MOST INTIMATE

A ZEN APPROACH TO LIFE'S CHALLENGES

Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara

“Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara’s *Most Intimate* is exactly that: deeply forthright in its wisdom and fully at home in the body of her direct experience. Filled with precise instruction and insight, informed by the rigor of Roshi’s years of dedicated practice and service, her authentic voice speaks boldly and without compromise on these pages.”

—Sharon Salzberg, author of *Lovingkindness* and *Real Happiness*

“Warm-hearted, clear, precise, and deeply loving, *Most Intimate* beckons newcomers and old-timers alike back to the cushion of their own lives to live them with awareness and appreciation. Roshi Enkyo’s voice is deeply personal and her teachings deceptively simple, for they manage to address our strongest needs for relationship, joy, confidence, and freedom from fear.”

—Tetsugen Bernie Glassman, author of *Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master’s Lessons in Living a Life That Matters*

“We often think of Zen as a practice of stillness, and this book shows us the other half of mature spiritual practice: intimacy and expression. This is the kind of Zen that is loyal to both the monastery and the streets, and so the lessons here are vibrantly appropriate for this new century of dharma. Roshi Enkyo O’Hara’s voice is alive, bright, and welcoming.”

—Michael Stone, author of *Awake in the World* and *Yoga for a World Out of Balance*

ABOUT THE BOOK

For Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara, intimacy is what Zen practice is all about: the realization of the essential lack of distinction between self and other that inevitably leads to wisdom and compassionate action. She approaches the practice of intimacy beginning at its most basic level—the intimacy with ourselves that is the essential first step. She then shows how to bring

intimacy into our relationships with others, starting with those dearest to us and moving on to those who don't seem dear at all. She then shows how to grow in intimacy so that we include everyone around us, all of society, the whole world and all the beings it contains. Each chapter is accompanied by practices she uses with her students at the Village Zendo for manifesting intimacy in our lives.

ROSHI PAT ENKYO O'HARA is a Soto Zen Priest and Zen Teacher in the White Plum lineage. She received priest ordination from Taizan Maezumi Roshi and dharma transmission from Bernie Tetsugen Glassman. She is the founder and abbot of the Village Zendo in New York City.

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Foreword by Roshi Joan Halifax

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This book is dedicated to Sybil Myoshin Taylor
June 5, 1933–February 29, 2012
Who conceived it in association with her friend and teacher, Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara

THE FORTY-SECOND ANCESTOR LIANGSHAN YUANGUAN (Japanese: Ryozan Enkan) was the attendant to the forty-first ancestor, Tongan Guanzhi (Japanese: Doan Kanshi), and carried his robe for him. There was a moment in which his teacher needed to put on his robe, so Liangshan Yuanguan handed the robe to him. Tongan Guanzhi said to his disciple, “What is the business under the patched robe?” His student had no answer. The teacher said, “To wear this robe and not understand the great matter is the greatest suffering. You ask me.” So the student asked the teacher, “What is the business under the patched robe?” The teacher said, “Intimacy. Intimacy.” This was the moment when the forty-second ancestor broke through. He bowed to his teacher in great gratitude, and his tears flowed. The teacher asked, “What have you understood? Can you express it?” He said, “What is the matter under this robe? Intimacy.” His teacher said, “Intimacy and even greater intimacy.”[1]

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Acknowledgments

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And to the Village Zendo sangha and all the Dharma students I've known, thank you for your practice.

Foreword

I have had the joy of practicing with Roshi Enkyo O'Hara for many years, both in New York and at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We are often suitemates when she comes to my Zen center for Rohatsu *sesshin.* In the early mornings before *zazen* or late in the evenings, we find ourselves chuckling over the absurdity of our lives, joking about our "continuous failure," and appreciating the depth of our friendship and the richness of practice.

She and I have traveled many paths together, not only across the *zendo* but also across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas. We have circumambulated Mount Kailash together, like Han Shan and Shih Te, two old monks struggling along at altitude. As we have gotten older, we find ourselves more comfortable on horseback, riding narrow mountain trails and peering down at the Karnali or Brahmaputra rivers, as we remember that our lives are also passing from us at a similar rate.

Now she has written this marvelous book—*Most Intimate,* a perfect title for a life that continues to be lived intimately and authentically. All the pieces of Roshi's life seem to come together in this "most intimate" phrase: her practice, her laughter, her service, her scholarship, her love of others, her diligence, her courage, her truthfulness and testiness, her wisdom and wit, and her caring.

In Zen, we make our *okesa* (monk's robe) out of pieces of discarded cloth. That "pathwork" robe, or Buddha robe, is our life; it wraps around our life and the life of this world. *Most Intimate* is about our wholeness in our whole life, all the pieces of it, how to realize intimacy within it, and how to make a whole cloth of it.

In this book, Roshi Enkyo explores not just regular intimacy, but radical intimacy. She sees it as the ultimate path and realization of liberation. This path she invites us to open is not only about our lives; it is also about the life of this world in which we are embedded. Each other, our work, our society, our earth—none of this is separate from practice.

Our wholeness includes the truth of suffering and the discoveries we can make when we see suffering with unafraid eyes. Roshi tells us that this is healing. This is also our practice, which is to turn into the skid, to find our way to stillness in the midst of rough seas, to swim in the flood, to find sustenance in the desert. Roshi also calls us to stillness, even as our technology and obsession with work endeavor to entice us into a tangle of distractions.

This wonderful book's concluding chapters are close to the heart. They remind us of the supreme importance of "being with dying." They give us the way to know grief as a gift and show us a path to joy.

Through Roshi's words and the words of great teachers, practices that we can do alone and with others, we are invited to be most intimate.

ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX
May 2013

Introduction

WHAT IS ZEN?

She asks me, “Why Zen?”
clear blue sky
sunlight glancing off the bare branches
sound of leaves
the little black-headed chickadee whistles
my life so clear, so direct
gratitude for this mind moment.

The other day someone asked me, “Why Zen?” In a way, Zen is too close to my heart to be able to answer. It’s like asking a fish, “Why water?” Yet I want to answer the question, because I am so grateful for the gifts that Zen has brought to my life and the lives of others.

I first encountered Zen when I was a young woman. It seemed thrilling, a radical, spontaneous, and courageous way to meet life. I was interested in the arts and in the free and unhindered quality of Zen painting and poetry. Much can be said about the values inherent in the Zen arts, but what first struck me was the unpretentious, natural quality of the work, a quality that seemed to emerge from a fresh and free approach, unburdened by old ideas about the right or wrong way to create. This open quality, transferred to my own life, showed me the power of letting down my guarded, conditioned ideas about reality and inspired me to meet life directly. What is true in the

Zen arts, I found to be true in my everyday life. *Zen* literally means "meditation"—profound stillness, a quality of awareness of mind, but a quality that also carries an element of heart. In Zen, meditation, which we may wrongly associate with a kind of passivity or inaction, signifies a consciousness of mind and heart together. It implies an active, vital engagement in life as we meet it. One of the elements in the ancient Chinese ideogram for Zen is "clearing a space for an altar." I feel that is exceedingly apt, because so much of Zen is about making space in our heart-minds so that we can live a life that is direct and clear. We burn off the brush and find ourselves in an unobstructed opening to life, and that opening, that bare space, is our altar. It is open and allows reality to enter. When a flower comes, it is accepted as a flower; when a dark cloud comes, it is accepted as a dark cloud. There is no denial or grasping. There is recognition.

Zen is a way of being in touch with our wholeness—our self without the overlay of what may have crept through in our history, without the stories we make about our life, without the defensiveness or delusions that we have built up to protect ourselves. Too often what we consciously or unconsciously use as "protection" can become a frame through which we view all of life; it is a distorted frame—a prison, actually. And in that prison it is very difficult to function from the heart or even to find the heart. By clearing the space in our mind, we open our life to appreciation of and confidence in whatever shows up.

An old Zen Master named Ganto said, "There is no other task but to know your own original face. This is called independence. The spirit is clear and free."[1]

There is no other task but to know your own original face.

In Zen, our original face is the aspect of our being that leaves nothing out, that is free and open to all it encounters. The original face includes everything: the past, the present, the sunset, the rain, all of our ancestors, the leaves on the trees, now, before, and after. An element of many spiritual traditions, the original face can be found in different ways. Zen is a somewhat uncluttered way. By "uncluttered," I mean that Zen looks deeply at the main issue: the self. The focus of study is our mind and how our mind, once it is quiet and at ease, realizes that we are in relationship with everything

that is. We begin to see that everything is an opportunity for realization. Are we so different from the breeze of the fans, the sounds of the street, the bustle in the room? Asking ourselves this question may reveal a layer of our own being that we have not been in touch with.

Nothing is left out. A Zen approach recognizes all the aspects of life, our ordinary daily life and our function in the world as householders, family members, parents, lovers, students, loners, as craftspeople, businesspeople, artists, and teachers. We can enter this path at any stage of life. In my community, young people under twenty are joining, as are new members well into their eighties. When the time is ripe, Zen is there for you. And it does not require giving up your responsibilities and commitments; rather, it teaches a way to enter into them fully.

Doing Zen is a way to recognize our own being, how we are in each moment. It is a way to realize in the moment that everything is always changing and to be present to that change.

A metaphor that's used in Zen is seeing the moon in flowing water. For example, you see the moon in the Hudson River or a tide pool or a creek—you look at it, and there's the moon—but it's not static. It's constantly shifting, expanding and contracting with the waves and currents, or maybe it breaks up and there are just flashes of light. Then it coheres again; it appears once more. When we really realize that we are like that, we can respond freshly, creatively to each new situation. Think how you yourself shift and change as you enter different life situations. Why would you require yourself or anyone else to remain fixed?

By calling the Zen approach "uncluttered," I also mean that it can be simple. At the heart of Zen is *zazen* (meditation). When we sit in meditation, we can discover a way of being that is very different from our typical interactions with the world. For the period of time that we sit, we agree within ourselves to quiet the familiar internal chatter that goes on most of the time. We sit so that we can discover in ourselves this capability for stillness, for intimacy with our self. We can uncover the heart.

This process of stilling the mind and opening the heart brings a great feeling of ease that courses through the body, releasing the

sensation of holding back, of fragility or tightness, and freeing us to work with the challenges of life. I call that true intimacy. When we can actually feel what we are feeling, experience what we are experiencing, and recognize what we are thinking, then we become intimate with ourselves. This intimacy is a closeness, a quality of interiority, a nearness. To be intimate with yourself is to be so attuned to your own feeling-state and mind-state and perception-state that nothing is hidden, your whole being is available to your life. In this intimacy with self, we begin to recognize the habits of thinking that stop us from living confidently, generously, and vigorously. And we begin to trust ourselves.

One

BECOMING INTIMATE WITH YOURSELF

Sitting quietly,
one minute, one hour, no matter,
finding the quiet within
I find myself again and again.
Finding myself, I offer the quiet light
to those on the street, in the office,
all around me.
To the lost and suffering beings, to the bewildered
and questioning,
even to the bare tree with its leafless
branches filled with chirping sparrows.

One summer evening when I was nine years old, I lay on my back on a grassy lawn looking up at the starry night. I could feel the blades of grass sticking into my skin. I saw the flickering bright stars and the dimmer ones, the imaginary lines I could draw between some of them, and the occasional shooting stars that would course through the dark abysses. Gradually, my interest in specific areas of the sky waned, and I found myself simply looking at all of it—darkness, stars, light patterns, immensity, incalculable bits of light and dark. I felt myself sucked into this gigantic fullness: a tiny spot in this great, grand, shimmering canopy. I felt I was dissolving, swirling in this field

of the night sky. How glorious that moment was! I was stardust, black space, the sky itself! And immediately, simultaneously, I felt a fear in my belly, a fear that I was lost. After a while, there was the distinctive prickle of the grass on my legs bringing me back to my body stretched on the earth. I felt full of awe and, at the same time, the great relief of being in my own backyard.

I'm sure all of us have gazed at the pounding surf or glowing embers or have looked down from a tall peak and had that feeling of nearly dissolving. Most of us have also had the fear come up—that fear of our individual "me" getting lost in this awesome totality. How we want to protect this me! But what is me?

Before I began to practice Zen meditation, I certainly wasn't clear about what that me was. It was obscured by the ideas that others had expressed. My mother and father, my friends and teachers, even the place where I lived, the social milieu—all of them had told me who I was. I felt I needed to protect these ideas and the deeper feelings they created: the fears and desires, the grasping and the pushing away. I was like a bundle of distrust. Dissolving was far from my mind; I was consolidating. Throughout my life, I had consciously built up an efficient and effective persona, and that was my way of coping with vulnerability. But in the dead of night, in those moments when all my habits and protections would drop away and I was raw, I was aware that the persona I had constructed was completely false. It was not me at all. I felt that my life was like chaos on one hand and like cardboard on the other.

Then I had my first experience of Zen practice: a splash of cold water in my face. Wake up! After a few months of practicing sitting meditation, I felt as though pieces of the armor I had created to protect myself had begun to disintegrate and fall away. I learned that pieces would continue to fall away and return (they still do), but I had begun to sense the possibility of being free.

I joined a Zen community where everyone practiced together—not only sitting meditation, studying, and hearing talks, but also cleaning floors and washing dishes. I listened to others struggling with the same issues as my own, and bit by bit, I began to be aware of myself as not just "me" but as part of the other beings in my immediate environment. "Me" was not a fixed and solid thing. I began to feel a

little bit like a bird that flies free without a track to fly on. Birds just fly, fish just swim. How would it feel to be like that? Just to flow with life as it is?

Linchi, a great and famous ninth-century Zen master said, “There is a self—a true person of no rank—that just flows in and out of the holes in your face.”[1] How amazing to experience your true self as simply flowing. Breathing in, you breathe in the whole universe; breathing out, you breathe out the whole universe. Here is the self as me-and-you, as the sky and the mist of yesterday, the sun of this afternoon, and the rain of next fall. All are me-and-you. What could be more intimate?

To me, intimacy is the underlying liberation of Zen.

When I talk about intimacy, I’m talking first about intimacy with ourselves, then about intimacy with our lovers, partners, and close friends. I’m talking about intimacy with the work we do and the colleagues with whom we work, intimacy with our community and with the great earth—intimacy with everyone.

In this book, I want to talk about how we can find a way to trust that if we are truly intimate with ourselves, we can be intimate with everyone else, with every situation that arises. There is no need to retreat to phony artificiality; we can actually meet every situation with intimacy. We can’t really have an intimate mind, a mind that hides nothing, if we are actually hiding from ourselves. An intimate mind requires nothing less than a wholehearted, extreme commitment to waking up to ourselves, moment to moment, sensation by sensation, to allowing ourselves to be aware of what we are experiencing no matter how painful or uncomfortable or embarrassing it might be.

In Zen meditation, we get so close to our experiencing body-mind that we spontaneously just experience what we are experiencing without the walls, the curtains, the clouds of protection we have built around ourselves. The choice of expression comes later. What is real and authentic is the moment of awareness, the moment of intimacy.

Changsha, another ancient master, said it this way: “The entire universe is your eye, the entire universe is your complete body, the entire universe is your luminescence. In the entire universe, there is no one who is not your own self.”[2] This way of seeing is so grand, so

bold—you can't really take it in all at once. I suggest you write it down and tack it on your wall; just the one sentence: "In the entire universe, there is no one who is not your own self."

Such a realization is no longer foreign to twenty-first-century science. More and more, we can see how neurobiology, information theory, genetics, relational psychoanalysis, complexity theory, and the like seem to lead toward a view very much like these ancient Buddhist teachings of the self as expansive and including everything.

"In the entire universe, there is no one who is not your own self." Does that mean there is no difference between you and me? Definitely not! Each of us is as unique and individual as each star in the sky. Yet the sky itself is made of all the stars: seen as sky, we are part of everything else, and seen as star, we are uniquely our own being—not the same.

It is the fact that we're not the same that creates complications in our lives. We measure ourselves against others and imagine that the measurement defines our self. We see another person who is very successful, and we feel we're not, or maybe that person has things we like but don't have. And we ask ourselves, "Why not me? Why don't I have these things? Why is my life not like that person's?" In this way, we create a new form of suffering for ourselves. We feel something is lacking, having created a comparison that exists only in our mind as a thought.

I saw this very poignantly years ago when I was teaching at New York University and directing a technical program. I hired a middle-aged man whom I'll call Alan. He was competent, handsome, bright, a great wit, and everyone liked him. As a kid, he had loved baseball more than anything, and he was a good enough player to make it to the minor leagues. Ultimately, however, he was not chosen to go on.

From then on, he defined himself as a failure: "Good but not good enough." Time passed, but he remained stuck, fixated on a self he had created when he was twenty-two years old. He took jobs here and there, he went to this and that graduate school, but he was always suffering, always unable to see who he really was. He never saw how many people loved him, how they did things for him, found jobs for him. He could have coached Little League, taught sports to those in need, become a scholar of baseball history, or used his

experience of a fixed self as a transformative opportunity for himself and others. It saddens me to think of him—a wonderful man who was blind to his own beauty.

In Zen, we say, “Be careful of the stuck pointer on the scale.” The stuck pointer always gives you the same weight no matter what you’re weighing or how heavy it really is. Put a pound of rice on the scale, and the stuck pointer will say two ounces. Weigh a bag of tea, and the pointer will still say two ounces. That’s what can happen in our own lives. Not awake, we are stuck thinking we contain only our fixed selves. Like Alan, we don’t realize that we are part of the ever-changing world. And like Alan, we don’t realize that the ever-changing world is part of us.

Zen teachings often use striking images like the stuck pointer to help us break free of our fixed sense of “me,” to help us open out our small selves to this boundless world. A particularly important metaphor for awakening in Buddhist practice is the lotus. This treasured blossom only grows in the stagnant water of ponds and lakes. A common Zen phrase is often recited when giving thanks: “May we exist in muddy water with purity like a lotus.”

Gardeners know that muddy water is wonderful. It’s filled with nutrients, yet it stinks. It’s smelly, it’s dirty, but only out of the muddy water can we have the lotus—that beautiful symbol of spiritual purity. If we pull the lotus out of the muddy water and plant it in distilled water, it won’t grow.

We too are living in the muddy waters of our difficulties—our anger, our suffering, and our doubts—while all along we are also that flawless lotus. Right in the midst of where you are, right in the midst of where you might be today, you are pure as a lotus. This is a paradox we’ll return to in this book again and again.

“May we exist in muddy water with purity like a lotus.” It sounds so simple, but it’s hard to see purity in the midst of our suffering, attachments, desires, and aversions. A few years ago, when I was struggling with a rheumatic condition, it occurred to me that for most of my life I had wanted to see myself as strong and tireless. I had created a superstrong, energetic persona, and suddenly I was weak and tired all the time. It was as though the rug had been pulled out from under me, or at least from under the “me” who always expected

the “tireless one” to show up. I was disappointed. So right there was the lotus in the muddy water: the opportunity to just be with that disappointment, to work with, to be with, to not pull away from my condition and reaction.

Ironically the very quality I had thought of as my strength and tirelessness had obscured my purity—the purity of just being with whatever was happening. My notion of who I needed to be was like carrying baggage I didn’t even know I had. Many of us carry such baggage. We imagine that if only we were smart enough, pretty enough, enlightened enough, we would never have to dwell in muddy water again; we would always be sweet-smelling lotuses. When we reach out to some ideal like this, we are rejecting ourselves. And when we reject ourselves, we reject our interrelated world; we reject everything.

Of course, since the body and mind are not separate, our body also expresses what we feel. We hold memories of old injuries, both emotional and physical, and these are attachments too. I remember one day when I was teaching, looking down and seeing my hand in a tight fist. *What is all this tension?* I thought. *Drop it. Just let it go!* The truth is that we have no idea of all the places we’re holding tension. Where are you holding tension in your own body right now? As you’re breathing in and out, find the places in your body that are tight, where you are holding tension—and let it go.

Just let it go. There you simply are—no separation. The words make it sound kind of mystical, but actually, it’s just being completely here. Because here is all there is. The rest comprises our ideas about what is. Zen practice uses metaphors and images to point you there, but don’t get caught: anytime you attach to a metaphor or description, you cover over the living instant. When I want something called “enlightenment” or “happiness,” I have separated from it, made it into something “other,” and thus I cannot recognize it when it is already completely me. When I say to let go, you may think there is a formula, a fixed way of doing that, but actually, it is simply releasing: breathing out, placing your attention on the area of mind and body that is holding tension, breathing into that area, and releasing—letting go into *this*.

Letting go of our usual version of “me” is something most of us have experienced at one time or another. It’s a moment of complete flow, like when we’re painting, cooking, writing, biking or swimming, listening to music, or making love. At that moment, there’s nothing but flow; we are flowing in the moment before judgment comes back to comment, before an interior voice says, “Oh, this is the most wonderful thing in the world,” or “This is horrid,” building a kind of superstructure around the experience. Once something is frozen as horrid or even beautiful, it is really hard to see the nuances—the beauty in the horrid and the horrid in the beauty. Yet that seeing opens worlds of understanding and compassion.

Of course, letting go doesn’t mean that Zen tells us, “Don’t think.” Not at all! The human mind has evolved this amazing ability to focus, to box experience into categories in order to organize the world. In fact, our labeling and organizing cast of mind is very valuable. It helps us to be efficient, to serve others and ourselves. We couldn’t live without thoughts—we couldn’t even cross the street. However, by fitting this blooming, throbbing universe into categories and boxes, there is a danger that we lose the very sound and color of life itself. So while there is no need to dismiss your discriminating and critical mind, you can also experience the formless, continuous flow of yourself in the world. I know that sounds complicated. How is it possible? How do we stay open to what is?

