Seeds for a Boundless Life

ZEN TEACHINGS FROM THE HEART

ZENKEI BLANCHE HARTMAN

ABOUT THE BOOK

Zenkei Blanche Hartman is an American Zen legend. A teacher in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki, author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, she was the first female abbot of an American Zen center. She is greatly revered, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she has lived and taught for many years. This, her long-awaited first book, is a collection of short teachings taken from her talks on the subject of boundlessness —the boundlessness that sees beyond our small, limited self to include all others. To live a boundless life she encourages living the vows prescribed by the Buddha and living life with the curiosity of a child. The short, stand-alone pieces can be dipped into whenever one is in need of inspiration.

ZENKEI BLANCHE HARTMAN (born 1926) is a Soto Zen teacher in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi and a revered elder figure in American Zen. She spent two terms as abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center and was in fact the first woman abbot of a Zen center in America. She's an expert in kesa sewing (those bib-like things you see Zennists wear that represent the Buddha's robe), and she's been particularly known for her attention to women's issues in Buddhism and Zen.

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ZENKEI BLANCHE HARTMAN

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SHAMBHALA
Boston & London
2015

Shambhala Publications, Inc.
Horticultural Hall
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
www.shambhala.com

Cover photo courtesy San Francisco Zen Center
Cover design by Katrina Noble

“Living a Life of Vow,” “Initiation and Ordination,” “What Is a Zen Priest?” and “Reenergizing the Life” originally appeared in the *Shambhala Sun.* Material in part three, “Seeds of Advice,” originally appeared in *Buddhadharma.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hartman, Blanche, Zenkei, 1926– author.
Seeds for a boundless life: Zen teachings from the heart / Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel.—First edition.
pages cm
eISBN 978-0-8348-0304-6
ISBN 978-1-61180-284-9 (paperback: alk. paper)
1. Zen Buddhism. I. Manuel, Zenju Earthlyn. II. Title.
BQ9268.3.H38 2015
294.3′420427—dc23
2015003159

If we're open to embracing the surprises as they arise, then there will be inconceivable joy. If we fuss and fume and say, "This isn't what I expected," then there will be inconceivable misery. Just to welcome your life as it arrives moment after moment, to meet it as fully as you can, being as open to it as you can, being as ready for whatever arises as you can, and meeting it wholeheartedly, this is renunciation—this is leaving behind all of your preferences, all of your ideas and notions and schemes. Just meeting life as it is.

—ZENKEI BLANCHE HARTMAN
(Blanche's dharma name, Zenkei, means inconceivable joy)

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FOREWORD

Blanche and Lou Hartman and my wife, Kathie, and I started practicing Zen together, at around the same time, at the Berkeley Zen Center with our dear teacher Sojun Mel Weitsman. Now it is forty-five or so years later. Lou has passed on after ninety-six years in this human form (he and Blanche were married for more than sixty of those years, had four children, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren); Kathie and I are still practicing and trying to teach Zen; Mel, in his mideighties, is still abbot in Berkeley, and Blanche has become, in her old age, a Buddhist saint.

I don't think there's any way that I could adequately communicate the feeling of wonder and appreciation that comes with the living of the facts I've just recited. Forty-five years sounds like a long time but seems like a short time. You turn around, blink once, and a lifetime dissolves before your eyes. And yet nothing has changed, no time has passed. Blanche's face looks the same to me as it did when I passed her in the entryway at the old zendo in Berkeley all those years ago.

Knowing one another so long, practicing together heart to heart, not seeing one another for a long time but also being, anyway, side by side . . . something inexpressibly sweet and deep emerges.

I call Blanche a Buddhist saint. I mean it. Her simplicity, her kindness, her humility, her devotion, her love are, at this point in her life, pure, innocent, and complete. Her faculties are 100 percent sound, but she's slower now, calmer and sweeter. She appreciates everyone, has something to give to everything. Everyone who meets her can see this right away. Above all, her faith in and love for Zen

practice are perhaps deeper than they ever were, deeper than that of anyone else I know.

Blanche and I were coabbots together at the San Francisco Zen Center in the late 1990s. She was the first woman abbot, and I was the first of the younger generation that did not study with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. I do not recall a single disagreement or even an unsteady word between us. All I can remember is Blanche's constant encouragement and appreciation. Though she began her practice as a capable, strong-willed, opinionated woman (as she says in this book), she became a person of immense openness and generosity (as this book demonstrates). I feel fortunate to know her, to have seen her deepen and grow over so many years, and to remain her friend. Each time I see her I am encouraged in my practice. I suspect the same is true of many others. The job of abbot is a saint's job.

In this book Blanche tells two stories that are destined to be, I believe, classical Zen stories of our time. The first took place before she began her practice—and propelled her into it. Blanche is confronting a police officer at a heated political protest. Looking into the officer's eyes, she suddenly recognizes that she and he are one person, one fear, one passion, one humanity. Not knowing how to integrate this into her worldview, she begins her Zen practice.

In the second story she approaches her teacher, Suzuki Roshi, with her accomplishment: that she can now sit without much thinking, following her breath faithfully. What's the next step? He replies to her: "Don't think you can sit *zazen.* Zazen sits zazen!"

These stories summarize a lifetime of practice for Blanche and all of us in our time and place. Love, concern for, and identity with the other. And faith in a profound practice that we can't do but that, rather, does us.

This book is more than another wise or interesting dharma book. It is an example of a classical Zen genre not often seen in our times: sayings, compiled by a disciple, of a great teacher at the end of a long life of practice.

The virtue of what you are about to read isn't found in the words or ideas. To savor this book you'll have to read between the lines to hear the spirit, the life of the dharma itself, the living dharma, whose light leaks out from between its words and phrases.

—ZOKETSU NORMAN FISCHER

PREFACE

I have practiced with Blanche Hartman for more than forty years at all three of the temples of the San Francisco Zen Center: City Center, Green Gulch Farm, and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. When I first met Blanche in about 1971, it was as if she came from another generation; being about twenty years older than I at that time, there seemed to be a huge difference (she was probably about forty-four). However, Blanche had a sprightly gait, a warm and friendly spirit, and an indomitable will to practice that was ageless. She and her late husband, Lou, who was about ten years her senior, practiced along with everyone so wholeheartedly and so completely —with a mixture of energy, maturity, innocence, and powerful way-seeking mind—that everyone was inspired. They showed me a wonderful example of the different ways that practice could manifest and continue throughout one's life.

At Tassajara in the early seventies, Blanche met the Japanese nun Joshin-san, a teacher of the sewing of Buddha's robe, and that would change her life. I remember when Blanche was chosen by the abbot, Zentatsu Richard Baker, to be the sewing teacher for the San Francisco Zen Center and given the time to train thoroughly with Joshin-san, who it was said selected Blanche because she understood "right angles." Blanche took this new position on with a devotion that perhaps astounded everyone, herself included. Blanche came from a chemistry and engineering back-ground and was an airplane mechanic during World War II, and although the so-called womanly arts, that is, sewing, were never what she identified with, this somehow was not an obstacle to her dedication to this traditional form. The effect of Blanche's enthusiastic taking up of the

practice of sewing Buddha's robe, with intelligence and untiring devotion, would reach across a budding Buddhist world in the West. This has led to an invigorated and extensive core of sewing teachers and dedicated sewing students who now flow from her sewing lineage. Blanche not only learned how to protect and pass on Joshin-san's sewing practice and teaching, she also learned and showed everyone how to take care of a teacher. With respect and commitment to the person herself, Blanche expressed her gratitude and did her best to requite that which can never fully be repaid, except by practicing wholeheartedly.

At a recent meeting of a group of sewing teachers held at Green Gulch Farm, Blanche showed a particular way of doing some aspect of the construction of Buddha's robe. Everyone gathered around as she carefully, patiently, and lovingly worked with the materials and explained the process. I loved watching her hands slowly smooth the fabric and handle the needle and thread with precision and skill, and hearing her voice, so steeped in zazen sewing practice, passing on not only the steps of the procedure to the group but also the feeling of practice expressed in everyday activity.

Blanche was the first woman to serve as coabbot of the Zen center, starting her term in 1996. In 2000 I joined Blanche and served with her until she stepped down in 2002. How unusual and refreshing it seemed at the time to have two women in the main spiritual leadership positions at the San Francisco Zen Center. When Blanche led practice periods at Tassajara, she was able to be a firm and exacting teacher. Because she was always so warm and accepting of everyone, ready with hugs and smiles, she was able to ask so much of the students, who could not project onto her an image of the "tough Zen master." She just asked with her "grandmother mind" (she was literally a grandmother) for what she felt was the best for their practice and offered what had been beneficial for her. The dharma gates of sitting all night, carrying the *kyosaku* stick, and following the schedule completely were her trademarks.

During her Mountain Seat Ceremony, in which she was installed as abbess, her husband, Lou, told a story of their courtship days. He had gotten a new car with a fancy rumble seat and he wanted to take

Blanche for a ride—just the two of them, for a date. The only problem was that as they were riding along, every time Blanche saw a friend or someone she knew, she would call out to the person, “Come on! Join us! Come for a ride!” And that is the story of her practice to this day: “Come, you are welcome, join us, you are accepted and valued, I want to practice with you. I love you.”

After all of these years, Blanche continues to live in the City Center building. She always chose to live in community, attending zazen, always at meals, lecture, and service, and present at community meetings. And she has shown us how to age in community—doing the things one can do and letting go of others. For many years Blanche has conducted a well-being ceremony every morning in the Buddha hall, chanting to the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion for the protection of life for many, many people—steadfastly manifesting her practice, keeping her vows to live for the benefit of beings.

It is not possible to completely express in words how Blanche’s life and teachings have touched people. I know that she is loved and trusted and has brought the spirit of Suzuki Roshi’s way into her life and demonstrated it to countless people. Her many students are carrying on the spirit of helping others in their own unique way. I want to thank Blanche for being an example of the Shining Practice Bodhisattva, Samantabhadra, and for showing me the way.

—EIJUN LINDA RUTH CUTTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my great appreciation first to my parents, who taught me by example the importance of love, compassion, and honesty as well as peace and justice in the world. I first encountered the buddha dharma in midlife when I heard Shunryu Suzuki Roshi speak at the Berkeley zendo, and it completely changed my life. I am eternally grateful for his teaching and the teaching of his many disciples, including my root teacher, Sojun Weitsman, and my *shukke tokudo* preceptor, Zentatsu Baker. I am also grateful to all of my fellow students with whom I have practiced over the years at the Berkeley Zen Center, Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, Green Gulch Farm in Marin County, and Sokoji temple and Beginner's Mind Temple (City Center) in San Francisco.

I would like to acknowledge the support of my family who encouraged me as I became more deeply engaged in dharma practice, and especially my late husband, Shu Un Mitsu Zen, Lou Hartman, my beloved spouse of sixty-three years and my fellow monk.

I would like to express gratitude and appreciation for the many ways my dharma heirs are bringing or have brought Zen practice into the world. They include Seirin Barbara Kohn, Cathleen Williams, Kosho McCall, Meiji Tony Patchell, Shishin Dai Nei John King (deceased), Ryumon H. Baldoquín, Junsei Jana Drakka, Myozen Joan Amaral, and Keiryu Liên Shutt.

I am grateful for Shosan Victoria Austin, who was indispensable in assisting me with many dharma transmissions.

Lastly, I want to thank Zenju Earthlyn Manuel (who is now working with me to prepare for dharma transmission) for taking on the project

of compiling excerpts of my talks for this book. She took on this project at the request of many people while in the midst of establishing her own *sangha*. Together we were able to make what seemed impossible become possible in my lifetime. Many bows to her.

PART ONE

Seeds

THE CURIOSITY OF A CHILD

Beginner's mind is Zen practice in action. It is the mind that is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgments and prejudices. Beginner's mind is just present to explore and observe and see "things as they are." I think of beginner's mind as the mind that faces life like a small child, full of curiosity and wonder and amazement. "I wonder what this is? I wonder what that is? I wonder what this means?" Without approaching things with a fixed point of view or a prior judgment, just asking "What is it?"

I was having lunch with Indigo, a small child at City Center. He saw an object on the table and got very interested in it. He picked it up and started fooling with it: looking at it, putting it in his mouth, and banging on the table with it—just engaging with it without any previous idea of what it was. For Indigo, it was just an interesting thing, and it was a delight to him to see what he could do with this thing. You and I would see it and say, "It's a spoon. It sits there and you use it for soup." It doesn't have all the possibilities that he finds in it.

Watching Indigo, you can see the innocence of "What is it?"

Can we look at our lives in such a way? Can we look at all of the aspects of our lives with this mind, just open to seeing what there is to see? I don't know about you, but I have a hard time doing that. I have a lot of habits of mind—I think most of us do. Children begin to lose that innocent quality after a while, and soon they want to be "the one who knows."

We all want to be the one who knows. But if we decide we "know" something, we are not open to other possibilities anymore. And that's a shame. We lose something very vital in our life when it's

more important to us to be one who knows than it is to be awake to what's happening. We get disappointed because we expect one thing, and it doesn't happen quite like that. Or we think something ought to be like this, and it turns out different. Instead of saying, "Oh, isn't that interesting," we say, "Yuck, not what I thought it would be." Pity. The very nature of beginner's mind is not knowing in a certain way, not being an expert.

As Suzuki Roshi said in the prologue to *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,*[1] "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's there are few." As an expert, you've already got it figured out, so you don't need to pay attention to what's happening. Pity.

How can we cultivate this mind that is free to just be awake? In zazen, in just sitting, in sitting and noticing the busyness of our mind and all of the fixed views that we carry. Once we notice the fixed views that we are carrying around with us, the preconceptions that we are carrying around with us, then it is possible for us to let them go and say, "Well, maybe so, maybe not." Suzuki Roshi once said, "The essence of Zen is 'Not always so.'" Not always so. It's a good little phrase to carry around when you're sure. It gives you an opportunity to look again more carefully and see what other possibilities there might be in the situation.

THE HABITUAL STATE OF MIND

I don't know about you, but when I started to sit, I really began to see how many fixed ideas and fixed views I had. How much judgment was ready right on the tip of my tongue. How much expectation, how much preconception I was carrying around with me all the time, and how much it got in the way of actually noticing what was happening. I don't want to tell you that after years I'm free of all that, but at least I notice it sooner, and I sometimes don't get caught in believing it.

First, before you can let go of preconceptions and expectations and prejudices, you have to notice them; otherwise, they're just carrying on unconsciously and affecting everything you do. But as you sit, you begin to recognize the really persistent ones: "Oh my

gosh . . . you again! Didn't I just deal with you yesterday?" And again. And again. Pretty soon, you can't take them seriously. They just keep popping up and popping up and popping up, and after a while you become really familiar with them. And you can't get so buried under something once you realize that it's just a habitual state of mind and doesn't have much to do with what's right in front of you. It's just something that you haul around with you all the time and bring out for every occasion. It hasn't much to do with the present situation. Sometimes you can actually say, "Oh, I think I'm just hauling that around with me. I don't think it has anything to do with this."

COMING BACK TO YOURSELF

It's often the case that when people begin practicing at the Zen center, first they'll be curious about all of these forms we have. Then they'll get kind of interested in practice, and they'll really get into it. They'll start to learn the forms, and then they're experts. They know the forms, and they're looking around: "He didn't do it right. . . . She didn't do it right!" The Form Police. Suzuki Roshi used to say that you should just take care of your own practice; don't concern yourself with other people's practice. But there is that stage in almost all students who practice for a while, where they "know," where they feel that they know and the new people don't know. Don't be concerned with people like that—they'll learn after a while. Not knowing is nearest. They'll learn that if they want to help someone learn the forms, it's altogether different from judging someone about whether the person is doing them right or wrong, or correcting someone so that those who judge will be right instead of wrong. So you'll notice that after someone has practiced a little longer, if you're not sure of what to do, that person will be quite different in the way he or she helps you figure out the appropriate formality for the situation.

These forms may seem rather cumbersome and burdensome, but they are just ways of bringing us back to the present moment all the

time. We step into the zendo [meditation hall] with our left foot, the foot nearest the outside edge of the doorway. There is no religious significance to that. If you step in with the other foot, nothing awful is going to happen. Really. But it's a way for you, at that moment, to notice where you are. You can see if your mind is where you are or if your mind is somewhere else. All of these little formalities function that way. They're aids to help you bring your mind back here, like following your breath or checking your posture during zazen. You turn toward what's happening right now to bring your mind and body together so that you're wholly present. When you're passing someone in the hall, bowing. Just buddha bowing to buddha. Just bringing yourself back here, back here, back here, so that you can actually experience your life.

HOW AMAZING THE WORLD IS

In her poem "When Death Comes," Mary Oliver has a few lines that say, "When it's over, I want to say: all my life / I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms."[2]

This is beginner's mind: "I've been a bride married to amazement." Just how amazing the world is, how amazing our life is. How amazing that the sun comes up in the morning or that the wisteria blooms in the spring. "A bride married to amazement, . . . the bridegroom taking the world into my arms." Can you live your life with that kind of wholeheartedness, with that kind of thoroughness? This is the beginner's mind that Suzuki Roshi is pointing to, is encouraging us to cultivate. He is encouraging us to see where we are stuck with fixed views and see if we can, as Kosho Uchiyama Roshi says, "open the hand of thought" and let the fixed view go. This is our effort. This is our work. Just to be here, ready to meet whatever is next without expectation or prejudice or preconceptions. Just "What is it? What is this, I wonder?"

So please, cultivate your beginner's mind. Be willing not to be an expert. Be willing not to know. Not knowing is nearest. Not knowing

is most intimate.

