the collections for anyone walking a spiritual path. Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki told an anecdote about the abbot of Eiheiji, one of the two

central training monasteries of the Soto school. Kitano Zenji was a serious smoker. At some point he quit. But he would continue to find situations where he would want just one cigarette. Suzuki Roshi commented, “Even though he gives up smoking, he will have desire as long as he’s alive. He knows how to treat his desire, that’s all.”[1] More bluntly, the Zen teacher Taizan Maezumi is said to have said, “An enlightened person who loves alcohol, when they pass the liquor store, their head will still turn.” Considering his deep insight and his importance as a Zen teacher—and his alcoholism, which killed him—I find this observation particularly poignant.

When we discuss our spiritual path, we are talking about our lives. And there is no escape from our lived lives.

And, of course, there’s awakening, the thing that is never what you think. It’s the voice from the whirlwind. It’s the bottom falling out of a bucket. So while I’m fond of the Snakes and Ladders model, ultimately as a map it doesn’t really work. Perhaps it’s like a child’s copy of a pirate’s treasure map. The elements of luck and karma are there, but the whole picture of the spiritual journey is nowhere near fully addressed in that particular game.

An important thing here is to turn to a more mature map, like the ten oxherding pictures. But even with that map to hold it lightly. To know its value as a pointer but that the reality is found in our walking. And we will find at some point the path is not linear.

Our awakenings appear as gifts.

And, of course, there are all those wells. Their own kinds of gifts.

It’s a journey with a thousand steps.

And one surprise after another.

5
Into the Way (Oxherding 2)

A redwood was once a seedling,
The Empire State Building was once a construction site,
The journey of a thousand miles begins with the ground under your feet.

—Tao Te Ching, chapter 64[1]

There's an old joke that I've heard in different versions. Someone is caught up in the midst of a catastrophe, usually a flood. People come by and warn him to leave, and later even offer to get him to safety. He declines all the offers, saying, "God will help me." Six times he's offered help, and six times he declines. Finally, in the flood version, he drowns. In heaven he confronts the divine in all its majesty.

I have been known to say I would be happy to find there was an actual deity, as I have a long complaint list to discuss. In this story, there he, she, it—you know, that majesty—is. And the man gives God an earful. But it boils down to, I gave you my trust, and you left me alone to drown. And the deity responds, "I sent you help six times."

For me, this joke resonates with that burning question that launched me on the spiritual way. How I wanted either to know God or to know as truth that God does not exist. Desperately, with all my

heart. I even bargained that if God would reveal himself, herself, itself to me, in the next moment he, she, it could kill me. I meant it.

With that vow, something happened. In the oxherding pictures, we have arrived at image two.

Along the river, under trees—jumbled tracks!
Thick fragrant woods, is this the way?
Though the ox wanders far in the hills,
His nose touches the sky. He cannot hide.

What I got was silence.

It took me a long time to notice that silence was one of my opportunities, perhaps the greatest of them.

Part of the problem for me at the beginning was that I had no idea what I was actually seeking. It was some sort of inchoate longing, and the best I could articulate it was, Is God real? For me it proved just a slice this side of impossible to notice there were questions within that question.

It would have been very easy for me to take that silence as *there is no response and nothing to respond.* In one sense, after all, that is what happened. I looked and found nothing. And, as they say, not the good nothing. I believe many people come to such a moment and decide that's the end of the search.

If we look at the world as objectively as we can, the atheist stance is a very reasonable position. Well, perhaps agnosticism is the most reasonable. What is knowable is elusive, at best. The God that is presented as normative in Abrahamic traditions, a God that intervenes in history, that responds directly to prayers, that has a plan for you and me—well that's a hard God to believe in given the givens of life. And that silence, that nothing, seems to be a refutation of God.

But I also noticed some haunting quality to that nothing I kept encountering. Something I couldn't see directly but that seemed to

appear at the edges of things. Elusive. Now there, now not.

Later I stumbled upon these lines in a popular Zen text, the *Harmony of Difference and Sameness*, the *Sandokai:*

> In the light there is darkness, but don't take it as darkness.
> In the dark there is light, but don't see it as light.[2]

They describe where I found myself at that earlier point. In the silence I caught the hint of some distant song. And I began to question my question. What if I had framed it wrong? Instead of trying to prove or disprove some theological assertion, I began to allow the world to present and teach me.

As I continued, I found new mysteries and new directions. Increasingly, the image that guided me was not climbing up some mountain, but rather heading down into previously unexplored depths. I had a sense this intuitive direction was mine, deeply and truly. And, just as important, finding my own path was not an invitation to judge other paths.

Judging and closing doors, at least in matters of my spiritual life, seemed more and more a dead end.

Instead, some growing curiosity called me on.

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Once we've noticed there is a problem—noticed that sense of "wrongness"—and decided to take off on the great pilgrimage of the heart to the heart, then what? Well, then and, actually, before, and all along the way, we need to notice we aren't doing this alone. There are people who preceded us. There are companions right now. And they've all marked the trail.

At first, I thought I was alone. My question was mine alone. I left my childhood religion almost not noticing I also left a community. For me, passing through adolescence toward adulthood further

complicated the matter. I was trying to find myself as well as resolve some greater question. I was in need of a time of separation, differentiation—something common to the spiritual path.

But if we're not careful, differentiation becomes isolation. And there are a lot of demons to be found in isolation, in the echo chamber of one's unchecked mind. Isolation is bad for human beings in general, and it can be a real problem when one hopes to follow a spiritual path.

I was fortunate in finding a discipline that, while it turned on gathering for silent meditation, was also where I found friendships. I began to attend the Berkeley Zendo. I met people who were walking their own path. But as I heard of their troubles, hopes, and discoveries, I found I was learning things about myself. Later, when I joined Kennett Roshi and the people forming the Zen Mission Society, I began to sense my private practice was not so private as I had thought.

It's never, "I'll figure it out on my own," as appealing as that might sound. We need those friends. They can be critical to finding our way. So finding a community of practice that resonates with your heart is very, very important. Some communities are wonderful. And some you would be advised to avoid. Do your homework about the people and practices involved. Take your time. And always reserve your own final judgment. Keep your heart open. And keep your eyes open.

If you want to truly sense the breadth of your companionship on the path, the first thing is to read. Somewhere along the way in our Western Zen communities people got it in their heads that you aren't supposed to read. Okay, there are reasons. Words are traps. It's easy to make them into little shrines, offer some incense, and be on your way. But within the vast literature you will find innumerable companions offering rather useful pointers.

Reading a little of the canonical literature of Buddhism, and in particular Zen, can be enormously helpful. Canonical because it's

been curated; this is the wisdom on which generations of your predecessors have collectively agreed. In addition, there are mountains of first-rate commentarial literature. And many good introductory books. Get some reading lists.

But don't settle just for Buddhist texts. Read the mystical literature of other world religions. And more than that. Look at art. Really look. There's an icon of the Holy Trinity painted in 1425 by a Russian artist, Adrei Rublev, that in my view points directly to the great mystery. Look at it. Really look at it. There are three figures sitting around a table, each showing a relationship to the other, and yet none are contained by the picture itself. Listen to music. Seriously listen. There are those who say Beethoven's Ninth Symphony justifies the whole of human existence. They might be right. Explore the world's sacred music. Take walks. Lots of walks. Learn how to saunter as Henry Thoreau suggested. Volunteer in a Catholic Worker soup kitchen. Attend a Quaker silent meeting. Go to an Anglican High Mass.

Once I co-led a Zen retreat in rural Connecticut. The resident teacher, Mary Gates, was also an Episcopal priest. Sunday morning she had to excuse herself to celebrate Mass at the small chapel she served as vicar. I asked if I could tag along.

It was a small group of surprisingly mixed ages. The service worked its way through the acts of a Mass to the recalling of Jesus and his disciples gathered at that ancient meal. And finally, the consecrated bread and wine were offered to all who were present. Me, I've been to many Episcopal services over the years. Episcopalians are without a doubt my favorite Christians. But I never take communion. As lovely as that tradition is, I always felt just enough of a separation that partaking in that most intimate part of the service never felt appropriate. Not respectful. Not right.

This time was different. Maybe in some degree it was my relationship with the priest. But that hardly would be enough. Something else happened in that little stone chapel in rural

Connecticut. The whole universe was present. All the angels of Western faith and all the devas of the East were present and circling around that little altar that somehow became the navel of the cosmos. And without thinking about it, without worry about theology or proper decorum, without any concern but a longing to come ever closer to the moment of creation, I stepped into that small circle.

Among friends. People gathering together for a meal. A stylized ritual meal. But it was enough to reveal companions of the heart in people I didn't know. Showing a different kind of friendship based in a raw presence.

Self falls away. Other falls away. In the silence that is left heart sings to heart. Heart reaches to heart. No Buddhist. No Christian. And everything, absolutely every blessed thing is related.

And able to notice this in that moment I stepped forward and received communion. It was an intimate act of deep friendship. A small intimation, and the whole of the project.

So all these things.

And through it all, continue to sit. Just sit.

The great secret is not in becoming a student but in staying one. Beware of falling into expertness. Be ready to be surprised or shocked or pleased.

Awakening comes. But without context it is all too easy to miss the real import of what has happened—or, conversely, to put too much emphasis on what really is of less or even sometimes no value. So take up practices of presence and some serious study of the intimate way. Absorb the teachings of the great Zen teachers and cross-reference them with Sufis, masters of Vedanta, and Jewish and Christian mystics. Doing so can provide new wrinkles, other angles, and, sometimes, corrections. Even the old masters, such fine companions on the way, can on occasion use correction.

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So after noticing something is wrong, thinking just maybe there is a right to be found, making that promise to take up the way, and now adding in practices such as meditation, participating in a community, seeking true friends, and reading widely—then what?

What you may find, passingly or sometimes more deeply, is something striking in how things present themselves. A fork. A flower. An old love. A person's hands. Children playing. The smell of the morning air. The feel of a cat in your hands. They might take on a new sense, a richer presence. Perhaps a moment of deep peace. Maybe even a glimpse into something that feels deeper.

In his comments on the second of the oxherding pictures, the great modern Chan master Sheng Yen tells us that the practitioner's "mind has begun to calm and he has a sense of something, but he sees that the ox is not easy to find." Still, things are happening. The teacher continues, "Searching for Buddha-nature is like looking for a mountain through a thick layer of clouds. Others say it is there, but you are uncertain of what you see. Is it a cloud or a mountain?"[3]

It's important to let these things be. Notice, but don't chase after. They rise and they fall of their own accord. Opening our eyes and ears, and in fact all of our senses, we begin to notice there are traces everywhere. A blazing path snakes through the trees, pointing the way.

6

On Family, Home-Leaving, Resistance, and Love

Reaching out to the many things is delusion;
Allowing the many things to present themselves is awakening.

—Eihei Dogen[1]

I know someone who joined the San Francisco Zen Center as a young woman. This was in the very early 1970s, early on for a convert to Zen in the West, and her parents were terrified she'd joined a cult. Today most scholars of religions would tell you a cult is basically a religion you don't like. But in the 1970s there was an explosion of minority religious groups, and it turned out it wasn't hard to get a lot of people terrified about anything that's not mainstream—and it's true that a few of these groups were abusive.

In this case, the family hired a deprogrammer to have her kidnapped. A sad story. But kidnapping and deprogramming of people who joined minority religious groups was something of a cottage industry at the time.

There was a brief moment of confrontation in which her parents presented themselves and told her that they were responsible for her abduction. This was to provide the rope for the victim to grasp in the midst of some fairly brutal coming days. It was part of the method in their madness, bringing the person home. And in this case, this is

where things started going off script. She offered them a deal. She'd go through the deprogramming voluntarily. But at the end, if she decided to return to the Zen center, they would have to honor her decision.

Reluctantly they agreed. She did the program. It was torturous. And when it was over, she returned to the center. Today she is a venerated elder within the Zen community.

When we notice within our bones that something is wrong, a sense of dislocation can ensue and can unfold in any number of ways—not least as dislocation from the intimacy of family and close friends. There are reasons that that young Zen practitioner's family was terrified. It wasn't just the cult scare of the time; they were being presented with a fundamental challenge to the world they lived in. This, it turns out, is an old story. In the Christian allegory Pilgrim's *Progress*, the protagonist, whose name is Christian, has a vision of a terrible apocalypse and wishes to embark on a journey to his salvation. He tells his family, his spouse, and his children. They don't believe him, so he embarks by himself.

When we find ourselves aware of the ox and our yearning it can become all-consuming. I've seen an argument that such abandonment is not very Christian. The challenge, in that view, would've been to find a way to bring his family along. I think this is a real point. In fact, there's a sequel that includes his family. There is a parallel in the Buddhist world, too—the current feminist critique of the Gautama Siddhartha's abandonment of his wife and child along with his responsibilities as a prince. In pursuit of the true, one can leave a lot of hurt in one's wake.

How do we throw ourselves wholeheartedly into the way when there are people who depend on us?

Another story comes to mind. I was talking with a clerk in a large department store. It turned out he had been a Catholic monk for more than twenty years. He left because his mother was sick and had few resources, and if he didn't take care of her, she probably

would have been on the streets. What I found particularly compelling in our brief conversation was that, while the pain of leaving the monastery was clearly on his heart, it was also clear he'd made the right decision. And, most important, he seemed to feel he was still fully engaged in the great matter.

The Zen teacher Grace Schireson talks about once being confronted for being married and a Zen priest. When asked how she squared that circle she replied, "I keep all my vows." If a koan is an assertion about, and invitation into, the intimate way, *I keep all my vows* is definitely a koan.

We shouldn't be hasty though to dismiss monasticism. In traditional Buddhism, entering the way means "leaving home." In fact, the original Buddhist community was a company of monks. Later a company of monks and nuns. If you couldn't or wouldn't take monastic vows, the best you really could do was support those who did and hope for a more propitious birth next time around.

But the mere fact of becoming a monk or nun doesn't guarantee anything. I've known more than one sour monk. People who after years of crushing their lives, at least as I see it, find solace in belittling "worldlings," those who didn't throw it all away. It's like the famous story of the two Zen monks on pilgrimage who meet a young woman at a ford in a river. One carries her across and then sets her down safe on the farther shore. They continue on their way. Finally, hours later, the second monk says, "You violated the rule against touching a woman." The first monk responds, "I put her down on the shore. You seem still to be carrying her."

Sadly, I've met a few more of the complaining monks than the ones who won the greater victory. This prompts a crucial question: What is grasping? In the fundamental matter of the heart, what is clinging really? And how do we meet it?

It is easy to fall into disdain for people following a different way. And every choice comes with a bundle of consequences, some negative. The householder path is filled with distractions, many

critically important. The monastic path, though sometimes quieter, is filled with problems as well.

In my view, the critique of the pilgrim's abandonment of his family is right. He chose to leave his family who needed him, and there would be consequences. There are always consequences to our decisions and actions. And good intentions are not enough. The critique of Gautama Siddhartha abandoning his family and obligations—that's right too. There would be cascades of consequences. In this world we learn no matter what we do, there will be negative consequences, whatever the good that might also come out of it.

And at the same time, Christian's headlong pursuit of salvation is right. The hints we find in the ox's footprints are invitations that we would be foolish to ignore. The person who gives it all up and becomes a monastic is right. Whatever the cost, there is some profound need within our human hearts that must be honored. Or, well, there will be consequences. Siddhartha's abandonment of his family and embarking on the way is right. It led to the possibility of healing for a whole world.

It is worth noting these are both stories. And rough edges quite often get polished in stories. As I noted, eventually Christian's family are all saved, too. And the Buddha's family all join into his great project. In Job after the worst that can happen, Job then gets a new family.

The key thing is to seek the deeper point these stories are trying to draw out. Does your urge to leave your family, whatever that means in your case, cover over a resistance you've never dared to look at? Or do you allow certain culturally normative obligations to hold you in place more tightly, or for longer, than they need to, displacing your heart's yearning to follow a spiritual path? These are the real questions.

When I started practicing with a Zen center, I didn't tell my family. I wasn't living at home, and I didn't have to deal with the emotional

consequences. However, when I decided to move into the temple in San Francisco it became inescapable. My father thought all religion was hokum and only worried I was being taken in. But it was much harder on my mother and grandmother and my auntie, who had a parental place in my heart. Each of them addressed the issue in their own way. Auntie simply pretended nothing was going on. My mother worried but said nothing. My grandmother sighed and said she'd pray for me. And did.

I was haunted by their wounding and worry. What they didn't do was cut me off. What I didn't do was abandon them in my heart even as I stepped forward into the spiritual discipline that I felt might actually help.

For every deeper truth of our lives, we will find a lot of counterfeits. In Buddhism the fundamental analysis is that most of our human suffering comes from grasping after that which is passing. In the grossest of senses, one can call that the world. In each moment the world and every part of it is dying. One's family is not a bad placeholder for the world and one's connections to it.

But if the solution were simply to not care, well, that would be a pretty sad thing. And that's not what this path is about. The real question is, how do we surrender our unhealthy grasping? The holding that is a fiction. The grasp that denies the realities of the world and of our hearts. And how do we do it in the situation in which we find ourselves? Not some imaginary place, but this place.

For some, this might very well lead to some cloister. It might lead to trips to India, to entering monasteries—Myoshinji in Kyoto, or Tassajara inland from Big Sur, or St. Catherine's in the Sinai, or the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani outside of Louisville. The list is long, and any of these might be a right choice for you.

Eihei Dogen wrote that we achieve awakening the moment we leave home and embrace the precepts. And reading him, it is easy to assume he isn't being metaphorical. There's a lot in the traditional literature about how the robe and the bowl you receive in the

ceremony needs to be yours, not borrowed. You will be using them. Lots of pretty literal stuff around that home-leaving.

He's absolutely correct. And yet, there's something much deeper than shaving a head or entering a monastery. In our time and in our place, we do not have to travel the world to find the gold that has always been buried within our hearts.

The traps are right here. And we will always take them with us, wherever we go. And the keys to our freedom can be found right here, too.

There's a wonderful cartoon where the guru says to the disciple, "You've now completed your training. You have only one more test." The next panel shows the disciple at home at a Thanksgiving dinner.
What is love, really?
And what is it that you really need to let go of?
A question to revisit every step of the intimate way.

7

False Friends and True

If you eat of me, you will hunger for more
If you drink of me, you will thirst for more

—Sirach 24:21

There was a time when if you pulled into a rest stop to use the toilet, when you were washing your hands you might find a little comic booklet resting on the sink. I mostly enjoyed looking at them, a quick read and then a deposit in the trash.

In one I particularly recall, the protagonist is led by all sorts of people—I forget the list, but it included friends and professors—right to an untimely death. Then, as he is confronted with the devil, all these friends parade in front of him, pulling off their masks to reveal that they are demons.

It is true that sometimes we might think we've found the spoor of the ox, but it turns out to simply be shit.

Now the reality is that few among our friends fit the demonic bill. At least not in the conscious sense. Everyone is, after all, a hero in their story. Certainly no one thinks of themselves as leading people astray. Mostly they are, we are, simply following the currents of our lives, largely without much thought beyond the simple necessities and pleasures of the moment.

If religion enters the conversation, it is often a rote recitation of what we were taught as children, now either believed or discarded.

But without any engagement, no history of wrestling with the tradition. Little looking at it with adult eyes. Or rarely so.

So by *false friends* I am not referencing those who want to use you or, as the song goes, be used by you. Rather what's important to note is that if we are engaged on a spiritual path, a lot of things matter, and quality of friendships matters a lot. If we've noticed that imbalance in things, the lingering hurt of life, and we have some hint that things can be different, and critically made a commitment to take on a spiritual journey, with whom you choose to spend your time will in time matter.

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Sometimes a condition for parole from prison is walking away from your old associates. If you're trying to get straight or clean, sometimes you have to let go of old friends. Friends who you may love, but who are, well, bad news.

But the matter is messy. The question probably really is, What is a friend? Or, perhaps, it's, Who is a friend?

It's now been a bunch of years, but I remember it clearly. I received an email from a member of the congregation I was then serving in Massachusetts. It was an invitation to become her Facebook friend. While I'd never before that moment given any thought to joining a web-based social network, I found this invitation was just so sweet. It made me smile. I mean how long has it been since you've been asked by someone to be their friend?

So I followed the link that had been provided and filled out the required form to join Facebook. However, then I came to the part that asked if I would like to invite my email address book to be Facebook friends as well; before I actually had finished reading the question and absorbing its meaning, I had already pushed the "yes" button. Pretty close to instantly I had a few more than four hundred "friends." Today, a fistful of years later, I have passed five thousand Facebook

friends. In part it's because I'm an author, and these days a Facebook presence is pretty much required of anyone trying to hawk a book. Still, a lot of that number of Facebook friends is just because, well, life happens.

All this prompts a question. Is a Facebook friend really a friend?

A dear friend once gave me a good working definition. He said a "friend" is someone who will help you move. Being of a somewhat jaundiced nature he immediately added how a "real friend" will help you move a body. I suggest as sweet as the Facebook term *friend* is, no one should assume a Facebook friend will ever help you move furniture or a body. It's all pretty lightweight stuff. Or is to all but the most naïve.

On Facebook, for the most part, we're actually addressing a different category of relationship. Think *acquaintance.* A sturdy and useful term that sadly has fallen out of common use. We're afraid of insulting someone by calling them an acquaintance, so we pretend friendship. But really within most of our relationships we're not talking about moving furniture or bodies. And Facebook is a perfect example of that much looser connection.

Friendship is in fact more complicated than helping us move whatever. No doubt *friendship* as we use it is a mutable term with casual and more profound meanings.

And in that mix are people who have been in your life, or you in theirs, but whose goals in life are ultimately different. And sometimes it is necessary to say goodbye. This is especially true if you've embarked on a spiritual life. A drink with friends once in a while is a reasonable choice. Friends you only drink with, well. If you really are on the path, you need to engage the question of what purpose such friendships are serving—for you or for them.

It can be good to see what a real friend might be. And with that let's turn to what Buddhism has to say on the subject. In fact, there's a story from the *Upaddha Sutta*, one of the Buddhist scriptures, that goes right to it. Here's my paraphrase of the text.

> One day while walking quietly together, out of the silence the Buddha's attendant Ananda declared, "Teacher, to have companions and comrades on the great way is so amazing! I have come to realize that friendship is fully half of an authentic spiritual life." They proceeded along quietly for a while more, before out of that silence the Holy One responded. "No, dear one. Without companions and comrades, no one can live into the deep, finding the true harmonies of life, to achieve authentic wisdom. To say it simply, friendship is the whole of the spiritual life."

The whole of the spiritual life? You want to know something—the Buddha was right. It is all bound up together. And at the same time dividing out the four kinds of loves used in the Western tradition—agape, divine love; eros, physical love; storge, familial love; and philia, friendship—helps us get some perspective on the dynamic of it all. So agape, divine love, or as I see it our individual experience of the whole, can't be understood without experiencing in some degree each of the other three. Indeed, all the loves inform one another. Some examples: Erotic love without a sense of affection inevitably becomes abusive. Familial love that doesn't extend beyond the boundaries of the house is narrow and tribal. And sadly, so sadly, we know what evils follow narrow, tribal loves.

Any friendship that isn't informed by all these aspects, all the dynamic variations of affection, misses its real value. Divine love informs erotic love which informs affection which informs friendship which informs all the others. We live in a multicausal universe, and nowhere is this truth more obviously so than in how we engage and must engage our friendships.

Friendship has many faces. And there are no real lists of how one can go about finding good friends and being one. Boundaries are part of it. That's important. And so I repeat: boundaries are part of it. As is abandon. Getting the mix right is hard. And me, I've

experienced getting it wrong a lot. But to have a worthwhile life we need friends. If we aspire to the mysteries of love that become that great dance, we must give ourselves to friendship, even if it means stepping on a toe now and again or having our own foot trod on.

Friendship, intimate friendship, is about that opening of the heart. It is about seeing our relationships fully as the path.

8

Coaches, Teachers, and Guides

> She thought of how precious it was to be able to know another person over many years. There was an incomparable richness in it.
>
> —Alice Walker[1]

There's a popular self-help guru who said he's lived with a number of Zen masters over the course of his life. And they were all cats.

The quote has become a popular meme on social media. I smiled when I first read it.

It has some truth to it. If we're truly on the way, we will find that even rocks and flies become our teachers. There's a great story in the Zen literature of a student of the way contemplating a tree for numerous kalpas, meaning eons, ages beyond ages. Trees are teachers. Absolutely. And no doubt cats can present the whole universe if we are ready to notice.

Yet the meme has some problems. The narcissism of cats, the feline "I only do what I want to do," is a pale counterfeit of what a real Zen teacher presents. I say this as a cat person, and I have the scratches to prove it. I should also add that I have seen more than a little narcissism among Zen teachers. And I have the scratches to prove that, as well.

It’s all a bit complicated, so let’s take a good look at this important and often vexing question of spiritual teachers or guides.

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All spiritual traditions offer guidance on the way, and that guidance takes a lot of shapes. My experience and observations suggest some of these ways of receiving guidance are more useful than others. The actual mix, and what’s best in that mix, is no doubt going to be different for each of us. That said, some of these ingredients are helpful for nearly all of us—and one of those is to earnestly take the role of student in relation to teachers of various kinds.

Just as books can show us the breadth of our companionship on the way, they can also serve, to an extent, as teachers.

Similarly, community can be a teacher. I spent just under three years living under rule in a monastic community that started in San Francisco, moved to Oakland, and finally settled at Mount Shasta. I have those scratches to prove it, as well.

There is something teacherly about the intimacy of engaging the project with others. Like, as some teachers say, being a potato thrown into a burlap bag with a bunch of other potatoes. Monastic life is like the bag being shaken vigorously. We carry everything about us into a constrained situation. They say that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. With a monastery, it turns out you don’t even have to be ready; the place is ready for you.

I didn’t have a clue what I was getting into. But I found teachers. A lot of them. Some were even human. All offered moments of intense instruction. I would recommend a stay in a monastery to anyone whose life circumstances allow for it. But monasteries are not typically places that you will find shaped specifically to your strengths and weaknesses; monasteries turn out to be one size fits all. And they are not a good fit for everyone.

Cats. Trees. Books. Monasteries. Oxen or even just their spoor. All of these can be teachers.

But what about the messier ones: humans?

Here's where we come to the harsher reality about religions. The religion that is separated out from organic spiritual life is inevitably oversold. And spiritual leaders and spiritual leadership are where, to continue the market metaphor, we can get an out-and-out bubble and things can most acutely go wrong.

But this is an axiom of the intimate way: starting out, and well into the path, without guides you will probably not find the treasure. The traps and snares of the ego are powerful. There are too many blank spots and worn edges on the maps. We need help.

There are no hard rules for looking for a guide on the intimate way. Awakening happens to whom it does. So a teacher needn't be "credentialed"—you absolutely can find a genuinely wise butcher, master sergeant, or geology professor. Awakening happens, but when it happens outside of the context of a tradition, usually that person has a lot of trouble helping others. Because their awakening just happened, they likely don't have much of a system to impart to others, and they might guide you straight into mistakes or dead ends.

For all the problems with teachers within traditions—attachments to hierarchy, getting too used to their own power, narcissism, and what have you—I still think they have the best chance of being competent guides. So most of the best teachers are found within traditions, but the best of those are not trapped by the limitations of their tradition.

There are some pretty good rules of thumb for finding the right guide for you.

First, be wary of authorities—but if you want to be wise about it, start with yourself. In the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell famously wrote to the general assembly, the religious leaders of the Church of Scotland, who were endorsing the son of the executed king, "I

beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." Interestingly, in statistics this line has been enshrined as "Cromwell's Rule." If you cannot entertain the possibility that your spiritual self-guidance is wrong, however passing that possibility is, you will be unable to see it even as the evidence piles up more and more.

So it's good to assume your ideas about spirituality are part of the problem. And that you might not be the best judge of who is going to be a fitting teacher for you. In the practices of the desert fathers and mothers in fourth- and fifth-century Egypt, they advised picking someone you don't like as your spiritual director.

I recall how, working with my primary teacher for years, I wanted him to be my friend. He had a casual way and used the language of intimacy, but we never really were friends in the sense I thought I wanted—like the voter who thinks they want a president they'd like to have a beer with. I needed a different kind of friendship. And while my teacher had numerous flaws, in this situation, and for me, he was the kind of friend I needed. Someone who wasn't particularly interested in me beyond whether I was following the koan way into the depths of the mystery. Someone who could say a word that might hurt, and sometimes did, but almost always helped. Today I cannot possibly express my gratitude.

And this is an important point. The helpers themselves are wounded. Every blessed one of them.

There are no perfect masters.

The heart of that sentence is captured in a famous koan, collected as case 11 in the *Blue Cliff Record.*

> The master Huangbo declared to his community, "You all are just drinking from the brewer's dregs. If you're constantly wandering around seeking one teacher or another, how will you ever find this day? Don't you know there are no Zen masters in all of China?"

A sincere student replied, “All over the country there are communities and masters of the way. What about them?”

Huangbo smiled at him. “I didn’t say there was no Zen. Only that there is no teacher.”