The Zen story from which this book takes its title speaks directly to this question. Dizang, a Zen monk, sees that his friend Fayan is dressed to leave on pilgrimage, and he asks Fayan what the purpose of the pilgrimage is. Fayan says he doesn’t know. Dizang nods and says, “Not-knowing is most intimate.” This saying, at the heart of the matter, contains one of the simplest and most elusive concepts or experiences of Zen, something vital to our moment-to-moment practice and to how we live life.

Not-knowing is most intimate.

What does “not-knowing” mean? Speaking for myself, I generally desperately want to know. On a certain level, I want to know everything about everything, but that desire is more than curiosity. It can also be a need to control and verify what we already know. These days, when medical news about various causes of illness and

various medications or vitamins regularly seems to contradict itself, we see the result of too much certainty and too little open-minded curiosity. This is even truer in our personal lives. How often have we thought we "knew" what someone meant when he or she said or did something and then later learned that we were mistaken? How many relationships has such "knowing" before investigation harmed?

What gets in the way of our spaciousness, our not-knowing? What gets in the way of our experiencing each moment, of our being curious and interested in the possibilities that arise? Isn't it our ideas about what should be; of what spirituality should be; of what should be happening to us, our friends, or the world? It is as if we have some superior view of life. But it doesn't have to be like this. We can free ourselves of this arrogant, troubling habit.

Even an unpleasant experience can bring us to a place of not-knowing. For example, I am susceptible to arthritic pain. When it starts, I think, *Oh, no! This is going to be really awful*. In the next moment, I realize that I can switch and be with the pain—not fighting against it, not fighting against my idea of what it'll be like and my fear of it. I don't need to add those extra elements, those labels. I can be present, aware, of the shifting sensations in my hands and feet and how my mind colors these sensations. That is being truly intimate, truly at one with myself moment by moment.

When we are faced with physical or emotional pain, we don't have to believe that we need to do something, that we have to fix the situation in some kind of way. We can be present to it. That is the way to be truly intimate: not knowing, just inquiring. Out of this most intimate inquiry, what to do or say just arises naturally.

Not-knowing is kind of like bodysurfing. I grew up on the Pacific Coast, and from the time I was five years old, I loved to be in the ocean and catch a wave. You're there in the water and a wave starts sucking in, and it's really big; it's hovering over you, and you're trying to swim fast enough to ride it. At the same time, you're scared to death that you will catch the wave, because it's so big and turbulent. Of course, that's the fun and the excitement of it. It's that mixture of excitement and fear that I recognize in so many other parts of my life, that kind of "Ah." It's an extraordinary release!

So I remind myself often, “Just don’t know. Just have that ‘don’t-know’ mind. Don’t always try to be so smart.” This life is not about being smart. That’s what trips us up all the time. We can benefit from being a little dumber; we don’t have to believe our every thought and doubt. We can allow them to be there, but we don’t have to believe them, we don’t have to stick to them. We can investigate them. We can just not know. A popular saying these days is, “Don’t believe everything you think.”

I encourage you to use the practice of not-knowing in your life. It doesn’t mean that you’re paralyzed or confused; it doesn’t mean that you stop making plans. It means you’re taking the time to open your mind so that you’re not following your preconceptions and suppositions. This is creative curiosity.

How do we become intimate with this open state? How do we become intimate with this me? We start by sitting on the meditation cushion (see “Guide to Practice”); we work with seeing our own resistance, our own aversion, our own self-hatred . . . and letting it go. We begin to really experience the magic, the mystery, and the incredibly truthful teachings of not-knowing.

We become aware of what we’re experiencing in each moment. How can we be intimate with ourselves if we’re not aware, alive, and close to ourselves? From that core, that practice of awareness, we can move outward with open minds and hearts to relate to our loved ones, our friends, and the world.

PRACTICE

In this and the following chapters, I make suggestions of ways to integrate these teachings into your own life. The exercises were developed over many years of giving workshops on the topics I explore here, and I encourage you to try them and to learn from your inquiry. The dialogues are edited versions of discussions I had in those workshops with people who had performed the exercises.

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you're like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Exercise for Working Alone

Set a timer for five minutes. Become aware of your breath. Say out loud exactly what is coming to your awareness moment to moment. With each arriving awareness say, "Awareness of . . ." For example, you may say, "Awareness of my heart beating"; "Awareness of the bird outside the window"; "Awareness of the smell of onions cooking"; "Awareness of a cool breeze"; or "Awareness of sadness in my heart."

When the five minutes are up, write down your impressions, thoughts, and discoveries. Was this difficult for you? If so, why? Is there something new for you here?

Exercise for Working with a Partner or in a Group Working in Pairs

Set a timer for five minutes. Sit facing each other. Take a moment to quiet your body and breath. Then repeat the preceding exercise but with one person asking the other, "What is your awareness right now?" After each answer, the questioner says, "Thank you," and repeats the question. The questioner's role is simply to be a witness. It's best not to coach with facial expressions; very calmly, with a relaxed face, take in the other person's continuum of awareness. It will sound something like this:

Q: What is your awareness right now?
A: A cool breeze.
Q: Thank you. What is your awareness right now?
A: My toe hurts.
Q: Thank you. What is your awareness right now?

When the timer rings, reset it for another five minutes and switch roles.

Evaluating the Exercise

After the exercise, if you're working on your own, write down the thoughts and feelings that arose. If you're working with a partner or group, open a discussion of impressions and discoveries.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Roshi: So how was that? Did you notice anything about that? Did anything snag for you?

Q: I was aware of trying to say something interesting to my partner. It's been kind of like that with my meditation: I've been struggling with, "Do I pay attention to what's happening, or do I try to have a certain thing happen while I'm sitting?" I constantly want to change my awareness, to be aware of something deeper and broader and more interesting than just, "Oh, there's the light over there."

Roshi: A good insight, seeing that quality of looking for something else rather than what is actually arising. In this case, you are now noticing the effect of the person you're working with on how you are experiencing yourself. Often, when no one's there, we still do it, imagining that somehow we have to add to what we are.

Q: Hearing the rain outside, I was aware of emotional states and feeling sad.

Roshi: Yes, and that's exactly how it is when we become aware of the largeness of the self, that it's not just our depression or our anger or our passion, but it's wider than that. It includes the sound of the rain and what that brings up for us, all of us in the room feeling it like "Ah." For you the "Ah" then turned to sadness.

Q: There's a certain censorship. What do I *not* want to be saying?

Roshi: Yes, that's judgment: "Is my awareness right?" This exercise can help us train ourselves to drop our stories, our shoulds, and our preoccupations and actually to be intimate with our lives.

Two

RELATIONSHIP

YOU AND ME AND THE SPACES BETWEEN

This patchwork robe
Chatters sometimes, and sometimes is quiet.
All the different pieces
Making one thing. Held together by
Thread and dye, so like our
Lives touching, shifting, changing
In the dark,
In the light.

On special occasions, I wear an outer Buddhist robe that members of our Zen community (*sangha*) made for me out of scraps of material. In the earliest times, followers of the Buddhist community wore robes that were sewn from remnants of discarded cloth, thus integrating elements of all life, from baby diapers to charnel cloths. Following that tradition, our community contributed pieces of cloth for my robe. Many people gave bits of material; then they were all sewn together and dyed to make a beautiful patchwork robe that is very much like the ancient ones. Actually, this robe belongs to the community and only temporarily to me.

The different pieces represent parts of people's lives, little pieces of cloth that had meaning for them. In one—part of a shirt with funny

little Scottie dogs—I see Raymond, who gave the piece before he died of AIDS. There's a very old fragment from Anraku's mother's kimono, a remnant from the 1940s. Next to it is a piece of Lynda Hart's blouse; Lynda died young of breast cancer. In the little book in which people recorded something about the item they contributed, Linda wrote, "I just wanted to give you a cheap blouse!" I've never forgotten that wisecrack, pointing to the all-embracing and humble qualities of a robe. There are many other pieces as well—from a school uniform, a waiter's apron, a silk tie, a dishcloth, a piece of old embroidery. It's awesome to see all these pieces together forming one robe. The robe calls to mind people I see every day, those who are far away, those whose relationships with others and with me have changed, and those who have died. Actually, "memory robe" or not, this is the way we all live: in relationship with everything all the time. But we forget that, or it can be merely an idea rather than a lived experience.

The robe can also serve as a reminder of how suffering is, in fact, an element of life. Those pieces of loss and grief, intermixed with birth and wedding materials, offer a true teaching. When we truly "get" this, life becomes much easier; we are better able to face the difficulties of relationship in our lives when we recognize that they come with the package of life. The first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths says simply, "Suffering exists." Ironically, it is a great release to realize that we no longer need to struggle to deny our suffering; instead, we can find ways for that understanding to help us in our lives. To think that any relationship we might have would be free of suffering is not only naive but dangerous to its endurance. Many relationships have gone sour because someone expects the other person somehow to be able to meet all of his or her needs and there will be no suffering in the relationship. When we think of it, what a peculiar idea to have: that a relationship could be without moments of sadness or difficulty! That teaching of the robe—that there is suffering in even the best of lives—is crucial to living an intimate relationship with those we encounter.

The patchwork robe also reminds us of the constantly changing nature of life. As I look at the pieces, I marvel at how all of us have changed. The robe itself has also changed through the years; it was

dyed a deep maroon, but it is faded and softer now. There is the sense that even those who have joined our community in the twenty-some years since the robe was sewn, by adding stitches here and there, are also entering the robe as it ages.

That all of life is a process of continuous change is a core insight derived from Buddhist teachings but even more directly from our own experience in meditation. When we are still, we realize that everything is in motion, even our stillness. How is that? “Oh, look, there are motes of dust floating around me, a slight breeze, changes in the light.” Realizing this current of change, we may be more disposed to rediscover our relationships, to see them as evolving energetic fields—all of us together, changing and revealing new aspects of ourselves.

This constant movement occurs inside and outside each one of us. When you are working with a friend on a project, think of all the other people and influences who are transiently, imperceptibly present in the back of your mind: your parents, schoolmates, cultural figures, stories. Right in the moment, where we are, even the quality of sound (noisy, quiet, or a familiar song) moderates who we “are” in that moment. As I focus on writing these words, my very precise high school teacher is in my mind, impatiently looking over my shoulder; there’s a sound of laughter from the next room and a whiff of incense. If that laughter were moaning, if the incense were the smell of sewage—how would that change what I have written?

So as individuals, we are made up of many shifting elements, and when we realize that, we begin to free ourselves and enjoy the many aspects of life. Yet this spacious way of being is not so easily accessed. It requires that we enter into an awareness of self and other within the very process, the swim, of our life as it unfolds.

The robe, when folded, comes together in one way, and when unfolded, it comes together in another. The robe has no distinctive “self” but arrays itself in accord with light and shadows: it is different depending on what other colors surround it, whether it is tied carelessly or with great attention; it fits differently depending on how fat or thin I am at the time; and so on. When we look at it in one moment, one fragment stands out; a moment later, a different piece

is prominent. The robe could even be a something else: a tablecloth, a sail, or a flag.

This is easy to see in a robe but more challenging to see in everyday life. We function as children, parents, leaders, helpers—all kinds of different roles all day long. When we get stuck in an idea of our self, we lose the fluidity that gives life its delight and mystery.

When we first come to Zen practice, many of us think that it is only about us individually. We think it's about "me" getting better at "something." We might want to be a better student or parent or runner—or just a better person. Personally, I wanted to be free of my fear: fear of others, of being seen in a negative light, of not being good enough, of not being accepted. I thought meditation practice would give me courage, and it did, but not in the way I anticipated. I had put the emphasis on myself, not recognizing that this self is, like the sangha robe, made up of everyone I encounter and especially of those people in my daily life. While I may hold certain unique and persistent qualities (cheap blouse, antique kimono), I am also capable of integrating the Scotties, the silk tie, and whatever else flows into me. Through the quiet awareness of meditation, I began to realize the freedom of experiencing myself as *relationship* rather than as an entity, a separate being. The courage meditation gave me is the courage of my wholeness.

We tend to think that we are independent of our environment, of the people and things around us. But when we sit in meditation and experience ourselves completely, breath by breath, we realize that we do not exist in a vacuum; we coexist with the elements and with all those with whom we're connected consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, in time and space. This is what wakes us up.

I used to be quite a loner. I thought I was independent and didn't need anyone. I imagined myself a virtual hermit. But look at a hermit: perhaps she meditates alone in a cave, seeking her own individual enlightenment, but what's this hermit's relationship with the spiders that are making cobwebs on her body, with the birds that are making nests in her hair, with the water she drinks from the stream? In every moment, the hermit is in relationship with everything, even with the very air she breathes. Everything, in turn, is in relationship with her. When she recognizes this, she is on the way to true realization.

Let's look closer at the word *relationship*. It is something we see only if we can take into account more than one part; it is the way in which one person or thing involves another. Words fail, of course. It is truly impossible to express the subtlety of this relationship between our uniqueness and our interdependence. Yet it is crucially important to our life in relationship, to our ability to be intimate with those we love and those whom we encounter in day-to-day life. When we enter into this realm of our real, everyday life, we can get caught either with an emphasis on what we think the "whole/relationship" is or on what we think "I" am as an individual. We can lose sight of the dynamic quality of our relationships, thinking it is all about harmony, wanting everything to be peaceful, without difference, ending up in an unhealthy merging and loss of our uniqueness. The problem arises when one of us relinquishes our individuality in the hope of maintaining the relationship.

Even two pieces cut from the same cloth are not exactly alike. You and I are not the same. That is the wonder and joy of the world! A favorite Zen expression is, "A duck's legs are short; a crane's legs are long." It says so much in so few words. The unique qualities of a duck can never be confused with those of a crane, nor mine with yours. For a duck to think it's a crane is as disastrous as for me to think that your traits are better than mine or that mine are better than yours. As long as I am secure in my "duckness"—intimate with my duck-nature—I can also be nondefensively intimate with everything, including that tall crane fishing from the shore.

I have seen this in my own life. I was married at nineteen to a fellow student who sang charming folk songs. I barely knew myself, and the same was true for him. Coming from difficult family situations, we seemed to have found a refuge for our feelings and desires in each other's lack of awareness. In my case, I was unwilling to be closely aware of my own needs and differences, of who I really was. In an attempt to make our relationship cozy, both of us sacrificed our uniqueness, preventing any true intimacy from developing. We thought we were close, but it wasn't true intimacy. It was a forsaking of our individual pieces for the whole of "the marriage." Of course, from time to time, the pressure to express our individual selves would become overwhelming and we resorted to

silence—or to my favorite, breaking dishes. Finally, the merger fell apart when we had a child, and I realized that I had no experience of myself, no way to parent skillfully until I could truly find my own self. We had no skills to navigate through the shallows of our denied feelings, wants, and fears.

It takes courage to share our dark sides as well as our simple everyday needs, to be listened to, appreciated, argued with, and recognized as a valuable, unique being, a piece of the robe unlike any other. If we have been hiding from ourselves, it is difficult to face our real feelings. It's so much easier to distract ourselves from our experience of life. We may be choking on social media, cupcakes, or beer, but that seems preferable to actually experiencing our fears or humiliation or anger. But until we are willing to do that, we cannot really be intimate with ourselves or with anyone else.

What is this intimacy with another? It is a closeness, a willingness to enter into an affinity with another person, to recognize our interrelationship and our differences. There is a Japanese word, *mitsu,* that communicates this clearly. It is like the density of cotton batting in a futon. Think of how inextricably cotton threads are woven together. A relationship is that close, that intimate. It is strong, and still—when you observe closely—each thread is distinct.

What might this intimacy look like for you or me? Would it be like this poem by Daito Kokushi, a medieval Zen master, who lived under a bridge among the homeless in Kyoto?

> Rain.
> No umbrella, getting soaked.
> I'll just use the rain as my raincoat.[1]

Facing yourself intimately and without judgment is like finding yourself in a sudden downpour without an umbrella or a shelter. You try to escape the cold and wet by huddling into your clothes, head down, but there's no way to move away from the rain, just like there's no way to move away from your own issues, sorrow, or anger. If you can just let go of trying to escape and acknowledge, "This is me, and this is what I'm experiencing," the need to escape vanishes. You are free to be truly there for yourself and others. It's like standing in the

rain with nothing to lose: your self is the raincoat that will protect you and protect your loved ones through your honesty. If you can see that you are not the world, but that the world is actually you, then you can begin to experience an intimacy with all things. The key is to train yourself to see this in your moment-to-moment life, to consciously dissolve the made-up boundaries between self and other, to appreciate that we are all linked together in this magic circle of relationship.

This might sound rather airy-fairy, but it is what gives us freedom, and freedom is what we really want. We want to be spontaneously alive, not stuck in our old habits of body and mind. So we flow with change; we nurture awareness; we listen with open heart-minds to ourselves and to each other. We recognize our own "selflessness" and our own "self-fullness."

It is the fulcrum of our relationships—with family, friends, coworkers—that can lead us to this continuous path of awakening. The key is to train ourselves to recognize how we are in our moment-to-moment lives and to honestly connect with others without shame or fear. Because, strange as it may seem, we learn more from relationships than from any other source. And they are not always easy! Buddha's teachings tell us that suffering arises from grasping for things to be different than they are, from not meeting the moment just as it is. We're so preoccupied with the *idea* of what we want that we miss what's really alive in the present moment. We always want to be safe and happy and to avoid any suffering, so we try to control our own lives and the lives of those close to us. We don't feel safe enough to just let things fall apart and reassemble. We try to "fix" the other people when that's not needed, and so we create more suffering.

Once a woman in the sangha sadly revealed how hard it was for her simply to be in the same room with her thirteen-year-old daughter. The mother was feeling a lot of sadness and heartache because her daughter was beginning the process of separating from her—going out with friends, growing up. They had always been very close, and now the mother was feeling abandoned, angry, and hurt. She was a wise woman who knew that her daughter was behaving like a normal teenager, but that didn't stop her from suffering a great

deal. She felt frozen in the past, stuck in her ideas of how her daughter *had* related to her and *should* continue to do so. And the daughter was upset at her mother, locked in to the idea that her mother, who had always been so perfect, unquestioningly accept her daughter's new behavior.

What would it be like if the mother and the daughter could face each other in the present moment? If all their ideas about what is a "mother" and what is a "daughter" could fall away? If all the preconditions and requirements for an acceptable relationship could fall away and leave just these two people in that moment, with no guarantees about the next moment? How different would it be if they could sit together and honestly share what they were feeling? If they could listen from a free space, quieting the ingrained judgments? Each could express her feelings, and each could ask the other to listen. I'm not saying this would "fix" everything, but what a difference there would be in the quality of relationship, the opportunity to be heard and valued. Imagine Mother saying, "I'm feeling sad because we don't giggle together or plan outings like we used to last year." And Daughter saying, "I feel frustrated that you don't seem to support me as I make new friends and find new things to do." This getting close, this is intimacy. This is what both Mother and Daughter yearn for, even as their lives change.

There is so much talk these days about happiness, as if it should be the default setting in life. A continuously happy relationship is not a given—not by any means! Often we expect too much from our relationships. While they can be the seeds of our awakening and a source of loving and caring, they are not likely to satisfy us all the time. Frankly, 50 percent of the time seems like a realistic figure. The rest of the time we need to work in order to make a friendship, a relationship, or a marriage meaningful and real.

Actually, this kind of intimate work brings a certain quality of pleasure as well as insight and meaning, because through it, we begin to see who we really are. Appreciation is the quality of recognizing someone's worth, of feeling gratitude for that person being in our life. We can only appreciate others when we appreciate ourselves. Otherwise, what we may be feeling toward others is envy or grasping or a denial of our own self-worth. That is where the

practices of self-inquiry (Who am “I”?) and relationship (Who are “we”?) that we have been exploring in this chapter can help us to see others and ourselves in a new light. It may sound strange, but even when we are struggling, we can find appreciation in the struggle itself. If we are willing to experience others and ourselves as evolving beings, we may realize that even the most disturbing insight into our self may be exactly what we need. At that moment, we can appreciate our willingness and courage to take the step into reality.

This willingness unveils a courageous trust in ourselves that is born of our readiness to engage in the work of relationship. This trust in self is also a trust in the wholeness of life, in the meaningfulness of our interconnection with all that is. It is like the robe: when we appreciate the unique, individual pieces, we see one aspect of life, and when we appreciate the whole robe, we see the other aspect of life. Both are always there—the pieces and the whole. They depend on one another, and no piece is less important than another. Together, they make the robe of benefaction.

PRACTICE

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you’re like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Writing Exercises for Working Alone, with a Partner, or with a Group

1. Working with Someone You Cherish

What do you think the phrase “work in relationship” means? Here’s an exercise to begin your personal exploration of this question.

- Think of a person who is important to you.
- Focus on that person, bringing him or her to mind as clearly as possible.
- Write for five minutes on the following question: What work do I need to do to nurture this close relationship?

2. Apology Exercise
Sit still for five minutes, just following the flow of your breath in and out. After five minutes, think of someone close to you and write down what you think that person would like you to apologize for. Then write a short apology in dialogue form, such as the following:

FRIEND: I would like you to apologize for monopolizing conversation at dinner.
YOU: I'm sorry for upsetting you by doing all the talking and not making space for you.
FRIEND: I would like you to apologize for canceling our movie date at the last minute.
YOU: I apologize for causing you distress by canceling our movie date.