THE OPEN MIND

You must approach everything with beginner's mind, with an open mind, the mind that is questioning and looking and listening and hearing and seeing and feeling and smelling without prejudgment, without preconception, without fixed views. Open. Ready to see what is right here. Open. Ready to see "What is this?" and ready to let it flower, ready to let it bloom in the world. When I first had zazen instruction, Dainin Katagiri Roshi said, "We sit to settle the self on the self and let the flower of the life force bloom." That's intimacy: to settle the self on the self. Then this buddha can bloom in all of its particularity, as you being totally you. Suzuki Roshi used to say, "When you are you, Zen is Zen." But what is this? Who is this? Will the authentic "you" please come forward and bloom? How will we open up this authentic "you" in the midst of all the accumulated fixed views that we carry about? We just have to notice them and let them go, and let them go, and let them go, and let them go, and let them go.

NOT CHASING AFTER THE PAST OR THE FUTURE

Why would you need to have instruction in just sitting [meditation]? Because just sitting doesn't mean merely sitting. It means completely sitting: not doing anything else, just sitting. I don't know if you've noticed, probably you have, that when you sit down intending to just sit, there is a lot going on. I think we don't really notice how active our mind is until we sit still with the intention of not deliberately thinking. Even though we are not deliberately thinking, a lot of thinking is going on. At least that is my experience. I had no idea how completely, incessantly, busily active my mind was until I sat

down with the intention of just being still and just being quiet and not grasping the thoughts that came along.

One of the reasons we need some instructions in how to just sit is to get some help with what might support us in letting some of that busyness go, in just going along without grabbing on to it, like paying attention to posture and paying attention to breath. Paying attention to what's happening right here and right now, which is this physical body, whatever sensations there might be, and breathing. Most of the stuff that's going on in our mind is not about what's happening right here and right now. Just check it out sometime and see. Most of the stuff that is going on in our mind is either chasing after the past or chasing after the future, or worrying about the future and regretting or rehashing or chewing over the past incessantly. And figuring out who to blame for all of our difficulties. It takes us a long time to realize that there is no one to blame and to just be willing to be here. There is no blame. It's just what's happening.

A SATISFIED LIFE

I was invited one day to participate in a spirituality discussion group. My friend said they were going to be giving some attention to the question of what do we do in the situation where there has been some real loss, where things are never going to be the same again. Someone you know and love has died, you have had a catastrophic illness or an accident, or something has occurred that feels like a terrible loss that can't be recovered from; you feel that things are really different now. How do you work with that?

This was a very interesting discussion. People checked in and talked about their lives. Some of them had had some loss that they could relate to this question, but really it was just talking about how things were going and how to arrive at some ease and comfort in our life, or some feeling of composure.

One person said something very interesting: "Things are going pretty well for me now, but I just noticed today that even though everything is fine, I have this kind of worried uneasiness, not about

anything in particular, and it seems strange when everything is going fine." I thought, This teaching that there is suffering in the midst of joy is right there in what he's saying: This kind of worried uneasiness that, although everything is fine now, something might happen and it won't be fine. So that, even in the midst of "everything is fine," he can't fully be there and enjoy it. He can't fully participate in "everything is fine."

Have any of you ever had that kind of experience? It's a very common human experience. It's putting our mind into the future and imagining it in many ways. We imagine, If only it could be this way, then it would be all right; or, It's fine now, but what if this happens? We have all kinds of ways of imagining the future that distract us from actually living in the present. What this just sitting, what this zazen is, is really practice about living in the present so that we can actually manifest this precious life in a way that feels satisfying to us, a way that feels right, a way that is consonant with our inner understanding of the dharma, of the truth.

ONE WHO IS AWAKE

Now, this buddha nature that we talk about is not something mysterious or arcane. *Buddha* just means "awake," "one who is awake." So we find out how to align ourselves, how to be awake and to align ourselves with our true intention, with our true being, with the wisdom and compassion that is already inherent in each being, including you. You are not the one single exception to the fact that all beings are buddhas. You are not that exceptional.

THE MOST TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT

During the Vietnam War, I was a political activist. I fought for peace. There was some contradiction. There wasn't any peace in me. I hated the people who disagreed with me. That was a kind of war within me. In 1968 I was just beginning to look at the way in which I

was vigorously clinging to my opinions about things and denigrating others who had different opinions.

When there was a strike at San Francisco State University, the police came with their masks and clubs, started poking people. And without thinking, I ducked under the hands of people to get between the police and the students. I met this riot squad policeman face-to-face, with his mask on and everything. He was close enough to touch. I met this policeman's eyes straight on, and I had this overwhelming experience of identification, of shared identity. This was the most transformative moment of my life—having this experience of shared identity with the riot squad policeman. It was a gift. Nothing had prepared me for it. I didn't have any conceptual basis for understanding it. The total experience was real and incontrovertible.

My life as a political activist ended with that encounter, because there was no longer anything to fight against. The way I described it to my friends was, the policeman was trying to protect what he thought was right and good from all of the other people who were trying to destroy it—and I was doing the same thing. Since I had no basis for understanding the experience of shared identity with someone whom I had considered completely "other" (that is, the riot squad policeman), and because the experience had been so real and so powerful, I began to search for someone who would understand it. How could a riot squad policemen and I be identical? In my search I met Suzuki Roshi. The way he looked at me, I knew he understood. That's how I came to be an ordained monastic.

THERE IS NOTHING MISSING

All the teachers I know have emphasized that we practice for the sake of practice—just to express and actualize our intrinsic buddha nature for the benefit of all beings. There is nothing we need to get that is not already right here, right now, in this very body and mind as it is.

The *Heart Sutra* says there is “no attainment because there is nothing to attain.” Kodo Sawaki Roshi said, “Zazen is good for nothing. And until you get it through your thick skull that it’s good for nothing, it’s *really* good for nothing!”

To seek for something other than “just this” implies that something is missing, that we are not complete somehow.

The first time I heard Suzuki Roshi speak, he said, “You are perfect just as you are.” I thought, “He doesn’t know me. I’m new here.” But again and again he would keep pointing in that direction, saying “You have everything you need,” “You are already complete,” “Just to be alive is enough.” I finally had to assume that I was not the sole exception to these assertions, but I was still dubious. And as I continued to practice and to talk with other students of the buddha dharma, I found that many people share the conditioning that leads us to think that there’s something wrong with us. If we could only *get*, *do,* or *be* something more, *then* we would be all right. It’s so easy for us to get the idea that there’s something wrong with us. And it’s so hard to let go of that and just appreciate this one life, as it is, as a gift. In fact, not only is life a gift and practice a gift, *everything* we have, without exception, has come to us through the kindness of others.

BEING HOME

Find your home wherever you are. This means to realize that wherever you are is home, not to be seeking for some special place, to be making some cozy nest, but to find yourself at home wherever you are and in whatever circumstances you may be. To put aside the worldly concerns of looking for material comfort and instead to cultivate mental comfort, comfort of the spirit and mind and heart.

This being at home wherever you are means being comfortable wherever you are. Not having to have some special place or special things to make you comfortable. Right here in this very body in this very place as it is, is home.

OPEN TO SURPRISE

A monk shaving the head is symbolic of renunciation. But really what is to be renounced is self-clinging, so shaving the head is just to remind us to renounce whatever it is that we cling to, whatever it is that we attach to. We need to let it go, let our life flow through our hands like a river and not try to grab some piece of it and hold on to it. Just to be present with it and find out how to express our vow in this moment, in this circumstance, right where we are right now, instead of trying to figure out how to make it the way we want so that it'll be just what we always dreamed of. It won't be. There will be many surprises.

If we're open to embracing the surprises as they arise, then there will be inconceivable joy. If we fuss and fume and say, "This isn't what I expected," then there will be inconceivable misery. Just to welcome our life as it arrives moment after moment, to meet it as fully as we can, being as open to it as we can, being as ready for whatever arises as we can, and meeting it wholeheartedly, this is renunciation—this is leaving behind all of our preferences, all of our ideas and notions and schemes. Just meeting life as it is.

NOT NEEDING ANYTHING MORE

Renunciation is "Just this is enough." I really like that as a description of renunciation. Can you meet your life as it is and say, "Just this is enough"? Or are you always looking for something more? That's where suffering comes in: "This isn't enough; I need something more." Then it always feels as if something were lacking. How can we meet our life as it is wholeheartedly, just like this? This is what our practice is; that is finding your home in the midst of homelessness, right here.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF FIRST

Suzuki Roshi used to say, “See everyone as Buddha. See each being as Buddha. See yourself as Buddha.” And if we’re all Buddha, if we are all interconnected like that, or inter-are, as Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned master of Vietnamese Zen, would say, then an all-encompassing love has to be our experience.

So for me, having that understanding . . . I just don’t know how to say how meaningful it is to me and how much I hope you will have this experience in your life of this warmhearted connection with everyone, with all beings. We are interwoven with each other. I am in you and you are in me. And to come into your own realization of this deep connection that you have with all beings is the greatest gift that you could get.

Our aim is to have complete experience or full feeling in each moment of practice. What we teach is that enlightenment and practice are one, but my practice was what we call stepladder Zen. I understand this much now, and next year, I thought, I will understand a little bit more. Do you ever feel like that? Is that an experience that you have had?

I would never be satisfied. It doesn’t make much sense. I could never be satisfied. If you try stepladder practice, you too may realize that it is a mistake to think that if we do not have some big, warm satisfaction in our practice, then it’s not true practice.

Even though you sit trying to have the right posture and counting your breath, it may still be lifeless zazen because you’re just following instructions; you’re not kind enough with yourself. You think that if you follow the instructions given by some teacher, then you will have good practice. But the purpose of meditation is to encourage you to be kind with yourself. Do not count your breaths just to avoid your thinking but to take the best care you can of your breathing. If you are very kind with your breathing, one breath after another, you will have a refreshed, warm feeling in your zazen. When you have a warm feeling for your body and your breath, then you can take care of your practice and you will be fully satisfied. When you are very kind with yourself, naturally you will feel like this.

I want to bring that up because Suzuki Roshi is talking about taking good care of ourselves and being very kind with ourselves. And I find a lot of times in my practice that I’m not really being very

kind to myself. I speak very harshly to myself in my head. I'm not doing something right, or I'm not doing enough of it, or I'm not . . . I think about being kind with others, the image from the loving-kindness meditation of suffusing love over the entire world—above, below, and all around without limit—so that one cultivates an infinite goodwill toward the whole world, and I find such an inspiring aspiration that I really hope you will all get to that point sometime. But in the beginning, you have to be kind with yourself. It's very hard to be kinder to others than you are to yourself. So take a good look and see if you're appreciating the buddha in you, if you're appreciating your connection with others, if you have some warmhearted feeling for your life and your practice and your *sangha* and your family.

What kind of connection do you have with your friends? Is it competitive or, perhaps, jealous? Or is it just warm and wide open? Can you be wide open in your relationships with your friends? Can you see that you are connected? And how is your next breath? Are you taking care of it? Suzuki Roshi talks a bit about taking care of your breath like a mother takes care of her baby. How are you doing? Are you taking good care of your breath? Taking good care of yourself? I have a quote from the Dalai Lama that I want to share with you: "Compassion is not religious business. It is human business. It's not luxury; it's essential for our own peace and mental stability. It is essential for human survival."[3]

GETTING UNSTUCK

There was a time when my whole description of myself to myself was: I'm someone who's fighting for peace. And at some point, I noticed that that was kind of an oxymoron, and if I wanted to work for peace, I should try to find some peaceful way to do it. And that's been sort of the story of my practice, because I think that's what practice for me is about—finding a peaceful way, a way that has room for love and compassion for everyone, even those people who, for some reason, harbor greed, hate, and delusion. We have to see

through these poisons and not buy into them. And, of course, greed, hate, and delusion do not produce compassion. So they are the causes of our suffering in this life. And any little dent that you can make in your habitual greed, hate, and delusion—good for you. See what a difference it makes and it will inspire you to keep working in that direction—to notice when anger comes up and isolates you because you're pushing everybody away, to see when greed overcomes all of your compassion and you just can't wait to get more of whatever. And notice that this is what causes your suffering—not somebody else, but your own getting stuck in these three poisons.

RESPECTING OURSELVES

In our zazen practice, we stop our thinking and we are free from our emotional activity. We don't say there is no emotional activity, but we are free from it. We don't say that we have no thinking, but our life activity is not limited by our thinking mind. In short, we can say that we trust ourselves completely, without thinking, without feeling, without discriminating between good and bad, right and wrong. Because we respect ourselves, because we put faith in our life, we sit. That is our practice. When our life is based on respect and complete trust, it will be completely peaceful. Our relationship with nature should also be like that. We should respect everything and everyone.

All of us need to begin by respecting ourselves and see how we can spread that respect around to include everyone we encounter, everyone we practice with, everyone we see on the street. To understand their suffering when they're suffering, knowing that they have feelings just as we do. To be kind to them and to be kind to ourselves. To take care of their suffering as we take care of our own suffering. To see how intimately we are woven together with each being and to embrace ourselves as we are and to embrace everyone as she or he is. And if someone needs some improvement, work with the person. I could use a little improvement. Help me. If you could

use a little improvement, ask for help. Recognize that buddha is inherent in each one of us.

The awakened mind of buddha is available to each one of us. But we have to take down the walls. We have to clear out any ill will that we can notice. We have to find out what's feeding it and how we can disconnect it from our lives and put it down. To see what's separating us from all of those around us. To recognize greed, anger, and delusion when we first see a tiny, tiny bit growing out of the ground. To say, "Oh, that's one that I think I need to take care of. I don't have such a warmhearted feeling there."

If you can develop a warmhearted feeling for taking care of yourself, that's not selfish, because then you will be able to expand that warmhearted feeling to those around you and continue expanding it to more and more people. If we don't have this compassion, as the Dalai Lama says, it's necessary for human survival that we cultivate it. And in the whole climate-change problem, I think we see that we're talking about its literally being necessary for survival. And when I can have that warmhearted feeling, it's a lot more fun, and it's a lot easier to share it with others. So find it in yourself. Cultivate it in yourself. And offer it to the world. That's what the bodhisattva vow is about. Vow to benefit all beings. This is our intention, our effort, our focus. How can we benefit others? Please work on that. Please help others to work on it.

RESPECTING THINGS

If you think it is easy to practice because you have a beautiful building in which to do it, that is a mistake. Actually, it may be quite difficult to practice with a strong spirit in that kind of setting, where you may have a handsome Buddha and offer beautiful flowers to decorate the Buddha hall. We Zen Buddhists have a saying that with a blade of grass, we create a golden Buddha that is sixteen feet tall. That is our spirit, so we need to practice respect for things. I don't mean that we should accumulate many leaves or grasses to make a big statue. But until we can see a big Buddha in a small leaf, we

need to make much more effort. How much effort, I don't know. Some people may find it quite easy, but for some people, like me, great effort is needed. Although seeing a large golden Buddha in a large golden Buddha is easier, when you see a large golden Buddha in a blade of grass, your joy will be something special. So we need to practice respect for things with great effort.

One morning when we were bowing in the zendo, we heard a big noise overhead, because upstairs in the dining room, people were pushing chairs across the floor without picking them up. This is not the way to treat chairs—not only because it may disturb the people who are bowing in the zendo underneath, but also because, fundamentally, this is not a respectful way to treat things. To push the chairs across the floor is very convenient, but it will give us a lazy feeling. This kind of laziness is part of our culture and eventually causes us to fight with each other. Instead of respecting things, we want to have them for ourselves, and if it is difficult to use them, we want to conquer them.

OUR PRACTICE IS TO HELP PEOPLE

In the zendo, everyone can come and practice our way—experienced students and also those who don't know anything about Zen. Both will have difficulties. New students will have difficulty that they never could have imagined. Old students have a double duty to do their own practice and to encourage those who have just come—without yelling at them. Without telling them "You should do this" or "You should do that," the old students should lead new students so that they can practice our way more easily. Even though newer students don't know what Buddhism is, they will naturally have a good feeling when they come to a beautiful Buddha hall. That is the ornament of a Zen center. But for Zen Buddhists especially, the true ornament of the Buddha hall is the people who are practicing there. Each one of us should be a beautiful flower, and each one of us should be buddha leading people in our practice. Whatever we do, we are considering how to do this. Since there are no special rules

for how to treat things, how to be friendly with others, we keep studying what will help people practice together. If you don't forget this point, you will find out how to treat people, how to treat things, and how to treat yourself. This is what we call the bodhisattva way.

Our practice is to help people, and to help people, we find out how to practice our way in each moment. To stop our thinking and to be free from emotional activity when we sit is not just a matter of concentration. This is to rely completely on ourselves to find absolute refuge in our practice. We are just like a baby who is in the lap of its mother. I think we have a very good spirit in the zendo I practice in. I am rather amazed at the spirit. But the next question is how to extend this spirit to your everyday life. You do it by respecting things and respecting each other, because when we respect things, we will find their true life. When we respect plants, we will find their real life, the power and the beauty of flowers. Though love is important, if it is separated from respect and sincerity, it will not work. With big mind and with pure sincerity and respect, love can really be love.

ZEN PRACTICE EACH MOMENT

Zen is really just a reminder to stay alive and be awake. We tend to daydream all the time, speculating and dwelling on the past. Zen practice is about appreciating your life in this moment. If you are truly aware five minutes a day, you're doing pretty well. We are beset by both the future and the past, but there is no reality apart from the here and the now. So this is a very concise teaching about zazen, just a reminder to stay alive and be awake. Notice how much you tend to dwell in the past and speculate about the future; it will help you to practice more in this realm of appreciating your life in this moment.