I’ve heard people commenting on this saying there are no enlightened masters, only enlightened activity. That doesn’t quite cut to the matter. The mess needs us, you and me, lovely, ugly, people. But that noted, the observation about enlightened activity isn’t all that far from the truth.

But we need the people, both students and teachers. It is after all, about our lived lives. And this is part of why I think it very important to work with teachers who’ve bound themselves to some kind of ethical code.

Personally, the Buddhist precepts seem very helpful here. They are both an expression of what awakening is, and when we’re off balance, when we’re clouded and confused about things, they become a mast to which we can tie ourselves. Yet even a public commitment to Buddhist or other ethical precepts is no ultimate guarantee of a teacher’s good conduct. If the heart wants something badly enough, we can justify anything. It’s a good reason to find someone working within a tradition that at least attempts to hold what might best be called “professional standards.”

I can think of one teacher who violated the trust of the community and had a relationship with a student. In his case he bowed into the consequences, which were to seek counseling and to join in the community but as a beginner with no authority. A couple of years later he was reinstated and is widely respected. Sadly, I know of other stories that didn’t turn out so well. The teacher walks. The community turns away. There are lots of ways for it not to work. But

binding oneself to rule, wherever one is on the way, seems the least wrong thing to do.

Sometimes the best teachers are people who royally messed up somewhere along the line. Just like that old concept of the “wounded healer,” the “wounded teacher” often has a lot to offer. I sometimes mutter that I want a doctor who is fat and drinks too much. It’s sort of a joke. I want my doctor to have the medical degree and the training, but I want her humanity to show, as well. I think of those fat Chinese Buddha figures.

The way is about intimacy, not some kind of artificial consistency. If a teacher seems always wise, kind, perceptive, all giving, they’re either not fully integrated or are not showing their full person. My teachers were all of them flawed. And their flaws proved to be equally important to their skill sets as spiritual practitioners. I saw they found a way toward depth, and so I could too.

I find the most successful teachers are rooted not just in a tradition but in one of introspection. In my view, for the most part Buddhists have been the most successful in plumbing the depths of introspection and so tend to offer the most competent guides. Among these, the ones I’ve lived with most, and which I’ve found helped best, are Zen teachers.

Within Zen there are monastic teachers, there are noncelibate priestly teachers, and there are householder teachers. My first formal teacher was a monastic. The teacher with whom I worked the longest was a householder. Each brought gifts. Each had limitations. Sometimes it felt almost as if their limitations were tailor-made to match mine.

The Zen tradition is based in a wonderful insight, a profound leaping beyond our divided and dividing minds to seeing how all things lack any abiding substance, and then beyond that to a place of peace and depth. It isn’t a steady state, as it is often oversold as being. But it is real. It can infuse our lives, bringing something wonderful. But this insight, this awakening, in itself doesn’t make us

better people. Just people who see a bit truer. Some are wonderful. Many are not.

Teachers should be people who've found and not been bound by either the boundless truth or the various particular manifestations of truth. They should carry a certain ease within, as Kurt Vonnegut put it, the nothing with a twist that is everything. This is certainly true of what makes good Zen teachers.

To be better people—that's a project related to, but not precisely the same as, the spiritual quest. We need to be aware of that. And hopefully we find these twin needs intertwined. They support each other.

So it is wise to find teachers who have seen true, who've learned some of the practices that are associated with seeing true, but who also show some humility in their lives. Everyone will screw up. It's sort a cardinal mark of being human. But the teacher we want is someone who has looked at themselves and who still answers to someone—has their own teacher, that is. That person probably will make fewer mistakes and be more likely to try to correct them when they do.

When I offer these warnings and guidelines in looking for a teacher, I am not saying one cannot open their heart through a path of absolute submission. There is a sense in which to find the intimate way we need to let go of everything. And perhaps that is the true heart of a formal teacher-student relationship. The expectation of complete surrender and obedience on the part of the student is certainly prominent across many Asian Buddhist lineages. Yet my observation is, at the very least, that it hasn't translated very successfully into our culture. Honestly, I have strong suspicions of what happens in those parts of the world where guru practice is normative.

All moments are perfect just as they are. But that's a bit of a hundred-mile-high view. In our lived lives, moments are not perfect. They're messy. There are loose threads, sometimes gaping holes.

And there are consequences to every action. This world is a messy affair, and as we lean into it, we discover many parts of ourselves. So for the long haul I've found it best working with a human teacher who has not been set up to confuse what they want and what they ask for from a student, as we get with someone who is presented as a perfect master. To find and work with an imperfectly human teacher is an incredible piece of good fortune—but even that is no guarantee.

—

You may not be the best judge of who will be a good teacher for you, but some natural feeling of connection to the person is certainly necessary. And the first place to find that is within the community of practice. That's why it's good to look for a teacher who is part of a community. I recommend a broad search. Asking around is good. Then try on the community. Participate and observe. The teacher and the community will reflect each other. Can people joke? Does the community pay attention to relationships and power dynamics? Do they seem like they really want it all to work for everyone? Another thing to look for is that no one is on a pedestal so high they can only fall from it.

Look for the humanity of the group. Take your time. Feel your way in.

The vow you've made to enter the way is sufficient for now. Try on the practices the teacher works with. Live with the community of practice. See what seems right.

And then, when it seems right, when it feels right, when it makes sense—then make a serious commitment. Allow this person access to your heart.

And with this friend, continue on your way.

9

Surprised by Joy (Oxherding 3)

Each branch of coral holds up the moon.

—*Blue Cliff Record*, case 100

Let's consider the moment our hearts turn. That grace when we are gifted with noticing the world with new eyes, and we discover the world is not how we thought it was. When our certainties loosen their death grip, and we catch a glimpse of a larger life. In Zen, the word for this is *kensho*, seeing into who we really are. Another term of art for this moment in Zen is *satori*, "to know" or "to understand."

Kenshos are mysterious invitations into joy. A strange joy. A terrible joy.

The words are slippery. What is "who we really are"? What is "known or understood"? And "joy"—what does that mean? Now, one can try to present the matter logically, spelling out types of processes and encounters. And there is merit there, no doubt. But this is a matter of the heart. It's about how we live in this world. We need to make sure our bodies come along with our minds. In my life, I've found stories generally more helpful when approaching these deeper matters of sorrow and joy in how we meet this world. So here are some stories.

In my late twenties, I began to cobble together a hodgepodge of a self-directed education. I'd left the monastery and moved to San

Diego. I was a high school dropout working at Wahrenbrock's Book House, a fabled and large used bookstore in the city's downtown, now long gone. I turned it into my private university. Mostly I followed my nose. But I did on occasion take advice, including when I was encouraged to read Marcel Proust's magnum opus, *Remembrance of Things Past.*

Valentin Louis Georges Eugène Marcel Proust was born in Paris on the tenth of July, 1871. He was the eldest of two sons in a well-to-do family, their father Catholic, their mother Jewish. In deference to various things, they were raised Catholic. As he aged, Proust rejected formal religion and seemed to approach ever more deeply a naturalistic mysticism.

Being well-to-do proved critical for how Proust was able to conduct his life. Except for a brief period of military service, he remained at his parents' home until their deaths. Mostly an invalid throughout his life, he rarely left his bedroom. He died in 1922, only fifty-one. Thanks to his brother, a prominent surgeon who saw the genius and made sure the book was published, Proust is renowned for his magisterial novel. *À la recherche du temps perdu* has been translated variously as *Remembrance of Things Past* and *In Search of Lost Time.* Its seven volumes ran approximately 3,200 pages (actually 4,300 in the Modern Library English version—I looked).

Remembrance of Things Past was called the greatest novel of the twentieth century by Graham Greene and rather more grandly the greatest novel to date by Somerset Maugham. Although I also know Anatole France is said to have said, "Life is too short, and Proust is too long." In that spirit of both/and, I suspect they're all correct.

Confronting Proust's book, at first all I knew was that it was really big, and I took it as something of a challenge. I chose the Modern Library seven-volume edition. It was cheap. And I could carry the individual volumes without any trouble. This was important, as I read the first four volumes pretty much entirely while waiting for and riding

a bus between home and work. Those four volumes took me about a year. I read other things during the day and evening. Then, as I began the fifth volume, I got so caught up in the book I consumed the last three volumes in a single month. Sort of gobbled them down in large gulps.

That book lingers in my mind's eye. Taking the whole thing together, it encompasses multiple worlds. I fully understand how it became one of the great monuments of modern literature. While I've never attempted a re-read, it continues to have a place in how I meet the world, in my sense of who I am.

One passage especially caught me. I know I'm not alone in this. But it really touched me, personally, as a major pointer helping me to unpack my own life experiences, especially the deeper moments I'd found in the monastery. That passage, echoing the style of the book itself, is a bit long. It meanders sort of like one of those great rivers, a Mississippi of the heart. The sometimes gentle roll, the occasional flooding, all of it becoming, at least for me, irresistible.

Of course, if you've read the book, it's not about a river. It's about his meeting with a madeleine. At the time I had to look it up. It's a kind of cake, although it looks more like a kind of cookie in our American usage.

The passage, in an updated translation:

> And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—

> this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me.[1]

I think of that moment. Of that taste. Of that meeting. That simple joy that seems to open into mystery.

—

At the time, as I read that passage about the madeleine, it was different than my own moments, but it also resonated. I thought, *Oh my, is that a kensho experience?* Zen's word for the turning of the heart toward wisdom, for seeing beyond the dreams and stories we tell ourselves, pointing directly into the "real" of the worlds. This is the heart of the spiritual quest, to know for one's self the realities of this universe as some great unfolding.

Awakenings of our heart are essential for us to have direction. They birth for us a North Star. Perhaps even the star that appeared above Bethlehem. But for us, you and me.

I'm especially taken with how this particular pointing comes from a world-class neurotic who barely could get himself out of bed, someone who preferred cork-lined walls and his pen to any kind of actual human encounter. And yet he was able to point true.

The spirit, it turns out, really does rest where it will.

I take Proust's passage as pointing to something of the human heart's desire to encounter, with our own lives, the call of all the world's religions. It takes us into, well, into something where words begin to get shaky, even completely collapse. Although in fact, once loosened a bit, words prove how they are magical things. Angels, if you will, in the sense of messengers. At least if we allow them their play—as in a novel, as in a koan. Then we can receive the message, we can find a taste of that small cake for ourselves. To find in our

own bodies, as our own bodies, something bound in time and beyond time all at once.

Since my adolescence I'd been asking, *Is God real?* It was only after I left the monastery and was working at that now gone bookstore in San Diego that I realized part of my ancient question was answered.

Somehow, subtly, there was a shift. At first I simply accepted the fact God wasn't real. There was no entity out there that answered prayers. The storm god, the god of my childhood, who arbitrarily was loving or angry and seemed always very dangerous, the god who looked a lot like my father, did not exist.

Like an unfolding flower, I realized I was no longer asking that question. I realized that God didn't have to be either the creator and sustainer, or even the destroyer. The word *God* held an infinity of human longing.

Some years later, when in seminary, I framed my understanding as "God is a hole in the language into which we throw all our hopes and fears." Hole, gaping wide. One of my professors helped me on the way to knowing a bit less when she offered that, "Yes, God is a whole in the language…."

I saw I had framed the question wrong. The God I worried about existing or not was the projection of a human or humanlike personality into the heavens. That entity gradually began to slip away for me. The question became, *What does the word* God *point to?* Or, simply, *What is God?* Then, I realized God was, for me, the great koan.

God was an assertion of some sort of hole or whole. And with that, a calling, a persistent urge to know what that hole or whole was, and is, for myself. Then a slightly different question took root in my heart. *What is the shape of God?* became my question, my koan.

That was my own taste of the madeleine. My own remembrance of something past, and something future.

The third verse of the oxherding pictures captures the moment.

Oriole on a branch chirps and chirps,
Sun warm, breeze through the willows.
There is the ox, cornered, alone.
That head, those horns! Who could paint them?

Of course it's important to note that while it was a taste for Proust and a new form to my central question for me, for you it could just as easily be something you see, or hear, or meet with any of the senses. Each part of who we are can be a door into wonder. If we allow ourselves to meet what we meet in the intimate way, the secret of our bodies, the secret of the universes is instantly revealed.

People make a lot of whether any given insight is slight or deep. I suggest that's actually none of our business. If we take on the intimate way, these tastes—these small intimations, as the American Zen teacher Joko Beck uniformly called kenshos—these moments, each in fact simply invites us into a journey. That journey began before we were born and continues well on past these moments, even gloriously crumbly moments like that madeleine. They're not culminations but doors or signposts. Such a moment is a gate, swung wide. Walk through.

10

The Masks of God

Children of the way don't know Truth;
They know the shape of their hearts up to now;
the source of endless births and deaths;
The fool calls it the original self

—*Gateless Gate*, case 12

I was eighteen years old when I landed my first job at a bookstore, Holmes Book Company in Oakland, California. The shop was on East 14th Street downtown. It was one of those great bookstores that flourished through much of the twentieth century. It was founded in 1894, originally in San Francisco. For a while they were a three-store chain, the one in San Francisco, one in Los Angeles, and the third in Oakland. For its entire history, the Oakland store sold both new and used books in its old three-story building. It lasted until 1995.

My years working there were a particularly important time for me. This is where I picked up the habit of reading widely, which I would continue later in San Diego at Wahrenbrock's, where I found Proust and so many others. But it was in Oakland that I began reading widely. Widely and occasionally deeply, picking up smatterings of various religious traditions.

It was while here I also visited the array of spiritual teachers and communities on offer in the San Francisco Bay Area. And it was

while there I began to sit at the Berkeley Zendo.

Before finding Zen I was treading water spiritually, flirting pretty heavily with nihilism. At least of the pedestrian sort. Not that strange for someone who was at best nineteen and had a couple of hard years behind him. It reached a point where it was unusual for anyone to say anything without me adding in something negative. I suspect I thought I was witty. Finding the nasty or just unpleasant edge of something turns out to be pretty easy, and I got in a deep habit of being critical.

There was an older woman who worked the floor at Holmes as a sales clerk. Informally, she was the senior of the crew. One day, she took me aside and said if I continued being so negative, she would have to report me to the owner. I was angry and embarrassed. And I was blessed with being in a moment when I could hear her.

The next day, when I found myself saying something negative, I stopped myself. When something happened and I began to tell myself a negative story, I stopped myself. As anyone who knows me will testify, my critical nature remained, but it ceased being so poisonous.

It felt like a complete turning. No doubt my memory has polished this turning a bit. But it was quick. Adjusting one's attitude may not make a person rich, it will not cure cancer. However, it can open doors. And for me, this small interaction with that blessed sales clerk was amazing, a great gift. For me, negativity shifted to curiosity, and over the years toward a generally positive disposition in the face of our common failings. I can never express my gratitude sufficiently.

Not exactly a Zen teaching. But it opened doors. I can say it prepared me to see something in Zen.

—

What is the nature of personalities, their changing or not changing, when it comes to the intimate way? We have personality traits, and

they don't go away. Like I said—I still have a critical mind. But as the Zen teacher Mary Gates says about such traits and our practices, "in seeing them over and over something shifts without our really doing anything other than the seeing."[1] That doesn't mean there is no action. Doors open. And when they do, we are wise to walk through them.

Mary, who is also a therapist, suggests taking the time to deal with our personalities. Notice "where and how this trait shows up in our life." Here, "it's not just about thinking about it, more working with it the way we work with each Zen precept when we are studying them." I believe dealing with our personalities is another way of dealing with the mysteries of life.

Trying to follow the precepts and noticing how we are in the world are not precisely the same thing. But if we engage them the same way—as matters of importance, as aspects of life with consequences for ourselves and the world—then we begin to see how our own lives and the spiritual life are not so different.

Here's an insight to be had from all of this: there are actually two things going on at the same time—waking up and growing up. They're not the same thing. But if they don't travel together, it's unlikely we'll win the great hope of healing for ourselves or the world.

That head, those horns!

On a spiritual path, you can be sure that most of the naturally arising negative aspects of your life will present, usually from pretty early on. And you have the choice to deal with them, or not. If not, well, your career following the spiritual path will be either extremely slight or somewhere along the line will just plain end.

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Throughout the ages, people who have walked the intimate way have offered signposts for us, including some that concern what we now think of as our personalities. They've named many of the difficulties, and often they've added in positive attributes that correspond to the negative things.

In the Christian tradition, there are various lists of types of known spiritual difficulties. These lists seem to arise first among the desert fathers and mothers from the fourth and fifth centuries in the Egyptian desert. They had read Jesus's call to sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow him, and they did so. Famously, one among them promptly sold the book that told him to do this, gave the money to the poor, and became a monastic.

It's likely these desert monastics took some cues from Aristotle. For Aristotle the vices and their corresponding virtues are not precisely fixed. They seem to float a bit in his writings. But most people identify seven pairs. Each pair presents the poles of a perspective. For him, the goal was to find the mean between the poles. The seven are, in one rendering, prudence and pride, fortitude and anger, faith and lust, hope and envy, charity and sloth, temperance and gluttony, justice and avarice.

Taking these and running with them, the desert sages began to consider these things that arise in our hearts and that become hindrances if we encourage them. Evagrius Ponticus may have been the first. He identified these inclinations as hostile or negative spirits to be overcome. One of his disciples, John Cassian, wrote a book, the *Institutes*, which would become the prototype for manuals of spiritual direction into the Middle Ages and beyond.

Eventually a Christian set of seven blocks to the spiritual life became standard for those following the spiritual path. They were seen as sins, and specifically sins that cut one off from the movement of grace. So they were powerful and dangerous.

The lists differ. But by the end of the sixth century Pope Gregory I compiled a commonly accepted list. It even features in Dante's

Divine Comedy—a text where, amidst the literary elements and the small pleasures of putting people he didn't like into various parts of hell, one can also find points for the spiritual pilgrim. That book is perhaps especially good for such pointers toward the lacunae of our hearts, the shadows of who we are. In any case, here are the seven with their Latin names:

luxuria, lust or lechery
gula, gluttony
avaritia, avarice or greed
acedia, discouragement or sloth
ira, wrath
envidia, envy
superbia, pride

It was a harsh lesson to witness my own version of *ira*, wrath. For me, it was petty, and I felt ashamed. Facing it allowed me to see just a little bit more broadly. And over time, it opened more doors even than that. Some not pleasant. I became more vulnerable, for instance, which in some ways presents more problems than being negative. But all, as they say, was grist for the mill, finding both who I am and what I can be.

Perhaps reading this list you can feel echoes of stirrings in your own heart? Certainly, investigating each of them and how they manifest in your life could be worthwhile. Maybe not as a *sin*—sometimes a problematic term in a secular age. So perhaps as a shadow. Something that lurks in your heart, and that it might be wise to avoid, if possible. Whatever, certainly dredging into awareness, noticing where it takes us.

Each of these traits, these common human foibles, inclinations, or shadows is worth investigating. As we go on in this book, we will explore two in greater depth, acedia and pride.

The big thing to recall here is that, as we look at these feelings as they arise, several things can happen. To start, there is the bare noticing. Then probably some emotional content. Perhaps this is followed by an effort to amend one's ways. If not at first, at some point. And then, the moment we think we've conquered them, we fall into a well.

It turns out there are a lot of wells to fall into.

11
The Three Poisons

I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer house than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—

Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of Eye—
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—

Of Visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—

—Emily Dickinson

In Buddhism there's a teaching called *trivisa*—the "three poisons" in the Mahayana and "unwholesome roots" within the Theravada—though my favorite characterization of this teaching is as the "three demons." They are most commonly translated as greed, hatred (or often anger), and delusion. A mnemonic to help people remember them is GAS: greed, anger, and stupidity. In traditional Buddhist thought, trivisa is seen as the foundation of the various bits of

unpleasantness that constitute our emergence as human beings. Nasty things that we so often are.

Although some people might find this psychological model simplistic, it isn't in fact all that simple. I've found it helpful in my own quest to understand myself. And okay, the rest of you as well.

These three demons are among the *kleshas*, the mental states that lead us astray. There are a lot of them. I think the Abhidharma, the oldest Buddhist psychological model, and perhaps the oldest psychological model of them all, lists fourteen kleshas. But within Buddhist psychology, these three are generally understood at the root problems.

Greed, anger, delusion: not the best of terms, I think. Many of us struggle with the use of the term "anger" when it tags a baseline mental state as problematic. After all, anger is an appropriate response to any number of situations. It's like touching a hot stove and feeling pain. I have an argument with "stupidity" as a stand-in for delusion, as well.

Part of the problem is that we're not so much talking about a specific state, as we are pointing to a constellation of related states. I believe these constellations do exist, and we encounter them quickly when we're on the spiritual path. So let's unpack them.

First, greed. The Sanskrit term that is rendered as greed is *raga*, which appears to mean "attachment to a sensory object." In practice, it is the constellation of grasping. This can be grasping after anything from food to sex to, well, what do you want?

The second constellation in this list falls under the umbrella of *dvesha.* Though it includes anger and hatred, it actually translates as "aversion." You can see how it is also in some ways the opposite of grasping. It is a pushing away.

But here we begin to see the problem that calls for parsing. As I just noted, anger can be the appropriate response to many situations. It's the clinging and sometimes free-floating feeling that's

being addressed here, and why “hatred” is probably a more helpful translation.

The third is *moha*, which seems to be translatable as “delusion,” “confusion,” or, in a slightly different register, “dullness.” It is also sometimes collapsed with another term *avidya*, which is translated as “ignorance.”

I can see how “stupidity” could be the word used for this constellation. But it is problematic. Stupidity is not like ignorance, which can be remedied. So “stupid” doesn’t work for me as a concept to help practice with moha. In addition there’s the problem of “right thinking.” I’ve met more than one person who has the terminology down, understands all the definitions, but it stops there. I’ve been there myself. It isn’t integrated. And it can be the way of Inquisitions.

What I’ve come to understand moha as is certainty. It is in fact the constellation of our certainties. Anything we are sure of absolutely, without a hint of a doubt, and where that certainty cannot be challenged—well, that is moha.

In Buddhist iconography, these three demons are pictured as a cock standing for grasping, a snake as aversion, and a pig as delusion, that world of certainties.

Each of the three demons has its flip side. They can become other things, more healthful, more useful to self and other. In the traditional telling, greed becomes generosity, aversion, loving-kindness, and ignorance, wisdom. In my life, and I’ve seen it in others, greed does indeed become generosity. I’ve noticed, however, that aversion less often becomes loving-kindness but rather clarity, an ability to see through. And, if the constellation of delusion is really the constellation of our burning certainties, the flip is not wisdom but curiosity.

As I’ve experienced Zen, the great project is not quenching or extinguishing our experiences, as we often find in both the literal translations of Pali texts as the$$ re plainly represented by many

modern Theravada Buddhists and many Mahayana Buddhists, as well. Zen's great project is, rather, "seeing through" our experiences and all things. That is, being present without attachment, or holding passionately but being able to let go when it is time to let go.

What precisely this seeing through is is a bit mysterious. For me, the terms *quenching* and *extinguishing* are relevant but imprecise. Seeing through is absolutely not a turning away from. Perhaps the best way I can put it is that seeing through, for me, carries the feeling, *This is the world in which we live. And there is no other.* We are composed of inclinations that include grasping and aversion and attachment to certainties. They do not go away until the time when the various factors that coalesced to become you and I disperse.

I find the Greek emphasis on finding the golden mean between extremes helpful, if not held too tightly. We're not looking to land at some conceptual place, either a problematic version or some idealized opposite. On the intimate way, we're looking to manifest a vital presence that is dynamic, as all things are, and that stops in no particular place.

There is within this sense of "seeing through" a letting go of the results while living fully with the moment. It's a magic trick humans get to do. In Zen, we call it awakening, seeing the horns of the ox in all their glory. Sadly, in my experience, we also fall back asleep. We forget that we saw those horns, like it was something that happened in a dream. Kind of all the time.

But with continuous practice we find a kind of oscillation where each *now asleep* is sooner or later followed by a *now awake* that becomes a new birth. And with that we can live with our grasping and become generous, live with our aversion and see clearly, and live with our certainties and find ourselves endlessly curious.

12

The Five Hindrances

> There were two elders living together in a cell, and they had never had so much as one quarrel with one another. One therefore said to the other: Come on, let us have at least one quarrel, like other men. The other said: I don't know how to start a quarrel. The first said: I will take this brick and place it here between us. Then I will say: It is mine. After that you will say: It is mine. This is what leads to a dispute and a fight So then they placed the brick between them, one said: It is mine, and the other replied to the first: I do believe that it is mine. The first one said again: It is not yours, it is mine. So the other answered: Well then, if it is yours, take it! Thus they did not manage after all to get into a quarrel.
>
> —translated by Thomas Merton[1]

Having looked at the three demons in the last chapter, let's now turn to the Buddhist concept of the five hindrances—no end to the lists in Buddhism, you know. In both Theravada and Mahayana versions, the five hindrances show overlap with the Western seven sins. In their original formulations they're hindrances to meditation. And they are that, but I've also come to see how they feed into the whole of our spiritual lives on and off the cushion. Here are the Pali words with translations:

1. *kamacchanda*, craving sensory pleasures
2. *vypada*, feelings of hostility, resentment, bitterness
3. *thina-middha*, half-hearted engagement
4. *uddhacca-kukkucca*, restlessness
5. *vicikiccha*, doubt

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the *Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness*, the Buddha teaches to notice when each hindrance is present, to notice when it is not present, out of that to notice its source, to notice how this extinguishes the hindrance, and to notice how it continues to cease to arise. The core teaching is to notice without following.

In early Buddhism, there's a general sense of the world itself as a trap. Those who hold this view naturally feel distaste for worldly desires, which leads to a lot of emphasis on separating our consciousness from the rising desires of our bodies.

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, for instance, a monastic is encouraged to think, "There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidney, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, nasal mucus, synovial fluid, urine."[2]

In addition to such meditations on what early Buddhists saw as the repulsiveness of the body, they discouraged practitioners from putting themselves in the way of the distractions of the world. Monastic rules extend beyond celibacy and sobriety, prohibiting the performing, teaching, or attending performances of singing, dancing, or instrumental music. In my experience, the reality is often different. I've sat with Vinaya monastics watching skits put on by participants during a conference of teachers of Buddhist meditation in the West. Where the rubber hits the road, when life happens, the rules turn out to be flexible. At least to some degree. And of course, in Japanese

ordination models, the majority of these prohibitions completely disappear.

There is another way than simply noticing and letting go. A bit more complicated, a lot messier. For me, such messiness is part of the way.

In the koan anthology the *Blue Cliff Record*, case 74 has this story:

> Before each meal, Master Jinniu himself would bring the rice bucket to the meditation hall, dance and laugh loudly, saying, "Little bodhisattvas, come and eat your rice!"
>
> (Xuedou: He was not being cordial when he did that.)
>
> Later, a monk asked Changqing, "Long ago, a monk said, 'Little bodhisattvas, come and eat your rice!' What did he mean?"
>
> Changqing said, "It was a sort of grace before the meal."

Later in the same anthology, as case 93:

> A monk asked Daguang, "Changqing said, 'That was a sort of grace before the meal.' What did he mean?"
>
> Daguang did a dance. The monk bowed.
>
> Daguang asked, "What did you see to make you bow?"
>
> The monk did a dance.
>
> Daguang said, "You evil fox spirit!"

Just to round this out—Hakuin Ekaku, one of the signal figures of Japanese Zen, in his *Song of Zazen* tells us flatly, "singing and dancing is the voice of the law."

So what to make of this juxtaposition of Buddhist models, with groups of monastics on one side appearing to vigilantly guard against the five hindrances, and on another seeming to rejoice in

eating and dancing? Perhaps this is the secret to seeing the ox's horns?

What does it mean when we feel the longings of our bodies? What of it when we take pleasure in colors, songs, scents, or touch? And with that the sexual urges of our bodies. What about them? Where are the traps, and how do we avoid them? Or, when they tangle us, how do we untangle?

For the longest time I thought my quest centered on God was all about whether there was a he or a she or an it in terms something like a big human in the sky. I was trying to confirm the reality of how I read divinity in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is an interesting project, and more than merely academic. But that quest in fact wasn't what my heart was calling me toward.

For me, the principal trap is thinking that this thing, whatever it is, is most important. How can I give up this thing? And with that, turn away from the quest?

The real issue is to realize that you are a bundle of many things, not least of which are the perceptions and feelings that arise because you are a body. You are that. But it is not you. You are the things of the world. You are the stuff of your body. But the picture is bigger than any particular thing, your reality vastly broader.

Can you dance when dinner is served? Can you call your friends together with a song? And can you let it be just that? Let it be, and then do the next thing? Dealing with the matters of our bodies is, if you will, a dance. Sometimes you lead. Sometimes you follow. And sometimes you need to sit it out.

God. The ox's horns. The dance.

Notice the thing arising. Live with it. Dance with it.

And be ready to let it go.

—

Let it go. Easier said than done. Of course. Of course.

Although I've argued against an overly literal or fixated understanding of the five hindrances, they made that list for a reason. Let's look at number two on the list, *vypada*, feelings of hostility, resentment, or bitterness—all those negative feels that arise within us.

Hostility, resentment, bitterness. Each has causes. Everything arises connected to other things. There are good reasons to feel hostility, to feel resentment, to be bitter. And as we embark on the spiritual path, sometimes these things seem to arise of themselves. They appear to float free but attach to our practice.