Exercise for Working with a Partner or in a Group Working in Pairs

Take a moment to quiet your body and breath. Sit facing each other, and set a timer for five minutes. In this exercise, one person asks the other, "What habitual pattern stops you from relating authentically?" After each answer, the questioner says, "Thank you," and repeats the question. The questioner's role is just to be a witness. It's best not to coach with facial expressions; very calmly, with a relaxed face, take in the other's continuum of awareness. After five minutes, switch roles. It will sound something like this:

Q: What habitual pattern is stopping you from relating authentically?
A: I'm not listening. I'm assuming.
Q: Thank you. What habitual pattern is stopping you from relating authentically?

A: I value another person's opinion and way of doing things more than my own.

Q: Thank you. What habitual pattern is stopping you from relating authentically?

When the timer rings, switch roles and repeat the exercise.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: I kept telling myself, "Listen to her; listen to who she is." That's what came up for me over and over again in different forms.

Roshi: Good, good. What I hear is the desire to be nearer, to listen, to trust the other. To give a gift of liveliness, a gift of energy and freedom, we have to have it ourselves; we have to be willing to play. Instead, the fear comes up that we are not safe, that we won't be happy, and we project that onto the other person: "I can't stand this. I can't stand the emotions you're bringing up for me right now!"

Q: I'm an anxious person, and I load my anxiety onto my partner. I want to stop expecting my partner to take care of it for me, to make me happy 90 percent of the time. I found that nurturing my friendship means reminding myself that what I think I want from her is not what I really need. I'm jealous of her other friends and need to work with that.

Roshi: What a relief! Imagine having to carry that around.

Q: My father always has to be right. So we fight. But actually, I need to be the big one.

Roshi: What is "the big one"?

Q: In a conflict, that's the one who can let it go.

Roshi: The one who sees it from a wider perspective?

Q: Right. I need to see my unwillingness to bridge the gap between us.

Roshi: For me, the work of relationship begins, first of all, with my willingness to plunge into my own vulnerability. I really have to be intimate with myself before I can be anything that's truly authentic for another. To be attuned to another, I really have to be there with my own issues. In order not to absorb another's anxiety, I cannot deny

my own. Learning to let ourselves feel the pain and learning to communicate it open a relationship into a truly intimate space.

Three

SEX

CLOSE, CLOSER, CLOSEST

Right now, looking into your eyes,
I feel myself falling deeply into you.
Your breath, my breath, bringing us closer,
Skin, sound, touch, rapture!
One breath, it breathes, we are briefly one.
And now, the light changes, shifts.
Two again. Look!
The moon's waxing crescent.

When I was a young woman in the very wild 1960s, I went along with the prevailing spirit of the times: proving myself by breaking conventions and being outrageous, uninhibited, and sexy. But actually, it was superficial, not who I really was at all. It was how I thought I *ought* to be, the way our culture was demanding that we behave. Somehow, I thought I would be more worthy by expressing what we called "sexual liberation." Yet, like so many during those times, I discovered that this so-called liberation could be double-edged, not only dissolving rigid existing ideas of sexuality but also letting us slip into either cool detachment or actually harmful behavior.

In our Western culture today, we live with sexual contradictions: we have accessible Internet pornography, highly erotic advertising, and kids who are being sexualized at age eight or nine, but at the same time, our lives are still colored by our inherited tradition of puritanical morality. We live in the middle of these mixed messages and conflicting ways of responding to our sexual nature. These antithetical ideas loop from the mind to the body and back again until we are not at all intimate with ourselves.

When it comes to sex, most of us hold a bundle of contradictory views that come out of our culture, our personal experience, and our own desire. There are so many shoulds and should nots, dares and fears, urges and repulsions that it's natural to feel overwhelmed by the different attitudes and to shut down our heart, passions, or moral compass.

Yet a wholesome understanding of the subtle facets of the erotic can be a gift of humanity, loving action, and wisdom. How do we find our way through the maze? How can we heal our broken sexuality and return to a more innocent and natural way of behaving, feeling, and experiencing our own bodies and those of others? How do we relate to our partners or those whom we'd like to be our partners? How can we disengage from all the confusing social ideas and realize our own true sexual way of being?

Although I'm asking how, it will probably not surprise you that, as a Zen teacher, my answer is that you have to meet and be intimate with yourself before you can truly be intimate with another, and the way to do that is to practice zazen, or sitting meditation. This goes back to the central theme of the book, to your willingness to engage with your heart and mind so you can recognize and be aware of what you are truly feeling and thinking. By being intimate with yourself, you realize your continuous interaction with all of reality. Perhaps most of all, in terms of sexual intimacy, your willingness to explore your moment-to-moment experience offers you wisdom and compassion in this most compelling realm of human existence. There is always the possibility of a moment with another that is alive, pure, clear, and true to what you really feel: a place where two energies merge.

When I meet a person I find captivating, I experience a moment of pure magnetic attraction. At that point, it is possible to get lost in a fantasy and turn away from the reality of the moment—this being in front of me—and reach for some old idea or experience instead. Do I place a string around the person's neck, tie him to me, and say, "You're mine. You're attached to me"? Do I expect him to behave in a certain way? Do I make him part of *my* story? In short, do I lose the opportunity to be alive in the moment and fall back on my history?

When you're true to who you are in the moment, you're not caught in old conditioning; you're not trying to control your partner or figure out who your lover wants you to be. It is more than likely that your partner is caught up in the same kind of conditioned thinking, so your clarity, honesty, and certainty help you both.

Sex in the Zen tradition is not something to be avoided or repressed. We can be intimate in the moment when body, mind, and heart are joined with another. When we are honestly aware of our feelings and thoughts and are willing to include them in our experience, we are on the way to authentic sexual response. We have everything we need to realize who we are, to be present in the moment, and to be true to who we are in the moment.

Sex is a part of the world where we find joy, power, tenderness, vulnerability, and excitement; the preciousness of an intimate relationship with another; the thickness and denseness of intimacy. Sex is (or can be) the closest and most intimate way we relate to each other. With our bodies, we touch, taste, and smell; we physically interpenetrate one another. The experiences of our senses suggest all manner of emotions and feelings to our minds: intimacy, affection, respect, power, control, vulnerability, fear, frustration, and anger. These feelings can be expressed as images of ecstatic joy or of vulgarity and depravity. What makes the difference? Mainly, it is our internalized notions of right and wrong, the cultural conventions we have inherited from our families and society about various forms of sexuality such as masturbation, pornography, nonmarital sex, multiple partners, and homosexuality. There is no intrinsic rule regarding these ways of practicing sexuality. Rather, beyond these ideas and cultural differences, sex can be a way of expressing love, gratitude, and compassion—a path to

enlightenment, in fact. Here, *enlightenment* means being aware of who you are in each moment, aware of your feelings and desires, how you stand in the world and what you're here for; you know how to restrain yourself and how to let go and flow.

Becoming intimate with ourselves in this way, we can begin to let go of what leads to false behavior and a destructive sense of self: the fear that we are not desirable; that we won't be able to perform; that if we don't behave a certain way, we'll remain alone and unloved. Of course, whatever the overlay of our times or culture, we do live in a sensory world of sexual attraction; of bodies and sweat and perfumes and taste; of men and women, men and men, women and women.

In such a world, we can lose our balance and find ourselves at the extreme ends of either restraint or desire. At one extreme, we can use sex and seduction to further our own ends and to support all kinds of destructive emotional needs and addictions. At the other, we can restrain our desires to the extent that we lose the joy and juice of life and a vital aspect of our connection to others.

The question is, how do we navigate between these extremes? It's no wonder there is a tradition of celibacy in all the world religions! Sex can be complicated. But somehow, in Zen, a vital force has always argued that it is in the very core of our sexuality that we can find our compassion and wisdom. Zen Master Sung-yuan (1139–1209) once asked this wonderful question: "Why does the bodhisattva not sever the red thread dangling from his legs?"[1]

Bodhisattvas are enlightening beings (*bodhi* means "awaken"; *sattva* means "beings") who are right here, functioning in our human world and helping everyone to wake up. They are all around us, and they function to serve all beings. Sometimes you are a bodhisattva; sometimes the person next to you is. They are like great trees that nourish all whom they encounter. Their nourishing and enlightening energy derives from their great compassion, and the red thread is the natural passion that is in all of us. So the question Sung-yuan asks is, why don't these enlightened beings cut off their passions? Why do they carry this red thread?

The red thread represents our sexual desire, sexual longing, and sexual expression; it also includes all the warmth, kindness, and

compassion—the intimacy—that results from our connection to others. We mustn't wall off our hearts. Even in moments of temptation, when restraint is required, there's a way to enjoy the restraint without turning ourselves to stone. How, then, are we to be true and pure in a sexual world? When we are intimate with our own being, as well as with the dignity of the other person, then we naturally act with respect and joy. Enlightenment and compassion can arise from such connectedness, the awareness of fluidity between self and other.

We all know that there are limits to sexual expression. Anytime sex oppresses or harms another being, it is not right. Although we may be attracted to a vulnerable or an inappropriate person, our only recourse is restraint. The word sounds austere, but your meditation practice can show you how helpful the practice of restraint can be. You sit on the cushion, and particularly in Zen, you don't move. If you're uncomfortable, you remain sitting still with the discomfort for an entire half hour. You do not move. You don't get up after five minutes just because you have an odd thought; you stay with it and see what happens.

When we hold still, we create a field of clarity for ourselves. We learn restraint. Yes, there are parts of the self that resist that clarity, and then the body jumps into movement to cloud the field: we scratch our nose, rearrange our limbs, and shift our attention. And we miss the moment of holding still, of clarity and readiness. Doing this practice for many years, I find that learning restraint in this way is especially valuable for people like me who jump around from one thing to the next. The restraint of holding still allows me to enter a state of presence and intimacy that I wouldn't get to otherwise. Without it, I might embarrass myself by getting up and walking out of the meditation room!

But learning restraint is much more important. In terms of sex, anger, and greediness, restraint can be the key to compassion and skillful action. When we're ready to do something really unskillful, suddenly a little shadow of awareness comes up in our minds, and we don't abuse, we don't yell, we don't grasp; we just stay still. In that moment of restraint, we can discover our own strength, our own integrity.

Yet life is more subtle than just following one way or the other, particularly when we are considering sexual expression. Because when restraint is taken to an extreme, it can become suppression and paralysis, a denial of passion, and right after the denial of passion comes the denial of compassion. One of the teachings on sexual conduct handed down in Zen is Bodhidharma's fifteen-hundred-year-old warning not to create a veneer of attachment, not to "gild" reality with our grasping.

What does this mean? To gild is to embellish or decorate, to make reality into something it is not. And a veneer is a covering, something that masquerades as something else. How often what we interpret as sexual desire is really something else. It can be a way to conceal our feelings of being incomplete, deficient, and lonely. This disguised yearning—masquerading as sexual desire—is not the healthy bond we feel for others; rather, it emerges as a compulsive craving. Why is it not a healthy bond?

Let's look at the word *attachment,* which implies one thing that is connected to another, an extra part or add-on. The word conveys a sense of two solid things rather than an interactive process of living beings involved with one another. How romantic is it to think of your partner or partners as "attachments" to you? Wouldn't we all prefer to consider them as living, relational fields in which we are elements, maybe as a dance of different elements? Of course, language fails us when we try to describe this interdependent quality of the universe, but it is vitally important to try so that we can liberate ourselves from the bondage of old attachments and realize what we are feeling in each moment.

This, according to Bodhidharma, is the key to not misusing sex or mistaking it for something else but, rather, to meeting our desire directly. This, he says, is ungilded reality—in other words, the Plain Truth. When we use our awareness with the sensitivity of a tuning fork, we are able to recognize the habits of mind that are destructive to ourselves and our relationships; we are able to see our fantasies and stories as just that, fantasies and stories. Then we can come back to what we are really experiencing. We can express love, caring, and mutual and joyful sexual play.

I'm sorry there are no simple hard-and-fast rules for us to follow, but there are some clear indications of when using sexual restraint benefits us all. We know that in practicing restraint we can't take advantage of the vulnerable; we can't take advantage of the very young, the sick, or the broken. (Sometimes it's easy to take advantage of broken people, but we can't do that.) When practicing restraint, we can't act violently and rape or abuse out of rage and anger, as happens in wartime, in prisons, and sometimes in the most conventional households. And we know in our hearts that we can't act sexually in order to hurt a third party intentionally.

For most of us, the hardest form of restraint is to refrain from covering over, or gilding, our insecurity or loneliness by acting out sexually. True restraint manifests with the vigor of courageous energy. It's not about denial, condemnation, or a rigid system of dos and don'ts. True restraint is to stop, to notice. To take a breath and ask, "What am I *actually* doing?"

Restraint is not a question of "just say no," or abstinence. It's saying, "I see my craving, my attachment, my past suffering without judgment, and at this moment I resolve not to create more mindless suffering. Looking directly at my craving, I see I'm not helpless."

We have to look past our *ideas* of what is acceptable behavior and see all the way through our delusions and conditioning to what is appropriate in just this moment. We can discern what to do by looking inside ourselves. That's where the guidance is. Then we can be true to our own sense of sexual expression.

When sex is an automatic reaction, we become like puppets on sticks rather than two beings meeting each other with honesty. Compassion grows out of that honesty, and out of compassion comes wisdom. Whatever happens—rejection, blunders, interruptions, loss, all of life's surprises—we'll find that we are strong enough to face it.

Each moment of your life holds the richest treasure, and at that instant, you can decide your response. You can make the decision clearly, because you've trained yourself with the intimate practice of moment-to-moment awareness. This is, of course, the key to caring, loving sexual expression. To offer your body and mind to another is

to offer love and compassion. It is to honor and bless your mutual humanity. It is the gateway of great joy and kindness.

A monk asked Joshu, “In whom does Buddha cause passion?”
Joshu said, “Buddha causes passion in all of us.”
The monk asked, “Then how do we get rid of it?”
Joshu replied, “Why should we get rid of it?”

When someone reaches out to you, what is your spontaneous response? The only guideline for that is within you, within what you’re doing day by day. Is this an appropriate action? Is that an appropriate action? Within yourself, you already know the answer. You merely have to look honestly, closely, at the preciousness of the moment: is this a moment for restraint or a moment of activating the red thread? Let me remind you:

Why should we get rid of it?
That pesky red thread,
Leads to trouble, leads to bliss,
Leads to compassion, leads to suffering,
Why should we get rid of it,
That precious red thread?

PRACTICE

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you’re like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Private Exercise for Working Alone or with Other People

Find a quiet space and spend five minutes in meditation. Then write for seven minutes on this topic: How do my ideas, my gildings, about sex affect my actual experience of sex itself?

After writing for seven minutes on the preceding question, those who would like to share what came up for them have the opportunity to speak.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: I'm a little confused. I thought that Buddhism promotes celibacy and denies all attraction to the senses.

Roshi: When we begin to read the sutras (the Buddhist scriptures), it can be very confusing. First, we must realize that the ancient rules were created for monastic communities. Imagine the complexity of managing large groups of spiritual seekers traveling the countryside and living in monasteries. These rules were never intended for laypeople. Yet lay Westerners reading the old teachings can feel guilty when they elevate these rules of celibacy as if they were elements of the enlightened way rather than simply appropriate means for communities on retreat. Second, the times and places are completely different. Today, in a primarily Judeo-Christian, psychotherapeutic, consumerist culture, the ancient teachings on sexuality are useless in their literal sense yet very helpful when taken from their wisdom perspective.

Q: What then is sexual misconduct from a present-day Zen perspective?

Roshi: What we do with our bodies and with whom we do it is not a question of external rules but one of acting from our intimate connection to another, without harm or disrespect to anyone in our relational field. Seen in this way, we don't have to theorize about reconciling the concept of sexual misconduct with the various ways that people arrange themselves in terms of marriage, homosexuality, or nontraditional relationships. What constitutes sexual misconduct? It is any act that causes harm. Consider the issue of infidelity, a possible violation of trust or agreement with an intimate other. Putting aside our conditioned ideas about monogamy and romantic

love, reflect on the consequences of infidelity. Are we creating harm? By being unfaithful, are we lying to or stealing from someone we care about? When we are in accord with ourselves and those whom we affect, there is no misconduct.

Q: When two people are engaging in a sexual relationship in which role-play becomes a spontaneous arousal for one of them, I can't think of that as necessarily bad. But isn't a role an idea? Can you be really present in the moment if you are taking on a male or female role?

Roshi: Taking roles is like a dance, a tango, in which there are very clear-cut parts to play, but it is play. Regardless of whether it's a man and a woman, two men, or two women dancing together, there's the role of the person who's leading and the role of the person who's following, and the roles can be dropped or reversed at any moment. The music can stop and you're no longer in that role.

It's difficult to tease out the place of roles from the kind of social pressure we are subject to in this place and time. Though that kind of pressure is present in all cultures, I think at this time in the West, we are in a pretty bad situation, with fundamentalism and consumerism cloaking the joy of play. When one is drawn to Buddhism and Zen, it can be even more confusing, because we can superimpose the sexual mores of other cultures and times on our own lives now.

But what I keep wanting to come back to is the importance of being intimate with the self. You can be playing a role as, for example, I'm playing the role of teacher now, but the key thing is to be aware that it is a role and to be intimate with that—then play!

Q: I think about roles too, about gender. I'm a heterosexual male, and I have the idea there is some expectation for men to be more sexually aggressive than passive. Can that change? I'm looking into myself and trying to trace this stereotype back and see if it's really true for me.

Roshi: Yes, of course, we can freely negotiate and play with different roles with our partners. Think of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* You could play the Fairy King or the Indian prince or the carpenter, Bottom, who has the head of an ass. Just kidding! But to allow ourselves to take on wildly different aspects of being is a great freedom. As an exercise, it's fun to dress

up in different costumes and loosen our hold on who we think we are. What is difficult is to let go of how others and we *think* we should be. That is the task we are all involved in, letting go of our ideas and allowing ourselves to manifest as we really are.

Q: My ideas ruin my sexual experiences in the worst possible way. They turn what is basically unknowable into a knowable, an endlessly grasping search for power, pleasure, and possession. I suffer because I'm aware that I'm stuck there. On the other hand, I feel more and more that all this awareness and suffering is taking me to a place where I ask for less and less power and less and less knowing. There's no joy there yet, but having less and less to hold on to is actually empowering my sexual experience. It doesn't always feel good, but it feels more real.

Roshi: Language can become so frustrating. Often, in Zen, when we talk about not knowing, we mean being ready for this moment instead of relying on past knowledge. I think that's what you're saying, very poignantly—that you don't engage in not-knowing, but you "know." What you realize is that you can free yourself from fixed ideas, and that leaves you ready for whatever is right at that time.

Q: In this exercise, I found myself focusing on how I forward my ideas about my past sexual experiences into the present and how that prevents me from being in the moment. At times, in a new relationship, I want to re-create something that worked or was pleasurable in a past relationship. Then I see it fall flat and am disappointed that I couldn't re-create that dynamic, that fantasy. I realize how I'm not really present to allow a new thing to arise between a new person and myself. This is not only true in sexual situations, although I think it's more heightened in sexual situations. I find this in my Zen practice too: when it's boring, I want it to be the way it was when I had a good experience in a retreat or sitting.

Roshi: Yes! The past, the idea that we're going to re-create something that happened before, deprives us of a new experience, the experience of now. First, we must realize that's what's going on, something we learn through the practice of zazen. We begin to train ourselves unconsciously to use our breath to bring us forward to now, to be curious about what is right now.

Q: Going into my own history, I feel that being honest is the key. For me, the thing in sex is to find my balance between self-consciousness and just finding my way.

Roshi: Is your self-consciousness a magnification of how you think you're being seen? Are you focusing on what you think is being perceived rather than on your own awareness of how you're experiencing the moment, the other person, or what's happening?

Q: I don't know. How do I recognize my self-consciousness without that obscuring my real experience?

Roshi: I think everyone has experienced that in some way—awkwardness and then hiding from that awkwardness, running away from it, letting it get in the way. What to do about it? Take a deep breath and look again at the whole relational field: you, the other person, and all that is involved in the moment, including your physical body and feelings. Changing your perspective to include the wider field allows you to recognize the person you're with. This is what we do in zazen: we sit and observe our shame or fear or anger come up; we see it; and we shift our perspective to our whole reality, our feelings, our body, our breath, and the world itself.

Q: One of the largest things that comes up for me is the tension between being who I am and my ideas of who I think my partner wants me to be. It gets in the way of being intimate.

Roshi: Yes, and again, this is how you abandon the fullness of the moment that includes you just as you are in that instant, wanting to keep that relation-moment authentic and pleasing to you both. In this way, you negotiate your way of being honestly, with compassion and clarity. You try to let go of what you think your partner or society might demand of a man and a woman or two women or two men in a sexual situation.

Four

LIVING IN THE SUFFERING WORLD

LOTUS IN THE FIRE

Open your heart,
Open your eyes,
Caring, Acting, Serving,
Thus we live our lives
Crossing, crossing over from
suffering to compassion.

It had been a long silent retreat, and I was feeling that gracious lightness that flows over me after deep practice. I was literally skipping down the cool, dark stairway of the Zen Center, headed for the lush green paths of a rustic New York summer day. As I bounded into the foyer, I saw a fellow Zen student hunched against the wall, his face contorted in what looked like shock and pain. He was gripping the receiver of an old-fashioned pay phone attached to the wall. Prevented from sitting by the short cord on the telephone, he half-stood, leaning heavily into the wall. He was saying good-bye to someone on the other end.