Suzuki Roshi said that when we practice zazen, we limit our activity to the smallest extent. Just keeping the right posture and being concentrated on sitting is how we express the universal nature. Then we become buddha, and we express buddha nature.

Instead of having some object of worship, we just concentrate on the activity, which we do in each moment. Suzuki Roshi emphasized seeing buddha in everyone. It's said that on his awakening, the first thing the Buddha said was, "Ah, I now see that all beings, without exception, have the wisdom and compassion of the awakened ones, but because of their delusions and self-clinging, they don't realize it." So Roshi emphasized the seeing of buddha in everyone as an important aspect of our practice. And you know, we have a custom here in the temple of bowing to one another as we pass, saying good morning with a bow. Buddha bowing to buddha. But it's helping us to remember to see buddha in everyone and, of course, to see buddha in ourselves. Sometimes we get caught up in our delusions and our irritations or our unhappiness in some way, and we forget that buddha is right here. So let us remember to bow to one another. Let us remember to see buddha in each other. Let us remember to express our buddha nature in our actions of body, speech, and mind.

JUST BEING ALIVE IS ENOUGH

In 1989 I had a heart attack. As I was leaving the hospital, I stepped out into the sunshine, and I had this sudden realization. "Wow! I'm alive. I could be dead. Wow, the rest of my life is just a gift." And then I thought, "Oh, it always has been, from the very beginning. Nobody owed me this life. It was just given to me. Wow!" And in that moment of waking up, I found what a wonderful, rich feeling it is to be grateful to be alive. Just right now, right here, all the time. I don't have to have anything more special than knowing that just to be alive is enough.

The great poet Emily Dickinson said, "To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else." And Brother David Steindl-Rast says, "The greatest surprise is that there is anything at all, that we are here." And from Omraam Mikhäel Aïvanhov, "The day I acquired the habit of consciously pronouncing the words *thank you,* I felt I had gained possession of a magic wand capable of transforming everything." So living this life of gratitude has really changed my life.

I used to be both quite opinionated and quite ready to criticize anyone who didn't agree with me. Now I recognize that my life depends on all the lives around me. We all support each other. None of us could take care of ourselves in a world all alone. We're so completely interwoven and interdependent. Our life depends on one another. And as you begin to realize that, you can't help but be grateful.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE GIFT OF LIFE

Along with this gift of life comes some responsibility for supporting life, participating in taking care of this fabulous gift of life on this earth that we've been given. And this is a particularly important point now in our history, as we find that the way we are living is endangering the continuity of life. We see that we have to make some changes in the way we use fossil fuels, because we are in danger of poisoning ourselves and changing the climate of this earth sufficiently to make it uninhabitable, at least by creatures such as we are. There is a responsibility to having received this gift of life, and that is to take care of it in whatever way we can. I heard this quote some time ago: "Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world at once but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach."[4] So we find out where we can make whatever contribution we can to the care of the earth and the other beings with whom we share it.

GOOD EVENING, BODHISATTVAS

The Dalai Lama's bodhisattva vow is "Every day, think as you wake up: 'Today I am fortunate to have woken up. I am alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it. I'm going to use my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others, to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. I am going to have kind thoughts toward others. I am not going to get angry or think badly about others. I am going to benefit others as much as I

can.’”[5] This is our essential vow as bodhisattvas. And of course, you are all bodhisattvas. Suzuki Roshi always used to begin his talks with “Good evening, bodhisattvas.” That’s what we’re here for, to be awake beings. And awake beings are awake to the deep connection we have with everything, with all living beings. We are all of one life, and we need to take care of that life so that it continues generation after generation.

IT’S ALL ABOUT LOVE AND JOY

I got a call that a dear friend of mine, who received precepts from me years ago when I lived at Green Gulch, was dying. I arranged with her husband to go and see her and give her the precepts again. One of the things that have been very helpful to me around this matter of birth and death—around this matter of my death, anyhow—is meeting death with great curiosity. What is it? We don’t know. We can’t know ahead of time. Can we be there for it and find out what this great mystery of birth and death is? When I went out to visit my friend, Jenny, I said to her, “Well, Jenny, it looks like you’re going to find out about the great mystery before Pete and I do.” She was on a hospital bed in her room, but she jumped up and threw her arms around my neck and said, “Blanche! It’s all about love and joy!” This was less than a week before she died. And so I thank you, Jenny, for that teaching. It’s all about love and joy. Can we allow that as a possibility in our heart as we study this great mystery? I know that I find myself, the older I get, imagining whether I could say such a thing on my own deathbed, but it certainly is what I’ve been talking about as I’m approaching my deathbed. That love and joy are really right here and available for us if we will open up to it. And I think familiarizing ourselves with the Buddhist teachings and especially the teaching on loving-kindness will help.

I received an e-mail letter from Jenny’s husband when she died. When they said good night, she said, “I’m going to meet the mystery.” Those were her last words to him. So, I offer you this line,

“I want to be full of curiosity,” because it’s been a great sustainer to me over the years.

HOW TO LIVE IF YOU’RE GOING TO DIE

I came to practice because I discovered that I was going to die—me, personally. I just had never considered it before, but then my best friend, who was my age and had kids the age of my kids, had a headache one night when we were together. It was such a bad headache that she went to the doctor the next morning. She was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor; went into a coma; and died. *Whoosh!* Maybe a month altogether from the first headache.

Well, that could have been me as readily as Pat. “Oh, my God! I’m going to die!” But the next thought was: “How do you live if you know you’re going to die?” It has been such a gift to me that that question came up. And so I started looking for who could tell me how to live if I know I’m going to die. And I do know I’m going to die. So I’ll just share with you these Five Daily Recollections from the *Upajjhatthana Sutra* of the Buddha:

- I’m of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
- I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape having ill health.
- I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
- All that is dear to me and everything I have and everything I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape from losing them.
- My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand.

These Five Daily Recollections seemed to be, for me, some clue to how to live if you know you’re going to die. Pay attention to how you live. Pay attention to your actions. Are your actions kind? Are your actions honest? Are your actions supported by the desire to

help beings, to benefit beings? Are your actions selfish or generous? How are you living this life?

PEACEFUL REPOSE

I chant every morning a sutra to the bodhisattva of compassion for the well-being of people in the *sangha* who are sick or people whom I know who are sick, and also for, as I say, the calm crossing over and peaceful repose of those who have recently died. Yet I found that when I was chanting just for Lou, my late husband, I was torn about calm crossing over and peaceful repose or many rebirths in which to continue your life, your bodhisattva vow. I wasn't sure of such things. But his death caused me to pay more attention to those words.

When I'm chanting for him, that's what comes up for me: the questions of calm, peaceful repose and rebirth. He was quite sincere in his bodhisattva vow to practice for the benefit of all beings, so I imagine that he may experience calm, peaceful repose and rebirth.

Lou and I once rode together with a Tibetan teacher who was giving a workshop on dreams. Lou was very aware of his dreams and felt there was great significance in them. And in the course of driving down to the workshop and back, somewhere in the conversation Lou said something about himself, and Tarab Tulku Rinpoche said, "Oh, well, that's because you were a monk in a previous life." Now, Lou was so focused on being a monk—not a teacher, not a scholar, not a priest—just a monk. Perhaps he wanted to go on having many lives being a monk until the bodhisattva vow, of ending the suffering of all beings, was no longer necessary. Anyhow, I really appreciate Shohaku Okumura's comments on death in his book *Realizing Genjokoan:*

> Firewood becomes ash. Ash cannot become firewood again. However, we should not view ash as after and firewood as before. We should know that firewood dwells in the dharma position of firewood and has its own before and after. Although before and after exist, past and future are cut off. Ash stays in

the position of ash with its own before and after. As firewood never becomes firewood again after it has burned to ash, there is no return to living after a person dies. However, in buddha dharma, it is an unchanged tradition not to say that life becomes death. Therefore, we call it “no arising.” It is the established way of Buddha’s turning the dharma wheel not to say that death becomes life. Therefore, we call it “no perishing.” Life is a position in time. Death is also a position in time. This is like winter and spring. We don’t think that winter becomes spring. And we don’t say that spring becomes summer.

THE GREAT MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Throughout Dogen Zenji’s teachings, the question of birth and death, or life and death, is called “the great matter.” On the *han* [a wooden board struck with a mallet] that calls us to the zendo, we have this quotation that’s often chanted every night in a monastery in Japan: “Great is the matter of birth and death. All is impermanent, quickly passing. Wake up! Wake up, each one! Don’t waste this life.” There’s a sense of urgency to understand about life and death, and that’s what Dogen Zenji is speaking to. Common parting words to someone who’s leaving are, “*Odaiji ni*”—please take care of the great matter. It’s very central in Buddhist teachings.

“Life and death” is an English translation of the Japanese expression *shoji.* As a verb, the Japanese word *sho* (that is, the character that’s pronounced “sho”) means “to live” or “to be born.” And the second character, *ji,* is “to die” or “to be dead.” Thus, the expression can be translated into English as “birth and death” or “life and death.” *Shoji* is the process of life in which we are born, live, and die. It is equivalent to the Sanskrit word *samsara*.

Practice is a matter of life and death. This life is our practice. This practice is our life—because it’s all about birth and death. And we’ve all been born, and we’re all going to die.

MINDFULNESS OF BODY AND BREATH

It says in the introduction of the *Satipatthana Sutra*, “The activity of *satipatthana* is the practice of mindfulness, cultivating mindfulness.” The activity of *satipatthana* definitely has a motivating agenda, the desire for awakening, which is classed not as a cause of suffering but as part of the path to its ending. The role of mindfulness is to keep the mind properly grounded in the present moment in a way that will keep you on the path. To make an analogy, awakening is like a mountain on the horizon toward which you are driving a car. Mindfulness is what remembers to keep attention focused on the road to the mountain rather than letting it stay focused on the glimpses of the mountain or get distracted by other paths leading away from the road.

We usually look at mindfulness of the breath to begin with, because where there is a body that is alive, there is breath. And so it will always be there in the present moment. Therefore it’s a very ready object of focus that keeps bringing us back to breath, keeps bringing us back to the body. Then there are the four noble postures of the body: standing, walking, sitting, and lying down. Extend your arm and then bring it back. Notice how we can keep coming back to the body in its physical function. Notice all the aspects of the body—all of the hair on the body, the skin, the bones, the marrow, the blood, the pus, the phlegm, and so on.

In ancient times (and even today) monks were instructed to look at a corpse as a practice of mindfulness. If they saw a corpse cast away in a charnel ground—one day, two days, three days dead—bloated, livid, and festering, they were to apply what they saw to their very body. “This body, too, such is its nature, such is its future, such is its unavoidable fate” (as said in the *Satipatthana Sutra*). If the monks saw body parts in the charnel ground, in this way they remained focused internally on the body in and of itself or externally on the body in and of itself. They learned how phenomena originate and pass away, especially in regard to the body. Their mindfulness that there is a body was maintained to the extent of learning not to cling to it or to anything in the world. That was how the monk was

taught mindfulness of the body in and of itself. The monk breathed this in and out.

To cultivate this kind of mind, this mind of compassion and generosity and loving-kindness, we make our own effort. It's for this reason that we cultivate mindfulness of body; mindfulness of feelings; mindfulness of perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. We don't do it just for the heck of it. We do it because there is suffering and because we want to help, to have a compassionate response, to that suffering—our own suffering as well as others' suffering.

Somehow, this sitting and breathing cultivates love and compassion and empathetic joy and equanimity.

FALLING IN LOVE ALL THE TIME

What is our motivation for our practice? Well, here we are. We are living in this world, and we notice that there is suffering. And we develop, as the Buddha did, a wish to know how to help people in their suffering, because compassion is a natural, normal human response to suffering. And so we want to know how to ease suffering. We don't want to go around looking and feeling dismal and dull when the beautiful world is all around us, when beautiful people are all around us.

I practice with many beautiful people who are interested in the dharma and concerned with how they live their lives, and I'm falling in love all the time because of how they practice Buddha's teachings. It's hard not to love people who are loving themselves. It's hard not to love people who are in pain and need help and support or who help me when I am in pain and I need help and support.

The Buddha wasn't pointing out our human condition in his teachings in order to make us feel dismal about ourselves. He was saying, "Look, this is what's happening, so how can we live a joyful life in the midst of the fact that it doesn't last forever?" Well, in the first place, since it doesn't last forever, we may as well enjoy it while we have it, right?

LIKE A SWINGING DOOR

Suzuki Roshi said, “When we practice zazen, our mind always follows our breathing. When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world; when we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is limitless. We say ‘inner world’ or ‘outer world,’ but actually there is just one whole world. In this limited world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air comes in and goes out, passing through a swinging door that moves when we inhale and when we exhale.

“If you think ‘I breathe,’ the ‘I’ is extra. There is no ‘you’ to say ‘I.’ What we call ‘I’ is just the swinging door that moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves. That is all. When your mind is pure and calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing—no ‘I,’ no world, no mind or body, just a swinging door.”

> When we practice zazen, all that exists is the movement of the breathing. But we are aware of this movement. You should not be absentminded. But to be aware of the movement does not mean to be aware of your small self but, rather, of your universal nature or buddha nature. This kind of awareness is very important, because we are usually so one-sided. Our usual understanding of life is dualistic: You and I, this and that, good and bad, right and wrong. But actually these discriminations are themselves the awareness of the universal existence. “You” means to be aware of them in the form of you. “I” means to be aware of them in the form of I. You and I are just swinging doors. This kind of understanding is necessary. This should not even be called understanding; it’s actually the true experience of life through Zen practice.[6]

When we all concentrate on our breathing and we become a swinging door and we do something that we should do, something we must do, this is Zen practice. In this practice, there is no confusion. If you establish this kind of life, you have no confusion whatever.

When we become truly ourselves, we just become a swinging door, and we are purely independent of, and at the same time dependent upon everything. Without air, we cannot breathe. Each one of us is in the midst of myriads of worlds. We are in the center of the world always, moment by moment. We are completely dependent and independent. If you have this experience, this kind of existence, you have absolute interdependence; you will not be bothered by anything. When you practice zazen, your mind should be concentrated on your breathing. This kind of activity is the fundamental activity of the universal being. Without this experience, this practice, it is impossible to attain absolute freedom.

OUR HABITS ARE VERY STRONG

Our actions of body, speech, and mind are very important. They determine what our experience will be. So we want to really work on cultivating mindfulness, this staying with what's going on in the moment, as it's happening, so we don't get caught with "Oh. Why did I say that?" "Why did I do that?" "Wish I hadn't said that." "Wish I hadn't done that." If we are a little more alert, we can catch it before it's done instead of regretting it after it's done. If we are a little more alert, we can see the possibility of something wholesome that we can do and decide to do it. So that's what we're working on, that kind of alertness, that kind of presence, that kind of seeing something as it first arises, before we've actually put all of our energy and intention into it, and noticing, "Is this how I want to be in the world?"

It's up to me how I want to be. We really don't have anyone else to blame for it. We don't have anyone else to take responsibility for it, but we want to take responsibility ourselves, completely, for all of the actions of body, speech, and mind that occur here in this being, in this moment. And we want them to be actions that we really feel are helpful. It's not somebody else's idea that we would like to live a life that is beneficial. It comes from inside us. It comes from our already innate connection with everything. We are born with this connection with everything, and we express it through every action of body,

speech, and mind. Can we meet whatever occurs with our full attention, with our heart as well as our ideas? Can we be present for this life as we live it? This is the whole point of mindful awareness: to be able to live our life truly as we wish to live it and not to be pushed off our cushion by old habits of thought that have not done us any good in the past.

Doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome is said to be a description of stupidity. If you've done something before and the outcome was not so good, pay attention if you see that inclination arise again and say, "Oh, been there, done that, didn't work very well. Let's leave it alone." Just catch yourself in that moment before you've said whatever it is, before you've done whatever it is, and be grateful that you noticed. "Oh, I remember. This is what I don't want to do." So that's why we train ourselves to be alert and aware of what's happening right now, in this moment, so that we have some control over it, so that we don't do something stupid and then beat ourselves up about it. It's pretty simple, but it's not easy. Our habits are very strong.

SHARING LIFE

It is reported that the first words the Buddha spoke after his enlightenment were, "I now see that all beings, without exception, have the wisdom and compassion of the awakened ones, only, because of their delusions and self-clinging, they don't realize it." The possibility of awakening is in everyone, including you and including someone who has an irritating habit that you wish the person would stop, or the like. Everyone, by birthright, has the capacity for and essential nature of awakening. And we are all working toward bringing that into full flower, however we can, whatever impediments we've noted, working on letting them go so that we can fully flower as the benevolent beings that we are.

There is a quotation that is very encouraging to me, from Pema Chödrön, a teacher whom I much admire. It says, "The journey goes down, not up." She is saying that spiritual awakening is not like

climbing up a mountain on our own and leaving others behind. We are letting go of our attachments, even to climbing the mountain.

My feeling is that we come to practice because we have realized in ourselves the fear and the suffering, and we want to do something to alleviate them. We want to be there not just for ourselves but for everyone else who shares this human life, this precious human life. We value this precious life so much, and yet it is impermanent. We aspire to find love, peacefulness, joy, companionship, and friendship in the midst of the impermanence. We learn to really appreciate this opportunity to be alive, because it's so rare and so precious.

We need to work on our own places where we forget that life is a gift and forget to be grateful and forget that we're all in the same boat. We pay attention and notice what's happening in us and what may be separating us from the warmth and love and interconnection of all beings. We have some work to do because we have picked up bad habits along the way. In the process of this work, we need to have some compassion for ourselves and our bad habits, and for others and their bad habits. When we notice them, if we see if we can relinquish them, we'll be a lot happier, and so will the people that share our lives with us.