Slights, small and large, become festering wounds. Mistreatments of all sorts, some genuinely awful, arise in the mind, especially within our meditation practice. In fact, they arise all the time and have done so throughout our lives, but with our launching into a spiritual discipline, we begin to notice them.

It's easier to see how these feelings can be hindrances. They block us from moving on, and sometimes they remind us of the way the world has broken us. This happens in small and great ways. I recall a cartoon where in the first panel the boss yells at a man. A contagion of yelling follows, concluding in the last panel with a child yelling at her cat. And it can be vastly worse, currents that destroy lives and generations.

I'm an old white guy, and though I've experienced my share of difficulties, they haven't had much to do with being on the receiving end of racism or sexism. Even without those personal experiences, I can see in no uncertain terms that so-called negative feelings can be appropriate responses to situations.

Real injustices can't be wished away, and they don't vanish if we adjust our attitude. In my view, part of the moment is how especially in non-monastic practice we're called into the mess of lived life. And our duty to each other includes minimizing the pain of those who are suffering through nothing they did—a type of suffering I sometimes think of as eating other people's karma. The fact is that, even when it

gets harsh, we are bound up together, we genuinely are our brother and sister's keeper.

I recall a parent's advice to a young adult, a young man, to find a worthy cause, one that won't put a dollar into his pocket, maybe even something unpopular, even seriously unpopular, but just and good, and to give a part of his life to that project. I watched that young man begin to volunteer at a Catholic Worker meal program. I don't know how unpopular it was, but he certainly was on the countercultural side of his cohort. It touched who he was as a person. Volunteerism and later social justice activism became an integrated part of who he was as a person. I witnessed how that conscious choice to serve began to shape his character. I've realized it was and is an amazing spiritual discipline.

But there's another part to this for those of us on the spiritual journey. As we notice these feelings arise, we need to notice when they are warnings of something wrong. And at the same time if we cling to them, and these are all feelings that fester, then as the old Buddhist saying goes, we're drinking poison hoping to kill our enemy.

Notice. Be aware. Pay attention. Feel. But also don't grasp it tightly. As it naturally passes, let it pass.

The third hindrance is our half-hearted engagement. It's easy to see how this is a problem with meditation practice. It's just as true for our lives off the pillow. While it is true that awakening just happens, if we are lazy and only give the matter leftovers, that encounter will never flower into what it might be.

One of my favorite movies, *Heaven's Above*, featured an Anglican parson who was through a confusion of names accidentally transferred from prison chaplaincy to the pastorate of a large and posh congregation. Hilarity ensues as an authentic Christian proceeds to destroy the parish. The part that I find relevant here is a moment where the bishop is sunning himself on a supporter's yacht. While basking in the sun, he muses how it is at moments like this that he fully understands Christ's call to simplicity.

An echo of a truth. Wrapped in a lie.

As to the fourth hindrance, restlessness, let's start with a story. When I started my internship as part of my preparation for parish ministry, I was informed I would now be writing a newsletter column. I was asked what I wanted to call it. I said, "Monkey Mind." It would serve as the title for my church newsletter columns and then become the title for my blog.

I certainly have a monkey mind, flitting from this place to that. Some of it is helpful. I find having a range of experiences and knowing a little about different things is good. Yet early on I was warned that it is better to dig a single deep well than many shallow ones.

We encounter restlessness almost as soon as we undertake a discipline like Zen meditation. And I find that restlessness stands as a pretty good placeholder for the whole phenomenon of the spiritual life.

We are given basic instructions, we sit down, and, well, we find for some stated period of time—twenty minutes, half an hour, three quarters of an hour, perhaps a whole hour—we are not supposed to move from our place. In Zen groups we're expected not to move at all. Not even scratching an itch.

Just be there. Just do the practice. Or, if not doing the practice, just be quiet and hold still.

And what do we find? Well, lots of things. But near the heart of it, restlessness.

Restlessness. Boredom. Monkey mind. This hindrance is not hard to find.

In my youth I was much taken with the existentialists. I still am. They are people who try to face into the mystery of life, although I think they make a fundamental mistake when they attribute meaninglessness to the universe. I find that stance to be a projection of human needs onto something that is very much not human.

But they face their lives, and that is important. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus imagines the experience of Sisyphus, who stole fire for humans and was condemned to spend eternity rolling a great stone up a hill, only to have it roll back down again. A perfect image for meaninglessness but also for boredom, for restlessness, for wanting to not be where we are.

The essay concludes:

> I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.[3]

When we begin to let go of the tangles of "should" or "it might be otherwise," when we let go of our desire to be somewhere else, or be doing something else, worlds begin to appear. Magic imbues the moment in our zazen, our actions, our lives.

It can sometimes be profitable to ask ourselves what's wrong here? Why am I bored? Why am I restless? What other thing calls to my heart? What am I obscuring from myself that's actually right here and now?

In your wandering, in your spiritual quest, you've felt the call, you've wandered into the wilderness, you've seen tracks and maybe the spoor of the ox.

Perhaps you've caught a glimpse of those horns.

You've shared sorrows, you've seen yourself in another.

Where do you go now?

13

Finding an Only True Way (Oxherding 4)

A commitment to dance with the earth requires devotion.

—Zenju Earthlyn Manuel[1]

Once upon a time, Baizhang was walking with his teacher Mazu when a wild duck flew by, crying out as it went.
The old teacher asked Baizhang, “What is that?”
The student of the way responded, “A wild duck.”
The master then asked, “Where did it go?”
If young Baizhang had noted they’d waded into deep waters, perhaps he’d have been a bit more cautious. But oblivious to the entangled moment, he responded, “It flew away.”

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Mazu grabbed the young monk’s nose and twisted it.

Baizhang gave his own cry. And the master noted, “Why, it didn’t fly away at all.”

Somewhere along the line, this passing strange universe reaches out and twists our noses. And if we’re lucky, in the midst of that painful surprise we catch a glimpse of that place beyond self and other. We need to listen when those distant birds cry out, as they’re calling us home.

Somewhere and at some time, it may be that you experience the twist of your nose and the ouch. And maybe you will recall the echo of distant ducks flying. At some point, that is, the intimations fall away, and you find yourself fully present to the weird and wondrous fact of this world. A flock of ducks. Are they gone? Are they here?

The Zen tradition warns us that when we come to such a profound moment of clarity, it is wise to renew and deepen our practice. It's too easy to let the wonder take over when there is still much to do, much to learn. The seductions of that moment, to simply rest there, can be powerful.

But we're not done—far from it. In the map of the ten oxherding pictures, we're not even halfway through. This moment is addressed in the fourth image of the collection.

Last desperate effort, got him!
Hard to control, powerful and wild,
The ox sprints up a hill and at the top
Disappears into the misty clouds.

—

To touch the ox—at last, we know it's truly possible! It's no longer a dream, it's no longer something someone has told us about. But as the Buddha said, just because we're human with the wondrous set of conditions that make us in this universe, awakening can happen.

The Zen way of zazen, of koan practice, and especially of deep retreat is configured to put us in the way of this encounter. Zen monasteries serve as the fields most intensively cultivated to enhance our chances of finding ourselves in touching distance of the elusive beast.

But whether sought or just a free gift from the universe, which also happens, somehow it happens. And we find ourselves in a

moment alive, a moment electrical, touching with our own hand that muscled creature. Finding for ourselves.

Hard to control, powerful and wild

Such a moment is a tumble into not knowing, the deep intimacy beyond words. And in an instant it confronts us with a number of options.

One option is to chalk what happened up as a passing strange moment and simply return to one's more familiar life. Did the ox disappear into the misty clouds, or did I just dream that whole thing up in the first place? Another is to be moved to the center of your heart and go ever closer toward whatever this is. After all, Jesus is said to have said finding the realm of heaven is like a dealer in pearls who, when she found that one pearl of great price, sold everything she had in order to purchase it.

And the price is, well, everything. To pay it can be very difficult, because we have had experiences and encounters—pearls of all sorts—before this. Life is the teacher, and all these things from before have value.

There's no denying that something happened. That twist of the nose. The distant call of those ducks. The power of the ox under your hand. It no longer is a question of whether this is shallow or deep. We are now confronted with the intimate matter itself.

We have touched the ox. We've encountered that pearl of incalculable price. The barriers of self and other are seen through. So what to do?

On the Zen way, the big dispute among the masters of old was whether practice happens and then awakening, or awakening and then practice. I've found that the truth of the matter is more like practice, awakening, practice, practice, awakening, then a bit more practice, with the odd additional awakening. Of course, for the occasional person the whole journey just begins with an awakening

experience out of the blue. Whatever. The list just proceeds from there. There are, of course, individual variations on this theme. The *now awakening, now practice, now what's the difference?* emerges like a dance.

However a given person stumbles into that moment of touching the ox, it is like that koan, "Where is Mu when you're arguing with your lover?"

Here. In this place. With that person. Not in some other place. Not some other person. Not some other feeling. The place with dirty dishes, with work, and obligations. With that person who is wrong. Or with that person who is right, and the feelings that come with it. Here where everything has changed. And here where nothing has.

Who is the beloved? For those who are single, take heart—one's lover needn't be another person. Once in Bennington, Vermont, my spouse, Jan, and I visited Robert Frost's grave. The epitaph read, "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." That love. That quarrel. The object shifts from time to time. It is the other. Or our idea of the other.

That ox, that none-other. It could be anything, but it's no abstraction. One of the gifts of Zen is its physicality, the acknowledgment we are bodies in a world of bodies. We don't occupy our bodies for a while; we are our bodies. Zen isn't overly concerned with larger views of postmortem existences. It has no problem with the traditional Buddhist story of cycles of suffering and the dream of release. But Zen practice fits with other stories of that sort as well. Like those of Abrahamic traditions and even our contemporary naturalist views of a single wondrous life. This is because, in Zen, the stories matter less than who you are in this moment. You as a body, alive, right now.

And then, before you know it, the ox has sprinted away, disappearing into the misty clouds on the hilltop. The ox was there—you touched it and you know that you touched it. But now it's gone. Again, what to do? Here Zen's precepts become critical, because the appearance and disappearance of a moment of awakening can

invite any number of false steps: the snakes of grasping or pride, the wells of depression or self-criticism. Though the precepts, especially in their “do not” formulations, can come across like a Buddhist Ten Commandments, they can also be phrased positively and approached as invitations: Foster life. Respect the integrity of things, their boundaries. Respect your body and other’s bodies. Speak truthfully. And live into your clarity of experience and vision. With the ox having departed the scene for now, the precepts can be taken as helpfully descriptive of what the awakened life looks like. They describe the bodhisattva heart. They show the great vow of our going together.

All beings. One body.

14

Doubt, Faith, and Energy

> The opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty.
> It is madness. You can tell you have created God in your image when it turns out that he or she hates all the same people you do.
>
> —Anne Lamott[1]

In the oxherding story, we've touched the hard muscles of the beast. But it has vanished and we're not sure whether it was true or a dream. To shift the image: something has happened in our lives. Something that has planted a seed.

What I find interesting is that nearly everyone, maybe even everyone, has had some form of this encounter. I've spoken with many people over the years. Often that first intimation was found in childhood. For many it was in adolescence. And, yes, many people cannot dredge up a memory at all.

Or the experience only came as an adult, often in association with some serious spiritual discipline. Sometimes they're explosive things. More often they're much smaller intimations.

And after there is a "that was then, and this is now" going on. What did it all mean? Was it even real? There are, after all, so, so many stories about these intimate encounters. These stories are told within the context of so many different and, it seems on the face of it, *wildly* different religions. Sometimes it's seeing God. Sometimes it's

finding God and one's self are not two. Sometimes there is no God in the story at all. Agnostics and atheists also find turnings of the heart that do not call them toward ancient religions. But something calls.

It's like a seed. So small. So distant. So fragile.

So how does one proceed?

The Zen way has three maxims framed by the eighteenth-century Rinzai master Hakuin Ekaku. We find each of them as part of the practice much earlier in Zen's development, but he put them together succinctly. The work of Zen calls us into great doubt, great faith, and great energy. They're critically important to the deep pursuit of our heart quest. And each informs the other.

—

I've always liked Thomas the Doubter, his insistence on seeing the wounds and touching them before believing. I consider him my patron saint. However, as something to be taken as historical truth or even a reasonable possibility, his story is very unlikely. It only occurs in the Gospel of John, which was written about a hundred years after Jesus's death.

The gospel is often considered a "theological" document rather than an attempt at capturing the life of Jesus. So in the story when Thomas asserts that he needs to touch Jesus's wounds before he will believe, we're being informed about Thomas failing a critical test of the spiritual life.

The point of the story as it is presented is how much better it is to believe without evidence. This is how doubt is usually treated in religions—as an occasion for reaffirming traditional authority. Which you might recall given the Latin phrasing *argumentum ad verecundiam*, "argument from authority," is considered a logical fallacy.

There are indeed forms of doubt that legitimately hinder us on the spiritual path. It's not hard to create a list. Such hindering doubts

include:

- superficial skepticism that flirts with nihilism
- a hesitance, an inability to get in gear and get on with it
- a lack of trust in the possibility some teacher or teaching might actually have something important for us, and might actually be able to guide us

All of these are problematic.

But doubt itself, that feeling of uncertainty, can offer rich possibilities on the spiritual path. For instance, we can reframe that gospel story to make Thomas someone who must know for himself and has thrown body and soul into the project. All of a sudden, Thomas becomes a figure who could fit into a Zen koan. In fact, bringing one's whole being to the project, including one's hesitations and uncertainties, is critical to koan practice.

Zen practice suggests that doubt is actually key to our success. Of course, it requires discernment. There is an art to making doubt a spiritual tool. It requires navigating away from those doubts that are unhealthy or at least unproductive and toward a doubt as the great engine of our spiritual lives.

Is God real? What is truth? Who am I? Does life have a meaning or is it meaningless? How do I know God? Each of these questions is in fact a seed of doubt. And I think it fair to say these questions are different from run-of-the-mill doubt, the half-hearted thing that prevents our throwing ourselves into some project. They are aspects of the burning questions of our humanity and are precisely what our spiritual life needs. Given attention, taken on as a spiritual practice, any of these questions can become Zen's great doubt.

Zen is often called the "way of not knowing." And this differentiates it from most other spiritual schools, including most other Buddhist schools. I find it important how, in that phrasing of the deep way, doubt leads. However, doubt needs to be joined with

these other things, faith and energy. Otherwise, our doubt gradually dissipates and ultimately becomes one form or another of nihilism.

—

Doubt and faith are the great poles of our spiritual lives. But also there's Hakuin's pointing to energy. Great energy is our individual determination and effort as a generative element, a spark that flies within our lives. What we—you, I—actually do or do not do is critically important. One commentator on these three aspects of practice suggests that the word I'm translating as "energy" could also be translated as "wrath." There is much to dig into with that phrasing. I could just as easily say it requires great "desire." Passion. Determination. Energy. The Zen teacher Koun Yamada tells us, "Great determination is a strong resolve that wells up from the bottom of our gut and spurs us on."[2] Sometimes it is doggedness, just putting our shoulder to the wheel: getting up each morning and turning our heart and mind to the project. Much of the Zen way is about taking our own initiative. We put ourselves on the cushion. We turn our mind toward the matter of intimacy.

This determination, this energy should not, and ultimately cannot, be divorced from doubt and faith. It joins them. It is where they meet.

With that, there's faith. Unlike other spiritual traditions, there's not a lot of talk about faith in Zen. When we do speak of it, we often circle around how little faith we need. Early on in my practice I asked the question, "How much faith do I have to have to do this?"

I asked it of the late British-born Soto Zen priest Houn Jiyu-Kennett, who at the time was fresh to North America after five years in Japan and had just opened a small temple in the Potrero Hill neighborhood in San Francisco.

It was a real question. To be honest, I didn't have a lot of faith. I had a lot of trouble with any assertions about reality that moved too much from the observable, the measurable, the quantifiable.

She was a large woman with a quick smile and eyes that cut right into the center of my being. She smiled. She looked. And she replied, “All that you need to believe is that maybe, possibly, you can learn something.” And that was my mustard seed, that tiniest of things. As it turns out, she was right. What drove me at the time was my doubt, and my commitment. It was the commitment that mattered most in that moment, and soon after I moved into the monastery.

I completely understand the Zen teacher Albert Low when he writes he “always balked at the ‘great faith’ part because I could not help confuse faith and belief.”[3] And that was my problem as well. It’s not uncommon. So let’s look at that a bit.

Our English words *faith* and *belief* are in fact synonyms. Faith enters English from the Latin via French, while belief comes out of the Germanic language family. Both carry connotations of trust, and each have other overlays that give them complexity and nuance.

The distinction Sensei Low was reaching for is also one we hear from many Christians, and which I first heard in seminary. It has emerged because there are legitimate distinctions to be found when we talk about what it is we have faith in, what it is we believe. Fortunately in English, as it happens, we have these two words we can work with.

I want to suggest as a working definition that *belief* be used for those things that are asserted as true by someone in authority. We read it, we were told it, and we simply accept it. How much better it would have been to believe in Jesus’s resurrection without having to see the wounds and touch them. Belief. Spiritually, this is the “It’s in the book, I believe it, that settles it” stance—a phrasing I once saw on a refrigerator magnet in a Christian bookstore.

Often, belief in this sense is presented with a modifier like “mere,” showing this is the lesser term of the two. Although if we’re honest with ourselves, we believe in all sorts of things in this exact sense. As a practical matter, you can’t examine everything. We have to have some confidence in some sources of authority or we can’t

function. For example, we believe the sun will rise whether we have investigated the matter in any legitimate sense of that word *investigate*, or not. We believe it will be safe to drive the car to the grocery store, though very few among us know quite how that engine works.

Faith is related to that definition of belief, but it has been parsed out, allowing a more dynamic quality. While we still are talking about trust, we are also talking about engagement and reflection. It is the dynamic of our lives wherein we accept some guidance, maybe that little bit of "belief that I can learn something." Then do it. Then reflect on that doing. And maybe we find that, nope, it wasn't true. At least for me. Or, yes, there's something here. At least for me. And then going at it again from this deeper or more mature perspective. The process of faith is ongoing.

The Buddhist word that is usually translated as "faith" is *saddha* in Pali, and similarly pronounced in Sanskrit. And it is understood pretty fully in that sense of faith rather than belief. It carries the assumption the teachings should only be accepted provisionally. Then we are asked to investigate for ourselves, to taste and know whether, as the Zen line goes, "that sip of water is cool or warm."

Here's where the lovely observation by Anne Lamott gets really helpful. "The opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty." Certainty is the killer. When faith is not the opposite of doubt, it becomes the companion of doubt. And taken together, doubt and faith open us to new vistas.

Then, as the *Flower Ornament Sutra* sings to us:

> Faith is the basis of the Path, the mother of virtues,
> Nourishing and growing all good ways,
> Cutting away the net of doubt, freeing from the torrent of passion,
> Revealing the unsurpassed road of ultimate peace.[4]

And it continues:

Faith is generous, the mind not begrudging;
Faith can joyfully enter the Buddha's teaching;
Faith can increase knowledge and virtue;
Faith can ensure arrival at enlightenment.[5]

Here we find that little mustard seed planted and growing. And I hope we find ourselves invited into that dynamic, where a small belief, through active engagement, opens our hearts to ever-deeper contours of wisdom, compassion, liberation.

And there's another way yet into this path of faith. An important angle to notice.

Zen is a path of energy and effort, maybe even wrath. The other great Mahayana school in East Asia, Pure Land, goes in an entirely different direction. Or at least it appears to. Its founders suggest we live in the last age, a time of disintegration, where human access to wisdom is lost, and there is in fact no help for us through our own effort. We are all of us too broken, too defiled by our grasping, aversions, and endlessly complex certainties. We can't cut the thread of confusion. Not by our own hand. Me, I've felt this. I believe it's hard to look at the world and our own hearts and not find resonances with this perspective, not if we're being honest with ourselves.

And in response to this they tell a story of a Buddha—not Shakyamuni, the Buddha of history, but the Buddha of Infinite Light, called Amitabha in Sanskrit, Amida in Japanese. Amida presides over a Pure Land, a Heaven. And he has promised that if we just call on him he will carry us to that Pure Land where the way is open and clear and free. It's called Amida's Primal or Original Vow. It is the great vow of the heart, to take everyone with us. I believe if we've walked the great way for any length of time, we've had intimations of what this story points to.

Perhaps this is the Buddhist equivalent of what Christians call "good news." We don't have to have a strong practice. These are *upayas*, skillful means; they're tools. Whoever we are, whatever our situation in life, if we call on Amida, we will be saved. Period. We give our heart, our trust, and we will be saved. Sound kind of familiar? The whole of the Christian story is about forgiveness and unmerited grace. And from a completely different world a very similar story emerged. And with it an invitation.

I believe there are deep connections between the grace of Pure Land and the grace of Christianity. But they are also different. The Pure Land turns on a primal vow, which is itself a kind of mystery. Christian faith turns on accepting an invitation out of a cosmic sacrifice, the details of which are argued over by theologians of whom the wisest fall back into mystery. It's in that mystery where those two different stories invite a surrender of our certainties and an opening of our hearts, and with that offering an invitation into a world that exists side by side with this one. Belief is about the world after death; faith is about the world that can be touched here.

What I find mostly is the connection between doubt and faith, between not knowing and the open heart. In the Pure Land presented by the Japanese schools, this turning of the heart is coming to *shinjin*. According to the great teacher Shinran Shonin, *shinjin* means the "mind of reality." After he had spent twenty years pursuing the austere meditations of the monastic life of the Tendai school, then dominant in Japan, he turned to that invocation, calling on Amida, Amitabha, Infinite Light. After a year of wholehearted calling, there was a moment, a turning. Shinran awakened to shinjin.

This is the really important part. Most Pure Land teachings suggest you believe and call on Amida, and then when you die you will be reborn into that Pure Land. That's belief. With Shinran, as I understand him, you surrender into Amida's original vow, into the heart of love for all beings, into the mother of the world. And at that instant you are born into the Pure Land. For Shinran, this very place

is the Pure Land because there is no separation between this place and that.

So doubt. So faith.

So great energy and determination.

With that, work and play become the fields of our awakening. Or, returning to the ox, it is our touching the beast with our own hands. Smelling the sweat. Watching its muscles ripple. Sensing the strength. Even as our knowing and forgetting ebb and flow.

Here's the point. We may have had a dream of remembering. And yes, it all is perfect as it is. But our effort, our hurt and longing—we need them as well. And at the same time we need to let go of them, including our letting go of the stories and the images.

And with that we find the universe kindly bending to embrace us.

15

Vainglory

> Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.
>
> —Proverbs 16:18–19

I was living in a Zen monastery in Oakland, California. During a retreat I had a powerful spiritual encounter where I touched that sense of intimacy. But how important it really was—that was not at all clear. For me, in the moment, I thought, *Is this enlightenment?* And I thought, *Well, maybe, yes.* Maybe I had finally touched the great ox, and maybe that meant I could now do so anytime I wished.

A few days later I was walking in the neighborhood, still in the glamour of that experience. Everything felt numinously alive, as if each thing was illuminated from some inner light. The monastery was in a very large old house, and the area had a number of mature trees, shading a bright and hot day. Even now I remember the speckled light, birdcalls, the smells of cut grass, and passing cars. Each thing was distinct, and everything was some kind of wonderful. I felt called into some conspiracy of life.

And well, I felt kind of special.

Then there she was. A small girl—I don't know, nine? Ten? A skinny kid in shorts and a T-shirt. She was standing in a driveway, where she had been skipping rope. As I approached, she held tightly

on to her rope and eyed me suspiciously. “What’s that?” she asked, pointing at the large mala I was wearing like a necklace, my small show of my being part of a Buddhist practice.

“A mala,” I responded. “It’s a Buddhist rosary.” She didn’t seem to understand. “Prayer beads,” I said.

“Looks stupid,” she said, then turned away and began skipping rope again.

I think of that tarot card, the zero card. It’s called the Fool. It usually pictures a young man walking along with a bindle-stick, that stick that holds a large napkin or piece of cloth wrapping up one’s few possessions. There’s usually a dog nipping at his heels. I think the person’s almost always a “he,” although no gender has a monopoly on foolishness. He’s looking up. And he’s about to step off a cliff.

Well that was me. And hearing “looks stupid” was when I stepped off the cliff.

Suddenly the world was no longer quite as bright and clear as it seemed a heartbeat before. I felt embarrassed. I could feel the heat from my blushing face. I tried to think of what I should have said to her, to explain. To…well, to claim my place. But I was at a complete loss for words.

All for the best, no doubt. What had happened before, my moment of insight at the monastery, was that I’d had a small grace on the intimate way. It would prove important as a start. But that was all. It was just noticing the world is not as I’d thought. And with that it pointed toward deeper insights of intimacy to come.

But I rather quickly made it something quite special. I would like to say the little girl was an agent of the great intimate, pointing me on to the deeper way. However, that grand language is itself another mistake cut from the same cloth.

In my eager focus on the quality of my own realization experience—and it was probably more dangerous just because there was a real experience involved—I’d actually stumbled into one of the most

insidious of spiritual traps: pride. Before we delve further into that topic, however, let's take a short detour to look at one of the common ways that spiritual seekers become fixated on touching the ox.

—

I am a child of the 1960s. And for me, drugs had a place at the beginning of my spiritual life. Today there's been a resurgence of interest in drugs as part of spiritual life, especially among those who have stepped away from traditional religions in greater or lesser degree.

My personal experience of psychedelics, now many decades past, is that they can offer a real lesson, something profound and true. That lesson is that the world is not how we think it is. The world is not as *I* think it is. This is something profound and a great gift. It is critical to both projects, waking up and growing up.

That's what psychedelics can teach us. And in my experience and observation, that's all they can teach us.

Yes, in some cultures experience with drugs of several sorts is integrated into the communal life as part of a larger project. And I have no judgment on that path specific to some cultures. But in our culture this just isn't how it is. At some point, maybe. But today and in most any future I can envision, probably not.

At the moment the area I see that shows the most promise is in psychology. For instance, there are very interesting studies of psychedelic use for treatment and resistance to depression, suicidal ideations, quitting smoking, and other often serious ailments. Many show tremendous promise. I strongly suspect some form of regulated use of such drugs may well find a permanent place within Western therapeutics. But will we evolve an authentic psychedelic-spiritual tradition akin to those in the Amazon? The jury is very much out on that.

Whatever happens in terms of psychedelic use in Western spirituality, here's what I think is critical. As important as the experience that our views aren't correct truly is, it's not what's most important. Rather, the most important insights are those that take us to a perspective on who we are and our place within the cosmos. I know some claim these insights are also contained within the psychedelic experience. I acknowledge the claim, but I haven't seen much evidence it is true. I am not saying it doesn't happen—the world is too large and human experience is too mysterious to make absolute claims—but I've seen many, many more people arrive at such insights through other types of practice rather than psychedelics.

Perhaps part of my skepticism here centers on the quickness of the psychedelic experience—simply ingest a substance, and intense new experiences are sure to arise. Yet the authentic path is a lifetime journey. The experiences we call awakening or enlightenment are simply markers on a larger project that plays out over a lifetime. So whether psychedelics offer a single gift of a disruption of our ideas of how things are or in fact do lead us to a deeper insight into who we are within the play of things, the critical thing is that those experiences are themselves only part of a larger and more or less coherent path of realization and manifestation.

The real spiritual path is an ongoing investigation into the matter of life and death. And critically, it involves the incorporation of many, many lessons, only one of which is that insight into how what we think and how we "see" the world is not actually the truth of the matter. How sad it is, then, for pilgrims who become stuck on the "special experience" of that insight.

—

Earlier I mentioned Pope Gregory's list of the seven deadly sins. His "sins" are behaviors or habits that can poison the spiritual life. He

based his list largely on the work of a fourth-century mystical theologian, Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius's list had two terms, *vainglory* and *pride*, which Gregory saw more as nuances than distinctive spiritual traps. And so, in his list, Gregory combined them together into one word. In Latin that's *superbia*, and in Greek it's *hubris.*

I find *hubris* a very helpful word. For Greeks in antiquity hubris was the stuff of tragedy, that flaw that would eventually destroy the hero. Gregory saw all other sins rising from this "poisonous root." So an invitation into tragedy, for sure. Less poetically, but straight to the point, that other great, if complicated, thinker of Christian antiquity Augustine of Hippo declared "pride is the beginning of all sin." There's the word in English—*pride.*

Unfortunately, pride is a messy word, especially in our contemporary English. After all, there absolutely are healthy forms of pride. At the personal level this is simple self-confidence. It is the feeling we can do something. We've prepared, we've worked hard, and we know we can do it.

Another sense of pride is a healthy sense of self-worth. I am worthy just for being here. This is a good thing, yet it's something people struggle to feel in their hearts. Pride is also a term claimed by minorities and the oppressed asserting a place for themselves in a world that doesn't always notice them, and when it does notice them, it sometimes sees them as less than full human beings. Pride in such instances is an important form of resilience and an antidote to cultural trauma.