I didn't really know Robert all that well and might easily have slipped by him without even noticing, as most of us slip by those who are suffering while we continue on, immersed in our own world. But

on that day, in that moment, I stopped. I stopped and sat down by his feet and waited for him to finish his phone call.

That stopping changed my life. It happened so subtly that it was really just a matter of one breath at a time. Robert sank to the floor and looked at me with a stunned expression, and the words began to tumble from his mouth. His phone call had told him he was HIV positive and that his mother had lymphoma. This was well before effective drugs for HIV had been developed. It was shocking, frightening news, and the further news that his mother, his support, was endangered was too much for him to take in. (Years later, Robert's mother died a few days before he did.) We sat there a long while, and then we took a walk together outside in the summer day in which we both were utterly changed.

In the years before this day, I—like many people—was not without a fairly generous nature prompted by practice, by the subtle experience of emptiness that opens us to our oneness with all beings. I donated to charities, helped sangha members, and tried to live a compassionate life. I had worked professionally and volunteered for the well-being of the elderly, the disabled, and the addicted. Yet it was fairly easy to slip back into a habitual self-protective shell that distanced me from the suffering of others. I say "self-protective" because I think we often separate from the suffering of others out of fear. We do not want to really own our own illness, old age, addiction, or disability, so we move away from it in others. But moving away stops us from intimate action.

This day was different, and I would be different from then on. It began, of course, with Robert—just listening to him. Listening without trying to fix or change, opening my mind and heart to this man who was suffering. Later there was listening and finding Chinese herbs and alternative healing practices for Robert, then listening and helping organize a meditation group for those with HIV/AIDS. Later still, it was listening and learning to insert an IV needle in his catheter, listening when hope faded and there was little to do but wait. Meanwhile others joined to listen, to speak, and to share. We formed an HIV/AIDS network and then a national interfaith network. There were meetings; there were demonstrations; there was tremendous energy and love and reverence. Out of this

synergy came more connections, more energy with what arose in our circle: prison work, hospital chaplaincy, a school that needed help.

At first it was AIDS, but then there was cancer, drug addiction, emotional pain, and the day-to-day suffering to which all existence is heir. Gradually, I became drawn into this world of compassionate intimacy, of listening and active caring for all sentient beings.

My world—and I'm sure yours too—is flooded daily with heartbreaking and frightening images from all over the world: natural disasters, bombed-out homes, the stunned faces of refugees, the eyes of maimed children, newscasts telling us of the homeless and jobless. At the gym, twenty gigantic TV screens each show some misery that's going on somewhere around the globe. No matter how you get your news these days (from newspapers, the Internet, radio, or TV), whether you read it intently on a device or glimpse it in an elevator or as you pass through a public space, you are likely to be confronted with challenging, disturbing information about the state of the world. Each day comes with fresh reports of war, disease, crushing poverty, and ecological menace.

When I open my mail, I find painful statistics on hate groups in this country, on lost children in my city, on desperate people all over the world, on fighting and oppression—so much suffering. My heart literally squeezes, then releases and expands into a feeling of caring deeply for those nearby and those across the oceans. What can I do to help? Before I take action, I can be so sad, and often so mad, at the crazy way we humans react to the challenges of life.

Every day, as all this recitation of worldwide suffering demands attention and help, it is easy to become overexcited or frightened or numb. How do we continue to care about what's happening to our mountains and oceans, to those in the endless and cruel conflicts in the Middle East, or what a young woman faces in Afghanistan or even in our hometown? How can we stay vulnerable and open to the world and not be overwhelmed? How can we be intimate with the way the world is and not let it overrun us; exhaust us; create in us a sense of hopelessness, despair, and finally withdrawal?

How indeed. The answer reminds me of the Buddhist image of the lotus flower that blooms in the midst of a fire raging around it. The

closer the fire gets, the more fragrant the flower becomes and the more beautiful and vibrant glows the color of the blossom. The fire represents the suffering that is everywhere, and the flower represents our caring energy that, through our efforts, gives aid and solace to a suffering world. The question is, how can our lotus bloom in the midst of the world's adversity? How do we relate to the magnitude of the suffering we see in our own community or other parts of the world? Do we become enraged? Overwhelmed? Numb? Or do we become even more awake, blooming like the lotus?

Politically, I came of age in the defiant 1960s. Many of us responded to injustice and hardship by protesting. We marched, we learned to work with others, and we found our voices. Unfortunately, many also learned to hate, to view the "other"—the police officer, the soldier, the politician—not as a brother or sister shaped by their experiences and values in life but as an enemy. It seemed to be a world of us versus them, a world of separation. Such a sense of disconnection turns the other into a fixed object of our resentment, thus preventing listening and problem solving, and instead creating only more rage and violence.

Only by turning around and verifying our interconnection with all beings can we turn away from our anger, hatred, and violence. The power of wise, nonviolent resistance continues to amaze me. It affirms that each of us is completely and intimately interdependent on everyone and everything in this universe and on finding a way to make it work. The humanitarian Albert Schweitzer said, "The fundamental fact of human awareness is this: I am life that wants to live in the midst of other life that wants to live. A thinking person feels compelled to approach all life with the same reverence he has for his own."[1]

Such a view of life does not allow for hating or harboring anger, even in the name of "justice" or "ecology." If we approach all of life with such reverence, we search for wise measures to make change and care for the whole world. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking of his work, put it this way: "And so at the center of our movement stood the philosophy of love. The attitude that the only way to ultimately change humanity and make for the society that we all long for is to keep love at the center of our lives."[2]

King calls for love; Schweitzer calls for reverence. The question is, how can we approach life with such love and reverence in the presence of so much world suffering? How do we provide care *now* for this world that is in such need of intelligent stewardship? Finally, we must ask ourselves, what is it that stops us from taking responsibility, from taking action?

Followers of contemplative traditions often fall into the fallacy that, "Once I'm enlightened, once I've cooled myself down, once I've gotten myself together, *then* I'll save the world, *then* I'll be ready to enter the fire of life. But for now I need to withdraw and practice meditation." Waiting to "get enlightened," we miss our life, which is both inside and outside: our internal sense of self and everything around us. By waiting, withdrawing, we are separating our self from all of life, and we are denying the demand that we care for and take responsibility for life. *When we wake up to suffering, we must act.*

We live in the midst of enormous inequality. The gap between the haves and the have-nots is growing in the world. Many potent medicines, helpful therapies, useful devices, and scientific techniques have been discovered in the last hundred years, but they are only available to a small group of people. We're in a whirlpool in this world of inequality, and it is the source of the violence and war that is going on. One group is saying, "Give us some!" Others are saying, "No! We'll take your oil, we'll take your minerals, but we'll keep what we have for ourselves." And fewer and fewer people are among the haves.

People are starving in this country and in many other places in the world. Many don't have adequate housing or education, while wealth is squandered on extravagance. It feels obscene to walk into a bare hut in a poor country and witness a little TV showing images of the enormous opulence and luxury that can be found in other parts of the world. The earth is bleeding its treasures. Here at home, children living in our air-polluted neighborhoods suffer from asthma. There is anger and violence all around us, even in our so-called civilized cities and towns, where people are suffering and expressing their suffering by knifing or shooting one another. Things are all screwed up in this society in which we live: life now seems to be only about having things, having money, and being "profitable." The values of

compassion, kindness, and community have totally evaporated from the public dialogue. We can hardly call this a civil society. So I wonder, can we really wait until we're "good" enough and "enlightened" enough to do something about this situation, to act?

A long time ago in China, a Zen student asked if any of the sages had ever fallen into hell. His teacher answered that they are the first to go there! The shocked student asked, "But if they are enlightened, why would they fall into hell?" The teacher looked at the student and with a smile said, "If I didn't fall into hell, how could I help you?"[3] Do you see what he is doing here? He completely reverses the student's problem, saying this is not about the student's idea of purity, but about helping and caring. That is what's important. He's saying that you have to get your hands dirty; you have to dig right in. Just as you are, without some special robe or degree or twenty years of meditation practice. Just as you are, you can help.

It doesn't matter how imperfect we think we are, we still can begin to work. The vulnerability and brokenness that we bring to the task can help others, can encourage them and offer them a space to enter the project. It's kind of a mysterious thing. When we push ourselves to act, we enter this realm of service and caring, and although it may sometimes feel like hell, it is actually the realm of bodhisattvas (enlightening beings). We become more aware of our interconnectedness, and we share that with others by our actions. Through our willingness to muck around in hell, we are able to give meaning to our lives, to do what it is we can do as living beings, as part of the whole catastrophe.

Another barrier to acting in the world is the fear of being overwhelmed, of taking in so much suffering and pain that we become paralyzed, numb, discouraged, or hopeless. How does this happen?

It is how we meet the suffering we encounter. Most of the spiritual traditions of the world counsel us not to turn away from suffering but to move toward it. How do we turn toward it? We walk by a street person, say a young woman zoned out on some drug, and we feel sorry for her. We feel pity. When we feel pity, we separate ourselves from the suffering: "Oh, that poor thing. She has such problems." But giving pity does nothing for her; it's really condescending. We

elevate ourselves and look down on the pitiable. With pity, we actually pull back into a kind of arrogance. Even giving her something from the position of pity only lowers her position as a fellow human being and creates a kind of aloof superiority on our part.

On the other hand, when we feel sympathy—and this gets closer to the problem that a lot of well-intentioned people have—it's kind of like joining the other person. That's actually what it means: *sym,* meaning "join," and *pathy,* meaning "suffering." We share in other people's pain; their pain becomes ours. But when we join in their hurt feelings, their sense of inadequacy, their sense of despair, their sadness, and their desperation, we can't really help them because we're down there with them in the midst of it. It is a kind of emotional contagion. We're drowning as well. We may not be taking the drug, but (as people who have worked with addiction know) we become fellow addicts. We're addicted to the symptoms rather than to the drug itself, but we are drowning in this sympathetic situation. That leads to our being completely overwhelmed, to feeling that there's nothing to be done. When we are in sympathy, we fall into the same hopelessness of those who are victimized and suffering, and we can give up on the struggle to serve, help, make change, and alleviate suffering.

Different from pity and sympathy is the compassion of intimacy, being intimate with an open heart and mind with the problems of the world or a fellow creature. Intimacy, in this sense, comes about when we allow ourselves to be present and alive to what is happening, without pity or sympathy or our own agenda. We are engaged; we are prepared to act. In this intimacy, we are willing to get close to the problem, but we do not lose our self in it. We don't lose our agency, our own unique and individual self. We are part of the robe made of many patches mentioned in chapter 2, but we are also our own individual and active patch. We don't lose our ability to discern and act. We are close to and can sense the feelings of the other person or sense the destruction that's going on in this society, but we are distinct, active, and caring, and we find a way to serve those who need help. We are connected through life and at the same time individual enough to understand others.

If we're drowning in the mutuality of sympathy, we cannot function. If we look at this uncivil society we live in from the perspective of sympathy, we can be so discouraged that we don't want to do anything. But with compassionate intimacy, we have agency; we can make a difference. There is pain, but the pain doesn't destroy us. No matter how inadequate we may feel, we're willing to get up every morning and try to do something. Sometimes it's something big in our world, like directly changing someone's life, a law, or a community action. Sometimes it's as simple as offering a smile to a sad face, a warm hand to someone in pain, or saying "Paper, not plastic." How often I've been affected by observing such kind and caring acts. We don't know how what we do affects the whole. Engaging intimately in the world, people do notice, they do hear you; you get into conversations, and things change in small ways as well as in large ways.

Perhaps you have heard of Indra's net. It's an ancient Indo-Chinese view of the universe stretching out as an infinitely vast net. At the juncture of each mesh is a brilliant, mirrorlike jewel that reflects all the other jewels in the net. No one jewel can exist without all the others. Each is always reflecting all the other parts of the net. Can you imagine yourself as one of these jewels?

Although each of us feels we are a separate "I," we are not confined by the physical boundaries of our skin. Our very being is constantly changing and shifting in response to our senses, our experiences, everything. Our self is a function of the moment, this exact moment, and of all the moments that came before, back to our ancient ancestors whose blood runs in our veins and even to the formation of the earth itself. As you read this right now, you're not only what you might be thinking or experiencing; you are also the interplay and relationship with everything happening around you.

You are the jewel. This moment is you, and simultaneously, this moment is also all life in the world. Take a deep breath. What is in that in-breath? Is anything in the world left out? It is said that, breathing in, you take in the whole universe. And breathing out, the whole universe breathes out. You and I breathe the universe, and it breathes us—an intimate awareness rather than a thought. It teaches us how the lotus blooms in the midst of the suffering we

encounter. It helps us to be awake to that suffering. This practice, the simple practice we have of meditation, helps us train our minds to be present and alive. It teaches us to be intimate with ourselves and with those we love. And it helps us to change the rhythm of our heart and mind—we begin to be awake and aware of these voices inside us. Then when we turn to those around us, we can hear them too.

Baizhang was a Zen master who was famous for the saying, “A day without work is a day without food.” One day, one of his students asked, “This ‘daily work’—who do you work for?” Baizhang replied that something requires it. The student persisted, “Why doesn’t that something do it for itself?” Baizhang responded, “It has no tools.”[4]

The whole world has no tools, only individual people do. Who is it you’re working for? I would ask more than that: Why are you alive? What are you here for? What makes life meaningful to you? That’s really the point. Baizhang says the something has no tools, so he has to do the work for it. This world that we are a part of has no tools other than us. We are the tools. We are what will make a difference. And in the process, we are changed; we recognize our intimacy with the whole world.

PRACTICE

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you’re like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Exercises for Working Alone

- Take a moment to be aware of your breath. Consider this question: When you read about a devastating event or see one

on TV, what happens to you? How do you react to bad news in the world? Set a timer for five or ten minutes and write your responses so you can look at them later. Did you discover anything new?

- Close your eyes, breathe in and out, and bring to mind a piece of disturbing news you may have heard recently. Scan your body. Focus your attention on what you are experiencing and feeling in this moment. Locate where something is going on right now. Is there tightness in your jaw or belly, a constriction in your throat? Don't try to change the sensation; just be with it. After this exercise, if working on your own, write down the thoughts and feelings that arose for you.

Exercise for Working with a Partner or in a Group Working in Pairs

Here, you will consider the same question as in the preceding individual exercise. Sit facing each other. Set a timer to five minutes. For the first five minutes, one person asks the other, "How do you react to bad news in the world?" After each answer, the questioner says, "Thank you," and repeats the question. The questioner's role is just to be a witness. It's best not to coach with facial expressions; very calmly, with a relaxed face, take in the other's continuum of awareness. It will sound something like this:

Q: How do you react to bad news in the world?
A: I don't want to know about it.
Q: Thank you. How do you react to bad news in the world?
A: I feel sad.
Q: Thank you. How do you react to bad news in the world?

When the timer rings, reset it to another five minutes and switch roles. If you're working with a partner or a group, open a discussion of impressions and discoveries.

Q: I realized that when I see terrible suffering, whether it's in Syria or Gaza or New Jersey, a lot of my reaction is rage and blaming causes, and I'm kind of stuck with those miserable feelings.

Roshi: How can we feel compassion for what is happening and not feel hatred? In the situation of the Middle East or any place at a distance, we are witnesses, not actors. I send my compassion to both sides, my sense of the horror, fear, and anger on both sides. If there were an action I could take, such as when some people go and meet with those involved, that's different. You meet with people on both sides, and there is healing. But when you're sitting in your living room reading the *Times* and you become angry, try to ask yourself, "What is that?" What is that feeling, what is that anger that's arising? What is the value that you feel is being threatened? Look at that, try to raise that up, and it will shift from this kind of hatred to "Oh, this is something I really care about"—a kind of affirmation of what you care about, such as fairness, compassion, and justice. Then, possibly, you'll find a way to act on it.

Q: I found in listening and speaking that often the universal and the personal were almost the same.

Roshi: Good. Excellent. Thank you.

Q: I found it actually easier to switch back and forth after listening.

Roshi: How come? Why do you think that's so?

Q: It's something about being more present after listening.

Roshi: Interesting. Maybe it's more because you're anticipating self-revelation from the other while it's just what you're feeling as a speaker.

Q: I went into the exercise thinking I had tons of things to say, but I found it to be completely the opposite. After the initial "I am my name" and so forth, I was rather disappointed. I think my approach was too pedantic.

Q: I appreciated when one of us couldn't think of something to say. I also felt that it was very intimate, just by definition to be here now and to grapple with this very elementary foundational stuff.

Q: I was interested. Practicing intimacy is very difficult because you're always, whether you know it or not, going to a song or some other memory. And of course, just being here, just listening, is

challenging. What came out for me was realizing what a wonderful guy my partner is!

Roshi: That's a nice aspect, thank you.

Five

ANGER

HARNESSING THE ENERGY

Sitting on my cushion
my heart heavy with an old memory.
Come little demon sit with me.
We won't make up stories about another
but we'll sit together, my demon and me
feeling the wave of sorrow
not moving away not moving toward
simply here now with the feeling
and moving with the wave
through the rocks, the shadows
filtering through the duckweed lighter now
brighter through the shallows into the deep
not stopping
the air is clear.

I have struggled with anger most of my life. From a childhood in a chaotic and brawling family, one that idealized a "hot-headed" woman, I found it grueling even to try to manage my anger. All it would take was a trigger, and I would go off. "Going off" usually meant making a fool of myself by snapping at someone, walking

away and denying myself what it was I wanted in the first place, or muttering under my breath at the stupidity around me.

What to do?

On my computer desktop is an image from an old Japanese hand-scroll showing a monk sitting calmly facing a giant demon who is spewing hot flames. This is kind of how I feel these days: I can sit here and watch my demon spit out its flames. I can ask the demon, “What is it now?” And I can begin to find a way to work with what it is that has triggered me once again.

Not that I am without anger now. But through the years, somehow, something has changed. The explosions last but a few seconds, and then the question arises, “What was that? Oh, another gut-level response to something I don’t want to let in, some unwelcome challenge to my sense of who I am, my values, or even my rights.”

Anger is such a difficult energy. It often thrives on the muck of life (our resentment, fears, neediness, and so forth), then it bursts forth, often creating even more of a mess for us. Sometimes our anger can propel us to do something we need to do or say something that needs saying. Too often, though, anger blunts our skillfulness, and we wind up hurting ourselves and others, creating unnecessary discord and acting a bit like fools.

An old Indian myth tells of a great battle among the gods, during which the angry spirits are defeated and escape, diving into the holes of the lotus flower and hiding in the threads of the stem. I have always found this image provocative: the idea that my angry demons are hiding in the lotus at just that point that connects the beautiful flower to its roots in the muddy water. What this means for me is that my anger hovers as a potential energy within my being. It sits between the muddy everyday reality of my life, with all its demands and frustrations, and the blossoming and unfolding of my wisdom and compassion. How I use this energy is the key to how I affect my own life and the lives of others.

We can think of anger as developing in three phases: our physical reaction to a perceived threat, our thoughts about what’s making us feel that way, and our expression of the anger.

Recently, I was in an airplane—in one of those increasingly smaller economy seats—and just as I was treasuring my little cup of

coffee, the person in front of me suddenly reclined his seat, thrusting the tray and the coffee into my body, seemingly impaling me in my seat. My body said, “Alarm! Here comes adrenaline!” This is the first in the cascading physical responses to a threat: the heart starts beating fast and the muscles tighten. Often when we speak of anger, we are only thinking of this transitory reaction; yet this is the one that comes and goes, not the one that stays.

What we do next is pivotal. My mind starts with, “How dare he invade my space?” Then it indignantly asks, “What is this person thinking?” and I notice an impulse to kick the seat. Then I take a breath: “Whoa! There’s a lot of feeling in my body right now.” After several more breaths, looking at my reactions, I recognize that I’m thinking the person in front of me is invading my space, not considering me, and that I’m beginning to make a lot of judgments about him. This is the second part of anger: how we think about what’s happening and what has triggered our physical feelings.

How will I react? Will I kick the seat or politely request that the person move his seat back forward a bit? Will I look to see if it is a demon, a child, or a physically compromised person sitting in front of me? Or will I “stuff it” and hold the energy inside until it shuts me down or is unleashed at another time? This is the third aspect of what we call anger: our actual conduct, or expression of what we’re experiencing.

That expression of our anger is what determines if we are moving toward wisdom or more suffering. On the one hand, anger can be a positive force that signals danger; it gives us energy to react and a sense of control over our situation and response. On the other hand, anger can lead to impulsive aggression, confusion, or even complete shutdown.

What can we do when the volatile winds of anger shake us? In some spiritual circles, anger gets a bad rap and is smothered. In Zen, however, there is a long tradition of investigating the mind of anger. In his words on the precept of not indulging in anger, Zen Master Dogen counseled, “Not advancing, not retreating, not real, not empty. There is an ocean of bright clouds. There is an ocean of solemn clouds.”[1]

In these words, Master Dogen urges us to stay right smack in our experience: to be intimate with what we are feeling in our body, with our racing thoughts, and with what is actually happening in front of us. By not advancing, we stay with the feeling and sensations we are having. We don't jump—advance—to action. We take a breath and give our mind a chance to catch up with our feelings. By not retreating, we stay in the midst of what has come up; we do not hide or stuff our feelings. We don't go back over the story again. Neither real nor empty, the energy of our anger is like a strong wind. These are our feelings, our responses to a trigger, and they are not "real" in the sense that they are constantly changing impulses that rise and fall. However, they are not "empty" in the sense that they do have an effect on us; they are present to us just as our lives continuously shift from the bright clouds to the solemn clouds in the sky of our feelings and thoughts.