OPENING TO KINDNESS

Suzuki Roshi said there are always ways in which we can improve. If we can notice what's going on in ourselves, we have the possibility of letting go of some of the things that cause us grief, that cause grief for those around us who care about us. So we need to practice kindness with ourselves. It's pretty hard to be kinder to others than you are to yourself. It's important that we sustain this practice of being kind to ourselves. The traditional meditations are on loving-kindness and compassion and empathetic joy and equanimity—which are called the four *brahmaviharas,* or abodes of the gods—and those traditional meditations always begin with ourselves. May I be happy, may I be at ease, may I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering, may I have ease of well-being. We begin here,

and as we begin to open our heart, we include others; we include those close to us and keep moving to those a little further out until we can include everyone without exception, recognize our connection and interdependence and love for everyone without exception, and offer that love, offer that friendliness, offer that kindness wherever we go.

LIVING A BENEFICIAL LIFE

How do we benefit others? To live a beneficial life we want to develop the qualities of the bodhisattva that are called the six perfections. The first is generosity, the giving of yourself with openhearted attentiveness, being attentive to the person you're with. Generosity and gratitude are very closely connected. Gratitude engenders generosity. But the most important thing is to give of yourself, to give your full attention to what's happening right now and to the person right in front of you, to be there for the person, to listen, to smile, to see this person and all others for the bodhisattvas that they are or the bodhisattvas they can be.

The second of the perfections of a bodhisattva is morality: understanding and actualizing the deep meaning of the precepts. The precepts are just about how you live in the world, how you benefit beings and don't cause harm. We have been given not only this body but also the capacity to choose how we live in this world. I often quote Kobun Chino Roshi, who once said in a dharma talk, "When you realize how rare and how precious your life is and how it's completely your responsibility how you live it, how you manifest it, it's such a big responsibility that naturally such a person sits down for a while."

The third of the bodhisattva qualities or perfections is patience: steadfast perseverance and cheerful willingness no matter what the circumstances.

The fourth is enthusiasm, practicing with vigor, with diligence, assiduously—so, patience and endurance and energy or effort, enthusiastic engagement with your life as it is.

The fifth is zazen, with one-pointed awareness, attentiveness, opening to the vastness of being, opening to our connectedness with everything.

The sixth is wisdom, lucid insight into the fundamental nature of this great matter. And this list ends with “Life is short, mystery is profound, vow to awaken.”

PRESENT MOMENT

The thing about breath is that it’s always happening in the present moment. When you are able to be with the breathing in and the breathing out, you are in the present moment. Of course, when you’re in the present moment, then you don’t do things mindlessly. You know what you’re doing when you’re doing it. This helps us to live a more compassionate life and a more beneficial life and one that doesn’t get us into a lot of trouble. If you’re not paying attention, you can do a lot of things that are a little bit foolish, that end up having you wishing you’d been paying more attention. So what we do in practice is really cultivate paying more attention to whatever we do. Then we get to see . . . If we have some hesitation, we can stop and look at it and say, “Oh, is this what I want to do?” But if we’re not paying attention, we may already be in the middle of a mess before we notice, and then we’ve got to clean it up. This paying attention is really quite important, and it takes a lot of effort because we’re easily distracted.

WE ARE IDENTICAL TO EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING

Suzuki Roshi said, “Wherever you are, you are one with the clouds and one with the sun and the stars that you see. You are still one with everything. That is more true than I can say and more true than you can hear.” I was kind of taken by that quote. It caught my

attention. That we are one with everything. Many of you have heard such a thing. In fact, in my own life experience, I had never heard anything about being one with everything until one day in the midst of a very intense situation, I had the experience of all boundaries dropping away and of being identical with the person in front of me. And as all boundaries dropped away, I felt identical with everything. I felt a kind of expanding to include the universe, and I thought, “What’s that? That’s the way it is, but who knows about it? What was that?” That question is actually what motivated me to find someone who could tell me what happened in that moment when all boundaries disappeared and I felt identical, at one, with everything. And in searching around, I was very fortunate. I met Suzuki Roshi, and I went for zazen instruction on Friday afternoon, the third of July, 1969. I started sitting every day after that. There was just something about it, “I need to do this,” I said, “and he knows what I need to know.” This being one with everything is the way we actually exist in the world, but we most often don’t notice it.

CONTINUOUS EFFORT

Dogen Zenji, the founder of my particular school of Zen, the Soto school, says in his commentary on the precepts, “To expound the dharma with this body is foremost. Its virtue returns to the ocean of reality. It is unfathomable. We just accept it with respect and gratitude.” This saying, “to expound the dharma with this body is foremost,” is something that Lou Hartman, my late husband, who was a monk at San Francisco Zen Center, was very close to. As he got older, he could no longer go down the stairs to the zendo, so he decided to go sit in the Buddha hall on the back bench while we were downstairs in the zendo. He did this because our practice is not just for us, our practice is to join in with the whole community, with the whole *sangha,* and each one of us is supported by the practice of all of our *sangha* mates.

In *sangha,* a dharma community, you will notice how big a support it is to have the people around you making an effort. It helps to

support your effort. And this will become more and more obvious as your practice continues each day, month, year, and so on. We definitely depend on each other for support, and we give each other our support. And so it was very important for Lou as he was getting older and couldn't get down to the zendo to figure out what to do. It was clear that it was a deliberate effort to share his practice with everyone. One day Renshin Bunce, who is a monk at the Zen center and a photographer, snapped a picture of him sitting zazen in the Buddha hall through those glass doors. She printed out a copy and gave it to us. Lou looked at it and said, "Oh, my posture is so bad. I thought my posture was better than that." You know, he had some osteoporosis, so he didn't realize his posture was bad, but he had sort of a widow's hump in the back. He was making his best effort to sit with the proper posture, but his body wasn't built that way anymore. It was hurt, and he hadn't realized it and was quite disappointed, but he continued to practice.

This continuous practice with each other supports each of us. Practice is necessary, so do not rest. Dogen says that the way to continue is to have a generous mind, big mind, and soft mind, to be flexible, not sticking to anything. Practicing in this way, there is no need to be afraid of anything or ignore anything. We see this notion of continuous practice throughout the Buddha's teachings. We don't just sort of pick up practice on one day and then leave it alone for the rest of the week. We actually work on this bringing our mind to what we are doing in each moment throughout today, tomorrow, the next day, and the rest of it, however long it lasts.

WE ARE NATURALLY COMPASSIONATE

With zazen, we want to notice how our body and mind work together. We want to notice how we can bring our actions more in line with our intention. We want to notice what the influences that drive our actions are so that we can actually form an intention of how to live and follow that intention and not be dragged off into some activity of body, speech, or mind that we have found to be unwholesome. We

attend to how we're living our life because we have noticed that there is suffering, both in this life that we're leading and in the lives all around us. We are naturally compassionate. We want to find out how to live our life so as to reduce the suffering, so as to encourage wholesome lives in all of our companions in order that they may reduce suffering.

This bodhisattva practice is the ideal of Buddhism in the Mahayana tradition, which is based on waking up so that we can actually be the most helpful to others—waking up so that our life can be of the most benefit to suffering beings. That is the altruistic vow of a bodhisattva.

This says you meet yourself in all beings. When you practice zazen in its true sense, you are really buddha. We cultivate our altruistic intention, and we practice every day, and we work to drop our habitual self-clinging thoughts that are driven mostly by fear or desire. We try to live our life in a way that's helpful to beings.

TAMING JUDGMENT

We can be disparaging with just a look. We don't have to say a word, and people will feel it, and they will be hurt by it. We must be careful how we treat one another. Remember, each of you—not only are you buddha, so is your neighbor; so are the people that you live and work with. We are trying to cultivate buddha wherever we go, and so when you find yourself making a snap judgment about somebody or putting somebody down, preferably you will notice this before you open your mouth, but if it's after you open your mouth and say something disparaging, please try to have the courage to apologize. If you feel hurt by someone, this points out that people who hate are in their own hell. Hatred and anger come out of our own suffering.

Life is too short to waste it on judging other people by whatever standards we may have. It's actually not good to judge yourself in a disparaging way either. Just like loving-kindness begins with yourself, really being conscious of not disparaging begins with yourself. You can hardly be open and friendly and accepting of

everybody else if you're squashing yourself all the time. You can begin not disparaging right here at home and let it spread out to include everyone.

SITTING ZAZEN

We sit down. We arrange our legs and robes, get our base arranged. And then we lift up through our spine all the way through the crown of our head. Suzuki Roshi said it's sort of like holding up the sky with the crown of your head. And you let your head be level. You don't want your chin up in the air. You want it level, and you want to bring it back so that the weight of the head is resting on the spine—so it's this kind of motion: your head staying level but moving back so that its weight is supported by your spine. In Dogen Zenji's *Fukanzazengi* (the instructions for sitting zazen), that's what he means by saying "ears over shoulders": that your head is back so that it is over your shoulders. Getting that right was a very important moment for me, because it cured a lot of low-back pain or mid-level back pain that I was having because those muscles that hold your head up when it's out in front get tired.

Once you have your legs and your base arranged, you also want to, as Dogen Zenji says in *Fukanzazengi,* rock your body right and left, give yourself a little stretch, your side and neck, and then come to the middle where you're upright and you're not leaning in either direction. You also want to do that forward and back. When you do get yourself so that you're not leaning in any direction and your weight is going straight down through your sitting bones into the earth, then all of the muscles around your lungs can be soft and you can have much more spaciousness for breath, because the musculature around your lungs is not tight. Often when I find that balance point, there will be an automatic inhale that will happen, just because the lungs will expand when the muscles around it are not tight.

Then you arrange your mudra as well. Suzuki Roshi said once, "Your mudra should be sitting zazen too. Your toes are sitting zazen.

Your ears are sitting zazen. All of you is sitting zazen. And it's okay to rest your wrists on your thighs in the mudra, but it wants to be nice and open; it doesn't want to collapse and be closed."

I think of the mudra as kind of a receiver. One teacher at Sokoji, where I first started practicing, said, "You can visualize your out breath as falling down like a waterfall and your in breath as coming in through your mudra (hand and finger position) and filling you up." And sometimes when I do that, I find it very energizing but also very receptive to whatever is happening.

When I remember to smile, as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, not only does it soften my face, it changes my mood. It has a definite effect on how I'm feeling if I'm remembering to make an effort to have a slight smile. I don't mean a big grin. I mean just like a Mona Lisa smile, just soften it up a little bit.

ZAZEN SITS ZAZEN

Suzuki Roshi had asked us to try counting our breath from one to ten and back to one again. And many people found it difficult, and their questions to him revealed that they saw it as a technique, one they hoped would be perfect, that they would perfect some-day. Actually there's a story about the time I had been working on counting my breath. I was participating in a one-day sitting, and I sat one period where I counted every breath, and I went to see Roshi and said, "Roshi, I can count my breaths now. What do I do next?" I thought he would say, "Good for you." Instead, he got very fierce. He said, "Don't ever think that you can sit zazen. That's a big mistake. Zazen sits zazen." But here, in a lecture, Suzuki Roshi said, "When you count your breathing, one, two, three, it means, 'Right now. Right now, Right now.' It means you never lose your practice. You will not be so rigid as to try to do it in the future but right now."

When we are investigating Zen, we're just investigating how to live this life. I don't know of anything more urgent for me to investigate than how to live this life. Whether or not there's rebirth or anything

else, I get only one chance to live this life, and I'd love not to make a mess of it.

Sitting *sesshin* (a sitting retreat of seven or more days) helps me to look at my life, to put on some glasses, maybe, that focus better than when I am not sitting *sesshin*—maybe to provide me with a magnifying glass to look at my life a little closer. Once, I was working on using the mudra as a receiver of whatever comes in and working on keeping a smile on my face. I mean, I was really kind of working on the details of how I understand to sit zazen. And at some point I was just flooded. I felt a tremendous warmth and energy and love and compassion that just flooded me. It felt as if it were coming from everyone in the room, in through my mudra, filling me up. It started with gratitude, but it built into a warm energy that made me feel so immanently connected with everyone in the room and wanting to sit with this room full of people who were studying how to live their life so as to benefit all beings. That's a pretty rare opportunity, to be in a room full of people in that way.

A GREATLY ENLIGHTENED BEING IS SUBJECT TO EVERYTHING

When we see someone whose compassionate heart is not developed, we should have more compassion for such a person, because the person is truly suffering. When people are caught up in greed or anger or delusion, they are suffering more, and they are likely to cause themselves yet more suffering by engaging in harmful actions. And since actions always have consequences, without exception, we can't escape the consequence of our actions. We should have deep compassion for people who are caught up in negative actions, because they are making themselves a big bunch of trouble that they are bound to experience later.

We must realize that whatever actions we undertake, we will experience a result. If we undertake unwholesome acts, we will experience unwholesome results. And when we take care and act from the light of the moon, when we act from the buddha mind that is

in each of us, then the result will be wholesome. And when we forget and act out of greed, hate, and delusion, the result will be painful.

When we recognize, without any doubt, that if we act from unwholesome thoughts or motives, from harmful motives, we will experience suffering, it really helps us to live a life more beneficial not only to ourselves but to everybody around us.

Are our motives altruistic? Is our intention to relieve suffering? Intention is the key to whether actions are wholesome or not. What I want to recommend to you is to see the light of the moon in every drop of water. See buddha mind, buddha heart in everyone. Connect with that part of each person you meet. Be aware of your motives, what motivates your actions. Be sure that your motivation is altruistic. The more of us who conduct ourselves in such a way, the more we'll enjoy this life.

THE INTIMACY OF ZEN PRACTICE

I remember that on the application for Tassajara Zen Mountain Center practice periods, years ago, they used to have a quote from Suzuki Roshi, "Students should be as intimate as milk and water." More intimate than that, even, because we're all living Buddha's life as our own.

What Suzuki Roshi was pointing to was that we support and depend on each other. We make the practice period what it is. And if we want to develop an intimate *sangha* where we feel completely supported by each other and where we recognize that our practice is supporting everyone else, we can do that. It's up to us. I can't emphasize strongly enough how important a difference in our lives that kind of mutual support and intimacy can make.

When we speak of the three treasures, we speak of the treasure of Buddha, of the teacher, of someone who sees and understands how we need to live this life and tells us; of the dharma, the teaching that he gave us; and of the *sangha,* the community of practitioners; these are the three jewels.

One of the ways we develop this kind of intimacy is by practicing closely together. We sit long periods together, creating a very bonding experience. To make our wholehearted effort in the company of others who are also making their wholehearted effort is really very unifying. Even if nothing else happened, it would be worth the effort.

We can make an effort to develop intimacy within Zen training periods. My late husband, Lou, called the tight quarters of Zen practice “potato practice.” He said, “If you dig a bunch of potatoes out of the ground, they all have dirt on them, but you don’t pick up each potato and scrub it. You put them all in a bucket with some water and stir them around, and they bump into each other and clean each other up.” Or if you’ve ever had a rock tumbler to polish stones: you put all the stones in a cylinder and add some water and abrasives, then you let the stones tumble over rollers, and they keep falling on top of each other, smoothing each other off, and pretty soon you have polished pebbles. That’s how polished pebbles are made. That’s how Zen practitioners bond by being in close proximity, living together, and learning about human life.

One of the ways in which Zen practice encourages intimacy is through initiating a head student, or *shuso,* to help create such bonding. The *shuso* is sort of like the elder sibling for all the other monks. The *shuso*’s job is to model what it is to be a wholehearted practicing monk. *Shusos* set the tone for us. And they support everyone else in following the schedule completely, first and foremost by doing it themselves and by energetically engaging in all of the activities of the practice sessions.

The *shuso* awakens before anyone else and rings the wake-up bell. The *shuso* cleans the bathroom so as not to get a big head, or at some centers takes care of composting all of the garbage and cleaning the compost buckets. The main role of the *shuso* is to set an example of real engagement and to develop an intimate relationship with everybody in the practice period. To further build intimacy with students, the *shuso* has tea one-on-one with everyone in the practice period (which is a three-month-long Zen training) to get to know each student. The *shuso* is also invited to teach by giving dharma talks. And at the end of the practice period, there is a

ceremony in which each student in the practice period asks the *shuso* a personal question about practice. By that time, after sitting off and on, engaging for months, the life inquiries are expected to come from the heart, to be a serious question about life. The *shuso* responds to the person who is asking the question, not to the words with which the question is expressed, but to the heart of the question.

The most important thing is for *shusos* to be completely authentic and to be willing to reveal their life, to be seen completely. In order to be willing to be seen as they are, *shusos* must be willing to be as they are. You have to learn to really appreciate this particular buddha (the *shuso*) who is now sitting in the dharma seat, giving his or her heart to help the students' practice.

CAPACITY FOR KINDNESS

People have talked to me about how much they appreciated Lou, my late husband. My response has been, If you appreciated Lou, what were the qualities that you appreciated? Can you bring those qualities alive in yourself? If you enjoyed his humor, can you find your own humor and bring it out? If you enjoyed his kindness, can you cultivate your own kindness and bring it out? When you find that you appreciate someone, look into what is it that you like so much about that person. "Oh, I wonder if I could be like that. That's pretty nice."

We can encourage each other to cultivate our most beneficial qualities. I have a sign on my door, "You must be what you want to see in the world." If there's something you want to see in the world, you make it happen here. As you practice together, when you see a quality that warms your heart, learn from it. Bring it out in yourself. These are all human qualities that we all have. Kindness is not something that only the Buddha has. If it's something that only the Buddha has, then we're all Buddha.