We are passing like that wisp of fire and smoke from a burning match. But within that passing we are beautiful, precious. A light. Something to be seen. There's pride to be had in that.

And there are several snakes in the garden. There is also a negative pride: *I'm not worthy. I'm not good enough.* Sort of the shadow of the good pride. A great deal of the work of therapy is

finding and cultivating a sense of self-worth in the face of this very common human experience.

The pride Gregory and Evagrius warn of is not that sense of self-worth that, frankly, we need to function as healthy people in the world. I think it's more akin to what I was feeling as I walked in the neighborhood of the Zen monastery all those years ago. Specifically, what followed my intimation in the monastery was a kind of inflation. *Inflation* is a term with applications for both the psychological project and the spiritual quest. Carl Jung used inflation to mean an exaggerated sense of self-importance. In the spiritual project it can occur when our ego confuses itself with an insight, which can go all the way up to the one, or as we prefer to say in Zen, emptiness.

I find *vainglory* the most useful word for this specific kind of inflation—inflation as a spiritual mistake. *Vainglory* literally means "empty glory." If our hearts have called us into the contemplative life, or even to simple self-awareness, it's important to notice how easily we're seduced by vainglory.

Examples are easy to find. I recall a story from a Japanese Zen priest who went to sit in a particularly strict American monastery. Zen monastic life circles around meditation. The normal meditation rhythm is a set period of sitting. Half an hour is common, maybe forty-five minutes. Different communities follow slightly different rhythms, but there is always a pause in the sitting with a period of walking meditation. In Japanese-derived Zen communities these are normally relatively brief, five or perhaps ten minutes.

The priest observed that in the American monastery she was visiting there were some participants who did not get up to do the walking meditation and instead simply sat through the walking period, their particular diligence on view for everyone else. She smiled slyly, thinking, "Very special people." The tradition of the practice of a monastery is to bow into the rhythm. To need to be special is to fall into vainglory.

It's an enormously seductive problem. Evagrius noted, "It is difficult to escape the thought of vainglory, for what you do to rid yourself of it becomes for you a new source of vainglory."[1] My wanting to make my encounter with the little girl more than a popping of a bubble is a small example.

The traps of vainglory are numerous. Gregory notes four.

1. Thinking my experiences are unique
2. Thinking that my experiences are the direct product of my effort
3. As a slight nuance of 1 and 2, thinking my experiences came by grace but because I'd properly prepared myself
4. Exaggerating my attainment, boasting of something I'd not actually experienced

In the traditional Buddhist monastic rule, the Vinaya, there is a different four-part list, although it has a noteworthy overlap on its fourth point with the Christian admonition's fourth point. The Vinaya lists four reasons one will be expelled from the order. These are sexual intercourse, theft, murder, and claiming spiritual experiences one has not had. Whether such offenses are regretted and confessed or simply exposed, they lead directly to expulsion. The sole exception to this harsh and irrevocable rule within the Vinaya regards that fourth point, when one innocently overestimates one's experiences. But even there, the perpetrator is not the person who gets to decide what side of the line their assertions about their spiritual attainment fell on.

Erroneous claims of spiritual attainment are thus considered poisonous for the person and for the community in both Christian and Buddhist traditions. Let's look at why this would be treated so harshly.

Our spiritual journey and the disciplines we embrace are all about seeing through the illusion of a permanent, isolated self. This sense is what blocks us from seeing the deeper truths of our radical

interdependence, who we really are. And we need that ego—after all, it drives the ship. The problem is only that it isn't content to be captain; the ego wants to be the lord admiral of the high seas. Perhaps we can say the ego wants to be God. Although it will, if need be, settle for being the devil. It just wants to be in charge. That's its job.

We all have moments when we see through our egos. They are by nature fragile, the products of a moment within the play of causes and conditions. So whether through association with a spiritual discipline or just in the ordinary course of life, the ego, our sense of an isolated and separate self, occasionally falls apart.

If we're fortunate, if we pay attention, the reconstruction of our sense of self becomes more balanced, deeper, more intimate with the way things are. But the ego always wants more, and so a most dangerous moment typically follows the small or great grace where the masks of our egos fall away. Rather than integration, we can easily fall into inflation, into vainglory. The ego is usually all too ready to appropriate and weaponize experiences of spiritual realization, and perhaps this is why sometimes people use warfare as the language of the spiritual quest. Fighting the battle. More healthy, I believe, is the language of athletics. Running the race. Each are, of course, metaphors. The one I find most useful is the language of depth. If we are running a race, it is on a path into the deep places of our hearts, on a way of discovery and integration.

Vainglory is an ever-present trap, but fortunately it manifests in several observable ways.

Vanity, for instance—finding one's worth in how one is perceived by others. Our desire for approval, admiration, or popularity are all the rich soil of vainglory. Actually the possibilities for vainglory to take over our sense of ourselves are nearly endless. The end goal is always to make my ego, your ego, the center of the universe and the monarch of all it surveys. But heaven help us, it always turns out to be a petty, tinfoil God.

So what to do about it? If we're on the path to depth, if we care about an inner life that leads to the wise heart, what to do?

Pretty much all the religions have suggestions. The Gospel of Matthew offers a list of things one might do. I think three are particularly useful. One is doing the spiritual thing in secret. I believe we want to be careful about being categorical. I've certainly seen secrecy carried to unhealthy extremes and simply ending up inviting another form of vainglory. But not making a show of our lives and our experiences seems important.

Matthew also suggests exercising a consistent watchfulness, which I find critical. Watching, noticing ourselves. Being aware of what we're doing when we do it. Or at the very least in the wake of our actions. A bit late really is still better than not at all. And that often invites a certain humility, which on balance is probably a wise thing. Certainly a lifetime practice, that.

The last of the three in Matthew's list I find especially useful is having a spiritual confidant, if not a full-on spiritual director. Someone we open our hearts to. Holding our lives up to another can be an amazing antidote to much foolishness. It is part of the play of genuine intimacy.

To put it all together, the Chinese oracle the *I Ching* has a hexagram I've found helpful: number nine. In the Wilhelm/Baynes translation, it's called the "taming power of the small."[2] We don't need to analyze it, just notice, just witness. Take the power of stepping back, of not needing to be in charge all the time, of not needing always to be right. Or, if our preferences go that way, always needing to be wrong. Here the spiritual and the psychological return to being one thing: integration of the inner and the outer.

PART TWO

AFTER THE FULL MOON

Truly, is anything missing now?
Nirvana is right here, before our eyes,
This very place is the Lotus Land,
This very body, the Buddha.

—*Song of Zazen*

16

Integration of Practice and Encounter (Oxherding 5)

> There is no escape from the necessity for testing the validity of religious experience or ethical insight. This insistence finds expression in the folk saying, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating”; or in the biblical injunction, “by their fruits ye shall know them.”
>
> —Howard Thurman[1]

There have been two times in my life in which I didn’t meet the Dalai Lama. The first time, I was at a conference of Buddhist meditation teachers hosted by His Holiness, but I had to leave before he arrived due to a death in the congregation I was serving. The second time, I was serving a Unitarian congregation in suburban Boston when I received a call from the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Dr. William Sinkford. He told me he saw that His Holiness was going to visit Boston and asked if I could arrange a meeting.

I sighed and said no. The connections between Tibetan Buddhism and Zen are roughly those between Greek Orthodoxy and Quakers. I simply didn’t have access. He was disappointed. Then after I hung up I recalled that an old friend, a fellow monk at Shasta Abbey all those years before, had gone on to become a publicist and

now was running the publicity for the Dalai Lama's visits to the United States East Coast. An email showed that I was three degrees from the Dalai Lama: my old friend, his contact with the Dalai Lama's office, and His Holiness.

Bill, as the UUA president preferred to be called, was grateful for the invitation to meet the Dalai Lama and invited me to join his entourage, one of five. I was so excited to be part of this tiny delegation that I had my suit dry-cleaned. Then, that morning, I received a call from my church's administrator. Incredibly, just two hours before I was set to meet His Holiness, I was informed, once again, that my service was needed for a congregation member—this time an elderly member of the congregation who had been ailing for some time and had taken a turn for the worse. Life as a parish minister. And as with the earlier opportunity, death, or in this case death's doorstep, trumps pretty much all other things.

Canceling my planned attendance in the delegation, I was at first a bit more than disappointed. But then I arrived at the hospital, and I found as I walked through the doors and stepped into the elevator that all dropped away. This was the life I'd volunteered for, and I had absolutely no doubt this was the life I wanted. Whatever I thought I might see in a meeting with the Dalai Lama, it could not have been a more holy meeting, a deeper invitation into the real, than that visit with my congregation member.

With death hanging in the corners of the room, I joined a small band of relatives and friends. I actually arrived to laughter. I stayed for silence. Some tears. The watch was not just for death; it was a full meeting of the whole mess.

I saw as truly as a person can see: this is it.

Such moments are where we turn into the vast field of our lives. Here, cleaning and kitchen duty and child-rearing genuinely are the way. The old Zen saying, "chop wood and carry water," ceases being a slogan or a clever line to throw at the uninitiated and instead becomes the plain truth.

In the Zen map of awakening, we are at the fulcrum, halfway through the oxherding pictures. And it is here that the sense of steps begins to reveal something different. At this point, in very important ways, there is no past, and there is no future. This, as it is, is the way.

Don't lose the whip, hold on to the rope
Or he'll buck away into the dirt.
Herded well, in perfect harmony
He'll follow along without any constraint.

Our thoughts, which are such troublesome beasts, are tamed to some degree. We are still inclined to the mind road—that will be a truth as long as we are alive. But now as our thoughts arise we constantly notice that they do not have to lead to new thoughts. The cycles are there, but we can more clearly attend to the moment itself, that part of the cycle that requires no past and no future.

We truly are present. And that moment is clarity itself. Like the deep ocean, there is both vastness and particularity. We are alive within it, and squalls and even hurricanes may pass, and the deep things remain. And all of this is present to us; we are present to it.

We need to maintain our practice. The doing matters. But our whole approach shifts. Gradually our insights and our practices find a certain harmony. Instead of relentlessly returning to the present moment, the present moment begins to call to us. Sitting and walking and the other disciplines we've cultivated begin to cultivate us. The separation of the act and our being becomes less sharp.

In Japanese Zen this period is called *shotai choyo*, the "long nurturing of the sacred embryo." An interesting image. A bit more than a collection of cells, there is a hidden motion, and if not interfered with, it will grow into something. In this case "sacred" feels completely appropriate. Holy and mysterious.

We need to keep an eye on the ox, but we are traveling in the same direction.

—

Here is case 54 in the *Record of Empty Hall*, a thirteenth-century Chinese anthology of a hundred koans compiled by Xutang Zhiyu, who added in the odd comment here and there.

> Cuiwei asked the non-learning Zen master Danxia, “How is it to be a teacher for all the Buddhas?”
>
> Xia disapprovingly said, “Lucky guy and it sucks to be you. You must grasp the towel and the broom!”
>
> Wei retreated three steps. Xia said, “Mistake!”
>
> Wei then moved forward. Xia again said, “Mistake!”
>
> Wei then raised one foot, whirled his body one turn, and went out. Xia said, “Got it right away. He will be a teacher for all Buddhas.”
>
> Xutang’s alternate saying, “Mistake. Mistake.”[2]

Danxia Tianran lived on the cusp of the eighth and ninth centuries. He was a successor to the renowned Shitou Xiqian. The emperor would eventually present Danxia’s heir Cuiwei Wuxue with a purple robe and the title “Great Master Illuminating Everywhere.”

A “non-learning Zen master,” is one who has achieved the deepest intimate, and thus can teach anyone, even buddhas. So his student asks, “How is that?” and he gets an interesting reply. The more literal translation of the response goes, “Fortunate self, a pitiful birth.” Like Chinese in general, pithy. And endlessly evocative. Another translation reads, “Fortunately, life is fundamentally wonderful.” In Dosho Port’s colloquial rendition, “Lucky guy and it sucks to be you.”

Life presents. Mysterious. Wonderful. And it is all part of the vermillion thread, the great mess that runs through life. All of that. And then a turning. With that turning, we must still take up the work of life. Rags and brooms, polishing and cleaning. Zen meditation and cooking. Sincere practice and child-rearing.

The koan could end there. But we get a bit more where the student shows his insight, only to be met with “mistake!” Like the proverbial box and its lid. Words and actions are it. And words and actions can never touch it.

This is the barrier we must pass through. And here we do. Here the urgency gives way to the vast process that is our inner life. Here we begin to understand this is less about what we do, and more about what we are. Although we also have to be careful. It is too easy to fall into that sense of what we do is our practice all along the way up to now, only to discover those moments were a snare, a trap, a tumble into a well.

The ego can be such a liar. And a very, very good liar at that.

As we arrive at this place, there is an authenticity to our seeing that our lives and our practice and the intimate way itself are not in any way different things. Not as an idea, a concept, but as our actual experience. We begin to find an ease with our lives, a comfort in our skins. Here some of the traditional fruits of the intimate way appear. We might find a certain joy. We can discover deeper currents of compassion coursing through our bodies.

It is a lovely moment. Please note “moment.”

17

Noonday Devil

> Each time something contingent and impermanent is raised to the status of something necessary and permanent, a devil is created. Whether it be an ego, a nation-state, or a religious belief, the result is the same.
>
> —Stephen Batchelor[1]

A friend once shared a quote with me. “The ancients may have been naïve in attributing everything to demons, but we moderns are naïve in thinking there are none at all.” He said it was by way of the Trappist monk Thomas Keating. I’ve searched around a bit and can’t find the source. But I’m much taken with the sentiment in the words and the cautions they carry.

I agree with the good father or whoever said it, maybe my friend, that noticing a few demons could be helpful to us moderns. As long as we’re careful about literalizing. There’s a famous story that took place at Tassajara Zen monastery in the mountains inland from Big Sur. Two of the monks there got into a knockdown kicking, punching fight—over the correct order of a liturgy. No doubt several demons were involved in the run-up to the fight and appeared in the middle of it.

So many things can become demonic in our lives. It can be the food. It can be the regime. It can be that person sitting next to you

who you suddenly realize is the devil incarnate. On retreat it can be dreams of home. Dreams of being anywhere but here.

In the convent or in the family home, or, really, in a small apartment all by ourselves, sometimes the demons just move in. They demand a beer and settle in for a good long evening.

Within the course of our lives those little numinous moments—lifting that fork, noticing the flower, feeling the evening air brush our cheek—can turn sour. We become frustrated at our lack of spiritual progress or just at anything. We're easily irritated. The many disappointments grow into betrayals—sometimes real, more often imagined. Hardly matters as we're feeling it, whether real or imagined. It is a lump in the brain, a demon of the mind.

Boredom can be the big one. I had a period of time with involuntary sighs. I'm sure it endeared me to my companions. In the moment I was fortunate none felt they needed to intervene. Knowing there is a better place, somewhere else, comes in almost in a tie with boredom. Anyone long attached to a Zen center has met people who've fallen into that well. They come and discover this is the place for them. Unlike all those bad places they'd been to before. But sooner or later, more likely sooner, they uncover the harsh truth. This is simply another of those inadequate centers, temples, churches, monasteries. And off they go.

The reality is that type of story is simply the more public version of such events. Most anyone who has started seriously into a spiritual discipline quickly discovers the harsh truth: it's filled with people just like them, like you, like me.

And that can be a significant disappointment. When you meet the demons of disappointment, do you have the courage to ask them to stay and have a chat?

—

The bottom of the well of spiritual disappointment can be dark and damp, or alternatively hot and dry. Perhaps we feel it is time to give up. Find a better way. Maybe something that involves hot tubs.

This may be just a moment, really, or moments, or hours, or days. Or it can go on for weeks and months. Some of those in quest of "the good Zen center" spend their lives in that same place, no matter where they put their bodies. In the Western tradition, this affliction is called *acedia.* While that word is Latin, most trace it back to the Greek for "negligence"—a lack of care that leads to listlessness, torpor.

The American writer Kathleen Norris explains the problem like this: "The person afflicted by acedia refuses to care or is incapable of doing so. When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, acedia offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is there, yet can't rouse yourself to give a damn."[2]

When it occurs in the early phases of our spiritual lives, it is giving up easily. The exit option taken at the first bumps in the road. It's that noticing, as master Seung Sahn said of zazen, that it's just plain boring and deciding to stop because of that. Later it takes on different shapes, and at some point it can become the infamous dark night of the soul. Or at least one way to encounter the dark night.

The term "noonday devil" is said to be an allusion to the sixth verse in Psalm 90: "In the morning it flourishes and grows up; in the evening it is cut down, and withers." It is the vanity of things. It's finding ourselves at the bottom of the well. How we face into the matter makes all the difference.

Some moderns equate acedia with depression. To my mind, there are points of connection between acedia and depression, but it isn't depression. Depression is a medical condition, while acedia is a spiritual matter. I actually prefer to call it a soul matter.

I sometimes refer to myself as a pseudo-Jungian, though I've never actually had much of a taste for Carl Jung's work. I think while he was some kind of artist of the heart, he also liked to pretend his

work was science. And that just annoyed me. But his disciple James Hillman, well, he's a horse of another color entirely, as is his subset of Jungian thought, archetypal psychology.

You may have noticed how spirit and self, and sometimes mind, are in our times all taken as synonyms for soul. However, like collapsing acedia into depression, this is a problem. Hillman suggests this represents a reductionism in our current culture leading to a simple Cartesian divide between the outer and inner worlds. We are vastly more complicated.

He writes compellingly of psyche, or soul, and spirit as aspects of our inner lives that can be usefully untangled from each other. For Hillman, spirit is our inclination to the big picture. And he is less interested in that than in attending to the many specifics, what he calls psyche or soul. In an interview for a Buddhist journal conducted by the writer and meditation teacher Wes Nisker, Hillman says, "Soul likes intimacy; spirit is uplifting. Soul gets hairy; spirit is bald. Spirit sees, even in the dark; soul feels its way, step by step, or needs a dog. Spirit shoots arrows; soul takes them in the chest."[3]

He doesn't see these things as objective, nor does he see a real divide, but rather inclinations. He is informed by a poetic sense of the mind, or the mind as poetry. I believe the gift Hillman brings to us is an invitation to worry less about the big picture, the wholes of things, and to bring our attention to the lively matter, the animal of our being, the messiness. Instead he is interested in "soul work" in our human imagination, in our fantasies, in the myths we humans spin. Hillman loves our propensity for metaphor.

Hillman's work guided me into a way to engage the classical Buddhist understanding of the three bodies. I discussed these early on as part of the foundations of Zen Buddhism. One is *nirmanakaya*, the realm of history and causality. Another is the *dharmakaya*, the realm of the absolute or vast empty. And the third is the *sambhogakaya*, the body of bliss, the realm of miracle. Or, as I see it, the realm of dream and story.

In this third place the absolute and the phenomenal meet, and there are eruptions—perhaps not disruptions of time and space but absolutely disruptions of our sense of what is—which are mighty close. Here I find much of my life.

For me, seeing the two views—the classical presentation of the three bodies of the Buddha and Hillman's unpacking of psyche and spirit—opened up a dynamic I keep experiencing in my own life. Seeing each in its imaginative dynamic points to something more livable than even what's suggested by the great truths of the identity of form and emptiness. Here we're in the realm of psyche or soul, of the sambhogakaya. And if we're serious, we can leverage our way into ever-greater depths.

Interestingly Psalm 90 is not traditionally considered to be the work of David, as are all the others. Instead it's a song attributed to Moses. And while acedia is there, early on, it is very much like a koan, pointing and inviting.

I've sat with this psalm over a long time, and with that my own version has emerged.

> Beloved, we have existed within you for all of our days.
> Before the earth was formed and the mountains arose, before stars and dreams, before any beginnings and all the endings, it is holy. You are holy. Even in the midst of our worst, you are there. And always you whisper a call to return.
> A thousand years for you are no more than yesterday, like a watch in the night. You are found in the rising flood and in the growing grass. And in our dreams.
> We are like the grass growing in the morning that is cut down in the evening. We are consumed in the play of the cosmos, indifferent to our joy and pain, and so often we miss the harmony of the worlds.

Our secret sins, our separation from the world and you brings consequences. And our years are as a tale that has been told. We live seventy years, or if we are strong, eighty. But strength and sorrow, it is quickly cut away, and we fly into our many parts.

Who knows the power of the cosmos and the consequences of our choices?

So, Beloved, teach us the way, teach us to notice our passing days, and turn our hearts to wisdom. Meet us in our struggles, satisfy us with mercy. Allow us to rejoice and be glad all of our days.

Make us to find our way into the flow of causes and conditions, let the way of harmony open for us, and let us come into your glory.

As your children, let the beauty of the heaven be upon us and establish in our hands the work of the holy.

The psalm begins as a lament. Although for me there are koanic elements, several turns that can be seen as *wato*, points to ponder. For instance, “Before any beginnings and all endings, it is holy. You are holy.” The scholarly translations track fairly closely, “from everlasting to everlasting,” or “from eternity to eternity,” and then tied inextricably, “you are God.” There are the attributes and then there is the moment where it all explodes. The wato, the point to ponder, is that God.

Of course all the other shapes of God from the divinity of our childhood to the stories of people trying to convince us of one thing or another to the focus of longing and petition—all of that folds in. And then those things might dissolve into the word: *God*.

The invitation from a Zen perspective, or I would say from a universalist perspective, is to notice the sacredness of the moment—to open oneself to the mystery the ancient Hebrews called God. Or actually, they avoided the word, preferring to circle around the

mystery like wild animals circling around a fire. The most important mysteries can't be approached too closely. And yet they're too compelling to just leave.

In a commentary on the Mu koan, the word becomes like a molten hot rock stuck in your throat. You can't spit it up, you can't swallow it down.

God can be experienced the same way. Everlasting. Eternal.

A moment that can be noticed as a truth to be experienced.

But the psalm is also a lament, an awareness of one's own insignificance. How we live seventy years, unless we're strong or lucky, then maybe eighty. These numbers are not all that far from what we can expect today. Here, noticing the passingness of our lives, it is easy to slip from a path of wonder into despair or its many emotional variations.

Or maybe just give up.

Not unlike being at the bottom of a well.

However, in the psalm, from that place there is a turning, a questioning, a calling out. Heart to heart.

And with that, from the bottom of the well, an invitation into a holy place.

So we find ourselves at the bottom of the well. Who knows what threw us down into that particular pit at that particular moment? Could be a touch of depression. Something, by the bye, not to be ignored. Depression is a medical condition, and usually calls for some form of intervention. And it rises within the spiritual journey pretty much as certainly as the sun rises in the east. To begin the journey is to fall prey to many things.

But if you recognize the lethargy that has caught you is of a slightly different sort, if it feels to be a matter of the soul, a sense that the world is a dry place and there seems no reason to continue on the spiritual path, then we're called into the dream realm, that place between the worlds of form and emptiness.

To notice the transience of the whole thing can be enervating. We notice it really is all passing. And that word *meaning* can quickly turn to *meaningless*, and with that the taste of dust. But in the poem, the ancient song said to be sung by our ancestor, the primordial human, it then takes a turn.

Like with the book of Job, we find a different kind of invitation. Something easy to miss when the world is a well. But as we look up, we also notice the night stars. At least if we're just a little lucky. And maybe we can even catch just the hint of an evening breeze.

People who don't understand the discipline often think that koans have no meaning or that they're non sequiturs intended to shock us out of our normal thinking patterns. If we're lucky perhaps we're shaken, maybe shocked, but not into some other place. Rather they point to the wisdom of the well, to the place we are.

The hint in this poem is found in the image of the divine. That's the second of the worlds. As Zen practitioners, if we see this divine holding the place for absolute emptiness, then magic begins to happen.

Seeing the dirt walls of the well, we also see the intricate patterns of connection. Perhaps we can just, just for a moment, let go of our stories. Even the good ones. Even the stories of wells and God and ancient songs.

We turn back to the matter at hand, not by avoiding but by going through. By our presence.

And if we can, if we do, then just trudging on we find once again we're on our way.

18

Wanting Something Else

> I have seen the freest and best educated…in the happiest circumstances the world can afford; yet it seemed that a cloud hung on their brow and they appeared serious and almost sad even in their pleasures [because they] never stop thinking of the good things they have not got.
>
> —Alexis de Tocqueville[1]

Among the various smaller and larger tragedies that have occurred during the process of Zen's taking root here in North America was what happened in the aftermath of the death of one of our more charismatic native-born Zen masters. He had established a major training temple, and after his passing, one of his senior successors was named abbot.

The new abbot had trained for many years and was seen as a clear-eyed teacher, but after a few years it all collapsed. While married, he had conducted an affair with someone outside of his community. That itself was damaging to many people, but there was something else going at the same time. He had become interested in the South American hallucinogen ayahuasca. It appears he gave dharma talks while intoxicated. He was asked to step down as abbot because of the affair, but it seems obvious his drug use was in the mix as well.

When I first heard it I thought, well, I've known of others who've given dharma talks while drunk. Taizan Maezumi, a Japanese Zen teacher central to the establishment of Zen in the West, and Chögyam Trungpa, a very prominent Tibetan master, popped up in my mind pretty much immediately.

I'm not by any means making excuses here. These are damaging acts and not to be euphemized with terms such as "crazy wisdom." Accepting the role of spiritual director comes with more stringent restraints on behavior than might otherwise be the case. The cure of souls, to use an old Christian phrase, is a powerful thing. And boundaries and consequences are important. But at the very least the new abbot's behavior wasn't completely anomalous—sexual misconduct and drug use have cropped up in teachers across many different Buddhist schools and lineages within North America and the West.

Coming at this from another angle, I recall how someone who had been interviewing Buddhist teachers for several years noted he'd never met a "full buddha." He was asked, *What should a "full buddha" look like?* and *How would you know?* The response was that there'd be no self.

Disgraced teachers on the one hand and some ideal of a teacher who has advanced to "no self" on the other—here I think we find a part of the problem and something worth pausing to consider. We've glimpsed the ox, maybe even given it a pat, but does that mean we're suddenly free to do whatever we like or free from any compulsion to do anything? This chapter is concerned with what happens after we've had a glimpse of our true nature. Let's take a look at the strange realities of self, emptiness, and our dogged tendency to *want something else.*

—

There are spiritual traditions that assert there is no self, that what we call our “selves” is a delusion, a dream, or a hallucination. Now, there are truths within such an assertion. But the principal point—certainly the point we find in Zen—is that of course there’s a self. To ignore that fact on the ground is a profound mistake.

The Zen take is not that there is no self but that our selves have no abiding quality. Our sense of self is the product of causes and conditions, genetics and history, all coming together in a moment. We call that moment our self. It can hang together for a while. In some sense, it’s a moment that runs from birth to death. Although, truthfully, it is changing all the time between birth and death. But there is some big part of it, a sense of continuity, a thread of memory. However true or illusory, though, it ends with the disruption of the elements that have come together to form a self-aware entity.

Buddhist metaphysics can obscure this point. And it is doubly complicated by the fact of variations of interpretation among the schools. While Tibetan Buddhism seems to teach a form of reincarnation, at least among their deepest-realized practitioners, most other schools speak of rebirth. The distinction is that in reincarnation one can posit something that moves from body to body, while in rebirth what passes from body to body are simply bundles of karmic consequences. More like one’s children than one’s self.

The critical point is impermanence. We’re real. We’re also impermanent. Much of our human suffering is our emotional and psychic response to that impermanence. This is the first noble truth of Buddhism. And a consequence of this fact on the ground is that we often experience impermanence as discontent, which sometimes becomes a sort of restlessness, which results in a chasing after something new. You can see this at any time you become bored.

There’s a corollary to this that is a secret teaching of the Mahayana, the great way. What we’re going to experience in our spiritual lives is no different than what we’re going to experience in

our physical lives. The sadness and joys of our existence continue before and after awakening.

That impermanence, that lack, that emptiness. It isn't just that everything dies. It's that everything is dying in every moment. And even more, that every moment is in itself empty—vacant, if you will. Dead. Life and death are bound up together as something that can be called one or, at the very least, not two.

So with that, our shortcomings, our failures, our personalities—they are the stuff of our awakening. This body in all its complexity, this mind in all its wonder, is the place where the magic happens. There is something kind of wonderful in this. But it is easy to miss, and once we notice it, it is easy to forget. This is part of the spiritual conundrum.

And it is a problem with the stories we tell ourselves about awakening and salvation. Most stories in most spiritual traditions say it's one and done. Mainly because that's true. To see deeply into the matter, to touch the heart of the matter, to have that experience of healing and salvation—that happens. But it happens within and as who we are. And that remains. Our bodies and our minds abide for as long as causes and conditions allow. And during that time, we find ourselves playing peekaboo with our true nature. Now we understand, now we don't.

For those of us who have trained in the koan system associated with the great eighteenth-century Japanese master Hakuin Ekaku, there is a choke point in our training. After we meet this emptiness and come to sense it as our own intimate truth, we're asked a question: What is the source of this emptiness? In some schools the question is put in more organic terms: What is the root of this emptiness?

We must touch this source, and we must do so with all our heart and mind and body. An interesting consequence to feeling this root is that many people experience a letdown. I had what I'd have to call a

moment of depression. A sense of lack and all that might mean negatively.