Not advancing and not retreating prevents us from jumping onto a succession of thoughts that can lead to "my" story. Often these stories are "trueish." There is an element of truth but also elements of past stories—things we've thought, things we've heard, things we've imagined. In the example of the reclining seat, I might unconsciously attach the other times I've felt ignored or disrespected onto the action of the person in front of me.

This is even more evident when the incident involves someone we are in relationship with in our family, workplace, circle of friends, and community. Stories are the way we make sense of disparate events in our lives. We all know how easy it is to even slightly shift the emphasis in order to make ourselves the hero or the victim—and to believe the story we've made up. Even if many of the facts are true, the story can crystallize the feelings and ideas around the story, essentially creating a static solidity that does not allow other views of what happened. In this way, we form unmovable judgments and grudges that develop into long-standing hatred of others.

Once I had a strong disagreement with a spiritual teacher I'd studied with for many years. There was no flash of volatile anger, but rather a long escalation of difference of opinion leading to little slights that grew to what felt to me like shunning. Finally, I felt it necessary to leave and find another teacher and community. There

was a deep sense of loss, of not being heard, of not being respected.

Not surprisingly, I felt very angry with him for several years afterward, and it was extremely difficult for me because I didn't *want* to be angry. I wanted to be kind and good-hearted with him, but basically I was angry. It was a difficult, complex situation. Fortunately for me, I was able to sit long periods of meditation during this time and find a still point in my heart and mind. Many possible stories about our rupture rose to the surface of my mind: some were wildly off base, and others were more or less in the realm of reality. But I remained with feelings of hurt and anger. I sincerely didn't want to be angry, yet anytime anybody would mention this person or this place, a fire would envelop me; it would lick up at my ears. I would try my best not to say something mean-spirited, but I failed a number of times. Nasty little remarks came flying out of my mouth.

I resolved not to make a solid story about what happened. When I was asked to write or talk about it, I knew that it would be impossible. I knew that I would get carried away with one story or another, with a grain of truth here or there, and embellish the situation.

So instead, I spent a lot of time—years, actually—questioning my anger, experiencing my anger, dropping my anger, picking up my anger, and checking my anger. It would fall away and be gone; I wouldn't notice it for months. Then all of a sudden, something would be said, or I would even be in the middle of my meditation, and this thing would come lashing out.

It was difficult to avoid falling into some old story, without toppling into a hardened grudge or, worse, hatred. I wanted to be at the center, to allow the feelings that came, neither retreating nor advancing, neither diminishing nor enlarging. The years of sitting meditation and Dogen's words strengthened my resolve to experience both the dark clouds of sadness and the bright clouds of letting it go.

What was that about? What did my anger want? What did I need that made me want to feel angry again?

I realized that what I had wanted originally was to be acknowledged as a sincere practitioner. So I began the practice of recognizing myself, of giving myself the acknowledgment, thinking,

You are really a wholehearted Dharma student. You are really giving it your all, and I really appreciate you. Through this practice, I found that by addressing my underlying need, my reactive anger was transformed into free energy; then I was able to make use of that energy to take care of myself.

Sometimes, when the hurt is so deep or the violation heinous, the work of breaking down our internal hatred requires even stronger measures. Bernie Glassman, at one of his annual retreats at the Auschwitz concentration camp, was asked how we handle the deep hatred we feel when we witness such utterly vile human horror. Bernie said we have to take the hatred out of our hearts, put it on our altars, and take really good care of it. By "putting it on our altars," we bring our wrath and need into our consciousness, and we nourish what it is that has been defiled. In the case of the Holocaust, we recognize that our need for humanity and compassion and caring were horridly violated and that we must care for these needs so that we don't also turn toward violence and hatred.

Whether your altar is within your mind or actually in your room, you can use this as a way to feed those parts of yourself that need safety, compassion, respect, and care.

Of course, there are definitely times when it's important to respond, reply, and speak up. In certain situations, we have to say something. But that may not be so easy. To speak up without engaging our stories or our physical flare of temper can seem almost impossible. But it *is* possible if we can be utterly awake and present at the moment we speak—awake in that we are not lost in a story or a cascade of physical sensation but are aware of all this and are still able to speak forthrightly. This is a skill we develop in our meditation practice, the skill of being alert to our own mind, exactly where we are in that moment. That is intimacy in action.

When we first begin practicing and really being aware of our thoughts and feelings, we might be surprised at how often we are overwhelmed by a flood of anger and how quickly we are engulfed in it. After some practice, though, we begin to recognize the feeling as it builds in us. We may still get carried away, but we have a kind of awareness that makes it different. Through time, we recognize our anger when it arises, we feel it in our body, yet we are not its victims,

and we are able to respond appropriately. We are neither advancing nor retreating; instead, we are acting appropriately to the situation. We are intimate with our feelings and the situation. There's an anonymous Chinese poem that is evocative of this:

When the wind blows through the bamboo grove,
The trunks clatter against one another.
When it has passed, the grove is quiet once more.

That's how anger can be an authentic part of our lives. It doesn't have to be an abiding thing. It is a signal that something is amiss. How can we respond to it? As long as we're not anchored in our hatred or aversion, these things can blow through.

Over time, by our mindfulness and awareness of the arising of this energy, we become stronger and less likely to be snagged; we are less likely to become attached to the anger. But if we hold the anger in, it gets so attached that moss grows over it, and it becomes hidden. Then unknowingly, in a subtle way, we give it out to everyone we meet. And when they throw it back at us, we think, "Why me? *I* feel no anger. *I'm* not an angry person."

From my personal experience, these insights and transformations don't necessarily happen when you're practicing seated meditation. What happens is you do the work while meditating and learn how to be with anger. Then later you're walking down the street, at work, or washing dishes, and suddenly everything shifts, and it's a different way of perceiving your self, the anger, everything.

PRACTICE

We can talk abstractly about anger, but what concrete difficulties does it actually present in your life?

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present

and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you're like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Exercise for Working Alone

In this exercise, you may wish to speak your thoughts aloud, or you may write them in a journal. Allow yourself sufficient time to respond —at least five minutes for each section.

- Bring to mind a recent experience of anger. Allow the situation to present itself completely in your mind. Taking a breath, sink into that space of not knowing or judging. Without finding a name or a cause, can you simply abide in the sensations and feelings of this situation? Just breathe. Just be here completely.
- Recall the feelings in your body. Recall the state of your mind. Were you thinking clearly or confusedly? Did you feel in control? Did you feel victimized? What were these feelings like? Did they feel tight or loose? Where do you locate the feelings in your body? Did you have awareness of your body at the time? Consider what happened: What triggered the angry response?
- Without attaching to any thoughts, observe the thoughts that rise and fall around the situation. What does this remind you of? Does it happen often?
- What need in you does this reflect?
- Now just notice the energies in your body and mind in the present.

Exercise for Working with a Partner or in a Group Working in Pairs

Sit facing each other. Take a moment to quiet your body and breath. Set a timer for five minutes. Similar to previous exercises, one person asks the other, "How do you abstain from anger?" After each answer, the questioner says, "Thank you," and repeats the question. The questioner's role is just to be a witness. It's best not to coach

with facial expressions; very calmly, with a relaxed face, take in the other's continuum of awareness. It will sound something like this:

Q: How do you abstain from anger?
A: Breathing in, I don't separate from it. I don't tell a story about it.
Q: Thank you. How do you abstain from anger?
A: I ask myself, "Who is it that's feeling this?"
Q: Thank you. How do you abstain from anger?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: I think maybe I am greedy for results. I did this exercise, but an hour later, I got carried away getting angry. The other day, I went to print something, and my roommate had used up all the ink in the printer. I exploded. It seems like such a small thing, but I was really livid. Do we ever really change?

Roshi: As you bear witness to your anger in this way, you'll find that it changes. Anytime you put attention on anything, it changes. It's not solid. It's impermanent. So as it changes and goes this way and that, it wants you to buy into some story, and what's that story going to do? It's going to distract you from the feeling. You start with the story, "Boy, I should have told him . . ." and you're off and running again; you're in your head and away from your body. Pull back. Don't allow yourself to get distracted from it. Stay right with the sensation.

Then ask yourself, "Who is it that's feeling this?" Continue to experience it. The questions that you ask your anger, the questions that you ask your body—"Where is this? What does it feel like?"—those are the Dharma, the teaching. We need to be careful with ourselves and really allow ourselves to see. I shared with you that a lot of my anger has to do with abandonment. Someone else's anger might have to do with not being seen, always being ignored. We all have different issues around what triggers our anger, what kind of fear or hurt triggers it. Don't be so distracted by the trigger. Take a look at the root cause and experience that.

Six

HEALING

THE UNIVERSAL MEDICINE

When I lift my head
To hear the sounds of that one
The one who is always here,
I remember bird songs,
Leaves rustling, your voice so near.
Ordinary footsteps of the Way.

For many years, our Zen group met in my apartment, which really looked more like a meditation hall than living quarters. The living-dining room was lined with meditation cushions, and there was an altar, incense, a candle, a big bell, and a wooden drum. Every morning and evening, people would come by to sit in meditation, chant, and study the teachings. Before they arrived, I usually would quickly mop the floor, check the flowers, and then open the door. It was an energetic and joyful time. Then I got sick.

I remember lying in bed and listening to the meditation bells and soft chanting in the next room. How I wanted to join them, but I just couldn't get up. My whole body was wracked with pain, and it was unclear if I would ever be free of it. Even scarier was the fatigue; the draining feeling, almost as if mud were running through my veins; and the frustration. I recall thinking, *This is not me,* as if somehow

this “sick me” was not the “real me.” I had always thought of myself as strong and dependable, but now I was neither. It felt shattering.

How was I to heal myself? Many times, I had sat at the bedsides of others and held their hands, rubbed their feet, and wet their lips. I had often counseled those in pain. But now it was me lying there: weak, tired, and aching all over. What had I learned in practice that would help me now?

Hearing the meditation bell, I stopped fretting and took a long breath. Right here in my bed, I could pull the pieces of my heart and mind together. Using my breath, I could quiet the panic and fear and frustration I was feeling. Yes, I knew and had already experienced the easing of both physical and emotional pain that comes from focused attention. I had seen how a pain could be loosened when I placed my attention on it, breathed into it, and released. And I had worked with strong emotions, calming myself and finding a path out of such pain.

But this felt different, scarier. How could I heal myself, regardless of the medical outcome? This is to really study healing. Even the word *healing* provokes a deepening of insight: it comes from the root “to make whole.” How can we make ourselves whole while suffering physical and emotional pain? What is being whole? Isn’t it to be utterly awake to our reality as it is, right on top of our heads—the utter reality of this moment? Maybe it’s not a desired moment, but it is the moment *that is,* the moment existing right now. To be at one with that moment is to be whole and, paradoxically, to be healed.

In an old Zen story, a student asks the teacher how to avoid the heat and the cold. The teacher replies, “When hot, let the heat kill you; when cold, let the cold kill you.”[1] To “kill” in this phrase is to smash the you that is pulling away from the reality of heat and cold, the reality of fatigue, pain, or a scary diagnosis. When that veneer of separation is smashed, what’s left is just the pain and difficulty, without the extra layer of avoidance, fear, and tightness. It is that pulling away, that wrenching from what is, that creates the greater suffering. When that resistance is “killed,” there is room for healing.

A few years before the time I’ve been talking about, I began to experience unusual fatigue and joint pain in middle age. My first defense was to “correct myself” by changing my diet and trying

various alternative remedies and therapies. One day, my chiropractor said, “This must be systemic; you need to see a medical doctor.” That was the beginning of a multiyear struggle with various physicians, medical detective work, a crippling rheumatic condition, and finally, the promise of a painful but ultimately successful treatment.

I was given a strong and effective course of treatment. After six months, my old energy returned. My joints no longer ached. The medicine cured me, but the *healing* was the deeper lesson. A side effect of the medication sequence was a depression that slowly crept over me. I didn’t notice it at first, although others did, as I became irritable and weepy. Again, I asked myself how I could heal. How could I be at one with depression? I recall looking out the window and watching a raindrop s-l-o-w-l-y slide down the glass. I allowed my mind to drop slowly into the raindrop, into the sad feelings I was experiencing; with my breath, I eased my mind into the raindrop that fell from the skies and ended in a trickle on the ground. Tears welled up. I thought, *Yes, there is a well of sadness that can be seen in the life of a raindrop, in my life, in all lives. And that is where I am right now. No need to avoid, to escape, to make it bigger, to make it smaller. It is just this. Now another breath, an easing of the heart. No resistance, no anger or guilt, just this: at one with the raindrop.*

When we get caught up in the tragedy, the story of our condition, we disconnect from our own reservoirs of compassion, tenderness, and caring. We fall into a chasm of helplessness, blame, and unhelpful emotions. To heal, we must come back to this breath, this moment, over and over again, no matter how tough it is. Where, then, do we get the resilience to continually reenter the dragon’s cave; to go into—rather than away from—the pain we feel, the anxiety that arises, all the conditions we face at every turn?

Another ancient story helped me with this question. It is about Sudhana, a pilgrim who so desires to understand the Buddha’s teachings that he goes to fifty-three different teachers. Ironically, Sudhana’s name means “child of wealth,” implying that he has everything he needs, yet he looks and looks outside himself for what is already inherently his. In the story, when he is studying with Manjusri, the embodiment of wisdom, Manjusri simply says, “Bring

me something that isn't medicine." Sudhana begins to look around, and as he wanders from place to place, he realizes that everything he sees and hears can be a vehicle for healing.[2]

Seen with the eyes of compassion, every mote of dust can heal. We see the sunlight on a leaf, and it can bring us to awareness of the imperceptibly precious nature of this moment, and we are healed. We might also see a disturbing sight, such as a place of violence like a prison, concentration camp, or war memorial. How can this be medicine? For what sickness is it a cure? Used skillfully, even these elements of life can transform our life and heal us.

In my years working with Bernie Glassman and the Zen Peacemakers, I saw again and again the power of bearing witness, of going to a place of suffering such as Auschwitz, a drug treatment center, a homeless shelter, or a prison. When we allow ourselves to see the horror and misery of which humans are capable, we recognize that we must find a way to connect and make peace with everyone. That is a great healing, because we lose our tendency to make enemies and instead open ourselves to healing the suffering that causes such cruelty and wretchedness.

When you look into your own personal life—the difficult times you've had, the painful experiences, the illnesses—without rejecting them, denying them, or blaming, can you see how each one of those events can be experienced as medicine, as an opportunity for healing, for awakening?

For example, my illness taught me much about myself. I thought my strengths were my energy and ability to sustain work through long hours. I thought my clarity of mind was who I was. But the illness and medication took all that away. What did I discover was left? A softened heart, a sense of gratitude to those who helped me, and oddly a relaxed sense of self that did not need to "be" anything but what was arising in the moment.

How do we nurture a mind that is so open, alive, and intimate that it can take everything as medicine? The Zen way is rather uncomplicated and plain. It is to sit quietly facing the wall; to release our thoughts moment by moment; to let our discursive minds rest so that the innate, natural clarity of our deepest mind—the mind with the broadest, widest view, the mind that is not separate from anything—

can come to the fore. This allows us to experience a kind of calmness and composure that gives us the courage to face anything that confronts us. In this way, *everything* can be the occasion for awakening.

His lesson learned, Sudhana returns to Manjusri and says, “I can’t find anything that isn’t medicine.” Manjusri replies, “Then bring me something that *is* medicine.” Sudhana leans down, picks up a blade of grass, and hands it to Manjusri. You can imagine him standing there: he reaches down and picks up the simplest, smallest, humblest thing—a blade of grass. A blade of grass is like a grain of sand or a mote of dust; it can stand for the least significant things in the world. Every blade of grass is as a life that is lived, so every blade of grass is of enormous significance. Every blade of grass is your mind and heart and the minds and hearts of all those who are struggling. Every blade of grass, if the mind is right, can kill a person or bring a person to life. And that is exactly what Manjusri says to Sudhana.

Again, this Zen expression of killing means a dissolving of the false self, the robot we’ve created that goes around encased in a protective metal coating that doesn’t let anything in. That’s what we kill. Manjusri says that anything, even a blade of grass, can empower you to kill that robot and bring to life the quality of being that, like the moon in the river, is constantly shimmering and shifting its shape and form in response to what’s happening around it. That awakened self can move through life with presence and awareness. It may not look like your idea of the meditative mind at all, because it will likely be energetic and active, and it will show its emotions, its joy, and its sadness. Awakening brings us out of the dream of life to really live it. This is the essence of healing.

How can we realize that each of us is a child of wealth, that we have everything we need? Even when we are ill, we are wholly and completely who we actually are. In my case, I needed to recognize that my fatigue and suffering self, just as I was, were intimately all that I could be in that moment. Clinging to an idea, pulling away, or judging my condition only falsified what was truly present. Seeing my life in that way, I became whole.

When we have the flu, we hope to heal ourselves so we can go back to the way we were before we had the flu. But that model is inaccurate, because that time when we had the flu is completely that time when we had the flu and is as “whole” as that time when we didn’t have the flu (or as the time when we won’t have the flu later). So it’s a misperception to imagine that we need to be healed from the flu. What needs to be healed is our idea that we are not whole at this moment. This is true of whatever condition we may have, be it cancer, heart disease, AIDS, or broken bones. Is there anything that is not whole? Right now, in this moment, is there anything that is not this moment? Even dying is being whole—wholly dying. And being dead is also being whole.

Pain is healing. Dying is healing. They’re not separate from healing. We can see that on the level of the body and the level of emotions, on the level of relationships, in the world, and in our community. If we’re able to realize that suffering and death and disability are part of the whole—whether it applies to us personally, the quality of our relationship, or the state of our community—then we will not neglect or separate ourselves from these aspects. If we’re not able to realize this, then we’re constantly trying to shunt these aspects out of view, to destroy them.

In another story, an enlightened layman named Vimalakirti is in his sickbed, surrounded by a multitude of friends, students, and well-wishers. He is asked how to comfort someone who is sick, and he says, “Tell the person about the impermanence of the body, but do not tell him to despise or turn away from the body, and tell him to use his own illness as a means of sympathizing with the illness of others.”[3]

“Use your own illness as a means of sympathizing with the illness of others.” Can we remember that pain and weakness and death are not our enemies? That it is our fear and rejection of pain and weakness and death that are our enemies? That it is that rejection, that casting out, that incapacitates us and does not allow us to live life with courage and fearlessness?

Years ago, I encouraged our community to visit one of our sangha members, who was very ill in the hospital. One young man was quite nervous about visiting. When he entered the hospital room, the

patient, recognizing his discomfort, pulled off his oxygen feed and softly said, “Just sit down on the chair and breathe with me.” Who was healing whom? How can we say?

In the ninth century in China, there was a great teacher named Dongshan. He became very ill, and a monk said, “You are ill, Teacher. But is there anyone who is not ill?” Dongshan replied, “There is.” The monk asked, “Does the one who is not ill look after you?” Dongshan answered, “I have the opportunity to look after that one.” The monk asked, “How is it when you look after it?” Dongshan answered, “Then I don’t see that it has any illness.”[4]

Dongshan was on his deathbed. Imagine that. You’re lying on your deathbed and someone asks, “Is there anyone who is not ill?” Whatever the monk’s intentions, he is pointing to what I have been talking about—the nature of illness and wholeness. He inquires, he tests. And Dongshan leads him on. The monk then follows right along: “Does the one who is not ill look after you?” Does the universe take care of you? Does the Absolute (or as we Westerners might say, God) take care of you? Dongshan replies, “I have the opportunity to look after that one,” or her or him or everything; nothing is left out. Does *it* take care of me, or do *I* take care of it? The monk is kind of confused now. “How is it when you look after it?” What’s it like? Dongshan replies, “Then I don’t see that it has any illness.” When I take care of it, I don’t see that there is any illness; I only see the wholeness.

Wan-sung, who collected these stories some time later, said, “This is where everyday practice empowers you when you are dying.” That’s very blunt. We can hear the eleventh-century master saying, “Did you not get it, you twenty-first-century readers? Let me tell you again: this is where everyday practice empowers you when you are dying.”

“I don’t see that it has any illness.” There’s the great void, the great fullness, the sky—is that what we’re afraid to enter? We sit down on our cushions and say, “I’m really going to go deep.” Then blah, blah, blah, anything rather than jumping off into that great ocean, that great sky. This also happens when we’re dying; we’ll do anything to keep from going there. You’d think we’d have a little more curiosity about it.

Old Dongshan isn't escaping into some dream reality; he's inhabiting the moment as it is, that true person of no rank who goes in and out through the holes in his face, the one who does not get sick. How does he do that? By lying there in the bed, suffering, and answering the questions of this tedious monk! I mean, is there no rest? He's giving a teaching. How does he take care of that one?

How can we be empowered in such a way when we're depressed, when we're frightened about loss, when we have a physical ailment? We want to heal. We hope we can be free of what we're experiencing in the moment; we hope we can be free of our sickness, our depression, our anger, our broken relationship. Yet on another level, if we're able to breathe in and breathe out, completely present to this moment and to the true person of no rank, the one who does not get sick flowing in and out through the holes of our face, that quality of our being, then we are not sick. We are whole.

PRACTICE

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you're like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Exercise for Working Alone

Set a timer for five minutes. During this time, write down everything that comes to mind in response to this question: What is medicine for you? Then sit quietly for another five minutes. Now read what you wrote earlier and add anything new that comes up.