The capacity for kindness is in each of us. Will we cultivate it? All of these qualities that we appreciate in people are in us, and we can

cultivate those qualities and make them alive in the world by our own effort. And as we become more intimate with each other, we can help each other polish up those qualities that we like, those qualities that lead to harmony and affection and appreciation. We can make the *sangha* what we want it to be by making ourselves who we want to be. That's a lot of power, and you have it.

LIVING A LIFE OF VOW

In our Soto Zen tradition we have a ceremony called *tokudo* in Japanese, "entering the Way," or "attaining the Way." The opening line of the invocation is, "In faith that we are Buddha, we enter Buddha's Way." The main elements of the ceremony are confession and repentance to purify the mind, followed by receiving the precepts and vowing "to follow this compassionate practice even after becoming Buddha." So here we have both faith and vow, which, together with practice, I have found to be the three main supports of my life.

This has come as rather a surprise to me. As one who majored in chemistry and probability theory in college, I had thought of myself as a very practical person, more inspired by logic and reason than by faith and devotion. (*Devotion*, by the way, means "of vow.") But I have come to realize that the people in my life who have really inspired me and encouraged me were people of deep faith and devotion, and those qualities have been contagious.

As stated in the invocation above, the faith I am speaking of is not faith in something external. It is faith that "all beings have the wisdom and compassion of the awakened ones, but because of their attachments and delusions they don't realize it." According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra,* this is what Shakyamuni Buddha said on the morning of his enlightenment. It is a radical faith in the basic goodness, the wholeness of all beings. So even though we are already complete, because of our attachments and delusions, we need a lot of effort to actualize the wisdom and compassion that is our basic nature.

That is where the devotion comes in. By entering the Buddha's Way, we enter a life of vow. At the end of every lecture or class, we chant the four vows of the bodhisattva: "Beings are numberless, I vow to save them [or awaken with them]. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them. Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them. Buddha's Way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it." This is a big vow. How can we do this?

It means an endless vow.

When I first came to practice, I thought, "I'm a mess now but I'm going to get straightened out and then I'm going to get on with my life." After some years I realized, "I'm never going to get finished with this." Momentarily I was disappointed, and then I thought, Pollyanna that I am, "Oh, that means you will never use up this practice. I can never wear it out. It'll last my whole life."

The same is true of our vow. Our vow will sustain us and inspire us to practice for the rest of our life and maybe for lives to come. These vows will be our guide and our support and our inspiration for our whole life.

INITIATION AND ORDINATION

In Japan, since the thirteenth century, both home leavers (monks and nuns) and householders (laymen and laywomen) have been entering the Buddha's Way in the *tokudo* ceremony by taking the same sixteen bodhisattva precepts we use today. The ceremony begins by purifying the space with wisdom water, followed by the invocation mentioned in the previous section, and then the initiates are purified with wisdom water. With the body thus purified, the next step is to purify the mind with confession and repentance. Now the initiates are ready to receive the precepts.

They begin with taking refuge in the three treasures: Buddha, the awakened teacher; dharma, the truth of things as they are; and *sangha,* the community of practitioners. This taking refuge in the triple treasure is, I believe, common to all Buddhists every-where. In Zen we sometimes say, "returning to Buddha" or "being one with

Buddha," to emphasize that each of us is originally not separate from Buddha.

The next three vows in the ceremony are sometimes called the three pure precepts: avoiding evil, doing good, and benefiting beings.

The remaining vows are the ten grave or prohibitory precepts, calling our attention to actions that cause suffering, to remind us to be awake with our actions of body, speech, and mind so as to minimize suffering. We vow to refrain from killing, from taking what is not given, from misusing sexuality, from false speech, from intoxicating mind or body of self or others, from speaking of the faults of others, from praising self at the expense of others, from being possessive or stingy, from harboring ill will, and from disparaging the three treasures.

Following each set of vows, beginning with repentance, the initiates are asked three times, "Even after realizing buddhahood, will you continue this compassionate practice?" and they respond, "Yes I will!"

In this ceremony the initiates also receive a dharma name, a dharma robe, and a document of dharma lineage. Each one is a constant reminder of these vows. Every morning we balance the dharma robe on top of our head and recite the robe chant, twice in Sanskrit and once in English:

Great robe of liberation
Field far beyond form and emptiness
Wearing the Tathagata's teaching
Saving all beings.

WHAT IS A ZEN PRIEST?

When Suzuki Roshi suggested to my teacher Sojun Mel Weitsman Roshi that he be ordained, Sojun said, "What's a priest?" and Suzuki Roshi said, "I don't know." Sojun then went to the other teacher at the Zen center, Katagiri Sensei, and said, "Katagiri Sensei, Suzuki Roshi wants me to be a priest. What's a priest?" And Katagiri Sensei

said, “Hmm, I don’t know.” So this is a good koan for those who may decide that they want to be ordained as a home leaver—“What is it?”

As with any koan, it’s a question that’s always with us. It’s not a question that we say, “Well, now I know; that’s it; I got it.” It’s not like that—it’s always right here before us as an open question. Sojun says, “I still don’t know what a priest is, and I hope I never do.” This question should always be alive for us. It should always be with us, encouraging our practice and encouraging our inquiry and encouraging our effort.

This “leaving home”—what is that? Sometimes it is called the homeless life. In Japan, a person entering the homeless life in this ceremony would be called an *unsui,* “cloud water”—one who moves from place to place as necessary without obstruction, without attachment, like a cloud; and one who fits into whatever situation arises without resistance, like water.

One thing leaving home means is to find your home wherever you are. To realize that wherever you are is home—not to be seeking for some special place, to be making some cozy nest, but to find yourself at home wherever you are and in whatever circumstances you may be. To put aside the worldly concerns of looking for material comfort and instead to cultivate mental comfort, comfort of the spirit and mind and heart.

This being at home wherever you are means being comfortable wherever you are. Not having to have some special place or special things to make you comfortable. Right here in this very body in this very place as it is, to be at home. That’s one way we can think about what this homeless life is.

Those of us who have chosen Zen practice have discovered that sitting zazen is a good thing. This is how you can find your home right where you are. This just sitting, just being this one as it is, is finding yourself at home and at peace with *this* one. It is finding out how to express *this* buddha in the world.

Commitment and renunciation are significant elements in what a home leaver is. Shaving the head is symbolic of renunciation. But what is really to be renounced is self-clinging, so shaving the head is just to remind us to renounce whatever it is that we cling to, whatever it is that we attach to. Let it go, let our life flow through our

hands like a river and not try to grab some piece of it and hold on to it. Just to be present with it and find out how to express our vow in this moment, in this circumstance, right where we are right now, instead of trying to figure out how to make it the way we want so that it'll be just what we always dreamed of. It won't be. There will be many surprises.

If we're open to embracing the surprises as they arise, then there will be inconceivable joy. If we fuss and fume and say, "This isn't what I expected," then there will be inconceivable misery. Just to welcome your life as it arrives moment after moment, to meet it as fully as you can, being as open to it as you can, being as ready for whatever arises as you can, and meeting it wholeheartedly: this is renunciation—this is leaving behind all of your preferences, all of your ideas and notions and schemes. Just meeting life as it is.

How can we meet our life as it is wholeheartedly, just like this? This is what our practice is; this is finding our home in the midst of homelessness, right here.

REENERGIZING THE LIFE

In Zen practice, we reenergize life each month by renewing our vows on the day of the full moon in the bodhisattva ceremony. Every day our liturgy begins with the three refuges. There are also verses one can use for daily activity. For example, the verse for waking up in the morning:

This morning as I wake,
I vow with all beings
To see each thing as it is
And not to forsake the world.

There is a verse for bathing:

As I bathe this body,
I vow with all beings
To wash this body free from dust

Healthy and clean within and without.

For home leavers there is a verse for shaving the head:

Now I am being shaved,
May I with all beings
Cut off all selfish desires forever.

There is a verse for offering incense, for brushing the teeth and washing the face, and, of course, a whole extended ritual for receiving food. In short, there are vows for all of the activities of our daily life to constantly remind us that all of our activities of body, speech, and mind are to benefit all beings. At the end of the day, we say:

This evening as I sleep
I vow with all beings
To still all things
And to put an end to confusion.

THE EVERYDAYNESS OF BIRTH

I have just been spending the last two weeks in the midst of the miracle that is birth. And I was struck once again by how extraordinary this miracle is, and how ordinary—the simultaneity of the miraculous and the everydayness of birth, not just of a baby, but of any creature, of anything. While I was gone, involved completely in this particular birth, there were happening here at Tassajara myriad and innumerable births of every bud on every maple tree bursting open and presenting a new expression of life. The opening of every flower and the germinating of every seed and the opening of every bud are all miraculous births. Each one of us is in the midst of a gestation process.

Now, maybe I'm jumping to conclusions. Maybe there are many who have already shed all of notions of a separate self and are free of self-concern and have no more difficulty with this delusion of

separation. But at least there are some who are still caught in this prison of self-concern that separates us from the fullness and completeness and vastness of our actual being. Separates us from the direct experience of that completeness and wholeness that we are. From this imprisonment we experience a great deal of suffering. It's because deep in us is the awareness of our nonseparateness, that we have made the great effort to be in a situation that gives us the luxury, really, of spending hours in the meditation hall, facing our self, studying our self.

Finding or seeking to find, what is it, what is it sitting here? What is it that separates us, what is the boundary between this and not this? What do we imagine is the boundary between this and not this? Where is the bridge, where is the opening? Where is the birth into the fullness of all that this is? And we work very hard to give ourselves the opportunity to bring this gestation to completeness.

EACH ONE OF US CONTAINS THE WHOLE UNIVERSE

Linji Yixuan, a Chinese Zen Buddhist monk, said, "People who try to do something about what's outside themselves are nothing but blockheads." Maybe it's more accurate to say that people who imagine that there's something outside themselves are blockheads. But we can't fix it if we put it out there. We can't liberate out there, we can only liberate in here. It turns out that that's enough. What's apparently out there and what's in here are different only on the surface. When we look around us, we see joy and sadness, we see suffering and delight, we see longing to be touched and fear of being touched all together. We see longing to be free and fear of being free, side by side. And in ourselves we see the same. The differences between us are so miniscule when compared to the ways in which we are all the same.

We have this tendency to focus on the differences rather than the similarities. And in that we become confused. Each one of us is complete and contains the whole universe. And each one of us is

caught in the delusion of being separate. Even those of us who have at some point woken up to our connection with everything forget it from time to time and fall back into the old habit of clinging to the old separate self. And each time we do, suffering occurs. This process of waking up needs continuous renewal, just as each breath we take nourishes us and brings us alive; we feel it metabolizing and taking life-giving oxygen to all of our cells. But if we hold our breath and don't breathe out, pretty soon there's nothing left to nourish us. We need to breathe out and breathe in again. One of the great miracles to me is this incredible way in which I breathe in what the plants breathe out, and the plants breathe in what I breathe out. This body can be nourished by the roots and stems and leaves and seeds of plants. This body, all animal bodies and plants, can be nourished by the excrement of this body.

This amazing, amazing interconnectedness of everything with everything; it is a never-ending source of fascination for me. So we can't breathe in once and stay alive. And we can't wake up once and stay awake. Pretty soon we go back to sleep again. So this practice of ours is a never-ending, continuous effort. The never-ending continuous joy of waking up and waking up.

EVERYTHING YOU NEED OR EVER WANTED IS RIGHT HERE

An actual immediate experience of nonseparateness is never forgotten and continues to inspire us to let go each time we notice a new self-clinging or a return of an old self-clinging. We remember the joy of letting it all go. It becomes easier to let go again. The habit of attachment takes a long time to relinquish. And each time we find ourselves caught in self-concern, it's useful to say, "Oh, hmm, who do I think I am now? What cherished view of self am I clinging to at this moment? What particularly attractive or unattractive idea of who I am has arisen just now?" Sometimes we cling as tenaciously to negative self-views as to positive ones. We are very skillful. We can hold both an extremely elevated view of self and an extremely

negative view of self at the same time. Neither one is accurate. We can never in any definition that we can imagine include all of the vastness of just this as it is. So that whenever you find yourself thinking, I am this, ask yourself, Yes, and what more? And this and this and this. To use any one or any group of definitions is to limit yourself to less than your completeness. How will we engage ourselves to study the self, to forget the self, to be confirmed by all things? How can we midwife the birth of a bodhisattva within us? How can we find that just this, as it is, is not a limiting description but a limitless description of what we are? Everything you need, everything you ever wanted, is right here, right here.

THERE IS ALWAYS PERFECT DHARMA

Before a dharma talk we chant a verse that speaks to the unsurpassed penetrating and perfect dharma. It is as if the teacher were going to talk about perfect dharma and now you have it to see and listen to from the teacher. However, this unsurpassed, penetrating, and perfect dharma, which we have to see and listen to, and which we vow to taste via the truth of the Tathagatha's words—this unsurpassed, penetrating, and perfect dharma is all around you all the time. It has nothing to do with what the teacher is saying. We see the truth of things as they are, from the time we're born to the time we die. But we rarely meet it, because we're so busy thinking about something else. We rarely just meet the truth directly. So we vow in practice to taste directly, each one for himself or herself. The truth of things as they are, which is available to everyone all the time—not only to people with special talents, not only to people who are strong or bold or particularly intelligent or particularly anything. The perfect dharma is open to everyone to taste the truth of her or his life as it is, to experience directly things as they are.

NO DISTINCTIONS, JUST ORDINARY

In practicing the way of tea, or *chado,* anyone can boil water and make tea. Anyone can sit down and have a cup of tea. The way of tea is not available only to those of superior something or other, and not unavailable to those of inferior whatever. It is for persons of no rank. There is no rank in the tearoom. And this is true also in zazen. There may be people with particular responsibilities in the zendo, but there is no rank in zazen. Each person does his or her own zazen, and each person experiences his or her own life in zazen. And it does not matter whether you are rich or poor or of superior or inferior intelligence or strength or talent—you name it. This is a very important aspect of the zazen of Dogen Zenji.

This is why the first thing he wrote when he came back from China and wanted to speak of the most important thing that he had to offer from his years of practice there was *Fukanzazengi,* also called "Universal Recommendation for the Practice of Zazen." He uses this title not as some advertising slogan but to emphasize that there is no class distinction. He himself was an aristocrat. But the zazen that he taught is sometimes called farmer Zen, as compared with the zazen that the aristocrats adopted (Rinzai Zen), which might be thought of as adept Zen. Not that there is anything superior or inferior about either of these, but their styles are different. The style of practice in Rinzai Zen is to strive for some goal, to strive for realization. The emphasis in Dogen's Zen is that from the beginning we are enlightened, and our practice, zazen, is the practice of our fundamental beginningless enlightenment. Or our beginningless enlightenment is expressed as zazen. We don't sit to become a buddha, we sit because it is what buddhas do. And we are all buddha from the beginning. So this zazen is one of no class distinction.

WE ARE ALREADY IT

I want to talk a bit about a koan or an exchange between the sixth ancestor in China, Huineng, often thought of as the great ancestor through whom Zen spread throughout China. He had two

outstanding disciples, and from these two all of the five schools of Zen of the Song dynasty developed. So, I want to speak of the exchanges he had with one of them, Segin Gyoshi. When Segin Gyoshi first presented himself to the sixth ancestor, he said, “How can we practice without falling into class distinction? How can we practice without getting into steps and stages, better or worse?” If you set up some goal in zazen, if you set up any goal—you want to become stronger, you want to become wiser, you want to become more enlightened, you want to become kinder, you want to become anything other than what you think you are now—if you set up some goal, then on the measure of that characteristic, you can set up class distinctions. This person is stronger, so he is better, or this person is wiser when she comes, so she is better, or this person is kinder. So you immediately set up class distinctions. If you are sitting just to express your original enlightenment, there is no way to be better or worse, so there are no class distinctions. So this is why Dogen Zenji says there is nothing to attain. There is nothing you need to add to yourself as you are right now. To be completely this one, our practice is to settle the self on the self and let the flower of the life force bloom as this one. And there is nothing you need to add to become this one. You are already it.

If just this is all there is, there is no true self outside of what we personally experience. This true self is the self, which cannot be anything but the self, whenever and wherever; we don’t have to go anywhere to find it. We cannot adopt or reject it to gain it, and yet at the same time in our day-to-day lives, even though we actually live out the reality of the self, we seldom actualize it through our bodies and minds. We usually want to go to some fantastic place to get something a little bit better and throw away anything bad. Consequently, we are always looking outside, wandering here and there. From the viewpoint of this wandering self, the original self, which is only the self in whatever situation that is the true self, is entirely lost. Eventually, we must practice and realize it through our bodies and minds.

THE VITALITY OF LIFE

Life must have been very, very difficult, just keeping the body alive, in the hunting and gathering tribes. It was extremely difficult, more difficult than we can imagine. People coped with it in two ways: One was to try to devise tools to help them—the bow and arrow, or spear, things to help them find enough food to live. But those tools helped them only so much. They also needed to turn to some power greater than the power of their technology, which was so limited at the time, to ask for help. There were prayers for good hunting, prayers for finding berries, and prayers for protection from the elements. Later on, in societies in which there was agriculture, they were still totally dependent on weather, over which they had no control. There was always this turning toward some power that was greater than their own technological possibility of taking care of their livelihood, just to help keep them alive.