Touching the source of this emptiness is touching our ordinariness. It isn't This Very Body with capital letters; it is this very body. Yours. Mine. This one. Not some other. And it comes with all the same issues that were there when we began the journey. In Western traditions our human failings are noticed, as they say the spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak. And so a common prayer even among those who've thrown their hearts and bodies into the intimate way, is to remain constant to the end. The prayer because we know it doesn't have to end that way.

As the Zen poet Ryokan noted, "Last year, a foolish monk. This year, no change." After that magical touch of the ox, after that glimpse of our true nature—what about now? How is it different than before? Mostly it's going to be the same old boring person we were before.

There just isn't a lot of difference. If our insight is deep, like being struck in the heart with an arrow, we're graced with some quality, where no matter what happens, we never totally forget—although we can forget for long enough to do ourselves and others real damage. If our insight was more like being grazed by the arrow, we can just plain forget. It can so easily become a fading dream.

As a practical matter, we are wise to assume our insights are never steady-state. And we should always, always be cautious about what we think is so. When we experience boredom, we are actually being offered a moment to notice.

But before digging a bit further into that ordinary thing, boredom, let's make a detour to examine the aforementioned phrase *crazy wisdom.* This term refers to people whose realization manifests in ways contrary to cultural norms. It comes from the Tibetan tradition, though you can see the phenomenon it describes manifesting in different religious traditions. In Sufism, for example, there is the *madzub*, a person who is "divinely intoxicated." And we can find

examples of holy fools and kooky mystics throughout the history of religions.

But what about the former abbot—was he dabbling in crazy wisdom? He professed a need to continue to investigate the matter of his mind and said he found psychedelics seemed to help. They might. I have no hard view on the subject. But it was critical he resign his abbacy. Leading a community is a specialized task, and it had clear boundaries. And he had other things to tend to.

Such a move would have been more in keeping with the crazy-wisdom side of religion, as I understand it. For the most part, such ecstatics have excused themselves or have been excused by divine grace from meeting the world and its conventional expectations. It is a special calling. Although there are certainly cases where such people acted as spiritual directors, it's not the norm. It can be too confusing. So long as they keep within the bounds of their vows, it is fine to bow to their eccentricities. But not beyond them. When a teacher seems to be acting in a self-serving way, for the most part, it's wise to assume they are.

The same thing is true for us as practitioners of the intimate way. As pilgrims of the heart, we can pose ourselves questions about how we see our own thoughts and actions. What do we believe we're doing when we don't govern ourselves and what we do? Here the question is: How do we meet boredom and the desire for something new?

Like with medicine, the first vow of a serious spiritual practitioner is to do no harm. A more deeply phrased version of this question is: How do we meet ourselves and the world as full buddhas? Buddhas with desires and resentments and hatreds and endless foolish ideas that we're sure are as true as truth itself? All of these feelings are in fact gates into the mystery, yet by indulging them they become barriers.

The arts of the spiritual life are all about how to encounter the gates. In this case, how do we meet the obstacles of being ordinary

people? Confronted with the intimate truth that this moment and this place is the buddha-land, is heaven, how do we act?

I think of that abbot who resigned in the face of his scandal. I can envision a time when he incorporates his new explorations as a teacher in a new context. The world isn't done revealing itself, and we are particularly in a time that invites profound and wholehearted explorations beyond the boundaries of conventional religions. Time will tell.

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> A student of the way approached the master Dongshan and asked, "We're overtaken by heat and cold. How can we avoid these things?"
>
> Dongshan responded, "Perhaps you can go to that place where there is no heat or cold."
>
> The student was taken aback. "Where is that place, teacher?"
>
> The old master of the intimate way said, "When it is cold, let the cold kill you. When it is hot, let the heat kill you."[2]

Here I find myself returning to that observation made by de Tocqueville. He was observing early American culture, and he was, I believe, accurately describing a trait we Americans continue to have. At the time he was comparing Americans to poor people in unnamed European cultures he was aware of who seemed more satisfied with their lives. Actually this is a common observation of people who come from poorer cultures to more affluent ones. And a similar sentiment to one held by people who notice how little they may have had in their childhoods but never thought of themselves as poor. A designation they only realized was applicable to them after they grew up and became middle class.

Those who have studied the matter observe that money is important to happiness. In money cultures, at least. There is a saturation point beyond which more money doesn't make things better. That point is a bit of a moving target, and we don't need to try to hit it here. The question simply is, after attending to what needs attending, how do we meet the world? The real world. The world with loss and gain and constant changes and, of course, heat and cold. And boredom.

After we've touched the intimate matter, after we've seen into the deep possibilities of our lived lives, how do we meet our lives? Knowing that boredom and desire can be gates or boundaries, how do we live? Specifically knowing we are built dissatisfied, that our bodies want, how do we deal with it?

It turns out we're still pretty foolish.

Henry Thoreau—another of those people who walked deeply into the mystery but who was a bit more of a madzub than a personal guide—called us all to "simplify, simplify, simplify." He said to let one's affairs fall to two or three things. Probably not possible for most of us. But pruning and letting go are wise words.

I'm much taken with how the organizing consultant Marie Kondo originally counseled people to cut back on anything that they didn't need, or as she liked to say, to get rid of anything that doesn't spark joy. She became a celebrity. And while I was one of those who enjoyed a sort of mock offense at her suggestion to hold on to only a small number of books, I really thought her counsel generally made a lot of sense. But then she found her life complicated with children. Some people expressed disdain for her turn to a bit of a mess in her life. But me, I saw something of a pointer.

It's the answer to Dongshan's counsel to let the heat kill, to let the cold kill. We need to learn to meet the moment. Sometimes it's tidying. Sometimes it's living with a small tornado racing through your life. Observe, watch, witness. Return to the pillow. Notice. Judge as little as you can. And act when you must.

Remember, the desire for novelty is as natural as natural can be. And at some point it is harmful to the spiritual life.

Enjoy that cup of coffee or tea. Fully. And when you've finished the drink, put it down. Be wary of the temptations for a second or third cup.

Notice. Be aware. Meet the mystery. Even when it is boring. Especially when it is boring.

19

The Distant Song (Oxherding 6)

On the way of learning, we add something every day.
On the intimate way, we let go of something every day.
Less and less is done
until we arrive at nonaction.
Here nothing is done, and nothing is left undone.
Mastery of the way is discovered
when all things are allowed their course,
without interference.

—Tao Te Ching, chapter 48[1]

In the Greek pantheon, Persephone—also called Kore, the maiden—is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. More anciently, Demeter is the Earth Mother and therefore the goddess of life and death itself. Persephone is kidnapped by Hades, the god of the underworld. Demeter, not knowing what has happened to her daughter, is overcome with grief, which causes the earth to go barren, endangering all life on our planet.

Demeter wanders the stricken world seeking her daughter until she learns that Hades has kidnapped Persephone and made her his queen. Through the intervention of Zeus, the messenger Hermes is sent to reclaim Persephone. But having eaten some pomegranate seeds while in the land of the dead, Persephone must return from her mother's home back to hell for a season each year. And ever

since, during that season of absence, the earth begins to whither, only saved from sinking into endless night by Persephone's return to the surface each spring.

The rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries captured the essences of this story. While the secrets were successfully kept and we are not sure of the details of their rites, it seems a recalling of the story, perhaps enacted, with a revelation at the culmination of the rites, perhaps a presentation of grain, was deeply moving—well beyond my spare outline of what might have been done. This rite offered its devotees a spiritual discipline that pulled them right to the heart of the matter of life and death. Using the stories of the seasons personified by Demeter and Persephone—perhaps believing them literally, or perhaps not, but sensing some deep and personal truth—generations threw their hearts into a deep contemplation of this story.

I find that the story of Persephone and Demeter points to a place on our spiritual journey where the spiritual seeker discovers that the matter is in one sense resolved—in a sense, that is, not unlike resolving a koan. There is a presentation of profound truths about who we are within this world. Such a resolution does not fix everything but instead reveals our place in the great and sometimes terrible play of things. Guoan Shiyuan's verse for the sixth of the oxherding pictures captures such a moment where the sadness and mystery resolve.

> Riding the ox home, taking it easy,
> The flute's notes vanish in the evening haze.
> Tapping time to a folk song, happy as can be—
> It's all too much for words.

Persephone's story reveals our original innocence but also how it must be carried off by our lived lives. The Zen teacher John Tarrant tells us, "Whether fate carries us off or we actively seek the night, a

time comes when we identify with the dark, however involuntarily—when we marry and serve it."[2] There is much to be found in a reflection on our innocence and how life itself carries us away to some more broken but also more authentic place.

I imagine Persephone at ease with the ox. The need for muscle and energy is still there, but there is a harmony and with it a quiet sense of joyfulness. I picture Demeter's grief and longing and, within her search, her finding of a compromised and yet sufficient victory.

—

This quality of the sixth oxherding stage is captured in an interlinked set of three koans. I recall that when I first encountered them in my formal Zen training, they totally stunned me. I was far enough into the discipline to know koans are presentations of and invitations into the real. These invitations quite literally took my breath away.

As I heard the words come to me from my spiritual director's mouth, I realized he really was asking my questions, the ones that drove my spiritual quest from Baptist church through Vedanta to a Zen monastery and then a Unitarian Universalist church and now to being with this householder koan master.

These questions, rising from hurts that seemed never to quite heal, would coalesce for me around the many wounds of my life. And like with all those stories of spring—Demeter's quest, the Passover feast, Easter—I felt as a body longing to know how these questions were about my life, my death, and my eternal possibilities.

The three koans, which are given as questions, come from Doushuai Congyue, an eleventh-century Chinese monk. Doushuai's first question is: "You make your way through the wilderness on some great quest. Tell me, dear one, right now, where is your heart's answer?"

The second question follows like night follows day: "When you've found your heart's answer, you are free of the tangles of life and

death. So, dear one, as your life becomes death, where is your freedom?”

And finally, maybe the most haunting of all the questions: “When you die free of the tangles of life and death, you know where to go. So, dear one, when the elements of your being scatter in the winds, where do you go?”

These questions map exactly the story of Demeter, showing once again for me that the way of the heart’s wisdom is available to people of all faiths and, frankly, of none. Wisdom is our human heritage; our heart’s teaching is found in every corner of the globe. I know I see my own life, quest, and findings in Doushuai’s questions and in the story of Demeter. As I attended to them, they turned my heart in subtle ways, in useful ways.

So the first question. You wander the world, as Demeter wandered the world, seeking lost love. At that moment, at this moment of quest, where is your heart’s answer? For Demeter, her loneliness and grief were attenuated by the kindness of strangers. Wearing the guise of an old, old woman she was taken in, in one version of the story by royalty and in another by peasants. Whatever their state in the world, that kindness these mortals showed, that moment of care and attention, opened Demeter’s heart, and from it flowed all the arts of agriculture, cultivation, and all the ways we can bring ourselves into full life.

Doushuai calls us to stop and notice this moment. In the quest itself we can find the answer, all the answers. It is important not to skip ahead but rather to attend to wisdom of the longing heart, of your longing heart, of mine.

The searching finds a resolution. The searching turns out to reveal the whole mess.

And still there is another step. Here Demeter’s journey and the second of Doushuai’s points are unpacked. In the dream story of Demeter, her various parts, our various parts, are given names. Zeus, the great intellect, who had been complicit in Persephone’s

kidnapping, saw the hurt this caused and witnessed the possible death of the planet itself as a terrible consequence to his actions. With this he found his own heart broken. And with that happening within us, the mind's knowing becomes the heart's knowing, allowing death to join life, to let every blessed thing become part of the whole.

Another piece of the puzzle falls into place.

As that puzzle begins to shape into a larger picture, it births Hermes, who can move between the many realms and join them together. I love Hermes, the messenger of the gods and patron of travelers, merchants, thieves, and poets. On the spiritual way we make a mistake if we miss Hermes's central role on the quest. It is Hermes, the thieving, conniving deal cutter, who brings Persephone home, who allows the healing. And this matter is all about healing.

Perhaps your heart has broken? Not quite doing what you dreamed you would, suffering abandonment of one sort or another, experiencing illness or the impending death of yourself or someone you love. Experiencing death itself. The list of hurt is long. Of course, you know what your hurt is.

When we find this sadness in ourselves, there tend to be two responses. One is to be filled with the sorrow, to be lost in the sorrow, to drown in the sorrow. We have wounds, and the temptation is to poke them and probe them, endlessly, preventing any healing. And in truth, poked or not, some wounds never do heal. But even then, it just doesn't help to constantly jab a stick into it. And yet we do.

But there is something else that sometimes happens when we pay attention and are just a little lucky. Through the mediation of the Hermes of our hearts, the trickster who joins all things, we find the sorrow is part of something larger. Winged Hermes connects it all, and we find ourselves in the midst of sadness, surprised by joy. We find our hurt and our joy sit together as old friends. We find a larger world, a world that shuts nothing out but rather encompasses it all. Hurt, longing, the quest, finding, joy, and even death itself are one

thing. And like becoming one with the quest, this knowing, too, is enough.

And even yet there is one thing more, where Demeter's story maps Doushuai's third invitation, where an apparent barrier turns out to be a gate swung open.

Doushuai tells us that when we have joined all things, when we have united with life and death, we will know what to do next—we will know where to go. And I suggest this place is neither heaven nor hell, at least in the sense of going to some other place. When Demeter is enthroned and her daughter is at her side, it is the world itself that is healed, this place and no other.

When we come to realize the gods and goddesses are all aspects of ourselves and of the world, then we see how our actions can become the life divine. Informed by knowledge of our true nature, our hearts grow large.

That image of the seeker now one with the ox, resting easy on its broad back, playing a tune, echoing some distant song. Matching it. At one with it. An ancient grace.

20

Magic Lands

Once a dream did weave a shade
O'er my Angel-guarded bed,
That an Emmet lost its way
Where on grass methought I lay.

—William Blake

On the journey of riding the ox home, the pilgrim has a great deal of time to sit and practice. And a lot can happen in those outwardly stable, even boring-seeming moments of practice. The neuroscientist and longtime Zen practitioner James Austin notes that "intensive meditative concentration for weeks or months invariably yields visual or auditory aberrations, hallucinations, or unusual somatic experiences."[1] And I need to add that with a regular discipline, with or without monastery or retreat, these disruptions will usually come at some point.

There can be more than an experience of physical distortions. With our sense of balance being thrown off, our sense of the real can be challenged. Actually our ideas of *what is* all need to be challenged. And if we're authentic to the disciplines of the inner way, they will be.

So being unaware that disruptions likely will happen can trigger a lot of problems. If one has significant mental health issues, the side

effects of sustained practice can be an extended encounter with those old issues.

Today in Western Zen centers, applications to retreats often include questions about mental health. And people are, and certainly should be, cautioned about these dangers. These are dangers that are most evident during intensive retreat but that will occur—maybe more slowly, maybe not—with any significant commitment to the discipline.

Although we Westerners are learning to understand disruptive meditation experiences in relation to Western concepts of mental health or illness, such aberrational experiences are well documented in Zen and other Buddhist traditions. The Japanese word *makyo*, for instance, points in this direction. It consists of two characters, the first of which can mean *demon* or *magic*, while the second can be read as a *place, boundary*, or *condition.* The colloquial rendition I've most heard for makyo is "demonic interference." I've also heard it called the "demon cave," "ghost cave," and—perhaps my favorite rendition—"magic land."

Magic lands. A wonderful term for large parts of the spiritual life.

Let's look at the first intimations, the earliest strata of makyo. At the beginning of our practice life, mostly these are small things, physical or perceptual distortions that come across as experiences with little intrinsic meaning. I've seen things when facing a wall or gazing downward at the floor in zazen. Early on, the strangest of my persisting physical makyo was listing strongly to one side while feeling I was sitting upright. The monitor would correct my posture, gently pushing me back upright, and I would feel sure I was being pushed to an angle.

These experiences have no particular meaning. They don't convey secret messages. But they do tell us that how we sense the world is governed by many things, only some of them the objective world itself. Objectivity itself begins to get slippery. And noticing the slipperiness is foundational, at least so long as we don't impute deep

meaning beyond that realization about our senses and the information they convey.

Makyo can take on much larger contours as well. It is not uncommon for practitioners to have full-blown visions. These can be at the edge of consciousness, similar to a waking dream, where one can experience it while being aware it is a mental state. Robert Aitken Roshi describes one: “I experienced a makyo in which I was seated on the floor of a huge old stone temple, with enormous pillars extending to a lofty ceiling. Very tall monks dressed in black walked slowly around me in a circle reciting sutras in deep voices. The total experience had the flavor of something from the ancient past.”[2]

These visions can completely take over for a time, carry us fully into the dream. And they are not necessarily limited to our time in meditation.

I had a major visionary experience of my own. It happened during a Zen meditation retreat, but not on the pillow. Sitting in a chair in a rest area, I had a vision of Jesus walking toward me, his hands together palm to palm like the Christian prayer mudra, Hindu namaste, or Zen’s *gassho*. He was saying, “I have a great gift for you.”

My immediate thought was of my childhood Jesus, the one with all the little children. And I felt waves of love washing over me. Then he spread his hands to reveal those infamous bleeding wounds. A terrible visceral fear leapt into my throat as he then grasped my own hands with those bleeding hands. And with that, the pain of worlds birthing and dying ran from his wounds into what are now mine. And then it was over. I was back at the retreat. The physical residual was that my hands hurt for weeks. To this day I can still sense an echo of that hurt.

For me, within the makyo aspects there was an intimate encounter. As it happened, it was a meeting of the world and the great empty. That reality of form and emptiness is experienced in a lot of different ways. In that moment as a crucifixion. The experience

departed from the relatively cold-blooded formulation “form is emptiness” and took me into suffering and joy, and…

But in that moment, I took the guidance of my teachers and simply let the experience happen, and also let it go. Then it could do whatever work needed doing within the dark places of my heart. And that touch has continued its unfolding.

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In the *Surangama Sutra*, chapter 10 speaks to “demonic” states of mind. It asserts that, once you have learned the practices and are engaging them, if you’re not wary, or if you don’t find the deeper perspectives, you may not recognize what’s happening when such a state sets in. And if you don’t, danger awaits. Altered states, visions, sensations of changed perspective such as noticing oneself from above or outside of oneself, experiences that resemble paranormal accounts. Visits from Jesus.

Whatever they are, the best way to meet them is simple enough, Zen teacher 101: “Don’t worry. This will pass.” Experience it. Let it go.

The touchstone of practice of the spiritual way when encountering any state, beautiful or ugly, is recollecting that all things pass. Including, always including, this state. Indeed, in the end, there is no need to judge the state as demonic or magic. Just notice it and remember it isn’t permanent.

Grasping the state, holding it as important—quickly, magic can transform into a demon. I don’t say it *isn’t* important; I say don’t *hold it* as important. For me, it was critical to let the vision of Jesus and my hurting hands play out. The substance of such things comes along later. Mostly things dissolve into memory. Sometimes it is the beginning of greater unfolding. But to assume anything other than this *too will pass is* a mistake.

The *Surangama Sutra* lists fifty demonic states of mind. I think there are vastly more than that. These states are limited only by the limitations of our own specific personal conditioned existence. Limited only by our bodies and our emergent minds. I see such states as the visitations of aspects of our minds—usually of our longings or our needs. If we wait, sometimes things will be revealed.

What gets revealed? Feelings about sex are a big one. But our longings for money or other forms of power are also often present. These and all the rest are important to notice as they arise. But we also need to be careful of their seductions. It's easy to mistake the manifestations of our deeper longings as transcendent truths.

Among these, one of the more seductive is a sensation that appears to transcend physical longings, such as a visit from Jesus sharing the pain of his reconciliation of the hurt of the world with the divine. It's an easy step to all sorts of inflation. Lots of invitations into inflations. Lots of invitations into despair and self-abnegation, as well. Whatever your hidden demons are, no matter how well hidden, they will eventually find themselves invited into consciousness.

This is why it's critical to embrace a certain humility. Take to heart the lesson that what you think is not always so. Recall that everything is in flux, and things rise and fall following their own currents. Then makyo experiences simply become one more marker on the way. They are simply a revelation that the worlds of our lives are fluid and mysterious.

—

An old friend, a Zen teacher, read an early draft of this book and asked me why I thought that my vision of Jesus was an example of a makyo rather than some kind of deeper intimation. Perhaps, they conjectured, I'd had an awakening experience there among the bursting stars and pain and blood. The underlying question is, How is makyo different from kensho? How are these visionary moments,

disruptions of our sense of the real, different than the graces of awakening?

Some suggest there is no distinction, and there is an element of truth in that. The particular is always incomplete, so any personal encounter of necessity includes and excludes. But also the universal—the open, the boundless, what in some traditions is called the divine—is only known in the particular. It's a little joke the universe likes to play. Here we discover sometimes makyo experiences are also kenshos. And, of course, we have insights that can turn into delusions depending on how we meet them.

But it isn't in fact all that hard to tell the difference most of the time. The chief difference is that awakenings are into the boundless and the relationships of our particular lives with that boundless. Open. Empty. Yes, God. The thing we are meeting is the thing we are not. The moment in time and space where all things dissolve, the luminous dark that empties itself. Where it meets me. You. Us. This world.

Awakening is always about intimacy.

Makyo may touch that level of intimacy, and it can certainly open up as kensho, but mostly it falls short. Mostly it involves disruptions of our sense of stability. Nevertheless, held lightly, these are pointers for continuing the way.

In my own life, that encounter with Jesus is now a story, polished with the retelling. So I don't take it seriously. That's not quite the right language. Rather, I take that vision deadly seriously, but I also hold it lightly. I collect it with other such moments that have gathered within my life. I hold it as part of a world of experiences. It is part of who I am. And in that part I see into something mysterious and true.

With all this, a word of counsel. Whether you're in a monastery or your life turns to getting the kids to school and keeping the house halfway clean, consider your encounters in the world, all of them, as one makyo after another. Remember, this too will pass. Yes, as the wag says, it may pass like a kidney stone, but it will pass. And it

might be the most joyful thing in the world. It might be watching a child take their first step. You may want with all your heart for it not to pass. But this too will pass. Let it happen. Show up. Be present. And when it is time, let it pass.

If you're seeking the wise heart, accept the disruption of what you might ordinarily consider "real," and don't chase after these disruptions. Rather, let them come to you. As they will. Be present. And when they come, hold them lightly. Sincerely, passionately even. But don't squeeze the life out of your encounters. Hold them with open hands, like a master rider would hold the reins of their ox.

21

Love, the Four Abodes, and Near Enemies to Our Practice

> Do not send me away. Do not tell me not to follow you. Wherever you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. And wherever you are buried, there I will be buried.
>
> —Ruth 1:16–17

I find the image of the ox and the quest that turns into a ride and ever-deeper truths about us and the world one of the great images of world spirituality. However, given the limitations of the images, there are aspects to the intimate way that if we're not careful might lead us to miss very important aspects on our way.

When it is stripped to its essentials, I find the good of the Christian religion boils down to one thing—that passing, strange word *love.* Love is an attempt to bridge the gap between the pain of our human isolation and some mysterious force that calls everything together. Within the Christian tradition that force is called love. Probably love with a capital *L*. But here let's leave off the capital letters.

To me, one of the strongest evocations of the Christian sense of love comes in 1 Corinthians 13:

> If I speak in the tongues of people and of angels, but do not love, I am a clashing gong or a clanging cymbal. If I can prophecy, and understand the mysteries, and possess all knowledge, and if I have complete faith, and can even move mountains, but do not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I own, and even if I deliver my body, but do not love, I have nothing.
>
> Love is patient, it is kind. Love is not jealous. It does not boast, nor is it arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on having its own way. Not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in any wrong, but rejoices in all good. Love bears and believes and hopes and endures.
>
> Love is forever. Prophecies pass away. Tongues of the spirit pass away. Even knowledge passes away. Knowledge is imperfect, prophecy is imperfect. But when the perfect arives the imperfect passes away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I gave up my childish ways. Now we see in a mirror darkly, but then it will be clear. Now I know partially, but then I will understand fully. Even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three. But of these the greatest is love.

When I look at Buddhism, the place where I find the closest analog to Christian love is in loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is one of the *brahmaviharas*, literally the “abodes of brahma.” They are the cardinal virtues of the Buddhist way. In fact, they’re older than Buddhism, but the Buddha adopted and adapted them to his own purposes. And they’re a pretty good description of the mess that I am reaching for when I say love.

It seems it was the great scholar-practitioner Buddhaghosa who first mapped out a formal meditation discipline based on these four abodes in his fifth-century classic, the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Path of*

Purification. Although for many of us in the Western community it hasn't been Buddhaghosa but rather the Vajrayana nun Pema Chödrön and the insight-meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg who have been the principal interpreters of loving-kindness as a spiritual practice.

The abodes are *metta*, which is most commonly translated as "loving-kindness"; *karuna*, mostly translated as "compassion"; *mudita*, usually translated as "sympathetic joy"; and *upekkha*, mostly rendered as "equanimity." Each of these terms can be further unpacked.

Metta invites a forest of translations. These include "friendliness" and "benevolence." I think these terms shade into the English neologism loving-kindness.

Karuna is almost always translated as "compassion," although I've found it rendered as "empathy" once or twice. Which, again, adds shades to the word.

"Sympathetic joy," like "loving-kindness," reveals the difficulties when there is no precise translation. Although I found it really helpful when I read Stephen Batchelor explain mudita as the opposite of schadenfreude.

Upekkha calls forward a term, "equanimity," that usually stays at the edge of common usage in our culture. The only other word I've seen used to translate upekkha is even more obtuse, "equipoise." I'd prefer more familiar terms like balance or harmony.

These abodes can be seen both as descriptive of the awakened mind and as practices, a lovely dual sense of preparation and doing. Like love itself, they are dynamic. They also inform each other. And when taken together, they present the unfolding mystery of creation —at least as we humans can experience it.

These abodes are known to have "far enemies," which are their opposites. And they have "near enemies," which seem similar to the abodes but that do not bear healthful fruits.

Let's start with the far enemies. The far enemy of loving-kindness is hatred. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty. The far enemy of sympathetic joy is envy, or perhaps that schadenfreude. And the far enemy of equanimity is prejudice.

I think of hatred, cruelty, envy, and prejudice as the demonic side of our personalities. These are the poisons of our human condition. To me their naming is reminiscent of two other demonic beings, the two children sheltered by the spirit of Christmas in Dickens's *Christmas Carol.* The boy "ignorance" and the girl "want." The Spirit warns Scrooge that they are humanity's children. And "Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy."[1]

Warnings piled upon warnings here. Along with endless invitations.

The near enemies aren't nearly as obvious as the far ones. Instead, think tawdry substitutes. Fool's gold, if you will. The near enemy of loving-kindness is attachment. The near enemy of compassion is pity. The near enemy of sympathetic joy is euphoria or overexcitement. And the near enemy of equanimity is indifference.

Actually there are many more than these, but they're pretty good stand-ins for all the near misses of our spiritual lives. As an example, Pema Chödrön notes that the near enemies of compassion not only include pity but also helplessness and what she calls "idiot compassion."

The term *idiot compassion* was coined by her teacher Chögyam Trungpa for when we try to help but forget ourselves and our needs in the equation, and with that cause our own suffering to add on to that of the person we set out to help. This reminds me of the *Giving Tree*, the once wildly popular children's book where the tree gives and gives, even to the point of its own life, to make the child (and later the man) happy. I notice that the boy and then man never seems satisfied. Think doormat. Doormat is not compassion.

—

Let's consider a koan, case 10 from the *Gateless Gate*, to take a deeper look at how particularly seductive these near enemies of our practice and our awakening can be. In this instance, the sought-after abode is compassion, and while its far enemy would be cruelty, its near enemy is pity.

A student of the intimate way came to the master Caoshan Benji. He said, "My name is Qingshui. I am solitary and destitute. Please give me alms."

There are several ways to take Qingshui and his request. But for now let's take it as we hear it. What is the right response? How do we meet the needs of the world?

Sometimes we're talking about actual hunger and thirst—the needs of our bodies. How do we meet them for ourselves and others? What can we do? Make a sandwich? Work to change a social policy? What part of our own life goes to this? And how do we see what we cannot do?

And what about spiritual needs? What about the thirst of the monk, Qingshui? What about the alms that he needs and that we need?

Compassion demands that we turn toward, not away.

Caoshan replied to solitary and destitute Qingshui, "You have already drunk three cups of fine Hakka wine and still you say that you have not yet moistened your lips."

There are any number of ways we can take Caoshan's reply. Dismissive. Given how we read the text, it can be seen as cruel. Literal thirst after all requires literal water. But even if it's read as it usually is as a request for spiritual direction, it can seem abrupt. But avoiding all sorts of seductions that attend to teaching, Caoshan avoids taking a high seat, he avoids pity, and instead he offers him the alms his heart has been asking for.

If we open our grasping, if we allow the universe to present, then the solitary is never alone, and the poverty Qingshui is referring to is a cornucopia of wealth.

The taste of wine.

22

Seeing the Cycles, Letting Things Be

The fullness of joy is to behold God in all.

—Julian of Norwich[1]

This is a good place to look at case 36 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, which presents a koan about the present moment:

One day Changsha went off to wander in the mountains. When he returned, the temple director met him at the gate and asked, “So, where have you been?”