Exercise for Working with a Partner or in a Group Working in Pairs

Sit facing each other. Set a timer for five minutes. For the first five minutes, one person speaks on the topic (What is medicine for you?). After the five minutes are up, the second person speaks on the same topic. Discuss together, or with the larger group, what you learned.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: When I am in a very painful situation—physical or psychological—it is not easy for me to think of it as medicine. Am I confusing things? Here's what I'm trying to get at: If I break my arm, yes, I can see how a blade of grass can be medicine, but is this teaching saying my broken arm is itself also medicine? Can you suggest ways we might remember that everything is medicine?

Roshi: Yes, the story tells us that everything is medicine, and that can be hard to take in when our minds want to reject and push away from what is real right now. Depending on how you relate to your broken arm, it can be medicine or, of course, it can be poison. What helps you to remember? Breath by breath, in our meditation, we train ourselves to meet what has actually happened, rather than turning away from it. That is medicine.

Q: I think many of us who take up meditation practice have trouble not falling into magical thinking. I might think I should be able to heal myself and others with meditation, or I might think I am a poor meditator if I get sick. Can you say something about magical thinking?

Roshi: Our practice of being with what is in each moment is not about changing reality but rather meeting it. It depends on what you mean by "healing," doesn't it? To heal in the sense that I am talking about is to be present with what is really here. Zen and Buddhism are actually very down-to-earth, reality-based systems!

Q: It has been my experience that when I am really present with a sick or dying person, there is an experience of wholeness, of not-being-sick or not-dying. The awareness of the moment is complete in itself.

Roshi: Yes, that's when we see clearly how everything is medicine. Thank you.

Seven

WORK

THE ONE WHO IS NOT BUSY

I came to this practice to find peace,
I wanted to be free, to feel alive and fresh.
I was doing it for myself.
And as I practiced, gradually,
I recognized who this “I” was.
And wherever I turn, there is one
I can serve, I can offer something, be of use,
And thus I am served by the leisurely one.

Several years ago, I was in the Catskills with a colleague, celebrating the completion of a two-and-a-half-year project. It was summer, and it can get very hot in the Catskills, so we were sitting on the veranda of my friend’s place with tall glasses of iced tea and stacks of novels. We had worked really hard on this project, and we were ready for relaxation. As we sat there, I kept looking to the side of the house at a hillside entirely overgrown with shoulder-high tarweeds, the kind of weeds with leaves that are sticky to the touch. They had so completely taken over the hillside that they were killing all the other native plants.

Suddenly, without even thinking, I rose up out of my chair, got some tools, walked up the hill, and began pulling up and cutting

away the weeds. I worked up there for the next three days, covered in sweat and sticky pitch, my hands stinging because I didn't have any work gloves. My colleague couldn't believe me; she could easily have had her caretaker do it. However, I remember it as a time of rapture, of enormous, satisfying pleasure. It wasn't about "work" as we usually understand the word; it was about my whole body and mind being fully with the smell of the tarweed as I pulled and hacked away at it. It was about complete mergence with that hillside, not thoughts of how it would look later, but a complete at-oneness with what I was doing in a most profound and beautiful way.

That's how I experience intimacy with work, even when the work is challenging. Spreadsheets, for example, are hard for me to understand and manipulate, and I find myself butting up against the software, asking stupid questions, and so on. Still, being immersed in that kind of work can also be a source of joy.

The word *work* is apparently about five thousand years old, and from the beginning—in its Proto-Indo-European version, *werg*—it simply referred to "something being done." How are we in relation to this something being done in our daily lives? What is the heart of our work? What are the qualities surrounding our something being done?

Work can mean our career or simply how we make money; it can be our calling (our "life's work") or simply our functioning in the world: cleaning the *zendo* floor, making the beds, doing the dishes.

I like to think of work as what we do; it is the activity of the life we live. Work is any activity we're engaged in that requires our energy and focus, whether or not we're paid for it. We all know you can work really hard for no money. There's work in the marketplace, and there's work at home. There's paid work and unpaid work. When I was a young woman, I took a few years off from the university and learned so much about the world. I learned to cook, to paint, and to write poetry; I tried my hand at pottery; I did canning; I gardened; I sold organic vegetables; I learned to quilt; I even sewed my husband's shirts by hand. Then I'd go to a party, and someone would ask me, "What do you do?" And because what I was doing had no value in the marketplace (even though I was experimenting and learning and full of creative energy), I felt like saying, "I don't do

anything.” But I was working twelve hours a day on all my projects. Amazing!

What is valid work? I know a woman who is a wonderful writer. I met her because she walks dogs for my neighbors in the apartment building where I live. We have the same daily schedule, so we often meet in the mornings and evenings when she’s making her dog runs. I join her, and we walk the dogs together. This is her profession, how she makes her money. Simultaneously, she’s also a really fine writer and probably has many other talents. Yet our society looks down on those who do such tasks as walking dogs for a living when they actually may also be involved in creative, nurturing, and service work.

What is work? There’s a story about the great thirteenth-century Zen master Ju-ching, who was once the sanitation officer at a monastery. In those days, the job of the sanitation officer was to shovel the shit. Back then, they had wooden toilets, and shit and piss would fall into tiled trenches below. Every week Ju-ching would go and clean out the trenches with buckets and take the manure to the garden. Then he’d wash the tiles with rags and brushes.

One time his teacher, Setcho, asked him, “How do you clean that which has never been soiled?” He was asking Ju-ching about himself.

Poor Ju-ching did not know how to answer. He kept practicing with that question for a full year, during which time he continued cleaning toilets. Finally Ju-ching went to his teacher and said, “I have hit upon that which has never been soiled.”[1]

This would be a good question for each of us to ask ourselves: How do you clean that which has never been soiled? Finally, after much struggle, Ju-ching saw that there is no work that isn’t of high value. Shoveling shit is not soiled work any more than walking a dog is soiled work. He went to his teacher and said, “I have hit upon that which has never been soiled.” To this day, in all Zen communities, a tradition for practice leaders during retreats is to go out in the middle of the night and quietly, unobtrusively clean the bathrooms and toilets.

How do you think about work? Is some work of value and some not? Are you “too busy”? Are you trying to get one thing “done” so

you can get the next piece “done”? Are you anxious about, angry about, or resentful of your work? Do you neglect your work? Do you do it in an obsessive way or in a sloppy, careless manner? Do you think, *If I work harder, I’ll be successful, and when I’m successful, I’ll get what I want?* Do you think, *This work is not what I am capable of, or deserving of, so I’m not going to give it my all?*

In terms of our work, we often think we have to act a certain way all the time, that we have to force ourselves into some kind of way of producing rather than being alive to what is here and now. In doing that, we close off our possibilities. We lose our creativity, even our compassion. Too often we find ourselves stuck in a loop of narrowing attention, trying to find some success, some acknowledgment, and in so doing, we lose what we seek.

There is a fairy story from China that illustrates this. Once there was a young man who wanted to meet Kuan-yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. He began to meditate very hard, feeling that if he were successful, he would become fully enlightened; he would achieve his heart’s desire. As he was meditating, Kuan-yin walked by and noticed him. Smiling, she walked up and tapped him on the shoulder. The young man said, “Please don’t bother me right now, I’m looking for Kuan-yin.” Delighted, Kuan-yin tapped him on the shoulder again. “Go away,” the young man said. “I’m busy meditating. I’m looking for Kuan-yin.” So Kuan-yin shook her head sadly and walked away.

I think each of us can recognize ourselves in this young man. Pushing too hard, being too busy, we miss the very reality we seek. We miss our context: the presence of our coworkers, our materials, the changing environment of which we are a part.

There is such a difference between complete effort and striving. It is possible to be thoroughly involved in work and yet not be attached to the outcome, to be thoroughly connected to the effort without grasping for some “result” that exists only in the mind as a concept, an anxiety, a figment. How can we realize and recognize the subtle difference between obsession and involvement? How can we sharpen our perception?

Once there were two Zen disciples who were biological brothers as well as Dharma brothers. They lived together at the same study center. One day, as Daowu was sweeping the ground, his brother,

Yunyan, passed by and said, “Too busy!” Daowu replied, “You should know there’s one who’s *not* busy.” Yunyan replied, “Oh, come on now, you’re saying that there are two moons!” With that, his brother Daowu held up the broom and said, “Which moon is this?”[2]

Visualize this. I can just see Daowu sweeping, completely in the zone: focused, immersed in his action. And Yunyan is critical: “You are too busy!” Maybe he thinks that Daowu, like the young man in the previous story, is lost to what is here, that there is no leisurely element that is alive to all aspects of the moment. Thus, he is “too busy.”

Daowu replies, “You should know there’s one who’s not busy.” I picture him continuing with his sweeping. Daowu is saying, “Oh, the leisurely one is here. You just don’t see him.”

Very often we mistake activity for busyness, but that is not what is really there. What is there is complete immersion: self and broom and sweeping; self and child and play; self and computer and problem solving. The trick is discerning the difference both in others and in ourselves. Sometimes looking out the window is active engagement and typing madly is not; sometimes the reverse is true. How can we tell the difference?

Yunyan says, “Oh, come on now, you’re saying that there are two moons.” He thinks he’s caught Daowu: “Aha! You’re saying there are two realities: the reality of your being busy and the reality of your being not-busy.”

In the Zen tradition, the moon in the sky stands for true reality, and the second moon—the one we see reflected in the water—is our *idea* of reality. Here, Yunyan is implying that when Daowu says there is one who is not busy, he is actually separating his sweeping activity from the concept of being one with the wholeness of life.

Daowu holds up the broom and says, “Which moon is this?” He brings it back to no-separation: even in our most involved, focused activity, right there is the balanced one, the leisurely one. It is in our actual activity, in our intimacy with all aspects of this moment, that we are whole.

Who has not felt, in a moment of great activity such as creating, serving, giving, or holding, both the energy and the aliveness of the activity and at the same time the leisure, the ease, the simple

movement? It is not poky and not frenetic; it is the smooth and unhurried quality of doing each thing at exactly the right moment—not too fast, not too slow, but at just the right moment. It actually has nothing to do with fast or slow; it has to do with the whole body connecting to reality itself.

We heal, we listen, we hold a hand, we find a solution or a way around a difficult problem, we draw a line, we make a sound, we make a meal, we clean a space, we give an honest answer or a steady hand up. Sometimes just the presence of our body sitting with someone when they are down, blocked, upset, locked up, or dying (or even dead) is the full-on activity that is needed.

This is true intimacy with our work of the moment, an intimacy with who we are and what we do, whether we are cleaning toilets or waiting tables or designing software or making art or playing music or teaching or whatever. Just the other day I was watching a young man working the back of a garbage truck, swinging up and down from the truck, picking up sacks of garbage, and manipulating the controls of the compressor. His whole body was synchronized, like a dance—utter involvement, aliveness.

Of course, not all work is like this. There will always be little breaks in the intimacy: a headache; a cranky boss or coworker; a hangover; the arising of resentments and comparisons and craving ideas in our mind that create anxiety, frustration, and boredom. What might we do at such a time? Again, the strategy is to include everything, to turn toward, not away from, the conditions that are emerging. Take a breath. Check your body and mind, and look directly at the obstructions. What is it that is pulling you away from this very moment?

The “second moons” trip us up. What are we to do? Daowu shakes his broom, saying, “No! Right here in what I am doing right now is everything: me, broom, floor, all of life is right here, flowing around me.”

The garbage worker grabs the next bundle of trash.

PRACTICE

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you're like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Exercise for Working Alone or with a Group

- Set a timer for ten minutes. Try to write continuously for the whole time without stopping to look back or edit what you've written. Write about effort in terms of the kind of effort you exert at home, at work, and in your community. Consider how your life and the quality of your effort affect those with whom you are connected.
- Set the timer for another ten minutes. Write about being intimate and wholehearted in your work. Under what conditions do you *enjoy* your work? Again, try to write continuously for the whole time, without stopping to look back or edit what you've written.

If you are working alone, look at what you've written and notice how it makes you feel. Did you learn anything about yourself? Did anything surprise you?

If you are working in a group, invite people to share what they have written or understood.

Exercise for Working with a Partner or in a Group Working in Pairs

Sit facing each other. Take a moment to quiet your body and breath. Set a timer for five minutes. The questioner asks, "What stops you from being intimate with your work?" After each answer, the questioner says, "Thank you," and repeats the question. The questioner's role is just to be a witness. It's best not to coach with facial expressions; very calmly, with a relaxed face, take in the

other's continuum of awareness. The dialogue might sound something like this:

Q: What stops you from being intimate with your work?
A: There are so many interesting distractions.
Q: Thank you. What stops you from being intimate with your work?
A: I'm impatient for results.
Q: Thank you. What stops you from being intimate with your work?

When the timer rings, reset it for another five minutes and switch roles. When the time is up, open a discussion of impressions and discoveries.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: It seems like a lot of things that are impediments to intimacy with our work are things that our society tells us are good. Like, you should make money, but thinking about making money can be an impediment to intimacy with our work. Or you should know what you're doing, but knowing what you're doing can be an impediment. Or you should work as hard as you can, or you should relax and take it easy. It seems like these can all be impediments to being intimate with our work.

Roshi: Yes. Buddhism often refers to the openings to insight as "gates." The gate can swing in two directions, so with something we usually consider a vice, maybe we just need to turn it another way. We can just turn something that keeps us "out" and open it as a way "in." Sometimes it's just our language. "Working too hard" is different from "complete effort," and "slacking off" is very different from "being at ease in our work." We get so caught up in language that it can condition us.

Q: There are these tasks that I hate, and I find it's really hard to remember that once I'm doing whatever it is, it's fine. For example, I hate doing the laundry. It's so hard for me to remember that once I'm doing the laundry, it's not a problem.

Roshi: Yes, because it's not doing the laundry anymore; it's more like putting things into the washer and taking them out and folding

them. That’s very different from doing the laundry.

Eight

DEATH AND DYING

LIFE AND DEATH ARE OF SUPREME IMPORTANCE

Oh! Time to go? So soon?
I knew the time would come, but now?
I thought there'd be more time.
Oh what needs to be done?
What have I left behind?
Will I be safe? Will I be happy?
Will I be?

Every year, our community holds a ceremony to honor the dead. We make floating candlelit lanterns, each one inscribed with the names of loved ones who have died that year and those we wish to remember from previous years. We take the lanterns to a winding stream that flows into the Hudson River and release them, letting them float down through the rippling waters, around the bend, and out of sight. Over and over we softly chant the refrain, *Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha*! It means, "Going, going, to the other side, blessed awakening!"

What is this blessed awakening? You could say that this annual release of the lanterns is a way for us to visually take in the reality of death—our own as well as those of others. We too will someday be floating down a stream into the great ocean. To clearly recognize our

life as a fleeting episode in the flow of all life is a core teaching in Zen.

It is not easy to look at our life as temporary, yet it is estimated that more than 150,000 people die every day worldwide. No human lives for more than 120 years. Still, death is rarely met head-on; it is rarely considered seriously, even when aging progresses and death is near. Surely this has been true throughout history, but the denial seems to be more prevalent in our modern world. It is not surprising in a time when the dying are removed from homes to institutions, when community rituals for grieving are declining, and when there is a general emphasis on youth and health as the most admirable aspects of life. Our society has also produced extraordinary capabilities for distraction, with an almost constant drone of electronic media flooding our consciousness, helping us to hide from even thinking about our fears of death.

It is natural to fear the end of life, of who we think we are. Somehow, though, we may be aware that when we remove death from our consciousness, or only permit it to serve as the scary thought we push down, we are actually missing a key ingredient of enjoying life.

There is an intriguing irony here: relating to our death is what can make our life meaningful, lively, and dear. It is said that the Buddha taught that just as the greatest footprint is that of the elephant, so the greatest meditation is the meditation on death. (For a meditation on death, see the "Practice" section at the end of this chapter.) Consider how it would be for you to look into this great matter of death through meditation and daily awareness. Such an inquiry doesn't have to be full of anxiety or drama.

I recall that a few years ago I was talking to an assistant manager at my bank. He has nothing to do with Zen at all, and I don't really know what it is he has to do with, but we have encounters from time to time over various business issues. I don't think he has to work very hard, so we tend to have rather long conversations. He'll ask me about my shaved head ("Why don't you have any hair?") and various things like that. This time he asked me about the Zen view of reincarnation, and I said, "Well, you know, after you die, you could be anything." He responded, "Really? What will become of me? I

wonder what will become of me." It was snowing—his office is right by the window facing Broadway—and pointing out the window, I said, "You could become a snowflake." And the most amazing thing happened. He said, "Oh, then I would fall from the sky and fall and fall and fall, and I'd land on someone. Then I'd fall off and melt in the street." Suddenly, this man who had just given me the most poetic teaching on death awed me. His acceptance of death in the fantasy was amazing, light, and true. It was as if, during our conversation, we had detached from fixed notions of death as loss and ending and had opened our minds to a larger view of death and dying. Wonderful!

What is that larger view? Once a Chinese emperor asked a Zen teacher, "After your death, what will you need?" The teacher answered, "Build me a seamless monument." The emperor asked, "What would it look like?" The teacher was silent. After some time, he responded, "Understand?" The emperor said, "I do not understand."[1]

Death is not something to *understand,* nor is it absence, emptiness, or vast space. Like the monument, like silence, it is seamless. Like the emperor, we do not understand. Most of us require more concrete imagery than vast space or seamless silence in order to take in the meaning. A line from a verse about this incident helps: "Under a shadowless tree, the community ferryboat." The tree casts no shadow because it no longer lives in the ordinary world of sun and shadow. It has no form, and thus it casts no shadow. A tree with no form! This is the realm of seamlessness. The ferry is a boat that regularly carries people from one side to the other. This ferryboat carries the whole community, everyone who has lived. No one, finally, is left behind. We all die. We are all subject to the ordinary rules of the world. At the same time, here we all are in this same ferryboat. We are together in this.

Of course, we fear death. Our day-to-day awareness does not abide solely in the realm of the seamless monument. We are afraid of death and of dying. We know what it's like to live, but we don't know what it's like to be dead. It would be unrealistic to try to banish our fear of death. But facing it, being aware of the presence of fear and the inevitability of death, changes the way we live. This is the

blessed awakening, what I have been calling intimacy. Intimacy with our whole life includes being intimate with our fear of death. I have known very wise people who have paid close attention to their mindstates; stayed intimate with their approaching death; and still experienced times of equanimity mixed with times of fear, tears, and disquiet.

It seems that true wisdom is being able to see through the clouds of fear and clinging, to look directly at the brevity of life, to be grateful for life, and to find a way to recognize the value of it. Enjoyment of life and service to it naturally flow from this recognition.

Death comes as a surprise. No matter how short or long our life may be, how sick or healthy we are, it still comes as a surprise. Why is it a surprise? Because we push it away from our consciousness, we put it out of our minds so we won't be afraid. We act as if we will not die. You could say that this is the primary denial—the refusal to face the truth of our mortality. Yet, ironically, facing this truth makes our lives much richer, much more "alive" than living in a daydream. There is something about recognizing the brevity of life that makes it more meaningful: the colors are brighter, the love is deeper, the taste is sweeter or more bitter or truer.

There is the fear of the dying process itself. What we may not realize is that in our constant state of change, we are a different self when we are dying than the self that thinks ahead about dying and is so afraid. When our body begins to go, it adjusts our mind. People often forget that and live in terror of how they will meet death. We can work on dissolving our fear of dying by recognizing once again the fleeting nature of the mind, of our self.

A new member of our community, Joanne, was a brilliant, feisty, somewhat cynical intellectual who had survived one bout of cancer. Because of genetic factors, she was fearful that it would return. She said to me, "I want to know how to die, how to handle the cancer if it returns." As it turned out, she had a year or so of wellness. Then the cancer came back aggressively. She had little time to prepare for her death; very quickly, she was dying. Her daily practice of awareness, of meeting her mind, whether anxious or angry or sad, supported her in those last months. She had lost the fear of the cancer returning; it had returned. She had found a way to be intimate even with her

physical pain by breathing into it, dropping into the sensations, and learning to notice the continually shifting sensations of intensity and release. She was young and did not want to die. She was not resigned to dying; yet she was dying, fiercely, with sadness and courage.

We don't know what the circumstances of our dying will be. We could go instantly, without even knowing that we're dying. In such a case, if we have not investigated our death in any way, we might die without expressing gratitude to those who have brought solace and joy to our life. We may miss the opportunity to offer and receive forgiveness. Or our dying may be lingering, like Joanne's. We may face physical suffering and the inability to care for ourselves. It is possible to meet these aspects of dying without adding more confusion and suffering on top of what is physically present. Those whom I've known who have been able to make that shift are the ones who have made a practice of attention to their sensations and feelings, who have learned to notice the incremental difference between each moment: the moment of pain, the moment of release, the moment of dependence, the moment of independence. In this way, they did not shut down or become overwhelmed but met each reality as it arrived.

A dear friend of mine, Thomas, knew he was dying. It was in the days before effective HIV/AIDS medications, and his slow but steady weakening gave him time to do things he wanted to complete: a musical composition, a visit to a favorite birding site, time with his mother. He also meditated every day. In Thomas's last twenty-four hours, although he was unconscious, he drew each breath forcefully, exhaling and inhaling; he breathed so hard he was almost panting. He was not gasping for breath but exerting himself utterly in breathing. It was as if he were giving birth. Witnessing his dying, I was amazed at his strength and the final surge of energy he released. A long-time practitioner, Thomas seemed to fill his experience of death with the vitality of his life. He did not go easily, yet he seemed utterly at one with his dying.