Nowadays, whether there is good weather or bad, we can always get enough food, or we can ship it in from somewhere that had better weather. The technology is taking care of our livelihood. But we lose track of that which is larger and deeper and of the vastness that is beyond our technological ability, because it looks as if we've got it all taken care of: we don't seem to need to turn to the universe, or to that which is beyond our human capacity anyway, because technology seems to be able to take care of all of our daily necessities. And that's why Uchiyama Roshi first told us that zazen itself is a religious activity. He defines *religion* as that which through practice can lead you to the truth or to a true way of living. The kind of literal meaning of religion in our language is something that binds us to God, but Uchiyama is talking about true religion as that which can lead to a true way of life, to a way of life that harmonizes with things as they are, harmonizes with the universe. We then appreciate that our life cannot be encompassed only by words or phrases or descriptions or ideas or thoughts about who we are. We recognize that our life is much deeper than any description that we can come up with, that it is much vaster than any idea or notion we can have of what this is. We sit to settle the self and to let the flower of the life force come from the depth of our being, to bring it into the world. And to allow our human heart to express itself fully. This is what zazen is.

BLOOMING INTO OURSELVES

I loved the first time I went to Sokoji Temple in San Francisco for zazen instruction. This was years ago. The instructor was Katagiri Roshi, who was then a young monk, Katagiri Sensei, who had come up from Zenshuji in Los Angeles to help Suzuki Roshi because many Americans were wanting to sit zazen. There he was, one person in this temple, with a Japanese congregation who needed some help as well. This young monk came up from Los Angeles to help, and he was giving zazen instruction. In the course of it he said something like, “We sit to settle the self on the self and let the flower of our life force bloom.” That was another one of those moments that have deeply moved me, and it has stayed with me forever. How do we let the flower of this life force bloom if there is nothing to gain from Zen practice? If this is it, our life as it is, and there is nothing to get and we are complete as we are, where does effort come from, if there is no goal? What’s the purpose of it, if there’s no goal?

It comes from the one who requires it. It’s sort of like, What is the effort that daffodils make in order to bloom? There they are, bulbs under the ground in the dark. They are doing something, something is happening there under the ground in the dark that results in the bloom that we see when we walk down the path. What kind of effort is this that we make to allow blooming to be completely itself and with which we meet the world and appreciate this opportunity to be who we are? The work of the daffodil preparing to bloom is very quiet. It doesn’t look outward to see if it’s doing it right. It finds this bloom within itself somehow. It comes from the very nature of the bulb, this bloom that we see as beautiful. It’s beautiful from the beginning, it’s completely there. It just needs conditions around it to help it bloom. In Zen, practice centers and teachers provide the conditions to help buddhas bloom. But really it’s all there, its all completely present right with you from the beginning. This is our faith. In faith that we are buddha, we enter Buddha’s Way. In faith we can bloom fully in the most appropriate way. We practice this practice.

BEING JUST THIS ONE

I'll read you this quotation from Dogen Zenji's fascicle called "Self Receiving Self Employing Awareness" or in Japanese, "Bendowa." He says, "The zazen of even one person at one moment imperceptibly accords with all things and fully resonates through all time." He is saying that our present practice will affect all time: past, present, and future. And each moment of zazen is full of this realization.

We are not practicing only by sitting but also before and after we sit. This kind of practice fills the universe. It would be tragic if practice ended after forty-five minutes of sitting. Therefore, we cannot measure our practice through time or space or just measure our own personal practice. Dogen says, "Know that even if all buddhas of the ten directions, as innumerable as the sands of the Ganges, exert their strength and with the Buddha's wisdom try to measure the merit of one person's zazen, they will not be able to fully comprehend it."

The spirit of our practice is to practice without trying to acquire anything, because we already have everything we need. Without trying to be anything other than just this one, because just this one is a buddha from the beginning. We practice to express and realize and settle on the suchness of this one, so that it can manifest in whatever activity we undertake, so that our oneness with all beings becomes evident. Can we do it, can we make it happen? Just sit, and just be willing to be here as this one, and allow what arises to come out. Be willing to be just this one. Can we just sit zazen, not judging whether we're doing it right or doing it wrong, just practice knowing the body?

PART TWO

Dharma Talks

FREE FROM THOUGHTS OF YOURSELF

One evening, just before dinner, I was out in the courtyard at SFZC and a friend asked me if I was going to have a dinner, and I said, “No, I have to give a dharma talk tonight and I have to go to my room and prepare.” And he said, “Oh, you know all that stuff already.” Of course, we all in the course of our particular lives accumulate particular kinds of knowledge, of this or that. Some of us know how to write and some of us know how to play musical instruments and some of us know how to make gardens, and so forth. But that’s not the kind of thing that we talk about in Zen practice. We don’t concern ourselves about knowledge one has mastered or knowing this or that. But there is that within which knows the truth of life as it is, the truth of things as they are, regardless of secular knowledge. Just what’s in front of us at every moment. But we screen it through such a barrage of preconceptions and judgments and personal agendas and habitual ideas of who we are and how we want to view the world that it is very hard for us to see directly what’s right in front of us. And Zen training and Zen practice are all about coming to have confidence in that which knows and in that direct knowledge that does not come through words or intellectual activity. As Dogen Zenji says in his instructions for zazen, “Take the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate the self.” And Dogen Zenji, who was the founder in Japan of the particular stream of Zen that I practice, called Soto Zen, also says in his fascicle *Genjo Koan:* “To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. And to forget the self is to be awakened by all the myriad things.” That is, to be awakened by things as they are, as Suzuki Roshi used to say all of the time.

The fountainhead of the Chinese school of Soto Zen, Dongshan (in Chinese; Tozan Ryokai in Japanese, from which the “to” of Soto comes), was, when he was a monk, very much taken up with the question of inanimate objects teaching the dharma, that the dharma is the truth of things as they are. He couldn’t understand this; inanimate things are preaching the dharma? And so he went to a number of teachers to ask about it. And one teacher said, “Well, yes, of course.” Dongshan had said, “I’ve heard that National Teacher So-and-So taught that inanimate things teach the dharma.” And the teacher said, “That teaching exists here also.” And he said, “Well, if inanimate things teach the dharma, why can’t I hear it?” And the teacher said, “Even though you might not hear it, don’t interfere with that which does.”

There is that which does hear it. There is one who knows. Our practice is to learn how to see what’s directly in front of us and to learn how to respond appropriately to whatever arises in the moment in the circumstances of our daily life. To respond spontaneously, directly, immediately to just what is in front of us, without this filter of “Is it good for me? Does it agree with what I already think?” and on and on. Not how does it measure up against all of our preconceptions and prejudices, preferences and aversions, but just directly, immediately, before all of these thoughts of self arise, before all of our ideas of who we are and what we like and how we ought to act and what’s expected of us by others and what’s consonant with the cultural context in which we live our lives, and so forth. To come to trust the one who knows, to come to trust that which hears.

Later on, Dongshan met the teacher with whom he studied the longest, Yun-yen, the teacher whom he succeeded as a teacher, and studied further this question of inanimate objects teaching the dharma, and more, and he studied with him for many years. As he was about to leave, he said to his teacher, “If, in future years, someone should ask me if I am able to draw the master’s likeness, what shall I say?” This was a way of saying, It is said that only the disciple of a teacher can draw his likeness. So he was asking, in a way, Do I have your permission to continue in your way? Yun-yen thought for a long time, and then he said, “Just this one is.” When Tung Shan left, he was somewhat dubious about Yun-yen’s last

words, and he was thinking about them deeply as he went along. As he crossed over a bridge, he looked down at the stream, and suddenly all of his doubts fell away, and he said, “Oh, I see. I am not it, but it actually is me.” And he made a verse speaking of his understanding, speaking of this matter: self and other are not two. I have a number of translations of this verse, and the first one I’ll read is Suzuki Roshi’s free translation. “Do not try to see the world as an object. The you that is given to see as an object is not you yourself. I am going my own way now, and I meet myself wherever I go. If you understand that you as an object is not you yourself, then you have your own true way.”

Another translation: “Don’t seek outside yourself, lest you become estranged from it. Alone I go my way. I meet him wherever I go. He is just me, but I am not he. Thus must you understand to be one with suchness. Do not seek him anywhere else, or he will run away from you. Now that I go on all alone, I meet him everywhere. He is even now what I am. I am even now not what he is. Only by understanding this way can there be a true union with the self so.”

I am speaking of this true person who can’t be classified. The “you” that is not an object, the “you” that responds directly and immediately to what’s right in front of you. The “you” that is free from thoughts of self, that is free from preconceptions, that is free from some idea of who you are. And I think, no matter how long I’ve been practicing to see and end my preconceptions, my idea of who I am keeps arising again and again. It isn’t as if you were going to get rid of all thought of self and never be bothered by it again. Please don’t imagine such a thing. But we can with practice begin to see how our cherished ideas of who we are interfere with our actually seeing the circumstances of our life directly, interfere with our responding straightforwardly to the actions that come up, the circumstances that arise. And we become a little more capable of not getting hooked every time by our cherished opinions. And sometimes we are able to respond directly and immediately and to meet someone right here. To actually be present for our life as it occurs. This is what our practice is about: to find out how to be present for the actual moment of our life as it occurs. Our life doesn’t occur a moment ago or in a few minutes. Life occurs only right now. If we have to sort through all

of our baggage before we can meet it, the moment is gone. So we have to begin to have confidence in our immediate response. We have to begin to ask, What is the baggage I carry? If I get upset or excited, who do I think I am right now? Not to get hooked every time by our preconceptions and prejudgments.

I began to study this true person of no rank again recently, because of getting caught in some of my own baggage. My feeling is that the more familiar we are with our habitual baggage, the more possible it might be to move through the circumstances of our life without being tripped up by it. The more we actually see the shadow of ourselves, the more we bring the shadow into the light and own it and acknowledge it, the less likely it is to lead us into inappropriate responses. And if we don't just own it to ourself, if we own it to our friends, they can help us. They can remind us that we have some baggage that might be getting in the way.

I want to own it, right out there, and I want others to keep me honest. I would like to continue to try to find the true person of no rank. To continue to function as best I can as a monk who is practicing together with others, without any special characteristics.

Please really recognize that this you who knows is always with you, never apart from you right where you are. Please try to become familiar with this you that is not an object, this you yourself that is not an object, that is always going in and out of the gates of your face. "The gates of your face" means in and out of all of the five senses, which are always present in this moment.

FEARLESSNESS: THINKING OF THE LATE SHISHIN DAINEI JOHN DANIEL KING, A DHARMA HEIR

We have this gift of life, this opportunity to live this life that is given to us, and we don't know for how long. We don't know what happens next. But we do therefore want to be awake in this life, to actually be here, to be present, to be aware, and not to sleep through it. We want to really deeply consider what we can do to make the gift of this life a gift for all of those around us.

Some time ago I went to a poetry reading, and the poet, Kay Ryan, read her poem "The Niagara River." When I heard it, I reacted to it physically, and the person sitting next to me, whom I didn't know was Kay's partner of thirty years, said something to me at the intermission, that she noticed that I had had a physical reaction to Kay's poems, not just to this one but to this one in particular. And I said, "Yes, 'The Niagara River' was really like a kick in the gut because the day before yesterday, a very dear friend and dharma heir, John King, informed me that he had a diagnosis of inoperable cancer." And Kay's partner told me, "Kay wrote that poem when *I* was diagnosed with cancer." And I had to say that *that's* what was right in front of me, John's imminent death. I think that he was making of his death a gift to everyone.

One of the great virtues of Buddhism is said to be generosity, or *dana,* giving. But the teaching is that a monk doesn't give material things, because a monk is homeless and a mendicant. A monk gives fearlessness. A monk gives the dharma and a monk gives fearlessness. When I first read that, I said, "Oh, I don't know

anything about fearlessness. How can I give fearlessness? I'm a monk and I don't know how to give fearlessness. So I need to study this business of fear and fearlessness." So far, as much as I've studied it, I don't think fearlessness means not ever experiencing fear, but I think it does mean something like not being cowed by it, not being overcome by fear, just noticing—Yes, there's fear—and maybe turning toward it and actually breathing with it and feeling it. Allowing it to arise and to subside and not allowing it to chase us around, making us run off and hide or distract ourselves with foolish activity. We want to *choose* our life in the face of the certainty of our death. There's another quotation, from the Mahabharata, the great Indian classic, where the sage is asked, "Sir, of all the things in life, what is the most amazing?" And the sage answers, "That a person seeing others die all around him never thinks that he will die."

I must say that first week after John told me, I just simply could not let it in. The grief was too much, so I couldn't allow myself even to think about it. But the thing is not to deny it or turn away from it but to recognize it, let the fact of the limited nature of our life be an encouragement to live it well, to live it in a way that benefits everyone, not to get caught up in fear and self-clinging and forget our connection with everything and everyone but to live our life in a way that makes of it a gift for everyone. Whatever we have found to be beneficial to us, can we offer that to others? Whatever has given us great joy, can we find a way to share that with others? Can we take the gift of this life and spread it around to all beings? This, of course, is the bodhisattva vow: "Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken with them. Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them. Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to end them. The buddha way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it." This is the bodhisattva vow; this is the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism: recognizing our total and complete interconnection and interdependence with everything that is, vowing to honor that by waking ourselves up for the benefit of all, sharing this life with all.

I don't know anyone who exemplified that vow more than John did. He made his death a gift to everyone. He was scheduled to teach a class at the Zen center on Dogen Zenji but decided, when he got this diagnosis about a week before the class was to begin, to teach a

class on the dharma of death, which to me is an extraordinarily courageous thing to do, to sit up there with his impending death and teach about the dharma of death. He did a great job, together with another person who practiced with him. He taught by the way he responded to life. His total attention was on how to take care of everyone around him as he was dying.

My questions for you are, “What is the direction *you* want to go in with this gift of life? What’s the most important thing for *you*? How will *you* spend this precious life?”

The *han* is a wooden block that we hit with a mallet, which makes a penetrating sound that calls us to the meditation hall or *zendo.* This verse is often written on the *han,* and it’s often chanted the last thing at night by monks: “May I respectfully remind you, great is the matter of birth and death. All is impermanent, quickly passing. Be awake each moment. Don’t waste this life.” For me, that is the essence of practice: to wake up and see how we are fully connected with everything and we can be of benefit to everything and everyone around us. What is the way we want to live this life? What is hindering us from living this life in the way we want to live it? Do we get caught up in distractions? Do we get caught up in seeking temporary ways to sort of blot out whatever difficulties we have in life? Or do we turn toward difficulties and take care of them? Do we turn toward the fears and be with them with kindness and gentleness? Do we turn toward those who are having difficulty and see if there is a way we can help them? Do we turn toward ourselves when we are in difficulty and give ourselves encouragement and care?

SAYING “YES!”

A group of us went to Japan. We went to stay at Suzuki Roshi’s home temple, Rinso-in, in the small city of Yaizu, where we did a three-week mini–practice period. We had done this once before, and I love to do that because there is a little traditional monk’s training hall at Rinso-in. It has twelve tatami, and it is very intimate, and it has essentially all of the things described in Dogen Zenji’s rules for the pure monastic community. I thought the first time I went that it would be fun to practice in a place that has all the bells and whistles and to try to do all the forms the way Dogen Zenji describes them. And we had varying success. There were those among us who thought the forms were just peachy keen, and there were those among us who thought the forms were just a kind of pain in the neck, particularly in all of the intricate detail that I wanted to do them.

We learned a lot about Zen practice on that first visit, but the most significant thing to me this time was observing or experiencing the way in which Hoitsu Suzuki Roshi, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi’s son, responded to whatever arose, responded to the members of his community and to us, with a presence and availability and unhesitating quality that was remarkable to me. And remarkable to me in that I have this ideal in my mind of the way a monk should respond, and in particular the way an abbess should respond (as I was abbess at the Zen center). But I had a very hard time being present and available to everyone. Because for me, I noticed, there was an idea of me and “I should,” and it interfered with my ability to be as spontaneous as Hoitsu Roshi. And it was very instructive to witness him. I didn’t really get what it was that captured me about

this until I got back and began to think. Because after we left Rinso-in, we visited some other monasteries.

One of the monasteries we went to was Sojiji, one of the two head monasteries of Soto Zen in Japan, which was established by Keizan Zenji. I went there to do a ceremony, and a young monk named Shotokusan was my *jisha* (helper). He was also our guide, so we spent some time with him.

I want to mention two things in particular that were commented on while we were there. The monks were in the middle of a training period. Many of them were brand-new monks, and as we walked around the campus from time to time, we would hear a sort of unison exclamation of "*Hai!*" which means "yes" in Japanese. I asked Shotokusan what that was. "Well, this is the monks getting their *soji* assignments." They were getting their work assignments and saying "Yes!" and rushing off to rake here and sweep there and do whatever. It sounded sort of like boot camp. So we commented on this among ourselves, that this was sort of militaristic. Then there were comments about what sweet guys these were, these monks who were showing us around Sojiji and out around the town, who actually took us to lunch and had noodles with us. What really wonderful, sweet guys they were, so accommodating and so forth. To me, there was a direct connection between this training activity of just saying yes, just doing it, and their availability to "just do it" when showing us around, to simply be present, without any grumbling or withholding—nothing held back.

The direct connection between those two things went in a straight line with what I had noticed about Hoitsu Roshi's ready availability. If you knocked on the door (the family has its own room there), it was, "*Hai,*" yes, what can I do for you? He would drop what he was doing and turn toward you, and be there, right there. So that, in fact, we noticed that we really had to limit ourselves and be sure that we really needed to call on him. Because he was going to respond any time we called on him. Do we really need to disturb his tea, to disturb his dinner, to disturb his time with his family? Do we need to go to him all the time? We began to consider seriously: Can we take care of this ourselves, or do we have to ask for help? Because he was

never going to turn us away, and that became clear. It was never, “I’m too busy now, come back later.”