Changsha replied, “I’ve been strolling about in the hills.”

“Which way did you go?”

“I went out following the scented grasses and came back chasing the falling flowers.”

The director smiled. “That’s exactly the feeling of spring.”

Changsha, agreed, adding, “It’s better than autumn dew falling on lotuses.”

One of those lovely quotes attributed to Mark Twain is “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” It appears he didn’t say that. Someone who dug into the matter does find him writing in the introduction to his *Gilded Age* a rather more cumbersome “History

never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends."[2]

To be honest about it, while I really like "rhymes," "kaleidoscopic combinations" is probably even better. What we tend to experience in our lives is how things roll, not in circles but more or less in cycles. Rhymes, perhaps. Kaleidoscopic combinations, for sure. Cycles, great arcs with their own mysterious origins and endings, but played out in their variety over the course of lives and history and onto much larger canvases than our imaginations can capture.

And within it all, well, many things. And along the arc in its motion there are points. Endings and beginnings. Sometimes autumn dew. Sometimes scented grasses. Sometimes birth. Sometimes death.

Of course it's not all just a walk in the hills and a contemplation of spring and autumn. Here in Southern California as I write this there's burning heat. The heat of this moment is another reminder, another pointer, if we are willing to let it be so.

Our teacher Eihei Dogen offers a challenge to the cycles. "Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Yet, do not suppose that the ash is future and the firewood past."[3] Another point. And another angle of the arc.

Beginning to turn toward the mysteries of a dynamic presence can challenge our conventional understandings of how things are. Of course there was firewood and now there is ash. But in this path, on our seeking to unpack intimacy and to discover our true selves, we are constantly surprised. Sometimes it's by joy. But not always. Sometimes we even slip from one arc into another.

On this path we need to be prepared, as best we can, to discover we're less prepared to meet the moment than we might think. Especially as we're thinking only with our heads. But that's also okay, because things are also connected. But here we're invited to look past the veil, to notice something. It only requires shifting our perspective a bit. And perhaps, instead of hearing hoofbeats and

assuming horses, to hear those hoofbeats and suspect, well, maybe zebras.

Dogen invites us to notice the firewood—really notice it. He invites us to notice the ash. Each a moment. Each a barrier or each an open gate. So what might we discover as we give our hearts to the moment?

We're so caught up in the business of our lives. Our intimate griefs and joys. It takes something to pull the membrane of our routine thin and to allow us to see that larger place. We might notice this when, as it is for me right now, knowing one of the cycles is coming to an end. And for each of us differing cycles are beginning.

Here we are in the flow of our lives. So many things happening. Each of us following the stars of our own lives. Each part its own cycle. It's within that context I've found myself thinking of that little story of Changsha and his stroll.

—

The *Blue Cliff Record*, from which the Changsha story is drawn, had several editors. Xuedou was the first, gathering the one hundred stories of the *Blue Cliff* sometime in the eleventh century and adding a word or two of his own by way of comment. Xuedou's comments are usually pithy and often cut through right to the heart of the matter. In fact, as this particular case is published, it includes a little coda from Xuedou. After Changsha's description of following scented grasses and falling flowers, the director's appreciation, and Changsha's pointed conclusion, Xuedou adds his own: "I'm grateful for this answer."

Me too. It points us on with a gentle hand. Gentler than most stories from the treasure trove of spiritual teachings gathered by the Chinese Zen masters. Yet his pointer remains just as compelling, just as urgent. This story of spring flowers and autumn dew points

directly to the secret of our path, the path of the intimate way. A way of grace.

First let's look at the line "I went out following the scented grasses." Everything is in flower, as those among us with allergies can attest about that season. The world is alive as Changsha walks in the countryside—inhabiting that moment and not some other.

But also there's that line about the autumn dew: "It's better than autumn dew falling on lotuses." Here we're also reminded of—and really invited into—the cosmic play, found for us as flashes of insight throughout our lives but most commonly noticed when we're quiet.

We might prefer the scented grasses, but really the autumn dew is just as precious, just as passing, just as beautiful. Each is, or can be, our intimation of interconnections so very vast that you and I—indeed everything we can name—collapses, like a star pulled into a black hole, where even words like *interconnected web*, or my preferred term *boundless*, all slightly miss the point.

Firewood. Ashes. Birth. Death. Before. After. This. This.

All this seen within the cycles, ordinary time and special time, children growing up and assuming their places as adults, adults living through their own cycles, each of us living and dying in our own time, cycles within cycles. Mind you, cycles, not circles, which are static things and allow no change. Cycles are more like spirals where things change, although often in subtle and frequently mysterious ways. Ways we rarely completely notice. Seeing the cycles and the larger cycles opens our hearts, reveals the powers of love. It is love that dances within and between and as the cycles.

The vastness of the universe can feel frightening. After all, it shows us instantly how insignificant our individual lives are. But we persist and lean into the vastness, and we begin to notice those cycles connecting it all. This is the good news of all authentic religion. And then, perhaps, possibly, with just the smallest of surrenders, we can discover the eruptions of love. We know justice

is what love looks like in action. But before that, love is what we discover as we surrender into the great play of what is.

Perhaps you've had that taste of reality in all its vastness. It's a gift to humanity, encountered by rich and poor, by educated and ignorant. Now and then we all catch a moment of its truth, like a flash of lightning in a summer storm. Or maybe it just haunts an occasional dream.

The deep connections of which our tradition sings—the perspective that we are all woven together so fine that we can't even find our separateness—this is an important encounter. I would even call it the God beyond God. The God that is a koan, an assertion of some great mystery together with an invitation. Again words reach, but always, at least in these matters of our hearts, words fail, collapsing into something more than that black hole. Yet for those of us who've noticed this experience, we might recognize that description of autumn dew falling on a lotus.

And it is important to notice this big thing, however we name it. It ties us together and puts the lie of our separateness and our sense of isolation to rest. But Changsha adds in something. We find that vastness nowhere but in things—and not things in general but specific things. The person sitting next to you reveals that whole. Your own experience of this moment manifests the universe itself and the space beyond naming. The whole interdependent web is revealed in a single flower. Even when the ride on the ox is at its very smoothest, you can still feel the most particular undulations of its body navigating the path.

We come into this place, we open our hearts, and miracles abound. We see the cycles; we find the mysterious connections as nothing less than love. And from that, from this love, we reach out. Our lives become gifts to other lives.

By attending to what is happening, we notice it. Love like electricity. Love like life-giving blood. In noticing the love that

connects and binds and enlivens, new possibilities are allowed to birth. Whole new worlds.

Changsha calls us to the world of the precious individual, of scented flowers. Here we're invited to see how that boundless place, that black hole of all ideas and separateness, is also this place. Everything may be tied up together in some great cosmic play that is so vast our words fail to convey it. But it is also nothing other than you and me.

The cycles all joined together. Like garlands of flowers. Our individual lives like the gift of a flower. Fragile. Beautiful. The dying already in the living. And letting things be. No cause. No effect. Just this.

And mysteriously, but truly: fully enough.

23

View from the Mountain (Oxherding 7)

What is the sound of the single hand atop Mount Tamalpais?

—Zen koan

I came to koan practice after some years on the Zen way. I'd lived in a monastery, been ordained a priest, and even been confirmed as a teacher. Then I'd left that community and wandered for several years, unclear as to what my path really was. Then I found zazen again, from a simpler perspective. More as a heart practice, more mine than it seemed before. And then I found the koan way.

Koan Zen recognizes the deep questions we all carry. For me, as we've seen, that was first, *Is there a God?* And then, *What is God?* Koans are artificial in the best sense of artifice: the work of art. If you don't have a question you can identify, pop open a koan collection and you'll soon find a perfectly good one. If you do have a question already, koans can be remarkable tools for turning it over to see it from innumerable angles.

An authentically held koan carries all the echoes of our longing hearts along with certain assertions about where we can find our answers.

When I found my primary spiritual director for that discipline, relatively early in the practice he asked me, "What is the sound of

the single hand atop Mount Tamalpais?" It would turn out his teacher gave him the question as "What is the sound of the single hand atop Diamond Head?" And that teacher's teacher was asked, "What is the sound of the single hand atop Mount Fuji?" One mountain with many names. And, of course, that single hand.

For me the single hand sounded atop Mount Tamalpais, which looms over the Bay Area in Marin County, north of San Francisco. It's a dominant feature of the greater Bay Area.

The sound of the single hand—more specifically "What is the sound of the single hand?"—is one of the primary koans. It was introduced into the practice by the eighteenth-century Japanese Rinzai master Hakuin Ekaku. He drew upon a comment by Xuedou Chongxian, the editor of an eleventh-century Chinese koan anthology. Reflecting on a case called "The National Teacher's Seamless Tomb," Xuedou observed at the turning point of that story, "The single palm of the hand does not make a sound in vain."

Hakuin said, I can work with that. And the question he formulated has now entered our common American lexicon. For most within the culture, it is a riddle with silly responses, mostly looking for ways to make a sound with a single hand. And I like that.

However, in the midst of the silliness, like the koan Mu it points directly to the fundamental matter, to that place of our heart's longing. It invites us. Then, if we find our way into that mystery, we encounter a series of questions that on the one hand (there's that single hand again!) check the quality of our insight into the matter. And equally, with that other hand (if it's actually another hand), invite us into a deeper consideration of the great gift that we're born into.

Koans call for specificity. In this instance, the koan calls us to a mountain. Perhaps it's the mountain of legend, the one that we're ascending on our spiritual journey. I think of Mount Carmel and Mount Sinai. I think of Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva. I think of Vulture Peak, sometimes called Eagle Peak. In the *Lotus Sutra* the mystery is sung to us like this:

When living beings have become truly faithful,
honest and upright, gentle in intent,
Single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha,
not hesitating even if it costs them their lives,
then I and the assembly of monks
appear together on Holy Eagle Peak[1]

Eagle Peak. Vulture Peak. Mount Fuji. Diamond Head. Mount Tam, as I know it, looms large in my imagination, with its many grass-covered hillsides, chaparral ridges, and clusters of oak. The first peoples there, today called the Coast Miwok, lived on its slopes or in its views until European contact and the devastations that followed. *Tamalpais* is Miwok for “coast mountain,” or perhaps “mountain by the bay.”

It’s a mountain I am familiar with. A mountain for me haunted with memories—my own and of my people. In 1965 the poets and Buddhist converts Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Allen Ginsberg famously circumambulated the mountain, re-creating an ancient Buddhist practice called “opening the mountain.” Others have continued that tradition annually ever since. Another dharma ancestor, Alan Watts, had a cabin on the slopes of the mountain and died there. That mountain.

I’d been told that in some creation stories, Mount Tam was the right eye of the great turtle that is North America. And there were stories the Miwok had a taboo against standing at the peak, as it was the home of a powerful witch. Another story says the mountain was created by the gods from the body of a brokenhearted maiden. That mountain.

In 1980 I was aware of a serial killer who haunted the mountain. That mountain.

I recall as a young Zen monk attending a Buddhist ceremony there in which birds were released from captivity. After the ceremony, the Chan abbot who had invited, among others, representatives from

our Japanese lineage monastery lectured me on the inappropriateness of being ordained by a woman. I recall hikes with friends. I recall sitting with Jan on one of the slopes looking out at the evening sky and the vistas of Marin County. That mountain.

Zen priests installed as abbots are said to ascend the mountain. That mountain.

What is the sound of the single hand on top of that mountain?

—

We take up our practices, we wander deep into the way. We find guides. We encounter monsters and beings of delight. We live deep. Our hearts break into a hundred shards. Our hearts mend, but with golden lines—not always stronger, as the stories go, but veinlike and very much connecting the shards. And then at some point, if the stars align and we are just a little lucky, we notice. We see. We feel. We hear the sound. We find the hand. We ascend to the peak of the mountain—the mountain where the Buddha is.

Then. Now. In this moment, it is all recalled. All our past lives are no other than the breeze of this moment. The future is nothing other than the soil. Some places thick, dark, and rich. At other places thin, rocky, and acidic. Dreams and reality coalesce. And in that same moment, it is all forgotten, cloud-hidden. No longer is there something separate from this moment.

The clouds break and the sun shines. Here it is bright. In the legends of our way it is said when the Buddha was born he took seven steps, pointed to the earth with one hand and the sky with another and declared, “Throughout the heavens and the earth, I alone am the holy one.” Bright as the light of a thousand suns.

In ninth-century China, a student of the intimate way came to Zhaozhou and remarked, “It’s said the intimate way is not difficult. It simply avoids picking and choosing.” A trope of the way, a pointer

and an invitation. Then he asked the question, “What is not-picking, and what is not-choosing?”

The master replied, “Throughout the heavens and the earth, I alone am the holy one.”

Zhaozhou’s reply invites me to be here in this moment. At this time. In this place, which is also standing at the top of the peak, smelling the wind, feeling the heat of the sun and the coolness of the breeze. Birds and flies flitting. Life all around. And the vista—the bright, clear vista.

This is an arrival still filled with our practices, our perspectives, and the many pointers handed down from our ancestors on the intimate way. Now we are home. No more need to do. Just being. Just be.

In the path of the ten oxherding pictures, this being at home is depicted in the seventh picture.

Reaching home on the back of the ox,
Rest now, the ox forgotten.
Taking a nap under the noon sun,
Whip and rope abandoned behind the hut.

It’s said that when you’ve crossed the river you should leave the raft at the shore. Here we see through the metaphors and images—the hands and mountains, the oxen and cranes—that have been our companions on the way. We don’t need them now because what they point to and who we are are no longer divided. We step beyond inside and out.

Even theologies and dharmas vanish. God’s face is revealed. The koan answered.

And here we are. You. Me. We are inseparable from the whole mess of this world. It is as clear as the fingers on your hand.

Gratitude arises from within. Why? I can’t say. But it is the feeling that bubbles up from the depths. When there are no longer two

truths, the world becomes a single hallelujah.

A peace that passes all understanding, bright as a thousand suns.

24

The Grace of the Real

> Try to keep your soul always in peace and quiet, always ready for whatever our Lord may wish to work in you. It is certainly a higher virtue of the soul, and a greater grace, to be able to enjoy the Lord in different times and different places than in one only.
>
> —Ignatius of Loyola[1]

There's a social media meme going around that purports to be an analysis of cockroach opinion. Apparently they see the future looking pretty good for themselves. As far as human beings go, we seem a textbook example of success carrying within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Overpopulation and ecological catastrophe seem to go hand in hand with our human excesses and, with that, hand in hand on over the cliff we go. So the prospect for humans is maybe a bit less optimistic than for cockroaches. And the truth is, even with the prospect of our near immediate demise, a fact that lards through our being and always has, we are nonetheless home.

With that, I find myself thinking about another Zen story, one that invites the deeper matters of life and death. It's another from the *Blue Cliff Record*, the sixth story in the collection. As we consider our lives, as we look at how hard things can be, both in our individual lives and communally, and as our practice begins to mature, we need to see as clearly as we humans can. We need to find that

illusive thing that is sometimes called “the real.” In this Zen story we are told:

> Yunmen asked his assembly, “I don’t ask you about before the fifteenth of the month. Tell me something about after the fifteenth.”
>
> No one spoke, so he responded himself, “Every day is a good day.”

This is no non sequitur. In East Asian cultures, the fifteenth is the time of the full moon and is a common metaphor for the moment of awakening. And awakening is our stirring from the slumbers of our certainties, the ideas and beliefs that prevent us from seeing what’s actually going on, and from there into the real.

So it probably is helpful to note that Yunmen lived in harsh, politically unstable times. Armies were on the march, and famine and danger were the common currency of the day. The possibility of bad endings was more along the line of probability. Knowing that, it would be very hard to take his phrase “every day is a good day” as meaning “don’t worry, be happy.” This good day carries with it a solid chance of ending very badly. The phrase is all about the real.

The real. Here we find ourselves in the place where our mortality is inevitable. One could say in a certain sense we and the whole world are already dead. It is that close to us, as close as our beating hearts. The necessary corollary here is that in this precious moment we are also eternally alive.

We both live in a world of endless causes and conditions arising and changing, where each passing moment contains all that was and all that will be, and, and, another thing. We discover this over time. It is a both/and. And that time brings with it sickness and old age and death, as well as every conceivable joy. With all that sickness, old age, and death and every conceivable joy, we can find a certain grace.

I recently found myself thinking of Margery Williams's lovely and in some ways sad story, *The Velveteen Rabbit: Or, How Toys Become Real.* And specifically of one passage:

> "What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"
>
> "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but Really loves you, then you become Real."
>
> "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.
>
> "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."
>
> "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"
>
> "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.
>
> Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get all loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."[2]

Me, I believe that koan from twelfth-century China and this novel from early twentieth-century America fit together like a box and its lid.

—

Margery Winifred Williams was born in London in 1881. She was the youngest of four children. Her father, Robert, was a British barrister as well as a fellow at Merton College, Oxford, where he taught classics. Her mother, Florence, was the daughter of an Oxford librarian and steeped in that traditional intellectual culture. However, Margery's father died when she was seven. And not long after, her eldest sister died as well. Everything was disrupted.

Three years later, her mother took the surviving children on an extended visit to America. Margery attended schools in New York and later Pennsylvania. She would carry the marks of this Anglo-American experience throughout her life.

Her father seemed to haunt her. She credits his love of literature and his untimely death as profound markers for her. And her writing would always show a sensitivity to the fragility of life and the reality of death in ways unusual for children's books.

Margery's first novel, *The Late Returning*, was published when she was nineteen, not long after she and her mother returned to England. At twenty-one she married Francesco Bianco, an Italian national and rare book dealer. They had two children, Francesco Marco and Pamela. Pamela grew up to be an artist and illustrator. The family traveled and settled for varying amounts of time in England, France, Italy, and England again before finally settling in the United States. From there the family's home base would remain America. Margery died in New York in 1944.

I find noteworthy threads in Margery's spiritual life. The family had been raised Anglican, but in the turmoil following her father's and sister's deaths, their mother converted to Catholicism and brought the children with her. In fact, Margery's upbringing included two years in a convent school. So classics and Catholicism are part of her deep background.

Actually, she credits the poet Walter John de la Mare as her "spiritual mentor." One obituary of de la Mare hints at the substance of his spirituality, declaring his "poetry and prose have a kinship with

mystical literature in being unconditioned by historical time and his verse in particular belongs to that rare and timeless strain in literature."[3] We certainly can see this as well when we think of the deep currents informing that passage from *The Velveteen Rabbit.*

A passion for the imaginal life, the dream worlds. Oh, and it probably didn't hurt that Margery once mentioned how her mother always treated her dolls and stuffed animals as if they were real. Everything, however small or large, is marked by the realities of life, especially change, especially death. Another distinctive feature Williams brought to *The Velveteen Rabbit*, as well as the rest of her twenty children's books, was her profound respect for children, seeing them as sensible as adults lacking only experience.

So within it all I'm finding Williams's vision to be a spirituality of magical realism, which I'm using to mean where the earthly life and dream meet. This space, where we let loose of our certainties, and the realities of life play out in ways we can never fully anticipate—that's the real.

It is, in fact, the only genuine real.

Which returns us to koans. To work with a koan, first we throw the backstory away. Good to know it, but now we let it go. And then we look for the nugget of truest true within the words as they present. There are a number in that passage from *The Velveteen Rabbit.* The greatest of which for me is the rabbit's question, "What is REAL?" It's a first question for anyone who dreams. We clearly live in multiple worlds. But which, if any, is true? Life. Hurt. Loss. Death. Love. These words arise from the heart of our existence. And the human quest becomes one of digging into these various worlds of perception and interpretation, seeking an encounter that might bring the worlds together and lead to some great reconciliation of heart and world.

What I find here are the various invitations, barriers from one angle and open gates from another, related to our ordinary lives. I write this at seventy-five. The spiritualities of my youth and middle

age and their snares and their possibilities have changed. I look at my hands with crepey skin and knuckles that are beginning to misshape, I find I must make decisions based on the fragilities of my back, and I just learned I'll be adding one more medication to my regular morning and evening rituals.

"Does it hurt" becomes an invitation.

"Become" and maybe "becoming" are amazing doors to walk through. Absolute and dynamic become one thing. Where while it is all found in the moment, that moment is wild, undulating, and mysterious.

So Margery: well she sings the deeper truths of this to us, all of us, wherever we are. She offers us a serious spiritual text. Young and excited and anxious? She opens the way. Or perhaps we have grown old, as the joints hurt, as the hair thins or is lost, as our eyesight—the part that is solely the eye of the flesh—begins to fail. Here too she calls us to how we find ourselves the repository of a world of dreams.

Within those dreams the world becomes real.

The real. Is. Eternity and a moment.

Every day is a good day.

Notice. Feel it fully. And then what?

Here we are. There are still bills to pay. Things to do. And—you are dying. I am dying. Our species is dying. The world is dying.

Getting real is not missing any of those things. The Skin Horse understood. It's the other side of the fifteenth. It's the call of the rainbow. It is our very lives.

25

False Gods and Better Angels

At his feet the six-winged seraph,
Cherubim, with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Alleluia, Lord Most High!

—Liturgy of Saint James (*trans.* Gerald Moultrie)

In 2001, the golden calf from Cecil B. DeMille's classic film *The Ten Commandments* was sold at a Christie's auction for a tad over $15,000. The golden calf was, as you might imagine, in fact roughly carved wood with gilt paint. Pretty expensive for what is ultimately little more than a tawdry souvenir. Although I suspect today someone might pay a bit more for it.

I find myself drawn to that line "rest now, the ox is forgotten," and to that roughly carved wood with its cheap gilt paint. When we're graced with a glimpse of insight, if we notice the divine all around us and inside us, a couple of things might happen. The oxherding pictures offer a narrative of success after success.

But wrong directions, missed opportunities—well, they are also always in the picture. The ox may be forgotten, but we can find an urge within us to create an image of that ox. You know, just to remind

us. And it can so easily become an idol. Roughly carved, dabbed with gilt. An idea to be worshipped.

But not to get too far out ahead. I loved the movie, which came out when I was eight. I may have seen it in the theater, but my memory is fixed by it playing in regular rotation on television starting in the very early 1970s, usually near Easter and Passover. And with that, for good and ill, my image of Moses as well as the voice of God is Charlton Heston, while Pharoah is and forever will be Yul Brynner.

I also have seared into my mind the image of the evil overseer, Dathan, played deliciously by Edgar G. Robinson. What I was unaware of when watching the movie was how DeMille, after considering a host of actors, picked Robinson in part because he'd been blacklisted during the Red Scare, and he felt he deserved a juicy part for his rehabilitation. Robinson's Dathan stood in for all the vacillation, compromise, and venality of, well, actually, everybody. So of course when it comes time for the golden calf scene, it's Dathan who does the deed, whipping the crowd into a frenzy and even offering an implied human sacrifice. It is worth noting that it was Dathan rather than the biblical Aaron, brother of Moses, who in the scriptures actually authorized the making of the calf.

The golden calf has entered our Western psyche. It stands for all the false idols of our lives. And, at least out of the film version, Dathan stands for those vacillating, compromising, venal parts in each of us. The parts not about the straight and narrow. The parts that worship the false.

That's the image, the archetype most in our Western culture live with. There is the bright and true and there is the false. Lots of binary choices. The problem for many of us is that, as we've lived into life, we've discovered that there are a lot of light shades that are nevertheless darker than some pure and shining light, and there are a lot of dark shades that register more brightly than some absolute desolate dark.

And yet I find the term *false god* remains useful to stand in for certain things we encounter in our lives, often as parts of ourselves, including powerful parts. They can even feel like independent actors. This inner plurality becomes especially clear when we're on the spiritual path, when we're engaged in the work of depth, the intimate way. And even more so as our practice deepens, and we encounter the deeper mysteries of the way.

We can always stop and create an idol or even a pantheon of them. Roughly carved and dabbed with gilt.

Or we can recall that other invitation. The grace where the ox is forgotten.

Taking a nap under the noon sun,
Whip and rope abandoned behind the hut.

Actually, the way I've framed it is a bit too either/or. More a problem of language. Our lives tend to be both/and. But as they say, time exists so everything doesn't happen at once. Our brains are meant to sort out and to order. We just need to remember it's a convention and not an ultimate truth.

The caution here is that even as we step toward a farther shore, feeling the damp sand between our toes and maybe the water washing around our ankles, we can take a leisurely noontime nap and find dreams both good and ill come unbidden.

—

When we're deep into the inner life, perspective can be hard to come by. Within the depths, what we measure something against can be confusing. Sometimes what looms large isn't, while what we slide over is in fact of enormous importance. Among the confusions, if we encounter a strong enough feeling, we can take it for more than it is.

In some ways this is a bit like the aforementioned Buddhist principle of near enemies, where we mistake a positive attribute like sympathy with something less useful like pity. Things that look alike but are in substance different. This is mistaking a good for the good. The error is in raising that strong feeling or that genuine insight into some absolute—into, well, a false god.

Earlier we discussed various snares that can catch us on the spiritual path—the seven deadly sins, the three demons, the five hindrances, and so forth. All religions offer lists. What's important for us to attend to is that the phenomena to which such lists point are woven into who and what we are. And they manifest in constantly changing ways, but manifest they do. Our little tin-pot gods.

False gods appear in the ordinary mess of our ordinary lives. The quest for prosperity or wealth is a perennial. And in our material times, "greed is good" is not just a slogan in a movie—it's an actual creed many people live by.

The quest for immaculate health can be another false god. People can be so focused on exercise and diet and a vanishing hope of not getting sick that they cut out anything that challenges their hope and in the process cut out much of the enjoyment of life. Or perhaps your primary false god is how you are perceived in the world. What do people think of me? How am I seen? Perhaps it's a desire for security. This can take any number of shapes from gated communities to obsessive planning for retirement.

Food. Living to eat and eating to live.

Then there's sex.

Then there's the many ways we distract ourselves. Alcohol and other drugs. Screens of various sorts.

The list continues, but each person's false gods are cut just for them. We all have our own personal variations on this theme. For me, all it takes is a step on the scales, and instantly I am reminded of my obsessive side. If yours is not immediately obvious to you, you can figure it out easily enough. One idea is to look at your checkbook

(if you still have a checkbook). Or, in an even more direct search for evidence, simply ask yourself, *What is it that I think about all the time?* And following directly on that, *To what do I give my time?* The important things, the really important things in your life quickly become apparent.

Now I hope it is also obvious there is nothing wrong with any of these impulses in and of themselves. Or at least usually. Some things might be unhealthy from beginning to end. But that's rare. The problem mostly is simply one of balance. If our path is not within a cloister, we have few external supports other than paying attention. And even within monasteries, that paying attention, that seeing intimately for ourselves, is critical.

Presence is the universal solvent.

And this is where we can bring an enriched sense of the precepts to our lives—cycling back to those foundational commitments we made much earlier on in the journey. The deeper current of precepts practice is not meticulous attending to precise behavior. Rather, it is feeling our way into the rhythms of our lives. Much of precepts work is finding what Aristotle called the golden mean, a middle way. It is about moderation and harmony.

As a spiritual discipline, precept practice extends to everything we do. We need to notice what we're doing as we make a living. We need to give it attention and find the harmonies. We have responsibilities to ourselves and to others. And we need to notice when our lives and the precepts begin to align. Similarly, we need to take care of our bodies. We need to attend to nutrition and health. It has a place. Taking our place in the world is appropriate. We have a place, each of us. We need to own it. And we need to do what we can to take care of ourselves and our families. Making plans and following through are important.

There is little as wonderful as a good meal. Sex is as natural as breathing and eating and drinking. Play is wonderful. Enjoying the world and its entertainments is one of the gifts of being human.

The problem is when one thing becomes outsized. When something becomes a golden calf. Impulses and desires should not be allowed to take over. Instead of being gods, they should be demoted to angels.

Angels are messengers of the divine who connect the material and the spiritual. And if we look at the most basic aspects of our lives —our bodies, our place within family and community, our work, and our responsibilities and obligations to ourselves and to others—then we see each of these things becoming part of the playful angelic dance.

And as Aitken Roshi would say, “fine words butter no parsnips.” Much of spiritual life is a struggle. Our impulses, our visceral urges, absolutely are a part of who we are, and they do not go away. We are currents and eddies. Mysterious creatures live within the depths. And we are always in danger of being overtaken by them—by our urges, our regrets, or maybe our ambitions.

We live surrounded by these beings of our hearts.

My mother was living in our Arizona home when she died, the family coming and going, she sleeping and waking in her reclined Barcalounger, which had become her preferred bed. She waited for a time when we were all gone from the room for her meeting with death. I can’t ever lose the fact I’d not only not been in the room but also out of the house running unnecessary errands. Whatever her preference, that timing was not mine. And now and for always that gap has a part in my dreams. Her memory is a visiting angel.

The mysterious taking its various shapes in my life and my memories.

I think of my father. And I think of my brother. I think of my son. Each now long dead. Foolishness, addiction, loss and longing; wounds so deep I cannot even begin to give them meaning. But they live in my dreams. They come to me as angels and sometimes they talk. It’s up to me to remember they are aspects of myself.

And their words, well…

26

No Trace (Oxherding 8)

The great way is not difficult
If you don't pick and choose.