When we think of our fear of dying, we forget that we will be different when we are going through the process, just as we are different when we are sick, busy, or sleeping. Dying is a different way

of being, each of us will do it differently, and it is not at all like our state right now. This is beautifully alluded to in a well-known story about the ancient Zen teacher Master Ma when he was mortally ill. A few weeks before the story takes place, he had taken his attendant to a cave in the mountains and told him that he (the master) would die soon. At that time, his body should be placed in the cave. One day, the temple superintendent came to check on him and asked, “Teacher, how has your venerable health been in recent days?” Master Ma said, “Sun Face Buddha, Moon Face Buddha.”[2]

In the *Buddha Name Sutra,* a sun-faced buddha lives eighteen hundred years, and a moon-faced buddha lives a day and a night. So the question “How is your health?” is answered, “Long life, short life.” Even when we are most ill, in the most pain, we can in one breath experience ourselves as bright and majestic like the sun, powerful and strong; in the next breath, we can experience the waning of the light, the shadowy, cool, and dark, the weaker pull of the moon. The wild thing is, when we are truly present to our transient, short life, we also receive the robust courage of our life as the vast, interpenetrating universe. We recognize the preciousness of this moment and take in each thing as it is.

Another story puts it this way. Dai Zui was asked, “How are you when life and death arrives?” He replied, “When served tea, I take tea. When served a meal, I take a meal.”

Our suffering is impermanent, and our nonsuffering is also impermanent. How can we respond? Just naturally. We already know in our hearts how to listen to the sounds of the world: they will be happy, they will be sad, and we can listen to them all. This is the great opportunity of spiritual life. What a gift it is for us to be so attuned to our life that we are ready and able to receive what is offered—life, challenges, suffering, and delight. What is served is what is here. How we receive it makes the difference. It is a liberating intuition.

Is it difficult to face the reality of death? Of course it is. That’s why it is so rich! Let’s not turn away, because the rewards of truly connecting to the life span that we have is the key to our awakening, to living a meaningful life.

What would it be like to be astonished by the reality of your life and death? Be astonished! In that way you will recognize your true self.

Perhaps you've heard of how those who are faced with a threatening medical diagnosis often regard it as a gift. For those who can penetrate the mystery, it is a gift. It is no accident that people who are told they have a shortened life span so often uncover in themselves a treasure they didn't know they had.

It is almost as if we put off our lives, as if we're waiting to live a life that truly reflects our nature. We squander our resources in fantasy, in addiction, in distraction, in waiting for "real life" to begin. When we realize, "This is it," we begin to live fully.

The beautiful evening *gatha* that is chanted in Zen temples all over the world concludes with this exhortation: "Take heed! Do not squander your life!"[3] For many of us, the realization is that any moment when we are not present to the preciousness of our life is a moment of squandering. What is the opportunity that we squander? It is the opportunity to be awake, to use our life fully, to enjoy this life we've been given, to recognize its impermanence, and to appreciate the delicacy and opportunity and marvel of our life today.

PRACTICE

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you're like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

A Meditation on Death

There are many ways you can use this meditation. You can read it to another person, record it and listen, or simply read it sentence by sentence. If, during this meditation, you should feel uncomfortable, take a moment to observe that, and simply open your eyes, take a breath, look around, and feel your hands and feet.

Close your eyes and let your body relax.
Let the body soften; let the breath come by itself.
Nothing to change, nothing to control, just breathing.
Soften the body, moment to moment, allow it to be loose, as if it were floating;
Allow the edges of your body to soften, to melt.
Allow your whole body, arms and legs and hands, to melt, to be at ease,
to enter that space in your heart, in your breath, that is melting, like an ice cube, flowing back into the fluidity of space and light.
Letting go of sensation, of the sense of the body, we float free of its constraints.
Melting, softening, ice to water, dissolving into the flow of light and space,
becoming quieter, more at ease.
As each holding arises, we let it melt, we let our name and reputation melt, our family melt, our form melt, our holding melt into our hearts and breath.
Letting go allows us to melt, to float free, to dissolve into the light, into space.
Letting go of the body, releasing the body, floating freely in the light.
Safely, each thought, each emotion, each perception safely flows away, and there is light, and there is space flowing into space, light into light.
No boundaries, even the breath now, slowly, falling away, melting into space.
Now, floating freely, as water in water, light in light, space in space,
there is no inside or outside,

free, completely, and utterly free, space, endless space.
Slowly now, observe the breath,
as you realize although many people right now are dying, are letting go, you are staying, it is not yet your time.
This is realization in vast, wondrous space.
Breathe slowly, feeling freshness, peace, and come back.

Exercise to Raise Awareness and Familiarity with Death as It Really Is

We can study death by finding ways to get closer to it. We might habitually read the obituaries, those fascinating little vignettes of lives lived, perhaps in our own town or village. We can become familiar with the ebb and flow of life around us: a fly's carcass on the windowsill, the cloud that slowly fragments and disappears in the sky, the little fish caught in shallow water.

Volunteer to visit and/or read to people who are in hospice or an assisted living facility.

Exercise for Working Alone

Write a description of how you'd like your death to be: where it would take place, who would be there, and so on. How likely is it that this will happen? What might you do to ensure that your wishes are honored?

Exercise for Working in a Group

Sit in a circle. Write a description of how you'd like your death to be: where it would take place, who would be there, and so on. What are your feelings about this? How likely is it that this will happen? What might you do to ensure that your wishes are honored? Make the description brief, five or six lines, and write or print clearly. Have everyone crumple their paper into a ball, and collect the papers in a bowl or bag in the center of the circle. Everyone draws a paper out of the bowl or bag (it is unlikely you will get your own). Take a few minutes to read the paper. You don't need to memorize it; just get a feeling for it. Then put it away. Going around the circle, each person speaks as if he or she were the author of the paper drawn. Other

people in the circle can ask questions or respond in other ways. You are standing in another person's shoes.

Evaluating the Exercise

After this exercise, if working on your own, write down the thoughts and feelings that arose for you. If working with a partner or a group, open a discussion of impressions and discoveries.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: I find the exercise on imagining how my death will be kind of disturbing, not because I'm afraid of it so much as that it seems to be one thing in life where we know we have nothing to say about it. Maybe I'd like to die in my sleep, or while meditating, or while acting in a play (the poor audience!), but I don't think I can in any way control it. What is the purpose of the exercise? I guess if I know I can die at any moment, I should always be doing what I want to be doing at the moment of death. Being awake to my life.

Roshi: When we learn to meditate by following or counting our breaths, we often slip into the idea that the observation of the breath is connected to controlling it, and so we begin to laboriously tell ourselves to breathe in and to breathe out. But of course that is not necessary; to be aware of your breath is the practice, is enough. Likewise, to imagine the optimal circumstances of your dying simply is a way to allow yourself to take in the reality of the end of your life. It is practice that can actually bring you closer to accepting your inevitable death.

Q: In the meditation there seems to be a life that transcends the small self, but it also feels like when I die my whole world dies with me. I try to be agnostic and say I don't know what happens after death, but I feel like I have a lot of "knowing"—knowing that nothing happens after death. My actions and friendships may continue to reverberate for a while, but consciousness?

Roshi: Well, what do you think that "life that transcends the small self" might be? Pause for a moment, right now. Can you feel it? What is it that nothing happens to? Stars die, yet the vastness that we don't understand nor know, what about that?

Nine

MAKING PEACE WITH LOSS

ENTERING THE TIGER'S CAVE

A lack of movement in the heart.
Like a metallic cover.
A sadness creeps over me.
I can barely raise my head.
Let me sit here and watch the light change.
Changing, darker, quieter . . .
Now the dark moves in my chest.
Darkness, yet movement. What is this?
A trickle of water, falling over the vault.
A breeze stirs, tears fall. This is hard.
And it is me, right now.
I am here, and what is not here, is not here.

It was a lovely spring evening on the East Coast, and a group of Maezumi Roshi's Zen students had gathered for a convivial dinner party in a quiet suburban home in New Jersey. Since our Zen teacher resided in California, this was a way for us to get together and enjoy our mutual interest. The hostess left the dining room at the insistent, repeated sound of the telephone. When she returned, her face seemed pinched and uncertain. She looked directly at me and said, "Our Roshi has died!" It was a sudden, accidental death,

completely unexpected. I recall simply feeling stunned, hollow, uncomprehending, a deep hole of dread and shock. Maezumi Roshi was my spiritual teacher, and after some years, we had finally reached a genuine mutual understanding. I was learning so much from him and had opened my heart to his way of teaching. I felt shattered. A huge force in my life was gone. There were no tears. For me, it was too much of a shock for tears; there was just this deep feeling of loss.

Grief about loss—whether through death or the end of a relationship, job, role, or home—hurls us into a different sphere of being. We feel alien even to ourselves. In a way, our sense of our individual self is really a set of interrelated elements of our own experience and all the other people, places, and things we do that make up our life. When we lose a person, a job, or a place, we feel unmoored. The threads that held us in relationship are left floating, with nothing but memory to hold us together. This is the great shock: the absence of someone or something that contributed to our sense of who we are.

A few weeks after Maezumi Roshi's death, a group of his students gathered at the remote center in the mountains of Southern California where we had so often gone to study with him. We were charged with planning his memorial service, which would be attended by his many students and others from around the world. One afternoon, as we waited for the next planning session, about half a dozen of us were leaning over a fence talking, when suddenly we heard a loud rattle and saw a snake dart forward, striking a squirrel. The squirrel jumped high in the air, then fell to the ground, shaking. Within minutes, the snake had dropped its big loosened jaw and, to our amazement, slowly swallowed the squirrel, whose bulk could be seen making its way down the snake's body.

The squirrel's fluffy little body and arching tail disappeared inside the snake. It felt to me that the sudden absence of the squirrel was just like the loss we experience when something we are connected to, defined by, disappears into the universe. When we experience loss, it feels as if our sense of our self, of our life, is utterly disrupted, that something we were a part of has disappeared. It can feel like this sense of loss is so great that it actually has a shape—like the

squirrel in the snake. How do we respond to such a tearing apart of our close-knit sense of our self and our life?

Like many people facing such a loss, my first reaction to Roshi's death was numbness, an almost total shutdown of feeling. This is a common reaction of many animals to trauma. We just stop and freeze until we are able to slowly allow the realization of the shock to seep into our consciousness. We might even be aware that we are stunned, which can be disconcerting, since we may feel that we ought to be doing something or saying something, and instead we are frozen. At such a time we can come back to ourselves by breathing deeply, attending to our physical sensations, noticing our hands and feet and the breath entering and leaving our body. We might want to hold someone's hand, or even our own, to reconnect the filaments of self that seem to be floating without an anchor. In this stage of grieving, it is enough to realize that we are reacting quite naturally to our loss.

In time (and how long varies with each person), the heartbreaking realization emerges: yes, this former element of ourselves—this person, job, home, situation—is now utterly lost to us. Like the squirrel, in a way, they are gone. If we are lucky enough to release, we cry. Sometimes people are surprised when a Zen person or a Buddhist cries. Often, there is an expectation that somehow to be spiritual is to be stoic, unruffled by emotions. But this is not so. The deeper our practice, the more open are our hearts. To cry at loss is a human thing, and our intimacy with such humanness is profoundly true.

The key lesson is to be able to cry and lament our loss but not to get stuck in this state. Even as we are engulfed in our sorrow, we can also nourish our understanding that life is change, that we ourselves are change, and that we are, right in this moment, changing. We can do this on our own by watching our moment-to-moment perceptions, how the light changes, how other aspects of our life intervene in our thoughts, how we are not just one grieving body but also a multifaceted field of life, charged with new energy at each instant. One moment, we experience memory and tears; the next moment, we give attention to the details of our ordinary life.

Certainly the customs and rituals associated with loss can be helpful in this regard. When we are with others, we more easily open ourselves to reflection, to the shifting circumstances, to attending to this very moment. Loss—always associated with some form of relationship, person, position, or place—is healed when we recognize the world that is still around us: the people and sounds and smells and colors of our extended self. We can do this with others, opening ourselves to reflection and to the changing reality of being with others in the loss. I recall that when we gathered together for Roshi's funeral, our grief exploded many times into almost hysterical laughter as we recalled episodes of our lives with him. This too is part of healing: sharing the grief and letting it shift into laughter, into sharing, even into silence together.

Sometimes, because of distance or circumstance, it is not possible to be with others facing the same loss. In such a case, it can be helpful to establish connections with others in a similar situation. In this way, we remember that we are never alone in our grief, that grief is a part of life, and we don't have to look far to recognize it in the lives of others.

There is wisdom to the traditional forty-nine-day mourning period in the Buddhist tradition. Typically, the memorial services are held a month and a half after the death. Even if our loss is not the death of a loved one, but the loss of a relationship, a job, or something dear to us, it can be helpful to think in terms of forty-nine days—time to remember and to adjust to the change in our life, in our self. This adjustment is really just noticing all of the feelings and thoughts that come and go in our being. It is coming to terms with the reality of our life, as it is now.

But coming to terms with or facing our loss can be hard when we are angry, and anger is a common response to loss. We find ourselves in the familiar refrain, "Why me?" and answer with anger, "It's not fair!" or "How could you?" Dealing with the anger of loss is tricky, first of all because we may not even realize that we're angry. For example, we may notice that we are feeling irritable about something—a website, a political issue, a piece of software—but it is actually not just irritation but a kind of furious feeling. First we have to notice the pattern of irritation. Then we might ask ourselves,

where is this coming from? We may not connect it with our grief but attribute it to other people or things. But somehow, finally, we recognize that we are angry and stressed. What can we do with that?

First we need to listen deeply to our body and mind. When we do that, we may realize that we are feeling hurt over a loss. This hurt may be generating a feeling of irritability, like the irritability a baby with diaper rash feels. Our irritation with everything that slightly rubs against us causes us to feel what we may experience as anger but is really a kind of hurt, a sadness and sorrow. Once we are able to recognize our feelings as sorrow, our irritability vanishes; it is no longer necessary. We can redirect our energy to simply mourning our loss. Each time the irritability returns, we can remember that it is really about the softer emotion of grief.

Essentially, this is the practice of listening to ourselves; listening with the whole body and mind. In that listening comes a relief, a release. Already the reality has changed. We know intellectually that everything changes in every moment, but through deep listening, we are able to experience with our whole being our changing heart and mind in the moment of loss and grief. You may have heard about the Chinese character for listening. It shows a picture of the heart-mind in the middle, surrounded by the character for complete attention: eye and ear. Thus, to listen is to open our mind and heart and eyes and ears—all our senses—to what we are feeling and what we perceive that others are feeling as we face the challenge of loss. We use our whole being in alignment, in attunement, in relationship, with our own sense of loss and sorrow. The way we begin is right there, in that horrible sorrow of loss. That is where I have found the healing from loss. We go directly to the source. We cry, and we don't run away from that pain. We are absolutely present to what arises within us, and exactly *there* is our path to healing.

There is a Zen story that helps us see this. A student asks, "What is it like when the tree withers and the leaves fall?" The teacher replies, "The body exposed in the golden wind."[1]

In one way, we can see this story as about autumn, the time when the mature leaves of summer fall and reveal the starkness of a winter's landscape. When there are no leaves, we see things that

have been hidden; we see with clarity, with a sharpness that is camouflaged when there are leaves and blossoms. That is similar to what happens when someone or something is lost to us; we drop the extra parts and see ourselves more clearly.

On another level, we can see that the questioner is actually asking about loss. When the tree withers (when what we think we are dies off), what is left? When we lose a person, a job, a home (something that defines us), what is left? The teacher says it's "the body exposed"—our true nature, right now, the one that is always synergistically transforming in accord with the arising and falling of reality, this true self is exposed—which is recognized as our own body, just as we are right now. The "golden wind" is the priceless movement of air and light that bathes our bare being, that offers us healing through wisdom and acceptance. It is the golden flow of life itself. This bare being, this body exposed, arises out of all that is alive in this moment. Recognizing this reality of our stripped-down self, the self that naturally aches for the old connections that are gone, is the beginning of the healing of the injury of loss through acceptance. The ongoing golden flow of life warms our exposed body and allows new growth, new leaves, and new branches to once again come forth.

Thus, acceptance and wisdom come as a final stage of our grief over loss. The acceptance comes through the gradual rebuilding of the self through time and new relationships. The stunned self that could not take in the death of my teacher on that spring evening many years ago has gradually accepted the loss as an aspect of my life. We do not forget, but we accept that this is the reality that has occurred. What has been lost may have stripped us down like a tree in the autumn, but it has also offered us wisdom. This wisdom does not make us forget the person, circumstance, or situation that gave us such joy when with us and then such sorrow at its loss; it allows us to heal the rending of our old self and awaken to a new self. It is the body exposed in the golden wind.

PRACTICE

Begin by Sitting

Find a calm space and sit comfortably. Try to view what you experience as neither bad nor good. Sit at ease and let the sounds in. Feel your body; allow the sensations in your body to be present and not blocked off. Include everything in your experience (annoying or not); allow all of it to arise. Without the veneer of opinion, preconception, and explanation, find the place of intimacy within yourself. Once you do, you're like a tuning fork. Everything is fresh.

Now you are ready for the exercise.

Exercise for Working Alone

Bring to mind an experience when you dealt with a loss, large or small. How did you deal with your loss? What would you like to change about how you dealt with it? Can you make a change now? If not, what stops you from making that change? You may wish to write about the experience.

Exercise for Working with a Partner or in a Group Working in Pairs

Sit facing each other. Take a moment to quiet your body and breath. Set a timer for five minutes. As in similar exercises, the questioner asks, "How do you deal with loss?" After each answer, the questioner says, "Thank you," and repeats the question. The questioner's role is just to be a witness. It's best not to coach with facial expressions; very calmly, with a relaxed face, take in the other's continuum of awareness. The dialogue might sound something like this:

Q: How do you deal with loss?
A: I try to ignore it.
Q: Thank you. How do you deal with loss?
A: I listen to music.
Q: Thank you. How do you deal with loss?

When the timer rings, reset it for another five minutes and switch roles. Discuss together what you learned.

Q: A year or two ago, I realized that I had a general and all-pervasive numbness to my own emotions and to being able to really perceive anything clearly in the outside world. It's still something I'm wrestling with; it's somehow related to the feeling I had when I was a child and everything was so fresh and so vivid, and I felt I lived in a full realization of who I was. I feel like there's a sort of gradual numbing as I became an adult.

Roshi: When animals are injured, the first thing that happens is they drop and become paralyzed for a moment or so in order to recover. It's that sort of numbness that we experience because we're sentient beings who have a lot of unconscious activity. Many of us, as we mature into adulthood, put up this shield that protects us. It's a natural thing. One reason we practice is to keep ourselves awake. Just the way we practice is the way we wake up; it's the opening. In a situation where many people are suffering loss, I think it's important not to turn away but to turn toward—and do any little thing you can do. Go to one place and open your heart to one person and offer what you can. Then you are yourself again. It doesn't mean you have to leave work and do social work for the rest of your life, but for an hour—I think that's very helpful.

Q: Recently, due to a hurricane, I was temporarily displaced from my apartment and lost a week of work. Now I'm very behind and I feel weak, so I'm not catching up. I don't have time to stop and recover. I'm slow. Riding my bike is slow. I didn't lose my apartment (or my life) as some other people did, so it was really not that big a deal, but I feel like I should have caught up by now. Actually I feel like I should be stronger as a result of this experience. Every loss must be compensated by progress.

Roshi: What I'm hearing is that first you're diminishing the effect on you of the complete disruption of your life. What's happened is there's the person who always has it together—you're always there—and that person wasn't there last week. He wasn't there this week either, because he's not caught up. So there is an internal grieving for that person you were and that you'd like to be again, but you're not now. This is a special time. You're different. Can you find the

buddha that's here now? How does that buddha sit? It's wonderful that you're here now. Appreciate that!

Ten

JOY

MOMENT-TO-MOMENT POSSIBILITY

I sit here,
Dappled by the sun filtering
through the leaves, a child chases a pigeon,
the old man naps there on the bench,
a white moth flits by,
occasions of joy,
always right here.

Say the word *joy* and what comes to mind? To me, joy seems to come unbidden, just erupting at the oddest times. It isn't possible to plan for joy, yet when it comes, it is an unmistakable overflowing of feelings of delight in the world and its mysteries.

I remember the morning that my dear friend Robert died, after a long night of struggle. It was one of those bright, early September mornings when the sun rises at just the angle that portends the waning of summer light. The nurses left me in the room for several hours, and I sat with his body. I chanted, I thought of our times together, I said good-bye, and then it was time to leave. When I stepped out on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 77th Street, just a few feet away was a flower stand bursting with the season's colors. I stood transfixed, staring at the beauty of chrysanthemums, asters,

dahlias, and zinnias. The sounds of morning traffic, the people moving down the street, the flowers, the sun, and the sky all seemed to be a joyous celebration of life itself, now seeming so precious after witnessing my friend's long night of letting go.

Yes, that joyful feeling was oddly present. It was as if a vibrant, fresh energy possessed me, like a brilliant dye coloring my whole being—the joy of life all around me. The intensity of his death, the long night of witness, and the early morning of saying good-bye all worked together to encourage a readiness to experience joy. Does that sound strange? It *felt* strange. After a moment or so, I was stunned at the feeling I was having. And I was grateful. Suddenly I was experiencing the vitality and immediacy of life itself—in the flowers, the people, the clamor of traffic—without the walls of resistance that human beings are heir to.