GLADDENING THE MIND

I will speak about right effort, which is one of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path, in a moment. But first, I'd like to share with you a wonderful metaphor that occurs in the *Avatamsaka Sutra,* the *Flower Garland Scripture,* which is the sutra on which the Hua-yen school is based. It's said in China that Hua-yen is the philosophy of Zen, and Zen is the practice of Hua-yen. The image that I find so appealing is that of Indra's Net, in which the whole universe is depicted as a vast net, and at each crossing of the threads of the net there is a jewel, and each jewel is reflected in every other jewel, and every other jewel is reflected in each jewel. So this metaphor for the vast interconnectedness of all beings is also a metaphor for dependent coarising—the idea that we arise in response to all of the causes and conditions of each moment, as described by the Buddha. We arise fresh in each moment in response to the causes and conditions of each moment, which is why we say each being is empty of some separate continuous entity. There is no fixedness to us. We are continually responding to the connectedness that exists among all of us. Each of us affects everyone, and everyone affects each of us. So building these bonds of *sangha* are an important part of who we come to be after practicing together with each other. Those we practice with influence us, and they are influenced by us.

I have the great good fortune of having spent some years practicing with many other people, of course. So I think it's really beneficial for us to recognize, each time we encounter another being, that we are already connected just by being alive. We're all living one life in some way. That sense of the vast interconnectedness that exists among all of us has a very important

influence on how we live our life. We recognize that every action that we take has an effect on our life and the lives of those around us. And so we become more awake to the actions we take, the actions of body, speech, and mind.

The sixth part of the Noble Eightfold Path is called “right effort” or “wise effort” or “perfect effort”—there are many ways of translating the Sanskrit word. *Right* is not used in terms of right and wrong but in terms of wise or complete or beneficial. There are four elements to perfect effort. One is relinquishing unwholesome states of mind that have already arisen. The second is avoiding the arising of unwholesome states of mind that have not yet arisen. The third is cultivating wholesome states of mind that have not yet arisen. The fourth is maintaining wholesome states of mind that have arisen. So as we sit in meditation and observe our mind, we see a great deal of activity—or at least I do; do you?

I think many of us don’t really realize how continuously our mind is making stories until we sit still with the intention of just observing it. In the Zen tradition in which I have been trained, our intention is “no thinking.” And it’s just amazing how much thinking occurs. So we need to become familiar with the states of mind that arise and notice if they are unwholesome. *Unwholesome* to me just means that they lead to suffering. There is an ancient Native American story of a young boy who notices such suffering. He goes to his grandmother and says, “Grandmother, Grandmother, I had a dream last night, and there were these two wolves in me who were fighting. And one of them was kind of nice, and the other one was kind of mean, and they were just . . .” And she says, “Yes, son, that often happens that we have these fighting wolves in our mind.” “But Grandmother,” he says, “which one will win?” And she answers, “The one you feed.”

As we observe our mind, we have a choice whether to feed a thought and embellish it and let it grow into a whole story or, when we see it arising, to say, “Oh! Been there, done that, takes me to a hell realm. I don’t think I want to go there.” We can relinquish that thought. Now, that’s easier said than done, of course. Some thoughts are very persistent and are favorites and sort of define who we think we are. We’re reluctant to let them go. But if they lead us to suffering, or if they lead us to harmful actions, what is the intelligent

thing to do? Well, not to go there. At least it seems to me that's the intelligent thing to do. And we're all intelligent people. So when you notice an unwholesome thought, when you notice a thought that leads to suffering, see if you can spot it when it first begins. When it first begins, it doesn't have a lot of momentum behind it, and if you don't feed it, it's not so hard to let it go. But once you start building it up and getting some energy behind it, it's a little harder to stop.

The Buddha said that there are three roots of suffering, these three poisons that are spoken of in the dharma: greed and grasping, hatred or aversion, and delusion or confusion—the biggest delusion being that I exist as a separate entity. What the Buddha discovered when he began to examine reality was impermanence and not-self and *dukkha,* or unsatisfactoriness. So our effort is not to encourage thoughts, not to give a home to thoughts that are tainted by the three poisons of grasping, aversion, and delusion. In addition, however, there is relinquishing thoughts that are harmful, thoughts that cause suffering, thoughts that make us miserable.

I find humor is extremely helpful in my practice. That was a real discovery to me. I didn't realize that I was making myself miserable with my thinking. It completely escaped my notice until one day, when I was in a *sesshin* at Green Gulch and was on my way to the zendo, I passed a pond that is right next to the zendo. It was early twilight of morning, which is a time that I am very fond of. The mist was rising from the pond, there was a great blue heron on the shore, and it was a beautiful morning, as sometimes happens at Green Gulch. I went on into the zendo feeling really, really good. And a little while later, I was feeling really, really bad, and I thought, "Wait, wait! Nothing has happened. I have just been sitting here. I have just been thinking. I did it all myself! Now, how did I do that?" I had been telling myself an old story. I thought, "Whoa, wait a minute. I don't want to go there anymore. If I did it myself, then I'm going to stop doing it." And as I continued sitting, pretty soon that thought came up again, and I went, "Oh, I don't want to get on that train. That train takes me to misery. I don't want to go there."

You can use whatever metaphor comes up for you that will help you spot an unskillful thought and drop it. I had an image once of myself moving a piano and putting it down on my foot. Well, if you

don’t want the piano on your foot, don’t put it there. Find whatever kind of image will help you laugh at yourself a bit instead of castigating yourself for having such thoughts. You could congratulate yourself for noticing the thought so that now you can let it go. I can get into criticizing myself a lot. But it’s much more effective if I congratulate myself for doing something right than if I hit myself over the head for doing something wrong. So that kind of slight switch of saying, “Oh, good, I noticed. Now I can stop,” instead of, “Oh, bad, I’m doing it again”—that slight switch is very, very helpful. It allows you to notice sooner, because instead of getting hit with a stick, you’re going to get a little pat on the back from the one who matters most—yourself.

I noticed somewhere in the early years of my practice that my big effort was to get people to love me. I really wanted people to love me. And what I discovered in practice was that it really didn’t matter what other people thought. The one whose love and appreciation and approval I wanted was right here. I wanted approval from here, and I wouldn’t give it to myself. What I found out was that no matter how much approval I got from outside, it didn’t count if I was not able to appreciate myself and be willing to be who I am. Whatever this is, it has become this over an accumulation of the actions of body, speech, and mind of more than eighty years. It’s my creation in a way. And it’s really helpful if I acknowledge it and befriend this being that I have created with the help of all of the beings with whom I have shared my life.

It’s also helpful when we give our appreciation to others, which is why I find that the cultivation of right effort is the cultivation of wholesome states of mind. For me, the most wholesome states of mind that I have discovered have been gratitude, or gratefulness, and love.

RIGHT WHERE YOU'RE STANDING

I often don't remember my dreams, but here I have a dream I'd like to recollect for you. I was at Green Gulch and I was supposed to be giving a lecture. I was going over to the main house, where the dining room and the kitchen are, looking for someone who was upstairs. I couldn't find the entrance. I was circling around and it got very convoluted—there were other houses there, and all of the houses were sort of on a cliff by the ocean. I was in a "You can't get there from here" kind of place. Coming to this impenetrable stone wall, I said, "Oh, gee, I better go back around the other way." Someone at that point came out on her porch and said, "You can scramble." And I said, "What, up that impenetrable wall?" And she said, "No, right where you're standing." I looked, and right where I was standing there was a hole in the wall, and on the other side was the entrance I was looking for.

And here's an old story about a sailing vessel off the coast of Brazil: The crew had run out of fresh water, and when they spotted another vessel they signaled the ship to please come and meet them, that they were out of fresh water, which is a very dangerous thing on the ocean. They were out of sight of land. And so they signaled, "We need water. We'll send some boats over." And they got back the signal, "Put down your buckets where you are." Although they were out of sight of land, they were where the Amazon River empties into the ocean. It's such a massive river that even out of sight of land, there is still fresh water. So, "Put down your buckets where you are." Our practice and our realization are right where we are. There is nothing missing right here.

There is an enlightenment story in the *Dentoroku* (Transmission of Light)—the stories that Keizan Zenji compiled of the enlightenment experiences or koans related to each of the ancestors of the Soto lineage—that I want to share with you from Lex Hix-on's translation in *Living Buddha Zen* (Transmission no. 40):

> The living Buddha Tao Ying enters the Dharma Hall and remarks to the assembled practitioners: "If you wish to attain a limitless result, you must become a limitless being. Since you already are such a being, why become anxious to bring about any such result?"

So are we practicing just to express this limitless being, or because we think we're not a limitless being? And once we discover we are a limitless being, will we continue practicing? Well, of course. That's what limitless beings do. This is Dogen Zenji's practice-enlightenment, practice-realization. This practice itself expresses the limitlessness that is our essential being.

This question comes up again and again throughout Zen history, "What is it?" Please investigate this: "What is it?" "What is it you're doing here?" I don't ask you to look for the words for it. Words are secondary. I want you to find the feel of it. I want you to find the fire of it. I want you to touch the source of your life force, to feel the joy and the love that can come from living from the source of your being. This is taking refuge: to throw yourself completely into the aliveness of your life. It's pretty risky. You could lose yourself. There's nothing to hold on to.

In the onrushing, kaleidoscopic chaos of our life there is nothing substantial to hold on to. Our lives arise moment after moment after moment, and we can't identify with any of it because it arises and passes away. In the midst of the openness of this question, "What? . . . What? . . . What? . . ." When you touch that really open place, let it enlarge, let it expand, let it explode your limited view of a substantial separate self and allow you to experience the boundlessness of your being. To see yourself in everything. This is what Dongshan meant when he said in his poem "Song of the Jewel Mirror Samadhi": "It's like facing the jewel mirror; / form and image behold each other. /

You are not it. / In truth it is you." This doesn't mean that when he saw his reflection in the stream, he saw that his *reflection* was him. It means that the water was him, the rocks were him, everything . . . the onrushing stream was not separate from him. Wherever he looked was himself as a jeweled mirror. Whatever he saw was not separate. This is awakening to the totality of who you are and what you are. It's not that you disappear. You are you and you are everything, simultaneously. The relative and absolute intermingle and interpenetrate, as we chant in "Merging of Difference and Unity." You are you *and* you are not separate from anything. It begins with breath. Just breathing in and breathing out. What is inside, what is outside? Following your breath in your *hara,* deep at the bottom of your belly, let it out all the way . . . let it go completely. Just exhale and don't worry about the inhale. The exhale will become an inhale of its own. Trust it. There, at the bottom of your breath, between exhale and inhale, is a very quiet moment. Stay right there. Be with whatever arises right there.

This affirmation that we're already complete pervades the teaching of our school. It is its fundamental teaching. Yet we must each investigate it for ourself. Each one of us must explore, "What? What can it mean?": buddha from the beginning. Dogen Zenji's question was, "If we're buddha from the beginning, why do we need to practice?" It was a consuming question for him. He pursued it through practice. Through zazen. Through sitting and attending to breath. Through becoming completely intimate with his innermost request.

What is this intimacy? It begins with yourself, becoming completely intimate with yourself. Through this intimacy with yourself, the possibility of being intimate with another arises. Because he was so intimate with himself, Suzuki Roshi could meet me completely when I bowed to him and jump up and bow back to me before I even knew it. When I was remembering one such moment, I had this deep pain, wondering, Will I ever be able to meet anyone as completely as he meets me? Wearing this robe without settling the great matter is indeed the most painful thing. Yet the "Hsin Hsin Ming" says, "One in all, all in one. If only this is realized, no more worry about not being perfect."

Please stay close to your breath; stay close to just this one, as it is. You will find everything you need right here in this moment.

PART THREE

Seeds of Advice

This section includes answers to questions submitted by practitioners to *Buddhadharma* magazine throughout the years, in a column called “Ask the Teachers.” As one of the teachers who participated in creating the column, I thought it would be helpful to include these contemporary questions of our times and consider them in relationship to Buddha’s ancient teachings. There were two other teachers, Narayan Helen Liebenson and Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, who participated throughout the years, and their answers are available for your perusal in the online archives of the magazine. The following are my responses.

ADDICTED TO MEDITATION

Q: I've been meditating every day for years, and now if I skip a day, I notice that I start to feel crazy and inhuman. It's hard to believe that I spent so much of my life in this state before I took up my practice. Is it possible that meditation can become addictive, with withdrawal symptoms that make life harder than it would be for someone who doesn't meditate at all?

A: Since you don't say what sort of meditation you have been doing daily for years, it's a little hard to respond, but if you are feeling "crazy and inhuman" when you miss a day, something is amiss.

If you are practicing *shamatha* only, I can see how that could have some addictive qualities. The calming and concentration of *shamatha* can become like an opiate if not balanced by *vipassana,* which brings insight, clear seeing, and intuitive cognition of the three marks of existence—namely, the impermanence, suffering, and egolessness of all physical and mental phenomena. The Buddha tried *shamatha* alone and found it does not really effect change because when you get up from sitting, perhaps rested and at peace for a while, the unwholesome mental and physical states inevitably come back. This may be happening with you.

Is your practice balanced, with attention given both to calming and to insight? Are you studying the precepts to clarify your ethical path? Do you have a relationship with a meditation teacher? Are you working with the contents of your mind, or are you trying to suppress them? Are you open to experiencing painful cognitive and emotional states that may arise and dealing with them? Could it be that you are seeking solace more than awakening? And, most important (from a

Mahayana view, at least): Is your practice first and foremost for the benefit, or liberation, of all beings?

ABORTION

Q: A friend of mine is considering getting an abortion. She asked me for advice, but as a Buddhist, I don't really know what to say. I'm concerned that it violates the first precept and will have negative karmic consequences, but in my heart, it feels more complicated than that. How would you counsel someone in my friend's situation?

A: The Dalai Lama has said, "Of course, abortion, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is an act of killing and is negative, generally speaking. But it depends on the circumstances. . . . I think abortion should be approved or disapproved according to each circumstance" (*New York Times,* November 28, 1993).

In order to counsel someone, we need to know about the particular circumstances. I would not categorically say every abortion is wrong. There is a guideline (the first precept, "not to kill") and there are circumstances. Have you listened carefully to your friend to understand her reasons for considering an abortion? What alternatives has she considered? Is it possible for her to carry the child to term and offer it to a couple who is searching for an infant to adopt because they cannot conceive? Or is the mother's life or health threatened by continuing to carry the infant to term? What is the most compassionate response in this situation? That is, what would cause the least suffering for all concerned?

You may wish to read the section on the first precept in Tenshin Reb Anderson's book *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*. There is a thoughtful discussion about abortion there that may help your friend discern whether she can find a way to respond that may cause less suffering.

Whatever course of action your friend chooses, be aware that if death is involved, there will be grief. She'll need to take care of herself and her grief, perhaps by working with her teacher, a therapist, or a grief counselor. She may also find it helpful to take

part in a ceremony calling on support from Jizo Bodhisattva. And, of course, as she is your friend, I hope you will offer her your support as well.

HAVING A TEACHER OR NOT

Q: My teacher died twenty-two years ago. Since then I have maintained my connection to the *sangha* and still practice in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. But that's only two of the three jewels. Am I doing myself and the tradition a disservice by trying to practice Buddhism without a guru? Would I be better off opting for another practice—perhaps secular mindfulness—that I can do without a teacher?

A: Certainly I think practicing the buddha way without a teacher is better than not practicing at all. However, you have not said anything about why you want to practice without a teacher. Do you live in a location where there are no teachers available? Does it feel somehow disloyal to your original teacher for you to work with a new teacher? Have you asked this question of your deceased teacher in your heart during meditation?

If your circumstances are such that you are able to practice with a teacher as well as with a *sangha,* I would recommend doing so, whether you take up Vajrayana practice, "secular mindfulness," Zen, or Insight practice. A teacher can be a mirror to help you see habits of clinging that may be leading you to suffering or to unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind. Good friends in the *sangha* can also be supportive in this way.

Practicing with a teacher also gives you a readily available recipient toward whom you can offer your gratitude for your great good fortune of being alive and born in a precious human body and for meeting the buddha dharma in this life.

THE GAP BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER

Q: Buddhist teachings talk about having no distinction between “self” and “other.” But they also talk about using meditation to discover one’s “true self.” If we’re trying to diminish the gap between self and other, how does discovering one’s self help in that process? When I meditate, I discover more about myself, but that seems to get in the way of dropping my sense of self. So this confuses me a lot!

A: Yes, the Buddha taught about no distinction between “self” and “other,” and he also taught about liberation from the suffering of self-clinging. He taught by sharing his direct experience of liberation. And he taught that a “self” separate from all existence is a construct of the mind and cannot be found in reality. Thus, discovering the “true self” is having the direct experience of identity with all that is; it is “being one with everything.” It is not that we meditate to try to diminish the gap between self and other. Rather, we practice in order to see directly that there never is such a gap in reality. The separation is created by our thoughts and by a lifetime of conditioning.

PASSION

Q: How do we retain passion in life and still follow the teaching that we should accept all of life with equanimity?

A: This “passion in life” that you want to retain, is it different from wholehearted engagement in the practice of the buddha way for the benefit of all beings? Or is it different from deep appreciation and heartfelt gratitude for the gift of life? Does it have anything to do with a gaining idea or getting something you don’t think you have?