—Sengcan[1]

My koan teacher John Tarrant describes the experience of receiving a phone call from his sister telling him their mother was dying. As quickly as he could, he booked a flight home to Tasmania, where he was welcomed by "gusts of wind and cold rain." He continues, "Water lay in sheets on the paddocks; the luggage on the carts was glistening. The hills were as green as in dreams, merino sheep had green seeds sprouting in their wool."

He went directly to the hospice and his mother's bedside. The doctor came, and John asked what it was she was dying of. The doctor replied, "Nothing, everything." Age. As John describes his mother: "Her hair was baby fine, bone white, and drifted above her skull. Her skin had an uncanny translucence relieved by large dark blotches where nurses had tried to find a vein and she had bled under the surface."[2]

When I read this, it triggered my own memories of my mother on her last day. Yes, I know this moment in my own life: A call home to something too large. Everything bright and distinct, a bit clearer than might otherwise have been. Every step. Everything around. The air

itself alive and crisp. No shadows in the moment. Or more accurately, even shadows seem to glow with their presence.

John, his sister, and their father sat with their mother (his wife) through the night and into the next day. People came and went. Things were said. Whenever John wanted the experience to be different, pain opened up. Floods of words from the past poured in, memories of choices made and not made, and of the consequences that followed. He watched himself as he thought about how things should be, including how people should be acting—his sister, his father, his mother, himself.

Then he opened himself to what it might be like if he just let things happen. In a heartbeat, he claimed his place beyond choosing and rejecting. This was a gift from the ancient times, from John's own path, and mine—and perhaps yours? For him it was the place he had found and could still touch.

Any of us can try to find this place of just letting go, just letting be. We can certainly capture at least a hint of a hint of that release. It can be part of an ongoing spiritual discipline. And in some ways, it is close to the heart of what zazen, seated Zen meditation, looks like. The most important thing is that this is more than a thought experiment. This is an experience experiment.

And it is a central part of the intimate way. A great fulcrum in our lives, with a before and a rather different after.

So there was John. He found himself without wanting something else. He and his family continued to sit with their loved one, and his part often was to read poetry, the poetry she liked—Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Frost—without judgment.

Then, as can happen with these things, she rallied. She went home and lived for another year.

In his book *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*, John writes:

> After my mother died, I dreamed that she was walking slowly and with some effort along a path in the country. It seemed

> that she could feel my gaze. Yet, as if she knew that this matter was for her alone, she did not turn to speak, or ask anything. She met what rose up before her as a task, and now it was her task to go on foot into death. I watched her walk along that trail until she passed out of my sight. She seemed to know what she was doing. There wasn't any picking or choosing involved for either of us.[3]

At some point even that sense of "her alone" or "I alone" dissipates. *No other* joins with *no self.* Both our sense of an individual self and that sense of boundlessness, of emptiness, are forgotten.

—

It turns out, after finding many wonderful things, after falling into innumerable wells, after finding oneself in the light of that brightness greater than a thousand suns—or, if you prefer, that darkness darker than a thousand nights—we even lose that self that recognizes the mystery. A great blessing, this.

> Whip, rope, self, ox—no traces left
> Thoughts cannot penetrate the vast blue sky,
> Snowflakes cannot survive a red-hot stove.
> Arriving here, meet the ancient teachers.

Here all our words fail. The oxherding pictures display this stage as an empty circle. In Japanese Zen, this circle is called the *enso.* The enso is most commonly rendered by a single brushstroke. It can be open. It can be closed. It might be a perfect circle, but probably not. It shares some qualities with the Taoist image of *pu*, the uncarved block.

And this is important: the enso, though a symbol, is no mere abstraction. The words, the symbols, they point to where we might

stand. At some point on the intimate way, if we persist, if we're just a little lucky, we come to this place.

This moment is experienced as a profound gift. In his letter to the Galatians, the ecstatic visionary Paul—not the later bureaucrat version of Paul who told women to keep quiet in churches and that bishops should have a single wife, but the one who had visions of Jesus, who sang a religion into being as some wondrous encounter between heaven and earth—tells it brief. Within the encounter he calls Christ Jesus. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female."

That place. This place.

When cooking sometimes you can test the readiness of the pan by throwing a few drops of water on the surface. When they instantly vanish, you're ready. Here it all has vanished. Like that water bubbled and gone.

Bodhidharma is the legendary founder of the Zen way in China. In our foundational story, he came from India and was granted an interview with the emperor Wu. The emperor was a supporter of Buddhism and recounted the ways he had supported it. And then he asked a question many people ask: *What was the value of all these good works?* What merit had he accrued through these things he'd done?

And Bodhidharma replied, "No merit."

In the story, that was a dangerous response. Emperors are dangerous creatures to cross or even to annoy. I can picture the emperor's eyes narrow as he asked, "So who are you?"

To which Bodhidharma replied, "I do not know."

Sometimes this line is recounted simply as, "Don't know," and possibly the best translation is "no knowing." The "I" of the matter drowned away in the great sea of not knowing.

Not knowing. Don't know. I don't know. Only don't know.

Sengcan sang to us, "The great way is not difficult / If you don't pick and choose." Zhaozhou and endless subsequent teachers

quote this as one of the great pointers for our lives. It is the heart of not knowing.

It all comes to this.

Not knowing takes us to the very heart of the matter. Opening ourselves as wide as the sky, we can discover the heart of the universe itself. The twentieth-century Indian sage Ramana Maharshi tells us of this encounter, “There is neither creation nor destruction, neither destiny nor free will, neither path nor achievement. This is the final truth.”

Once we find this place of no self and no other, we can always touch it. It is the final truth.

And yet we can’t live there. Just like fish who cannot live in pure water.

And amazingly, there are more steps yet on the intimate way—steps beyond any final truth.

27

Theories of Mind and Body

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and you—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

—Emily Dickinson

A friend told me of someone he knew who as a graduate student undertook a research project to measure the self-perceptions of people with varying amounts of time spent practicing at a Zen monastery. The test was simple: she asked them to draw their sense of self. Beginning students usually drew an image of their own body. Several of the longer-term students drew what they saw around them at that very moment. And among the most senior students and

the teachers, most went a step further and drew an empty circle, an enso, as if to say, “I won’t be drawn into representing any sort of division between mind, body, and world.”

Yet we don’t just walk the path, we also like to think about it. I believe we need to think about it. So please permit me a digression in this chapter to delve into some common theories of mind and body and to consider what they might mean on our spiritual journeys.

One of those questions that have perplexed people from the dawn of our humanity arises with our awareness of ourselves. And specifically asking what the difference is between our perceiving minds and our bodies. Are they separate? Are they not? And with that, who are we? Who am I? What am I?

What am I? is perhaps the primordial question of the human heart.

Learned papers. Wild speculations. Attempts to apply scientific rigor. Books flow from what people see and fear and hope.

Since just about forever, and across a wide range of religions and philosophies, three broad approaches to answering these questions have emerged:

- dualism, the belief that mind and body are separate things
- materialism, the belief that it is all body, and the mind is a product of the body
- idealism, the belief that it is all mind, and the body is a sort of projection of the mind

Hinduism (with the exception of its Advaita lineages) and Islam (with the exception of many of its Sufi lineages) are examples of spiritual traditions that assume the mind-body divide. Interestingly pre-Augustinian Christianity offers a kind of nondualism, in the sense that it believed in the resurrection of the body. The soul arises for Christians in a marriage between Judaism and Greek philosophy. This is implicit in the writing of Paul but becomes central with

Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century. Although from the beginning, the divide between God and the world is itself a dualism. So it's messy. Pretty much always.

The naturalism of David Hume in the eighteenth century opened the doors for the scientific approach to these questions. And the scientific investigation of the mind today pretty much assumes materialism, with the mind generally believed to be epiphenomenal to the activity of the brain.

Platonism (which has a long history within Christianity) in the West, Vedanta in India, and certain schools of Buddhism, most notably the Mahayana Yogacara, are, broadly speaking, idealist.

A pretty good rough definition of idealism suggests a hard and perhaps softer versions.

1. Something mental (the mind, spirit, reason, will) is the ultimate foundation of all reality, or even exhaustive of reality, and
2. Although the existence of something independent of the mind is conceded, everything that we can know about this mind-independent "reality" is held to be so permeated by the creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind (of some kind or other) that all claims to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge.[1]

Within the Western traditions, the Anglican bishop George Berkeley and, most importantly, Immanuel Kant, offered attractive arguments for a kind of idealism. Giving the phrase "it's all in your mind," a kind of reckless but compelling resonance.

In the seventeenth century, Baruch Spinoza offered a view that our minds and bodies are both aspects of an underlying reality. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the philosopher and psychologist William James posited a "neutral monism" that preceded both mind and matter. In a sense, at least, this echoes his contemporary Emily Dickinson.

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

Dickinson's poem resonates with my walk on the intimate way.

Buddhism from its beginnings challenged both idealist and materialist schools, at least as they were expressed in South Asian antiquity. The Buddha categorically rejected the substance of a sense of self, my idea of "me," saying it arises as the product of causes and conditions, held in a tension that will eventually fall apart.

David Hume's own inner journey shows what we find as we cast the light inward. "When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure," he wrote. "I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception."[2]

In the four seals of Buddhism, we see the radical stance of the Buddhist way with *anatman*, the teaching of not-self or no-self. The first notes the emptiness of all compounded things, how everything we identify is contingent, how our grasping after permanence is the cause of our deepest hurt—but, and this is the good news, we can find a deeper way. This does not deny the existence of our sense of an "I," our existence in this world. But it situates the sense of self within the flow of cause and effect and shows our momentariness.

Of course, the Buddha of history, Gautama Siddhartha, throws a monkey wrench into the matter, as he is also recorded recounting anecdotes of his previous lives. That noted, Buddhism from its beginnings rejected both the idea of a bare materialism, and with that the extinction of individual consciousness with death, and the idea of some form of eternalism for the individual mind or self.

It opens a somewhat different door. We're invited to another place than the apparent either-or of a reduction to the minute, the

very small, such as we see in materialisms, where it all falls apart, or a reduction into some very large, a collapsing into some form of eternalism, where everything is preserved.

Rejecting both assertions, the Buddha appeared to posit another stance entirely. He offered another door, which we see thrown open by those who followed Nagarjuna and in what would become the Zen schools.

And this is important. We can find a sense of that door or something very much like it elsewhere. Which makes sense if it is true.

Looking for commonalities with the West, some find phenomenology and existentialism working in similar ways to Buddhism. I admit my own thinking about spirituality as something other than repeating or rejecting the axioms of my childhood fundamentalist Christianity started with a fascination with existentialism, especially Karl Jaspers. In modernity, the Kyoto school in Japan provided an amazing platform to bridge the thinking of Western philosophy, especially Kant and Heidegger, and Mahayana Buddhism, particularly Zen.

—

The Buddha way generally and Zen in particular is inclined to cut through the abstractions that necessarily attend *any* theory of mind and body and move toward experiential encounter. Let's look at one such encounter in the *Record of Zhaozhou:*

> The master asked Nanquan, "Mind is not Buddha, Wisdom is not the Way. Then is there any mistake or not?"
>
> Nanquan said, "Yes, there is."
>
> The master said, "Please tell me where the mistake is."
>
> Nanquan said, "Mind is not Buddha, Wisdom is not the Way."[3]

A classic Zen response. In many translations, Wisdom is given as knowing. Personally, I like how wisdom and knowing are neither quite the word, although each works. That said, it is easy to see it as one more opaque encounter dialogue between Zen master and student. Small wonder people sometimes think Zen teaching is one non sequitur after another. But it isn't. Rather it points to something. And with that pointing, there's an invitation to come along.

So young Zhaozhou, face-to-face with it all, comes up with a summary phrase of what he understands. And he asks his teacher, first by saying his summary, "Mind is not Buddha; knowing is not the way." Wisdom is not the way. But he then adds, "Is this correct or not?"

That little extra is both a problem and the gate.

Mind, Buddha, way, and, yes, *not* are words. Just words. But magical words, as well. Maybe especially *not.* And then along for the ride there's that great longing to know, that great desire to be whole and healed.

His teacher, the beloved Nanquan, cuts through it all. He points for his student, and he points for me, and he points for you.

Whatever your mind is, whatever your body is, whatever your soul is—you must act. You have no choice but to be here, and the very being here brings consequences. Action or no action each brings about consequences.

What do I do? And, of course, what do you do?

Wumen, who took the conversation apart and simply presented the response as case 34 in his *Gateless Gate*, inviting you and me into the dance, then added a little hint of a sermon.

> It should be said of old Nanquan that in his dotage he has lost all sense of shame. Opening his mouth in a cloud of bad breath he exposes the shame of our way. Few appreciate his generosity.[4]

Zen rhetoric. Abuse as praise. And the hesitation it brings is a good thing. We're invited to let go of our attachments to those words. Buddha. Mind. Way. Not. Politics. Conservative. Liberal. Radical. Capitalist. Socialist. Whatever our favorite word might be. And that mess, that dirtiness, that bad breath not merely conveys the truth—it is the truth. Buddha. Mind. Way. Politics.

There is no place to stand that does not have consequences. As a citizen of a republic, however flawed, however much it betrays its ideals, I am still called into some sort of engagement. Engagement that will have consequences. So with whom am I going to stand? And with that I bring pragmatic taste buds, a visceral concern with how to actually achieve as much as I can for the world, my neighbors, myself, while seeing actual constraints.

I feel a confidence in this view that leads me to choose my involvement within this broken oligarchic republic that promises so much and delivers so little. And it leads me to support one political party over another. And it leads me to look with interest and even excitement at some candidates and horror at others.

And by throwing myself relentlessly onto the pillow, by bringing that perspective of interdependence and a certain freedom within it back to the front of consciousness and then back again into the moments of my lived life, I find a space. There's not a lot to that space. But it includes a knowing that I don't have the full picture. I don't see it all. I am constrained.

And I see it is also the very place where I find my saving, my awakening, my life.

Here we are. Here I am. Here you are.

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

There is no other place.
So hold it gently—let it hold you gently.
The great middle way.

28

Bodhidharma Sighed: Encountering the Dark Night

On a dark night, Kindled in love with yearnings—oh, happy chance!—
I went forth without being observed, My house being now at rest.

—John of the Cross[1]

Thoughts cannot penetrate the vast blue sky. The self is forgotten. We meet the ancestral teachers. And we find songs erupt from mouth and tongue. Although we are not so sure from whose mouth or whose tongue.

Once upon a time long ago and far away there was a virtuous woman and her husband. Life was good in nearly all ways. They had a lovely home and a farm that produced plenty of food, even enough extra to sell, giving them opportunities to purchase small luxuries. All was fine, except they had no children.

They prayed to the good gods for a child, but without success. Finally, they turned to the Awakened One. They offered incense and flowers and prayed for a child. They made donations to the support of the Awakened One's community. Not long after, one morning at breakfast, they saw the inside of their house gradually grow light. It continued ever brighter, until it was impossible to see for the shining

brightness. Strangely they were not afraid. Then, as suddenly as it arose, the light passed away. And everything was normal again.

Not long after, the woman knew she was pregnant. The couple decided when the child came, they would name it, boy or girl, Light. Nine months later their son, Light, was born.

Light was an unusual child. He seemed completely uninterested in worldly matters. Instead, he would wander into the nearby forest and climb up the mountain. He read the sacred texts of the intimate way and began to compose poetry.

When he came of age, he decided to formally enter the intimate way as a monastic. He went to Fragrant Mountain and entered the Dragon Gate monastery. There his hair was cut, and he took his vows. Light began by studying the sacred texts, both those of the elders and those of the Great Way. In time his renown as a scholar began to spread. But he knew something was missing. There continued to be a wound in his heart, some sense that things were wrong that no matter what he did, he could not shake off. He began to wander among the temples and monasteries speaking with various masters. And he spent increasing amounts of time alone in the mountains.

After several years of wandering, at the age of thirty-two he returned to Fragrant Mountain. There, while deep in meditation, a spirit appeared before him. It looked like an old nun, but he wasn't sure. He could see her and right through her at the same time. She smiled gently at him—he could see the wall behind her smile—and said, "This is not where you will open your heart. Go south, my child."

The spirit reminded him of his mother. Something about how her hair curled. Or maybe it was that smile. At the same time Light was sure it was not her. Still, he felt the words were true. He told the master of Dragon Gate about his vision. The old monastic listened to the story, then ran her hand gently across Light's shaved head,

touching the seven unusual bumps that ran from his forehead and back. They reminded her of mountain peaks.

She said, “Go south, dear one. Head for the monastery of the Wooded Mountain. There you’ll find the master Bodhidharma. He will open your heart for you.”

The next day Light packed up what little he owned, a second robe, a thin blanket, a toothbrush, a razor, his bowls, and three books, and began to walk south. It was a hard journey. Things happened. At one encounter he thought he might die. But he continued, and finally he arrived at the monastery of the Wooded Mountain.

There Light was introduced to the master, who set him to the practices of intimacy. Light learned to sit quietly, present, noticing. He began his practice in earnest, sitting with a burning heart, seeking the secrets of the great matter. But instead of seeking through books or seeking by wandering in nature, he simply watched the currents of his mind. Light met regularly with his teacher. But even with all this he couldn’t see through.

One day it all felt too much. His whole life seemed a waste. Desperate, he went to his master’s hut. But the door was closed. He knocked, but there was no answer. He felt a wave of panic. Of desperation. He knocked again, harder. And still there was no answer.

Not knowing what else to do. Not having any sense of somewhere else to go, he pounded and kicked the doorjamb. “Master! Master!”

Finally the old teacher opened the door. “Yes?”

Light didn’t realize until that moment he was holding his razor. With a flash of the blade he cut his arm and, bleeding, presented it to the teacher. “Please, please. My mind is afire. Please set my anxiety to rest.”

Watching his disciple holding his arm to staunch the bleeding while listening desperately for a turning word, Bodhidharma said to

Light, “Bring me your mind, and I will set it to rest.”

Light wailed. “I have searched. Deeply. Broadly. With all my heart. But I cannot find any place where there is some thing I can actually call my mind. It is just thoughts and feelings arising and passing away. I find no one thing.”

Bodhidharma sighed. “Yes. Yes. That’s it. Knowing that, your mind is at rest.”

In that moment, Light understood.

—

This is a story told from the mists of Zen’s foundations. It’s a koan, one of those questions that are not really, not exactly, questions. Rather, they are dream moments that point us to our true heritage, to who and what we really are.

This story is captured in the twelfth-century anthology the *Gateless Gate*, as case 41 in my version:

> Our founding ancestor was facing the wall. When the student of the intimate way, Huike, standing in the snow, cut off his arm, presented it to the master, and said, “My mind is anxious. I beg you, teacher, please set it at rest!” Bodhidharma replied, “Bring me your mind, and I will set it to rest.”
>
> Huike wailed, “I have searched thoroughly, and I cannot find it.”
>
> The founding ancestor responded, “I have set it completely at rest for you.”

Our old teacher Robert Aitken tells us, “The anguish of Huike facing Bodhidharma is that anguish of the heroes and heroines of fairy stories and folktales who must strive constantly, practicing that which cannot be practiced, bearing the unbearable.”[2] We are invited into a

place that touches history but is something more. It seems likely there was a person named Dazu Huike, who in his childhood was called Light.

He was a scholar-monk who lived in the sixth century of our Common Era. And somewhere around forty he became a disciple of the equally misty figure Bodhidharma. Huike studied with the semilegendary founder of Zen in China for four years. Or maybe it was five. A lot of people say six. And others like nine. Oh and some say he lost that arm to bandits while on his pilgrimages.

History? Dream? Folk story? The details don't really matter. What matters is that question.

And he has a question. It comes to him as anxiety. He feels it in his heart as a flutter. It hangs at the end of everything he does or thinks. Aitken Roshi, in his commentary on this case, tells us, "This is a treasure of the Path disguised as sheer misery." The roshi continues, suggesting, "This treasure is found in all religions worthy of the name. It is the 'dark night of the soul.'"[3]

Things happen. Starting with unsettling reports in 2019, the world was quickly engulfed in a pandemic, the worst of which didn't end until 2022, and only declared by the World Health Organization "no longer a global health emergency" in May of 2023.

It was a moment calling for measured actions, attention, and some care. A middle way, if you will.

Many, however, tumbled into despair. A frightening minority embraced denial. Some tried to capitalize on it as a power play. Many, however, caught in raging conflicts both medical and political, found themselves reduced to hard questions. How will I survive this? How do I get what I need? And hanging behind that is the great and hard truth: We are all going to die. We are all of us, every single one of us, passing as a morning's dew.

And with that thought, or half thought, or maybe it can't even be articulated in a word but is just a feeling: Anxiety. Anguish. A longing. Soldiers when dying sometimes cry out for their mothers.

That cry.

For those of us committed to the intimate way, to finding our heart's understanding, the quest we are on is like a thorn in our sides. And if we persist, we sometimes discover it as a festering wound. Perhaps we know that cry for our mother. With that we stumble into that world the Christian mystic John of the Cross called a dark night of the soul. He captured it in a poem. In Arthur Symons's translation it begins:

In an obscure night
Fevered with love's anxiety
(O hapless, happy plight!)
I went, none seeing me
Forth from my house, where all things quiet be.[4]

Aitken Roshi tells us, "Huike had no choice but to enter this dark night." Then he adds, "We have no choice either." If we enter the spiritual way, the intimate way, and we give ourselves to this path, it will take us to this place. This is where our journey brings us.

It is the opening of our hearts into the mystery. But it starts hard. It is hard. It is a confrontation with our mortality. Actually, it is a confrontation with the mortality of the stars as well. All things in fact do fall apart.

It is a dangerous moment. And we have to be careful. Here we need to engage our practice of presence and extend it from formal meditation into every single aspect of our lives, waking, working, everything.

And then there is the moment. It may come as a thief in the night. It may unfold like a flower blossom. There are as many ways as there are people.

The roshi tell us, "Bodhidharma said, 'There, I have completely put it to rest for you.'" And he continues, "The rest that Bodhidharma confirmed in the heart-mind of his disciple is the same rest he sought

to confirm in the heart-mind of Emperor Wu with his words, ‘I don’t know.’“ That conversation that turns on not knowing is the very foundational story of the Zen way.

Here we’re invited into a new place. A spring from which life-giving waters flow.

When we realize there is no source, that things arise and fall, and then we look yet deeper into that “no” of things, magic happens.

The world that was so tightly held is set free.

The poet Lynn Ungar responded to the COVID pandemic with a poem. I find it speaks to this moment. Both this moment in history and that moment in myth and dream that tumbles from confronting the dark nights.

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.
And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another’s hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.
Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.[5]

Now, in the Zen traditions we don't usually describe it as reaching out but rather allowing the world to come to us. But at some point it is no longer clear whether we are reaching out or receiving. Within that moment of not knowing, there is a grace that brings all things together.

That said, that's it.

That place. That moment.

Your hurts and mine, they don't actually heal, but they join into something else. They are doors through which we walk. And when we walk through those doors, we discover ourselves in a new world. Although it is at the very same time just this world.

But the real has become magic.

And our lives are changed.

Here we find the rest that passes all understanding.

It becomes the mystery of not knowing.

29

An Infinite Storm of Being (Oxherding 9)

"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—
But have no art to say—
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity.

—Emily Dickinson

Living in the orbit of Los Angeles, I also live just a few hours away from the Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks. And every now and again I feel the mountains beckoning. When my spouse, Jan, and I drive there, all along our way we discover John Muir as our constant companion.

He was a person of multiple parts, not all of them savory. He said racist things that should not be ignored. And as it also happens, he

sometimes is made out worse than he actually was. That shouldn't be ignored, either. He was central in saving Yosemite and Sequoia for posterity. The creation of those parks was itself a complicated thing, given the continuous displacement of the native peoples, even extending to the creation of the parks. Yet another aspect of our country's genocidal past that it has thus far so inadequately accounted for, much less atoned for.

On the positive side of the ledger within our North American culture writ large, John Muir is perhaps the great exemplar of nature mysticism. He genuinely delved into the way of wisdom that looks to nature as mirror of the human heart. And rather more, he invited us to a path we could actually walk.

He once noted of Thoreau, that other nineteenth-century Western luminary who called us into walking into the wilderness both of heart and body, "Even open-eyed Thoreau would perhaps have done well had he extended his walks westward to see what God had to show in the lofty sunset mountains."[1] Wise words for us all. And from that place atop the mountain, he offers some counsel.

> Most people are on the world, not in it—having no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them—undiffused separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate.[2]

Anyone who has thrown themselves into an authentic spiritual path, into the intimate way, understands. How rare to notice that our separation is a thing of the imagination. And he posited a fix that is as ancient as the mountains themselves.

> The mountains are calling and I must go.[3]

A koan. The mountains wink, walk, and dance. They call us to them. All we need to do is go; once there, we find invitations everywhere.

Muir appears to have taken every moment and every experience in the wilderness as a gateway. The hint of every koan is found in that. Presentation and invitation. Our eternal invitation printed on an engraved card and handed to us by the world. And what a noble demonstration of the intimate way.

—

In the oxherding pictures, the penultimate image is usually portrayed as a nature scene, typically without a human in sight.

Returning to the source, no more effort,
Just staying at home, sitting in the hut,
Blind and deaf to the world outside.
The river runs by itself, flowers are red.

Here, as in the eighth stage, the shackles of our constructed reality have fully dissolved. Yet we have stepped beyond simple emptiness —the empty enso of the eighth image—and we've returned to the world. Form and emptiness are alive here. It's like a blooming branch. Rivers just are. Mountains are. The oceans are.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk and social justice activist Thich Nhat Hanh coined an English word for us that speaks to this quality: *interbeing.* It evokes the radical and intimate interconnection of all things. With "being" in the mix, it also hints at the liveliness of this encounter.

In the midst of it all, always, something presents. For us, spiritual pilgrims, followers of the intimate way, as we progress through the various valleys and mountains, we might at some moment come to this autumn place. To a sense of wonderment. And peace.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches. You abide in me, and I in you. This brings

forth fruit, as without me you can accomplish nothing.” But with the realization of this dynamic, organic, everything becomes possible.

John Muir sings this mystery.

> When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars, all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty.[4]

30

Groundhog Days (Last Temptations)

Going a little further along he fell, and on the ground he prayed. “Father, if it is possible, please let this cup pass from me. And, not as I will it, but within your mystery.”

—Matthew 26:39

Case 9 of the *Gateless Gate* presents us with the following koan:

A student of the intimate way said to the master Xingyang Qingrang, “The Buddha Excellent in Great Penetrating Wisdom practiced meditation on the seat of awakening for ten ages. Nonetheless, he did not experience the great awakening.” She looked at the master, and with her full heart asked, “Why?”

The master replied, “Your question touches the intimate matter.”

The student replied, “But he sat on the seat of awakening! Why didn’t he attain Buddhahood?”

Xingyang replied, “Because he is a non-attained Buddha.”[1]

This koan references a story from the seventh chapter of the *Lotus Sutra.*

> The Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence had a life span of five hundred and forty ten thousand million nayutas of kalpas. This Buddha at first sat in the place of practice and, having smashed the armies of the devil, was on the point of attaining anuttara-samyak-samodhi, but the doctrines of the Buddhas did not appear before him. This state continued for one small kalpa, and so on for ten small kalpas, the Buddha sitting with legs crossed, body and mind unmoving, but the doctrines of the Buddhas still did not appear before him.[2]

Now after this passage he does awaken and from there gives a presentation in prose and in verse on the true nature of reality. But the koan focuses in on those ten long ages (kalpas in the Buddhist tradition, meaning ages of nearly unimaginable length) in which the hard-practicing Buddha does not awaken. The invitation is to ask with the earnest student, How can there be a Buddha who has not awakened?

I hear the desperation in her question, “Why?” In Zenkei Shibayama’s translation, the rub-your-nose-in-reality response from Xingyang reads, “Because he did not attain Buddhahood.”[3] Guo Gu’s rendering is “Because he did not.”[4] So much in that “not.” I find Robert Aitken’s tantalizing invitation[5] most helpful, himself following his teacher Koun Yamada’s version.[6] I repeat it for my paraphrase of this case, “Because he is a non-attained Buddha.”

There is something mildly delicious for me that we know next to nothing about Xingyang Qingrang. It’s a reasonable assumption that he lived early in the tenth century, as we know that his teacher, Bajiao Huiqing, was a Korean master who trained and settled as a teacher in China toward the end of the ninth century. Xingyang,

however, appears a bit like a dream and addresses us from that dream world.

And his presentation is the ancient dream about people caught up in the play of life and death, causes and conditions, beginnings and endings. It is also the dream about someone who at the very same time—she, he, that person—is Buddha, is the great awakening, is the boundless itself. Is. Just is.

—

The 1993 movie *Groundhog Day* begins on a February 1. The story turns on a television weatherman from Pittsburgh who goes to Punxsutawney to cover Groundhog Day. The next morning, February 2, actual Groundhog Day, he wakes up and does his job, if half-heartedly. We get a picture of what a jerk he is. Then, despite his earlier predictions, a winter storm blows through the town forcing him and his crew to stay the night.