What is this resistance? Why do we again and again resist our feelings of joy or happiness or love? We don't do it intentionally, but our conditioning, our habits of mind, and our culture all seem to work to build up the walls between what we naturally feel and what we allow ourselves to feel. Ironically, it is often the times when we are forced to feel intensely—times of grief, sorrow, or physical pain—that catapult us into feeling joy. That is why we often hear people say they are grateful for the losses or difficulties they have encountered. They are grateful because the shock forced them into an intimacy with life that had been hidden from them. Intimacy seems hidden, but it is actually available to us all the time: in the world we inhabit with people, in the natural world, in our work, and in all our relationships. Once we are willing to be directly intimate with our life as it arises, joy emerges out of the simplest of life experiences. Something happens—a mourning dove coos, the eyes of another person meet ours, a cat stretches, we notice the sensation of breeze on our cheek—and at once we are intimate with our life. It can be so subtle. You're hurrying along the street, and suddenly you notice a drop of dew on a leaf. You stop and allow that surging feeling in your chest to just well up. The moment passes, and you are back in the diffused attention of the street you're walking in: the people going by, the errand you are on, the way the day is settling on you. Yet this quality of joy hangs around the edges, allowing you to open yourself to

being awake and new with each experience you encounter. Joy wells up when we leave room in our consciousness for it to come.

Joy can come as a surprise, when we least expect it. I recall sitting in a dark, airless, funky “multipurpose space” we called the meditation room at an HIV/AIDS health facility in New York City. This was before the arrival of life-saving medication, and the center was very busy. Twice a week, I would ride my bike across town, walk into the dingy room, stack the chairs, vacuum the floor with our portable vacuum, unlock the cabinet, put out twenty meditation cushions, and wait for anyone who might come in. There were a few regulars who came to each meeting, and there were drop-ins, often those who were waiting for the drug treatment acupuncture clinic next door. We would sit in meditation, talk about it a little, and then it would be time for me to repack the cushions, reset the chairs, and leave the room. It’s hard to explain, because there was a grimness to the scene, yet somehow joy always arose in that little room with those who joined me there. Sickness and addiction were all around us, but the joy of connection, of being able to offer what little I could and in turn receiving the warmth and humanness of others, made those days of service uplifting and alive. No matter how tired and irritable I may have felt going in, I always seemed to leave with a flutter of energy in my chest: simple joy. Such a gift coming from a modest act of service to others! No matter how small or large our effort may be, the activity of giving and receiving in relationship generates a field of joy when it is not encumbered by our grasping for ego gratification.

In the midst of our work, whatever it is, to recognize our joy is a wondrously beneficial experience. Although the intense feeling may fade, the sense of internal gratitude and respect stays with us. This is especially true when we are working in a group for some mutual goal. When we gather to clean a park, make food, or write a document together, there can be a quality of joy within the whole group, a kind of dropping of our usual preoccupied selves—the selves that want to be gratified in one way or another or to avoid pain—and instead, there is the joy in the efforts we offer together.

What is this intimacy, this joy, this being so close to what is in the moment that we are filled with awe? When we think of joy, we think of a buoyant, upward-moving feeling of delight, pleasure, and

appreciation. We may associate joy with happy things, with falling in love, or with getting what we want. But actually there is a deeper, more resonant, soulful feeling: the joy of life no matter what the circumstances.

How is joy like falling in love? They seem similar yet slightly different. When we fall in love with a person or an idea or a project, there is also that upward sensation, that flow of energy that feels really good, almost magical, but the difference can be a subtle one. Falling in love or achieving great success is euphoric, an intensely felt elation that is dependent on the relative success of our attachment to the object of our love. True joy, with its sense of wonder and reverence, comes of itself and neither depends on nor arises out of our personal ego attachments, our projections, or our needs. True joy comes of itself, rather like the ancient Taoist notion of *tzu chan*—that which naturally emerges from what is present in this moment, this situation. Often this is the simplest of moments: a surprising joy that lifts you up when you feel a cool breeze on a crowded city street; a flash of inspiration as you glimpse the moon behind the clouds, a drop of water on a leaf, a toddler laughing. It is just what is actually coming up in this moment if we are free enough to notice it.

We can't control joy. It is something that bobs up when we are truly alive and meet the whole world in an instant. We can experience joy in every aspect of our life, in working, in caring, in creating, and even in suffering. I think the key to experiencing joy is, as we say so often, being awake. This is what I've been stressing throughout this book. What is "being awake"? Isn't it our capability to let go of our grasping onto what we *think* we want, what we *think* is happening to us, to drop all of those presumptions and be exposed and intimate with what is here, right now? I believe it is our resistance to what *is* right here, right now, that blocks the natural flow of joy.

You could even say that it is the search for joy that brings us to practice meditation. We may call it something else: freedom from our fear, our anxiety, our obsessions, our sadness, or our grasping (greed). Yet, if we go a little deeper, we may find that the key to our liberation from our fears is getting really close to ourselves, finding our own being deep within: the one who is not afraid, anxious, or

grasping; the one who is simply here now; the one who spontaneously experiences joy in the ordinary stream of life. How do we get in touch with that deepest, clearest, most intimate self? Isn't it through the practice of stopping, breathing, bringing our heart-mind back to this breath, this reality, whatever it may be?

In that practice of intimate meditation, we enter what the ancients called the "gate of ease and joy." This phrase, from an early Chinese meditation manual, evokes the ease that Shakyamuni felt as he settled onto a cushion made of kusa grass offered by the milkmaid who gave him the sustenance after his many years of struggle, intentional hunger, and self-denial. The offering of something of ease helped to turn him toward a "middle way" between asceticism and excess. Such is the ease evoked in the phrase "gate of ease and joy": an ease that gently smoothes the sharp pangs of life that invade our mind and leaves a space within us for joy. The joy in the phrase is like the joy evoked in the *Lotus Sutra,* where the Buddha says that those who respond to the teachings with joy will go forth in various places among various people, who will themselves respond with joy and go forth and in this way share joy throughout the world.[1]

The infectious quality of joy is like when a baby laughs or an old person smiles; we don't know why we experience joy, but we do, because it is joy arising.

What is it that opens the gate to joy in our ordinary, day-to-day lives? I've been calling it awakeness and awareness: the simple practice of sitting quietly, breathing in and out, dropping our obsessive thoughts and resistance to the freshness of the moment that is exactly here. It is amazing, our resistance to tapping into the joy that is like the blue sky surrounding this earth. Joy is always here if we can just for a few moments stop our constant ruminating and grasping for what is *not* here. Breathing in, we drop our preoccupations and thoughts, and we simply breathe in, enjoying that in-breath. Breathing out, we again simply enjoy that out-breath. In this way, we experience things as they are. Appreciation and gratitude suffuse our whole being, and joy arises.

Maybe it doesn't always feel exactly like that. When we hang on to our stories and ideas about ourselves, it doesn't feel joyful; it feels tiresome. We say, "Oh no, that thought again, that desire, that

frustration." But if we take a breath and calmly, without any self-recrimination, see the distraction and let it go, we are back in the reality of this moment. We are at once aware of what we were thinking and of the present moment.

This dual awareness, a split-second really, helps us to recognize the truth and vitality of being awake to this moment. And as we clear away this old debris, a deeper truth emerges. It is like the story of the Chinese Zen Master Dongshan, who was asked, "Is there joy in your practice?" He replied, "It is not without joy. It's like sweeping shit into a pile and then picking up a precious jewel from within it."[2]

Of course there's shit; shit is part of life. It is what is left over from our actions, smelling of all the aspects of life. If there weren't shit, we wouldn't appreciate the jewel. An old Buddhist theme is that in the mythical "heavenly realm" where everything is perfect, true liberation is not possible. I would add that true joy is not possible in a world without suffering. The suffering (the shit) enriches us, gives us wisdom and compassion. The jewel is this joy of life itself.

When we are willing to be intimate with what actually is here now, to look directly at all of our experience, we might recognize that this *is* our life, however different from our thoughts and ideas about it. It is as if we hunker down and actually get very real, recognizing that our thoughts of gaining and losing, good and bad, happy and sad, are what distance us from ourselves. When we breathe in fully and pause, we clear a space in our mind without judgment. If we are willing to hang in with the practice over and over again, noticing how our thoughts of gaining or losing distance us from ourselves and from what is, we open ourselves to a whole new reality. We enter into intimacy with everything; we enter a world of joy that is so close, so pervasive, that we are surprised we haven't been aware of its presence all along.

Once Dongshan was asked, "What is the deepest truth? What is the wisdom that liberates?" His response was, "I am always close to this."[3] It is the closeness itself—the intimacy with what is here with us now—that is the truth that liberates us. Imagine being so close to your experience of life! This is true joy. To be so close to your experience of life, so intimate with your world, that you are filled with

awe. You are like a child lying in the grass, staring up at the vast starry night.

Guide to Practice

The word *Zen* is tossed around so carelessly in the commercial world, the human potential world, the world of design, and popular culture in general, that for someone new to it as an authentic spiritual tradition, it has become too vague to have much meaning.[1] Real Zen is the practice of coming back to our actual right-now-in-this-moment self, coming back to the naturalness, intimacy, and simplicity of our true nature. Zen practice is not about getting away from our life as it is; it is about getting into our life as it is, with all its vividness, beauty, hardship, joy, and sorrow. Zen is a path of awakening—awakening to who we really are and awakening the aspiration to serve others and take responsibility for all of life.

This sounds good, but how can we accomplish it? How is it possible to enter such a new way of experiencing our life?

THE PRACTICE

There is a term in the Celtic tradition that I find resonates with something fundamental about Zen practice. The Celts spoke of “thin places,” places like caves or wells or other special sites where the boundary between the mundane and magical was permeable. To me, Zen practice offers a kind of thin place, a place where we can discover that there is fundamentally no separation between

ourselves and others, that what we seek is always so close, always right here. In the *Lotus Sutra*'s parable of the burning house, the only escape from our greed, anger, and ignorance is said to be through a narrow door. The narrow door, the thin place, and any of a number of metaphors point us in the direction of our own realization. A door or a gate or a threshold also implies that there is effort, movement, and investment in transformation.

At the heart of Zen practice is zazen, or seated meditation. One master said that listening and thinking are like being outside the gate, and zazen is returning home and sitting in peace. It is really a simple practice and does not involve complicated instructions. When we study the ancient Zen meditation manuals, it is always surprising how brief and plain they are. While they speak of the possibility of attaining the freedom and naturalness of a tiger in the mountains or a dragon in the water, the actual instructions are so concrete. Sit in the proper posture and attend to the body, breath, and mind.

Make a Place to Sit

It is best to have a place set aside for regular zazen. Whether it is a room or just a corner, the space should be clean and uncluttered. Place a mat on the floor (a folded blanket will do) and on that a *zafu,* another type of comfortable sitting cushion, or a bench. If floor sitting is too difficult, simply use a chair.

Preparing to Sit

When you do zazen, wear loose, clean clothes. At the beginning of a sitting period, it is traditional to bow to an altar, offer a stick of incense, and bow once more. Then, as you stand before your seat, bow toward and away from your cushion, bench, or chair. These acts help you to realize intention and respect. The incense is offered with the intention that the session is for all beings, for all creation, not just for yourself. The standing bow to and away from the cushion actualizes your respect for your practice and for those, whether present or not, who practice with you. The physical act of bowing, of folding your body down, placing your head in a traditionally

respectful position of vulnerability, gives your ego a big break, an opportunity to let go.

When you are seated—whether cross-legged, kneeling, or in a chair—settle into the zazen posture. Place your hands on your lap or thighs in the cosmic mudra, your right hand holding your left one, palms up, with your thumbs barely touching, forming a circle.

Count your breath, maintain your posture, and sit still—for the twenty-minute period of zazen. Notice that urges to move—to scratch your nose or tug on your ear—are usually ways to move away from the energies in your body. Instead of moving, stay with them, observe them, and bring your focus back to your breathing. Learn to notice how these urges fall away only to be replaced by others, demonstrating the Second Noble Truth: the cause of suffering is craving. All the disparate ideas, thoughts, and impulses —everything comes and goes, and yet you sit. Little by little, the chatter drops away and your body, breath, and mind are one.

Zazen is so simple. You focus on your posture and on counting your breath, and this develops *samadhi* (a unified mind). But the practice is not about reaching a specific number. It is about training the body and mind. Let the body settle; let the breath settle; let the mind settle. Don't worry about whether your practice is working; don't judge your performance; don't tell yourself stories or find other ways to avoid this very moment. These are just ways of separating from your deepest intention and your zazen. When you do zazen, just do zazen. That's enough.

Posture

Your posture in sitting is vitally important. Sit on the forward third of your cushion or chair, so that your hips are higher than your knees and your belly is free to move in and out without stress on your lower back. Your ears should be in line with your shoulders, your head balanced gently on your neck, and your eyes slightly open and gazing down about three feet in front of you. Your chin should point neither up nor down but be slightly tucked in. Place your tongue just behind your teeth on the roof of your mouth. Sway from side to side until you find your center point.

The Breath

Now attend to your breath. Breathe naturally. Breathing in, allow the breath to fully enter your body until your lower belly expands like a balloon; then, breathing out, softly allow the breath to ease out through your nostrils. Notice how the breath seems to travel through the main avenues of your torso. Your belly should rise and fall naturally with each breath. Later, you may notice that even the bottoms of your feet are breathing in and out. As you relax into the breath, you can begin silently counting each full cycle of breath, one on the out-breath, two on the next out-breath, and so on up to ten. When you reach ten, begin again with one. When you realize that you have stopped counting and are caught up in thinking, simply take another breath and go back to one.

The Original Self

In the *Genjokoan* (Actualizing the Fundamental Point), Zen Master Dogen writes,

> When one first seeks the Dharma, one is far away from its environs.
> When one has already correctly transmitted the Dharma to oneself, one is one's original self at that moment.[2]

Dogen Zenji's teaching reminds us of our initial separation from what is ours. When we begin to seek the Dharma, there is an "I" that looks for it over "there." But the Dharma is already alive in us and requires only that we realize it, which is what Dogen means in the second sentence: having "correctly transmitted the Dharma to oneself," one is one's real self in that moment.

I think all of us yearn to experience ourselves as whole and complete, to live our lives fully and freshly in each moment. But something blocks us, and Zen training is one way to see that we have had what we needed all along. This is called the realization of the original self.

The Daily Practice: Be Consistent

The zazen period I recommend is twenty minutes. You may find that you will want to do more—or less—and that's fine. What is important is consistency. To keep your practice consistent, remember what the famous Nike ad says: "Just do it." Don't concern yourself with trying to get to some particular place or state of mind. Each day's zazen will be a little different, just like the rest of life. We practice steadiness in our daily meditation; whether we're alert, sleepy, or focused, we just practice each day, through the high points and the low. When you mess up—and you will—just say, "Okay, back to my cushion." When you're sitting, you may realize that you're thinking about something else. At that moment, take a deep breath and recognize that, in that moment of realization, you have come back to now. As an old meditation manual says, as soon as you are aware of a thought, it will vanish.

When we are thinking of a thing, we are lost in it, lost in thinking about *x.* But when we become aware of our thinking, we are in a secondary state. The actual thinking about *x* is gone, and either there is just awareness or we begin a new thought based on that awareness. Either way, the original thinking is gone. If we practice daily, soon we are able to stay more often in that space of pure awareness without an object. Just breathing, just being present—we call this being naturally unified.

Zazen is a form that allows us to practice the no-form of boundless emptiness. The freedom that is made available to us through form is one of those grand paradoxes of life. When we organize ourselves and create a structure, we also create the means to be free of structure. Form helps us by organizing and directing our energies. But we can carry our form lightly, with respect and appreciation for its gifts. This subtle discipline—settling, unifying, letting be—is called the Dharma gate of peace and joy.

In addition to zazen and bowing, there are other aspects of Zen practice that help us on the way. One is setting up a home altar, which encourages the actualization of respect and devotion. To place something on an altar is to meet it, to hold it in esteem. Traditionally, in Zen monasteries, the altar in the *zendo* (meditation hall) had a statue of Manjusri, the bodhisattva representing transcendent wisdom, as its focus. Manjusri holds a sword that cuts away

delusions, thus clearing our mind. By putting such an image on our altar, we vow to take on that strong energy of slicing away at our delusions, ignorance, greed, and anger. We vow to be clear. For your home altar, place a statue or image of any buddha or bodhisattva who evokes in you the aspiration to realize those qualities—wisdom, compassion, peace—that he or she embodies. You may also decorate it with an incense bowl and incense, which is a fine way to time your zazen; a flower, which evokes transient beauty; water, an element of nourishment; and a candle to brighten the space.

THE PRECEPTS

Because all of this practice leads to our realization of our interdependence and interrelatedness with all beings, there is also the practice of the sixteen bodhisattva precepts. These precepts are not commandments; rather, they are guiding principles for living a life of freedom and service. The precepts themselves are worthy of a lifetime of study and practice. Indeed, in some Zen traditions, they are part of formal koan study, with each precept appreciated from various perspectives. Make them your own. Be intimate with them. Rather than simply trying to follow them, embody them, in much the same way you "become" your zazen.

These are the bodhisattva precepts we practice at the Village Zendo:

Three Refuges: I Take Refuge in the Following:

Buddha, the awakened nature of all beings
Dharma, the ocean of wisdom and compassion
Sangha, the interdependence of all beings

Three Tenets of a Zen Peacemaker and the Three Pure Precepts

Not-knowing, thereby giving up fixed ideas about myself and the universe. This is ceasing from evil.
Bearing witness to the joy and suffering of the world. This is doing good.

Loving myself and others. This is doing good for others.

Ten Grave Precepts

1. Recognizing that I am not separate from all that is. This is the precept of nonkilling.
2. Being satisfied with what I have. This is the precept of nonstealing.
3. Encountering all creations with respect and dignity. This is the precept of chaste conduct.
4. Listening and speaking from the heart. This is the precept of nonlying.
5. Cultivating a mind that sees clearly. This is the precept of not being ignorant.
6. Unconditionally accepting what each moment has to offer. This is the precept of not talking about others' errors and faults.
7. Speaking what I perceive to be the truth without guilt or blame. This is the precept of not elevating oneself and blaming others.
8. Using all the ingredients of my life. This is the precept of not being stingy.
9. Transforming suffering into wisdom. This is the precept of not being angry.
10. Honoring my life as an instrument of peacemaking. This is the precept of not thinking ill of the three treasures.

Sitting with Others

I encourage you to step up and experience Zen practice. But for now there is one more thing to keep in mind. While I hope I have provided you with what you need to get a solid start in establishing your own daily practice, Zen is not a solitary practice. As we chant at the end of our liturgy, "May we realize the Buddha Way together." Sitting with others, studying with others, working with others, talking with others—all these are integral to the life of Zen. So I encourage you to join with others whenever possible. Go to a Zen meditation center or a similar group and sit with other people.

Let's let Master Dogen have the last word:

The Dharma is amply present in every person, but without practice, it
is not manifested; without realization, it is not attained.[3]

Notes

Many of the koans and stories of Zen have been told numerous times by various writers and translators. I and many Zen teachers often paraphrase the translations in order to clarify their meaning. The notes provided here are general references, so you can pursue the words but not get caught by them.

Frontispiece

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Introduction: What Is Zen

1. Thomas Cleary, ed., *Teachings of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 32.

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1. Albert Schweitzer, "Reverence for Life," The Albert Schweitzer Fellowship, last modified 2011, www.schweitzerfellowship.org/about/albert-schweitzer/quotes-by-albert-schweitzer.
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Chapter 6. Healing: The Universal Medicine

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3. Burton Watson, trans., *The Vimalakirti Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 67.

4. Thomas Cleary, trans., *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1988), 402.

Chapter 7. Work: The One Who Is Not Busy

1. Francis Dojun Cook, trans., *The Record of Transmitting the Light: Zen Master Keizan's* Denkoroku (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1991), 233.
2. Thomas Cleary, trans., *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1988), 91.

Chapter 8. Death and Dying: Life and Death Are of Supreme Importance

1. Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1977), 115.
2. Ibid., 18.
3. This is a traditional Japanese Zen gatha, believed to be from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, although the source is unknown. This is the version *White Plum Asanga* uses: Let me respectfully remind you: / Life and death are of supreme importance. / Life swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost; / Each of us should awaken. Awaken! Take Heed! / Do not squander your life!

Chapter 9. Making Peace with Loss: Entering the Tiger's Cave

1. Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1977), 176.

Chapter 10. Joy: Moment-to-Moment Possibility

1. *Lotus Sutra,* chapter 18.
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Guide to Practice

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About the Author

Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara, PhD, founder and abbot of the Village Zendo in downtown Manhattan, is a Soto Zen priest and Zen teacher in the White Plum lineage. She began Zen study with Daido Loori Roshi. She received priest ordination from Maezumi Roshi and Dharma transmission and *inka* from Bernie Tetsugen Glassman. Roshi Enkyo's lineage comes through Maezumi Roshi, whose teaching was uncommon, bringing together Soto priest training and the study of the Rinzai koan system. She has also been deeply influenced by Roshi Glassman's focus on peacemaking.

Since 1985, in addition to her own Zen community, she has taught meditation to many special-needs groups, including people with HIV/AIDS, young people in drug treatment programs, and women in an alternative to incarceration facility, as well as offering retreats and workshops to the general public. Her teaching often focuses on the healing power involved in self-expression. She holds a doctorate in media ecology and taught for many years at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, focusing on social issues and new media. Her articles have appeared in *Tricycle, Turning Wheel, Buddhadharma,* and other Buddhist journals.

Enkyo Roshi's focus is on the expression of Zen through caring, service, and creative response. Her Five Expressions of Zen form

the matrix of study at the Village Zendo: meditation, study, communication, action, and caring.

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