The next day he wakes up to find it isn't the next day, it's the one he just went through. He finds himself trapped in a time loop, where each repeating day begins again with "I Got You Babe" on the radio. As they say, hilarity ensues. He is condemned to play out that day over and over again until, as it turns out, he becomes a new and better person. It's a sweet story, well told and well acted. Today it's considered one of the best movies of the 1990s.

A lot of people, including Christians, Jews, and Buddhists, have found spiritual themes within the film, and it generated numerous sermons and dharma talks. It seems the movie's spiritual themes were intended. The film's co-creator Harold Ramis has been described as "an ethically responsible spiritual pluralist with Jewish roots and Buddhist tendencies."[7]

I love that description of someone finding his way on a path between traditions.

The film captures how every day is an encapsulation of the whole of our lives. Everything is there—our impulses and obsessions, the ways we hurt others and ourselves—it's all on full display everyday. Well, if we're willing to notice.

As we proceed on our spiritual journeys it is critical to allow our ideas of how things are and what we are to reveal themselves as shadows played out on a screen. And then to notice the shadows and the screen vanish. Because these things have no substance in and of themselves.

This is a great liberation, yet it isn't the end of the journey. There is much more to do. The normal next step is a reconstruction of heaven and earth. It is a healthier universe. In the oxherding pictures, as we've seen, it's presented as an image of nature, a traditional Chinese landscape. Usually without a human in sight. Just the sun and the moon, oceans and mountains, trees and animals.

That idea of "without a human in sight" makes sense from one perspective—the barriers of self and other have dissolved, and the oxherder is simply *being.* Yet I think, as an idea, "no human in sight" also brings an unsavory temptation with it—something like the prospect of never having or causing any problems again. This leads me to the topic of temptations that arise well along on the path of the intimate way, and specifically to Nikos Kazantzakis's incredible novel the *Last Temptation of Christ.* It also has a film, one of Martin Scorsese's handful of religious investigations.

In the story both in novel and film, Jesus, while hanging on that cross, wracked in pain, finds his last temptation being to accept a way out. As if that prayer for the cup to pass was answered in the most mundane of ways. For him, the temptation was to come down from that terrible death, to marry Mary, have a lot of children, and to live to a ripe old age.

For me, this echoes something in the stories of the Buddha. For him, after his long journey investigating the great matter of life and death, finally, after his great awakening, Mara, the tempter of the

Buddhist tradition, whispers in his ear that he should now retire to some cave in the remotest reaches and live out his remaining days in quiet bliss. Quiet bliss instead of taking on the hard work of wandering, begging for his livelihood, and sharing the way of liberation with this suffering world.

Though Jesus's and the Buddha's "last temptations" were very different in detail, there's a parallel in the idea of being tempted to choose an easy path rather than to see it through to the end. What is the "it" you need to see through? And what is the last temptation, the thing that seems impossible to turn from?

For some, the great temptation is to think we have arrived and there is no more work. Should we become teachers, we can think every impulse we have is teaching. Guru's grace. I've seen how that plays out. Terrible sadnesses can follow.

Another temptation at this point, as we see ourselves reconfiguring out of the empty, is in some version of the Buddha's temptations—to simply to retire. To let go of the sorrows of the world as so many dewdrops vanishing in the morning sun.

Now, for me, over the many years I've thrown myself onto the pillow—really, within our tradition, it is understood as the Buddha's seat, the lotus throne, the navel of the world—over and over again. And what have I encountered in this practice? My temptations tend to be petty and common. In the popular Zen psychology map of the human mind and heart being woven out of those demons of grasping and aversion and endless certainties, I am in the hot embrace of grasping. Sex. Food. Comforts of several sorts. They have occupied my imagination, and vastly, for too many hours on that Buddha's seat.

Thinking about the details of who I am I can feel a sense of failure. So many years of practice. And yet I know myself. Maybe not thoroughly. There is a simple truth that we will remain in large part mysteries to ourselves for the whole of our lives. And truthfully to our

friends who might see us more clearly than we see ourselves. But we remain mysteries even to them. Because—we are mysteries.

And within those mysterious currents, we are the non-attained Buddha. Again from the wisdom of the Western tradition, the spirit turns out to rest where it will. And it comes to all of us. The wisdom of the intimate way is not the reward for success in life. The wisest often do not have success in any sense of worldly things. People in the worst circumstance you can imagine can and sometimes do achieve awakening.

Awakening, the murky assertion of our Zen way. But if it's not a reward, not a scout's badge; well, then, what is it?

This koan points to some part of the mystery that is our life and our way. What about that Buddha who sat endlessly and did not win awakening? What about me? What about you?

For one hint I think of something Wendy Egyoku Nakao, longtime abbot of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, tells as a comment on this koan. It's:

> a story of a devout woman who chanted "Namu Amida Butsu" every day. When she died, all her chants were reviewed. Each one that had not been chanted with her entire being was discarded. Despondently, she watched as thousands upon thousands of her chants were thrown out. Finally, only one chant was left. Luckily, this last chant had been chanted as her entire being—her one moment—and she was saved.

The reality of the matter is that this body, this life, the one we're in right now: that's it.

However, we're not called to some intellectual understanding. We're called into a moment of grace where we set down our understanding, and instead allow what is to be.

It turns out it is okay to be a mass of doubt, of confusion, of fear, of desire. We simply need to let go of our stories about these things,

these moments in the rising and falling of conditions.

And we need do it only for a moment. Only for a heartbeat.

The good news, as Roshi Nakao says, is that it can all be found: our saving, our healing. And it only takes a moment.

We notice that moment and the Buddha Excellent in Great Penetrating Wisdom awakens. We find the moment neither through hard practice nor through giving up on it all. We find it in the willing heart, in the moment we simply turn our head and see.

Because.

This body, the one that is anxious or angry or overweight, is the Buddha.

31

Hearing the Cries of the World

> The old woman said, “Go straight ahead.” But what is straight ahead in the midst of relationships?
>
> —Eve Myonen Marko and Wendy Egyoku Nakao[1]

I recall once, when I was a parish minister, driving late into church and hearing my local NPR’s broadcast of its BBC news program. They were discussing poverty in America. The story led with some of those sound bites that one hears from people, mocking what we call poverty in this country, pointing out how the majority of our poor have televisions and refrigerators. The talking heads often add piously how most of America’s poor never go without missing a meal.

But this NPR story only started there. They went from those comments to an interview with some children at a school in Nevada. They were homeless, an increasing part of our American population. Several of the children spoke of going to bed without eating. They struggled for words to describe their experience. “My tummy growled,” said one child. My eyes began to water. Another related how hard it was to sleep. “I waited until the next morning when I could go to school and eat.”

Another child said something so softly it was hard to understand. The interviewer had to ask for sure what the child said. It was, “We ate a rat.”

I’ve never forgotten that.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to talk about my experiences as a very longtime Zen practitioner at a survey of Buddhism class at the University of Southern California. It was fun. Mostly. And as often happens in my experience, the best parts came when the students were invited to ask me questions.

One question turned on politics. Can and should Buddhists be socially engaged? A fair question, and one for anyone walking a spiritual path, whether they identify as Buddhist or not. In response to that particular student, I said something along the lines of, “In the face of human suffering, how can we not respond?”

Later that day, I mentioned this experience on one of my social media platforms. Pretty close to immediately, I found a flood of comments, one of which I believe represents what a lot of people interested in Buddhism feel. The writer lamented the fact of Buddhist involvement in politics in the West. It quickly was clear he meant Buddhist involvement in left-leaning politics. He summarized it as the “disease of social justice.”

Disease. Dis-ease.

For me, it is important to try and not turn away too quickly, whether from something as material as a child’s report of hunger or something as digital as an unwelcome online comment. It’s too easy to dismiss those words about hunger through embarrassment or reluctance or disbelief. It’s too easy to move on from a critical comment, especially on social media, where so much is thoughtless and cruel.

This is a hallmark of my spiritual practice. It works for my inner life. So why shouldn’t it also be applied to my social life? That said, I have a visceral anxiety about our contemporary convert-Buddhist involvement in politics. The fact that nearly all of us who choose to write or speak on the subject fall to the left of the North American political scene is itself a red flag for me. Not that it isn’t complicated.

Not that we aren’t in a time that calls for public witness. Which, frankly, despite the progressive views of so many in contemporary

Buddhism, often seems inarticulate and often less than ineffective. So a red flag, but I'm not waving it with any energy. There are problems and people need to meet them, to do what one can in the immediate, and to bring intelligence and compassion to try and understand why these things happen and to advocate for changes.

At the same time I am mindful of how the Zen churches in Japan all fell into line with imperial Japanese war rhetoric in the run-up to the Second World War. And how people who are very important in my own spiritual lineages said things that I find reprehensible. The examples I most think of are various anti-Semitic statements—which, also, as most of the writers and speakers had no actual experience of Jews, were in fact used as a term of art or, perhaps better, a dog whistle for bourgeoisie democracy.

So endless calls to caution. Another hesitation that's built into my spiritual practice is "don't believe everything you think."

The writer who objected to what I felt was my very mild call to social awareness offered another point via two quotes that I think cannot be ignored. One quote, attributed to the Buddha as among his final words, is, "With diligence, seek out your own enlightenment." The other, from the lineage source of the Zen schools, the ancestor Huineng, is, "A true cultivator of the Way does not see the trespasses of the world."

There definitely are Buddhist teachings that the world is *saha*, something to be endured until it can be escaped. And what I take to be my correspondent's real point was that this world of tears cannot be fixed. And with that, that the whole project of Buddhism is being perverted by our contemporary and largely convert focus on social engagement. The real deal is escape.

Huineng's seeing past the divisions and sins of the world is speaking to seeing into the great empty. It is not saying don't be active in the world. Especially in our republican era, where governance has passed from kings and military leaders to elected representatives.

I find my spiritual life and my ordinary life are inextricable. I don't have private views untouched by how I meet the world. There are traditionally two ways of engagement, both forms of spiritual practice if engaged with open hearts. Historically Buddhism has in fact been pretty good about the first: service. Hospitals, feeding the hungry, caring for animals—these are historically part of Buddhism. The second, social engagement, is a current of religions but until the nineteenth century hasn't been a significant part of the Buddhist presence. It is today.

And here the Jewish and Christian tradition, at least currents of them, are invaluable. They identify God's love with the rejected and left behind. The ancient prophets were constantly calling the people to care for the poor and to seek justice. Jesus's whole ministry could be seen as identifying the kingdom as a feast for the lost, the poor, and the hated. Along with some dark warnings for those who ignore the plight of the poor.

Back to the questions I faced at that gathering of students at USC. They asked a number about social concerns and what Buddhism in the West might have to say about this. Here I found myself thinking of what has been emerging. A mixed bag, no doubt. Some of it silly, some of it possibly dangerous in unwholesome ways, but a whole lot of it a great intuitive turning toward the suffering of the world as the work of the heart.

What is our liberation? If it occurs no place other than this wildly open world, how do we engage in a way that is more helpful and less harmful? As it turns out, there are any number of hints for us within the Buddhist traditions.

One of my favorite resources for Nikaya Buddhism, the Buddhism that is most closely aligned with the Pali texts, is Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught.* First published in 1959, its simplicity, clarity, and generosity of heart has kept it in print and read to this day. It has also been criticized as an example of the emerging modernist Buddhism of which the "Western" Buddhism I've been

speaking to is a subset. That caveat included, the Venerable Walpola offers an interesting analysis.

He points out that the Buddha of history, though absolutely focused on ethics, spirituality, and philosophy, across his forty years of teaching also spoke on society, economics, and politics. Venerable Walpola cites the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* from the *Digha Nikaya* (number 26) as an illustration of his concern with the material life.

In this text the Buddha specifically addresses poverty (*daliddiya*) as the cause of theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, and cruelty. Elsewhere in the *Kutadanta Sutta*, he rejects punishment as the way of solving social ills, saying the fix is to address poverty, and that society through its governments needs to be involved in ways to mitigate the suffering of people. So there is ample precedent for social engagement and even something of a moral compass in the Nikaya literature.

More important for me is the implicit call of the two truths as I have come to understand them. The causal world is absolutely true. We arise within this world through causes and conditions. Our choices and our actions create circumstances for others as well as for ourselves. We are all of us caught up—again, to draw upon another source—within an indivisible garment of destiny. And to draw in the second truth, that emptiness of all things is also true, as fully true as the play of cause and effect. It also joins us in a single family of things.

As I've come to taste the realities of the consequences of my behaviors, and simultaneously to see more clearly the fact that it is all empty from before time, this paradox has raised in my heart a sense of care, of compassion for others, of what we in the West call love. And because of this I find a need to redouble my efforts to be of use for others as much as for myself. Indeed, I think the evolution of this need is fundamental to the mature spiritual path.

—

And with that, how do we engage? With questions of poverty and wealth, with questions of racism, with questions of isolation and pain, in the face of a multifaceted and ongoing ecological catastrophe to which we ourselves are actively contributing, and with the awareness that even our best intentions will not prevent the possibility that our engagement will yet cause harm—how do we engage?

It needs to be a new kind of engagement, something openhanded, something generous. The Venerable Walpola points in a helpful direction in citing the *Jataka Tales*, popular legends of the Buddha's lives before he became the Buddha. Within them, we find the ten attributes of a king. It is easy to see these as the ten attributes of good government. And, I suggest, they can equally stand as pointers for a healthful and genuinely healing engagement with society and its ills.

These ten qualities are *dana* (charity), *sila* (morality), *pariccaga* (altruism), *ajjava* (honesty), *maddava* (gentleness), *tapa* (self-restraint), *akkodha* (non-anger), *avihimsa* (nonviolence), *khanti* (forbearance), and *avirodhana* (uprightness).

I would reframe these as pointers for someone who wishes to engage social justice, as general rules of thumb:

1. Start with generosity of heart.
2. Bind ourselves to standards of conduct that support our aspirations. There are lots of rules, laws, precepts, and guidelines offered by different traditions. Understand what these rules are about and what they are for. Commit ourselves to those that make sense and align with our values.
3. Recall this is not all about ourselves, myself. It's never just about ourselves.
4. Commit to relentless honesty, especially about our own thoughts and actions.

5. Try for gentleness, aimed both at ourselves and others.
6. Recall we are never actually in charge, and it would behoove us to act like that was true.
7. Know there are some very important criticisms of the Buddhist call to avoid anger, pointing out how anger can be the only appropriate response to some circumstances. There is nonetheless a legitimate warning about a clinging anger, what I'd call hatred, which has a napalm effect on the heart. As with all these precepts, we need to hold them as all other created things, lightly, knowing there is a time to hold and a time to let go, but that does include a time of holding.
8. Be mindful that the Buddha way is one of nonviolence.
9. Cultivate a sense of patience, even amid urgency. There are injustices right now. And people are not in a position to wait. And all things come to fruition in their own time. Find the harmonies and act within the realities.
10. Return to not-knowing. Here is the great caution. We do not know how our actions will turn out. There are simply too many moving parts. At the same time, we're not excused. We must act.

To use a Zen saying, this is going to be one continuous mistake. That's just how it is.

I know how true this is of me. I don't have enough fingers or toes to count my mistakes, blunders, or self-serving misstatements and actions. However, if our actions are guided by the Buddha's broad guidance and especially these ten principles, then I believe we have a lot better chance of doing good than ill.

No kid should have to eat a rat. Not in our family.

And who can be excluded from the family?

32

Becoming the Fat Guy (Oxherding 10)

> So I close my eyes and say to her, across the years, “How distant are these relatives of yours?” She says, “Come closer.” I lean forward. “Even closer.” And we are face to face.
>
> —Zenshin Florence Caplow[1]

In the *Blue Cliff Record* there’s an anecdote that traffics in the Eastern preoccupation with status and shame rather than the Western one with money.

> Elder Ding made his bows and asked his teacher, the great ninth-century master Linji, “What is the essence of the way?”
>
> Linji stood up from his seat, grabbed Ding by the lapels, shook him, slapped him, and then pushed him away. Ding just stood there.
>
> A monk standing by—think of a guardian angel, think of every friend you’ve ever had who was true—said, “Elder, why don’t you bow?”
>
> Elder Ding understood.[2]

As we walk the intimate way, we pass through the many traps. We climb out of many, many wells that we’ve fallen into. We touch the

great mystery and find everything, absolutely everything, tumbling away. We begin to reconstruct who we are within the deep intimacies of life and death, and we fall into a couple more wells and climb out of them. After all of that, we come to the tenth of the oxherding pictures.

> Barefoot and shirtless, enter the market
> Smiling through all the dirt and grime.
> No immortal powers, no secret spells,
> Just teach the withered trees to bloom.

At this point, the intimate way is not over, but it has shifted and become something new. There's a lovely line in the "Jewel Mirror Samadhi," a classic Zen poem commonly chanted in contemporary Japanese Soto temples and monasteries.

> You are not it, but in truth it is you.

I find this line arising in my encounters. It appears in my dreams.

The poem is commonly attributed to Dongshan Lianggjie, a ninth-century Chan master and founder of the Caodong (Soto in Japanese) school. Dongshan is also credited with the poetic map of awakening's faces, the Five Ranks.

For me "you are not it, but in truth it is you" jumbles with a number of things. What is nonduality? What is it not? And what does this encounter, place, and perspective we find ourselves at mean for us as people walking the intimate way?

For Reiho Masunaga the line goes: "You are not him; he is actually you."[3]

For William F. Powell the line goes: "You are not him, but he is clearly you."[4]

For the official Sotoshu translations the line goes: "You are not it, but in truth it is you."[5]

At some point if we are a little lucky, we discover how true it is that we are a part of the great play of things. No one religion owns it, but each partakes in differing degree. I recall the first time I read the opening lines of “Thunder, Perfect Mind,” a Coptic language poem uncovered in 1945 as part of the amazing cache called the Nag Hammadi Library. Its most famous document is the Gospel according to Thomas. But there are other texts.

And I recall my breath escaping my body as I read “Thunder, Perfect Mind.” I’ve sat with it and I’ve found my own words for it.

I am the first and the last
I am honored and scorned
I am whore and holy
I am wife and virgin
I am mother and child

I am the deep silence
And a remembered thought
I am the sound of the voice
And the many interpretations
I am in the name

So listen
You angels
You spirits raised from death
I am the one who exists
And there are none to judge me[6]

For me the great way tumbled open when I found the answer to my koan, the question that has followed me all of my life. What is the real? What is God? Saint Francis is said to have said, “Preach the good news constantly.” If necessary, use words.

You are not it. But in truth, it is you.

You are not God. I am not God. But in truth, God is you. In truth, God is me. Getting the “is not” together with the “is” and opening up to the unfolding realities of this world, rising and passing. And then the long journey of integration. *Hózhó* in Navajo, the Beauty Way. Our lifetime practice.

Beauty is before me, and
Beauty behind me,
above me and below me
hovers the beautiful.
I am surrounded by it,
I am immersed in it.
In my youth, I am aware of it,
and, in old age,
I shall walk quietly the beautiful Trail.
In beauty it is begun.
In beauty, it is ended.[7]

—

The Buddha said, “I alone am the holy one.” And one person after another has noticed this great unity, as well. But it isn’t isolated. That’s a trap—one we’re quite likely to fall into and then have to climb out of. We notice. We taste. We touch. The “I” is simply a location. But we need to cast off our shoes, because we notice we are in fact treading on holy ground.

We are ancient and we are new. We are the same as we’ve always been, caught up in our wounds and longings. But the healing is also found. Found as nothing other than the being we are. That is you. That is me.

To me, the best of images is that fat guy, that laughing, rotund Chinese Buddha. I am not it. My ideas, my desires, I own them. They

play out as me, that fat guy, and my part of the great net of things.

I am not it. But in truth, it is me.

Here is the mysterious quality of presence. It is you. It is me. And we cannot claim to own it.

As Empedocles is first thought to have said, “God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.”

This is the secret of the nondual.

In this place, we find the unknowing that is it. And when we find this intimate truth, we instantly return to the world. We wander freely. We bring a good word. We reach out a hand as we can. We are the infinite itself. But we are just this moment, with all the limitations being a moment brings with it. The fat guy, beauty again.

33

Mystery Piled upon Mystery

> Wisdom is knowing I am nothing, love is knowing I am everything, and between the two my life moves.
>
> —Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj[1]

There's an old saying about politics. You run for office with poetry, but you must govern with prose. As the spiritual way opens for us, we discover our lives must incorporate both prose and poetry. There are the ordinary tasks of life, work, relationships, maybe romantic partnerships or marriage, sometimes children. There is the ticking of the clock. It certainly feels like prose.

But as we open our eyes and hearts we discover something. Actually, it's all poetry—even the proof of our lives is poetry. In fact, it turns out the universe is writing stories and songs, actually whole symphonies. And there we are. You and me.

We in fact live and breathe and take our being in stories. Like the turtles in that old joke, it's stories all the way down. And so, to recap the song and prose and poetry, to bring it all together…

—

Once upon a time long ago and far away there was a burglar.

She was quick-witted and nimble-footed, so she was successful in her chosen trade. However, as sometimes happens when one is

good at something, she kept pushing the envelope. And with that came the disaster.

She was discovered trying to break into a rich merchant's home. She fled without anyone catching a glimpse of her face. However, as a great cry of "Thief!" rang out, pretty much the whole village was soon in hot pursuit.

Fortunately for her, she was just far enough ahead of the crowd that when she saw a cave opening between the road and a creek, she had time to throw herself into the water, roll in the mud, and then climb back up to the cave. There she sat, settling into a traditional meditation posture in front of the cave opening. It looked exactly as if she were simply one of the many mendicants, monastics, mad people, or others who took to the road on the great spiritual quest.

When the crowd arrived in front of the cave and the convincing looking monastic, their leader saw her and said, "O holy one! Did you see the thief we were chasing?"

The burglar simply ignored the question and continued sitting as if she were meditating.

One of the villagers said to their leader, "Can't you see she's meditating? We would earn some very bad karma if we disturb her." And then another said, "Let's wait. When she's ready she'll speak." There was muttering of agreement, and the leader understood one leads by ordering people to do what they want to. So they all sat on the ground in front of the thief and waited.

While the burglar sat there, pretending to meditate, she desperately wondered when they would move on. Instead, more and more villagers gathered. Some remained standing. Most sat down. A few even began to meditate themselves. She had this terrible feeling, as if she were trapped in the bottom of a dry well. After about two hours, vastly longer than the burglar ever thought she could hold still, she pretended to awaken from her meditative trance. Slowly opening her eyes, she looked out at what was now about fifty people, all of them quietly waiting.

She cleared her throat and spoke softly but with enough volume to be heard by everyone there. “Why are you looking for some poor thief, dear ones? Wouldn’t it be vastly better to search for your true nature? After all, who isn’t stealing their lives by ignoring the great question of life and death?”

With this the villagers were overcome—some with grief at their wasted lives, others at the call to something more important than perhaps they’d ever considered before. A few ran back to the village to gather flowers to give her. Others went home and got some food as an offering, including rare treats.

Presented with the flowers and food, the burglar ate, trying not to gobble or look greedy. Then, asking herself what a wise person would do in a similar situation, she asked that the majority of the food be distributed among those present, specifying that the poorest get enough and particularly some of the best delicacies. She also handed out the flowers to everyone. People felt graced.

Finally, the rich merchant himself stepped forward and implored the wise nun that she remain here and grace their village with her wisdom. The burglar thought to herself, well, while I’m good at my trade as a thief, it is hard work, and it is too dangerous. This holy nun gig could be an easy way to make a living. As a thief, she thought she could easily steal what she needed just by pretending to be holy.

So she said, “I will stay with you. But only for a brief time.”

The villagers were ecstatic. They brought her blankets and candles, and someone even thought to bring her a down-filled pillow.

Life was comfortable beyond what she had ever experienced. The price was that she had to pretend to meditate for hours every day and then in the early evening to answer questions the villagers would bring her. Answering questions turned out not to be difficult. It seemed she knew what a good and generous heart would do, or, as she thought it, what a sucker might do. Not a lot of difference, she was pretty sure. Pretending to meditate, however, was harder. She knew people were watching, so she really had to hold still.

Life paraded by on the road. Merchants, monastics, families, and children. Once an ox led by a boy with a rope held in a loop through its nose trotted by. The pair paused and looked at her, their eyes—both boy and ox—were dark pools, then moved on without saying anything.

Time passed. Days turned into weeks. Weeks into months. The food was good. The blankets were warm. And oh my, that pillow.

But the burglar's meditating continued to be a terrible ordeal. She experimented with her posture, trying to find a position that wasn't painful. She began to sit on that pillow, and gradually become comfortable sitting cross-legged. Over time, her knees began to drop and then touch the ground.

But then there was her mind. She fantasized about everything that had happened her life, how she was raised. The poverty. The violence. The gift of learning to read at the local temple. And the reading of books. There weren't many, but she read them over and over.

Then there was her trade. Figuring out how to steal without getting caught. Experiencing what happened early on when she was caught. The moments of joy and the long times of boredom and intermittent flashes of terror. She also fantasized about the future, about what new treats the villagers might bring, about what she would do when she tired of this and returned to the road and a life of burglaries.

But as she passed in her imagination from the past to the future, increasingly, she noticed something else. At first it was like a flashing silence, just for a moment. Gradually, it grew larger in her consciousness. After a while, as those weeks passed into those months, that space, that quiet, that just being present became a large part of her holding still, pretending to meditate.

Something was now different. She began seeing the villagers in a new light. And even the words that came out of her mouth now landed in her own ears in a new way. She gradually came to know

the villagers—their sorrows; how they could be so petty and even sometimes cruel; the various intrigues in their lives; their loves as they arose and sometimes fell apart, other times deepened; their many generosities, sometimes unconscious, sometimes grand and even costly.

Gradually, she began to love them.

Increasingly self-aware, she began to see how her own life was just like theirs. She knew they were different people, and yet—somehow, mysteriously—they were also one. Increasingly as she spoke, everything she shared was based in that mystery, that they were different and that they were more closely connected than the finest woven fabric.

Then a teenager appeared. He approached her one evening, made bows, and said he'd been wandering looking for a teacher. And he'd begun to hear of this amazing nun who spoke wisely and, more importantly, modeled the great gift of silent meditation.

He declared he wanted to learn her wisdom.

Not knowing what to do, she simply ignored him. He took a place in the dirt below her as she began to pretend to meditate. He sat quietly. The next day, she told him to go—she wasn't interested in having disciples. But he continued to sit with her at a respectful distance. She knew she had to pretend to be generous, so she made sure he was fed. And before long, the villagers made sure he had blankets and even a pillow of his own. He seemed much less interested in them than she was. What he seemed to love was to sit quietly.

She asked him, "What are you doing while meditating?"

He said he did what he was taught when he first decided to walk the spiritual path. He counted his breath, putting a one on his inhalation, then exhaled, then put a two on the next inhalation, and continuing until ten. After which he repeated the process. She said nothing. Then she tried it for herself and discovered it helped with her concentration. But it also tended to obscure the quiet place that

seemed increasingly interesting to her. So a few days later she told him that he might try just sitting quietly, not trying to think, not trying not to think. And he did.

She began to wonder if it was time to escape.

The problem was that there were villagers around pretty much all the time, and the boy, well, he was there all the time.

So the burglar was stuck.

Over time the burglar grew quieter. She witnessed the day as it began. She witnessed the day as it passed. She witnessed the evening as it arose. Her last moment before sleep was noticing, witnessing, being present. And her words almost always came from that place, the place where she saw she and they were all the same.

Increasingly, she talked about the silence, about what she found, and what they might find.

One day, the boy came to her and said that when he took a walk down by the creek a crow called out. And in that moment, he realized the crow, the creek, the trees, he himself, and all things were joined so closely that the right word for what was true, and present, was simply “one.” He then added, embarrassed, how he knew even that “one” seemed a bit too much.

She wasn’t sure what to say, so she simply smiled at him, put her hands together and made a small bow.

They continued together in this way as the months turned into years.

She wasn’t sure when it happened for herself. In fact, she never had that “big thing” like her disciple. What she did have was a gradual growing into peace and joy. And gratitude for it all.

In that parade of humanity, at some point another ox trotted by. This time without an attendant. It ignored her and just continued on its way. The image of it swishing its tale as it trotted down the road stuck in her heart.

Eventually her fame as a wise counselor and teacher of the ways of the heart spread across the country. She was attended to faithfully

by her disciple, who was increasingly seen as a wise teacher himself. A small community of monks and nuns gathered around her. And within the village others seemed to become wise as well.

One year she fell ill, but that seemed okay. Her disciples tended to her. And that was okay. The villagers came to ask her last questions. And that was okay. The world, as terrible as it was, was also something wonderful, something amazing.

And when she died, her senior disciple, now a wise and respected counselor, oversaw the burning of her corpse. He installed her ashes under some rocks out beyond the small monastery of nuns and monks that had grown over the years. The community elected him to succeed their founding teacher.

Always before he lectured on the mysteries of the way, he would thank the good gods that he had been given such a wonderful guide on the mysteries of life and death.

The teacher who stole his delusions. And in doing so, opened his heart.

Mystery piled upon mystery.

The Intimate Way.

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Oxherding verses by Stanley Lombardo from *Zen Sourcebook* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), used with permission.

NOTES

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