According to my dictionary, the origin of the word *passion* is from the Latin verb *pati,* meaning “to suffer.” In English, *passion* refers to strong emotion, which could be either positive or negative, either love or hate. “Equanimity,” on the other hand, means evenness of mind, composure, serenity, tranquillity. It is true that in the buddha dharma we are encouraged to cultivate the four immeasurables, or heavenly abodes: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and

equanimity. I don't see that cultivating equanimity would discourage loving life or loving the world or being joyful, but it would perhaps temper strongly held preferences and opinions and the emotions that accompany them.

My teacher, Suzuki Roshi, encouraged us to appreciate "things as they are." He also said, "Just to be alive is enough." Many Zen teaching stories end with the punch line "Just this!" or "Just this is it." This teaching of accepting all of life with equanimity, or even with gratitude, is a very compassionate one. The events of our life will be whatever they will be, depending on the causes and conditions in any given moment. Of course, our intentions and our actions of body, speech, and mind are part of those causes and conditions. Whatever arises, we are free to choose whether to respond with passion or equanimity.

ANIMALS AND BUDDHA DHARMA

Q: Why is the cruel treatment of animals almost never discussed or questioned within Buddhist circles or in Buddhist magazines? So many Buddhists continue eating meat and wearing leather and fur. I don't understand this. What is your view, and how can we who live by the dharma bring about a change?

A: My view is that we are most effective in bringing about change in the world around us by the example of how we live our own lives. The most convincing argument for treating all beings with kindness and compassion is encountering someone who is doing that wholeheartedly. We feel the effect of their kindness and compassion and also observe that a person who lives like that is generally happy and grateful, as well as kind.

Your question here in *Buddhadharma* will encourage dharma practitioners to think about whether the way we are living is kind to all beings, not only humans. For example, as I was about to say that I never see dharma friends wearing leather or fur, except for shoes, I began to consider whether I might be able to find suit-able footwear that is not made of leather. So I think it is useful to raise the question

so that we may all be more thoughtful in the choices we make. However, we also need to be careful not to fall into the painful state of mind that accompanies being judgmental or critical of others.

While most dharma groups in the United States that I'm familiar with serve only vegetarian foods, it is important for you to realize that there are traditional Buddhist cultures at high altitudes or high latitudes where the climate is not appropriate for a human population to survive solely on the plant foods that grow there. Those cultures have developed in dependence on foods from animal sources.

The most relevant concern, for me, is the inhumane treatment of animals in the commercial mass production of animal foods. I therefore choose to eat a mostly vegan diet, except for some yogurt and cottage cheese and occasionally some fish. I also support People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals in their effort to help people become more aware of the need for more humane treatment of animals grown for food.

REALIZATION OR STILL DELUDED

Q: How do I know if I'm having a moment of realization or if I'm just deluding myself (still in ego)?

A: I think that if there is an actual experience of reality, if you are seeing just this, as it is, you will recognize at once: "*Oh, so that's how it is!*" The unmistakable reality of the experience will be clear. The delusion part is any thought such as "I" am "having" a moment of realization. That is, imagining a "self" separate from some "not-self" is delusion, and imagining a "moment of realization" as an object that can be grasped by a self is also delusion. The very idea of a "self" separate from some "other" is the negation of how we actually exist in the world. Each being includes the whole universe and is included in the whole universe. There is no separation.

There is a verse attributed to a Catholic monk that is pertinent to your question:

I really long to see my God

I ask in every prayer.
But He can't come to visit me
Unless there's no one there.

Once when I was sitting a *sesshin,* my teacher asked us to investigate carefully where we experienced the boundary between self and other. He kept encouraging us to let that boundary expand wider and wider to include more and more. At a certain point, there was the experience of the boundary expanding like a giant balloon without limit. Then I had the thought, "I am in *samadhi*!" and that "I" was like a giant pin puncturing the balloon with a big bang. I almost burst out laughing because it was so clear that my thought of a separate "I" had instantly created a separation where there had been none.

In his essay "Only Buddha and Buddha," Dogen Zenji says, "When you realize buddha dharma, you do not think, 'This is realization just as I expected.' Even if you think so, realization invariably differs from your expectation. Realization is not like your conception of it. . . . Realization does not depend on thoughts but comes forth far beyond them. . . . Know that then, there is no delusion, and there is no realization."

On one of Dogen's teachings, two monks were out walking when one of them pointed to the ground and said, "Right here is the summit of the mystic mountain." The other monk looked down and said, "So it is. What a pity!"

DEEPENING ONE'S PRACTICE WITHOUT RESOURCES

Q: There are lots of Buddhist resources available for the beginner or the person with modest experience (and a good income). But one can only read so many books and attend so many retreats. How does one get through that middle-to-later phase if one can't go live in a monastery or sit with a teacher for several years?

A: When I first asked my teacher, “What’s the big deal about Tassajara?” (our newly opened monastery), he said, “At Tassajara we live together, we sit together, we work together, we eat together. Pretty soon everybody can see who you are. You might as well see it yourself.” At that time I still had children at home and needed to work full-time, so I was able to visit the monastery only during vacations. The rest of the time I threw myself into daily practice at the local Zen center, where I could practice with a teacher and a *sangha.* My husband and I took turns with *sesshin* and childcare.

I don’t know if there is a teacher or a *sangha* available to you, but if your karmic circumstances don’t allow you to go off to a monastery, you need to find a way to invite that kind of mirroring from dharma friends so that you have no place to hide from yourself. Keep asking, What idea of self have I dreamed up today? It doesn’t have to be heavy-handed; in fact it can be quite light-hearted. But over time, it becomes very intimate and direct.

Our practice matures by bringing it into all aspects of our daily life. If your ultimate goal is to cultivate a constant awareness of the present moment so that all the actions of body, speech, and mind are in accord with buddha mind, be aware that this is the work of a whole lifetime (or many lifetimes). So we should not be too impatient with ourselves.

The practice of kindness and compassion begins right here. However, we do want to keep allowing our *kleshas* into our awareness so we have the possibility of letting them go rather than acting them out.

An intimate relationship with a teacher you respect, one who comes to know you well, is especially important. You don’t have to live in a monastery with your teacher, but you do need to have some kind of ongoing relationship, perhaps through letters and phone calls in between face-to-face visits.

I assume that you have a daily practice. If there is a way for you to practice with others at least some of the time, then do.

If there is no nearby group, could you help provide a practice opportunity for others? Perhaps you could invite your teacher to visit and teach from time to time.

DEPRESSION

Q: How does a meditator deal with episodes of major depression?

A: Since my personal practice these days has gravitated so strongly toward the cultivation of *metta,* or loving-kindness, my first response is to recommend that you regularly give yourself as much *metta* as you can muster, especially when you are feeling depressed. But I know that major depression is a serious illness and I am not trained to treat it, so I turned to two of my good friends, who are trained and licensed psychotherapists as well as lay Zen teachers, for a more informed response to your question.

One suggested that it's good to practice with others at least three times a week. You don't want to become isolated. She also explained that much of depression is brain chemistry, and that if you get your heart rate up for twenty minutes a day by brisk walking, biking, swimming, or running, you will increase your serotonin and dopamine levels as well as produce endorphins. All of these, she says, will help undermine your depression.

She pointed out that it's helpful to be mindful of what you are running in your head. If you are getting caught in negative loops, it's good to pause when you notice it, then congratulate yourself for having noticed and find something (anything) that you can appreciate in your surroundings, even if it's just a pleasing color. It's helpful to continue this practice of appreciation whenever you think of it.

My other Zen psychotherapist friend explained that sometimes meditators blame themselves for feeling depressed, as if they were in control of the cause of their depression ("I'm in pain and it's my fault"). She points out that many of us have learned that feeling bad means we *are* bad, and so we may try to get rid of or fix or talk ourselves out of an experience that may be numbing for some and excruciating for others.

She notes that an experienced teacher will invite a student to accept what is happening as what is happening and not put a story on top of present experience. The teacher can offer this as a supportive step toward accepting a discouraging internal experience

as it is—discouraging—while acknowledging that this is difficult for most of us because our common human tendency is to run away from pain.

She cautions that when we are engaged in honest meditation, we may discern that meditation is not at all helpful with the pain we are feeling right here, right now, and that sometimes we need to turn away from our suffering as the most compassionate response.

Honest discernment, she explains, helps us tap into whether to keep sitting on a knee that is getting swollen or relate to a throbbing toothache or sciatica. She suggests that we may need to take a break from meditation for a while and that the teacher can offer deep listening company as to the best course of action in *this* moment, and then the next.

REINCARNATION

Q: I was raised a Christian and taught that there is an eternal soul that leaves the body upon death and goes to heaven or hell. While I am now a Buddhist practitioner, my early religious upbringing has remained a problem. My logical brain tells me there must be something that animates a being and leaves the body when it dies; after all, one can tell the difference between a corpse and a living being.

In the Theravada tradition, we have the Jataka tales that describe Gautama's previous lives. In the Zen tradition, Jiyu-Kennett Roshi describes her former lives in her autobiography, *The Wild, White Goose*. In the Vajrayana tradition of Tibet, there is the *tulku* tradition with the intentional reincarnation of realized beings such as the Dalai Lama.

Please help me understand the Buddhist concept of what is reborn or reincarnated. What is it that is never born yet never dies? Is it consciousness? Awareness? Is it empty? It seems like an eternal soul to me.

A: This question of "What happens when we die?" or "Does anything continue, and if so, what?" has been very compelling for many

thoughtful people over the centuries. In Zen literature we encounter it, among other places, in the *Blue Cliff Record,* Case 55, “Tao Wu’s Condolence Call”:

> Tao Wu and Chien Yuan went to a house to make a condolence call. Yuan hit the coffin and said, “Alive or dead?” Wu said, “I won’t say alive and I won’t say dead.” Yuan said, “Why won’t you say?” Wu said, “I won’t say.” Halfway back, as they were returning, Yuan said, “Tell me right away, Teacher; if you don’t tell me, I’ll hit you.” Wu said, “You may hit me, but I won’t say.” Yuan then hit him.
>
> Later, Tao Wu passed on. Yuan went to Shih Shuang and brought up the foregoing story. Shuang said, “I won’t say alive and I won’t say dead.” Yuan said, “Why won’t you say?” Shuang said, “I won’t say, I won’t say.” At these words Yuan had an insight.

In my opinion, the principal teaching of this story is that each of us must personally struggle with these fundamental questions of birth and death; no one else can answer them for us.

My late husband had a favorite story about Pavlov, who apparently had devoted disciples present as he lay on his deathbed. As it was snowing, one of his disciples went outside and brought Pavlov some snow on a plate. Pavlov looked at it thoughtfully for a time as it was melting on the plate and then said, “Oh, so *that’s* how it is!” and died.

As far as I know, every religious tradition has some story of what happens when this body dies and a suggestion of something that continues. The importance of how we live our lives, and the teaching that our volitional actions of body, speech, and mind have consequences and will affect what happens next, are also part of all the religious traditions with which I am familiar.

Speculating about the great matter of birth and death may not offer as much ease as making your best effort to cultivate the six perfections or seeing the buddha in everyone. Frankly, at this stage of my life, with diminishing energy and some mobility issues, my focus is on cultivating loving-kindness for everyone and making my

best effort to follow the golden rule of always treating everyone as I would wish to be treated.

For me, the effort in practice is better spent on developing the capacity to fully experience the present moment so I may be more able to experience what is happening as I breathe my last breath. When my time comes, I truly hope I may be able to meet this great mystery with ease and curiosity.

PRACTICING MORE THAN ONE BUDDHIST TRADITION

Q: I don't identify exclusively with any one Buddhist tradition but rather find it helpful to learn from various ones, such as Zen, Vajrayana, Theravada, and Pure Land. Sometimes I'm criticized for not focusing solely on one tradition, but I don't see what the problem is. Why shouldn't we make the most of this incredible opportunity to learn from the many Buddhist traditions that have come to the West? After all, I even see Buddhist teachers studying with teachers outside of their tradition.

A: I agree with you that there is much to learn from each of the Buddhist traditions that are now available to us in the West. In the early years, San Francisco Zen Center hosted many Buddhist teachers from different traditions, and I appreciated the opportunity to hear them teach. Over the years, I have done retreats with teachers trained in the various schools of Zen, Vajrayana, and Insight Meditation, and I have been inspired by many teachers who are living their lives guided by the teachings of the Buddha.

However, once you make a strong connection with a teacher who inspires you, you should consider moving from search mode to engagement. When I first met Suzuki Roshi, I thought, "I want to be like him!" The best teacher for you is someone who inspires you by the wisdom and compassion you see in the teacher as she or he goes about daily life and interacts with the people around her or him.

I wouldn't recommend engaging with multiple teachers at once. It's best to give your full attention and effort to one teacher and *sangha.* If the *sangha* has multiple teachers available, you may need to speak one-on-one with several teachers to discern who is the best fit as a primary teacher for you. Then ask, Are you willing to sit down for a while and commit to a teacher, *sangha,* and practice?

REMAINING OPEN TO OTHER BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Q: I am a Zen Buddhist practitioner, and I live many states away from the order with which I practice, so most of the time I practice alone, even though there is a large community of Tibetan Buddhists and teachers nearby. I feel an affinity with Zen Buddhism, and I wonder about that attachment. Am I missing something by not opening myself to the teachings of those where I live?

A: When you refer to the order with which you practice being many states away, I wonder whether you have a relationship with a teacher there? If so, I would suggest that you explore this question with him or her, especially if you have taken refuge or received the precepts in that order.

While it is true that the style and forms of practice in Zen and Vajrayana are different, there is one buddha dharma. In fact, if the practice of the Tibetan *sangha* in your area is in the Dzogchen or Mahamudra tradition, you may notice a similarity in the style of meditation to the Zen meditation with which you are familiar. If your teacher has no objection, I would encourage you to explore whether you may benefit from having a relationship with a *sangha* and people to practice with on a regular basis where you are.

SHARING DHARMA WITH CHILDREN

Q: I have two sons, one seven and the other fourteen. I'd like to introduce them to meditation and the Buddhist teachings, but it's difficult to compete with Nintendo games, favorite television shows, and all the other exciting and flashy things kids gravitate to these days. How can I share the gift of dharma with my sons without trying to force it on them and potentially turn them off it altogether?

A: My first suggestion is to take good care of your own practice so that you are cultivating qualities such as patience, listening to your children attentively, and responding from your heart. Cultivate the four immeasurables—loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—so your children can notice and appreciate that something interesting is happening with you as you practice. If you practice with a *sangha,* your children may also notice that your *sangha* friends have some of these pleasing qualities as well.

I was somewhat older when I began to practice, and my children were older as well. Friends of mine who introduced their children to the dharma at a young age found it helpful to spend time with them at retreat centers and residential practice communities where they were introduced to the experience of *sangha* and brought into closer relationship with nature. Some centers, such as Green Gulch Farm, also provide children's programs that help introduce meditation and mindfulness practices in a fun and kid-friendly way.

It's important that meditation not become a chore for children. In Thich Nhat Hanh's community, family retreats introduce children to some engaging ways of doing meditation. For example, children collect pebbles and then on each breath place a pebble from one pile to the next pile. They chant with their breath, "In, out, deep, slow, calm, ease, smile, release, pleasant moment, wonderful moment." They also do an orange-eating meditation, peeling an orange and eating it section by section very mindfully, feeling, smelling, and tasting the orange at each stage of the process.

At home you can also find opportunities to share the dharma with your children. One of my dharma friends regularly chanted the meal chant before family meals and read her children storybooks about the life of the Buddha and the Jataka tales. She also created an environment of practice, with altars in the children's rooms and

elsewhere in the house. My friend's children have since grown into exemplary adults. I deeply respect the thoroughgoing atmosphere of continuous practice that she and her husband shared with their children and continue to manifest.

FEELING LIKE AN ALIEN IN THE WORLD

Q: There are times on the path when I feel isolated from society and the people around me. Perversely, this always seems to be when I am meditating the most and really clearing my head. Superficialities and consumptive tendencies seem very exaggerated, and I find myself feeling alien in the world around me. I don't think this is the proper response. What can be done to combat this?

A: You seem to be asking what can be done to combat the alienation you experience when you see the exaggerated consumptive tendencies of our society. Indeed, we have an extensive advertising industry designed to promote and further exaggerate these tendencies. But even in the Buddha's lifetime, he spoke of greed as one of the "three poisons" that cause suffering in our life. In the teaching of the six realms of existence, beings in the hungry ghost realm (the realm of insatiability) are depicted as having large bellies and thread-like necks, so it is impossible for them ever to fill their bellies. If you can see greed as an affliction, you may be able to cultivate compassion for those beings with exaggerated consumptive tendencies, rather than a sense of alienation.

Instead of judging yourself (that is, "I don't think this is the proper response"), you might cultivate gratitude for your good fortune at having met the buddha dharma and for the teachers and companions on the path who have welcomed you and may have demonstrated to you a more compassionate way to live this precious human life.

Are you familiar with the practice of cultivating the four heavenly abodes (the *brahmaviharas*)? They are *metta* (limitless loving-kindness toward all beings), *karuna* (limitless compassion toward all beings), *mudita* (limitless joy at the liberation of all beings), and

upeksha (limitless equanimity toward all beings). Traditionally, one always begins the practice with oneself. For example: “May I be happy. May I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May I have ease of well-being,” and so on. Then one moves outward to those who are near and dear, followed by those toward whom we feel indifferent. Finally, we include those who give rise to difficult feelings in us, until we can truly extend our heartfelt loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity to all beings without exception.

By cultivating these qualities, we can begin to be more aware of our deep connectedness with all beings and alleviate the suffering of alienation.

BEING ORDAINED TO BE ENLIGHTENED: TRUE OR FALSE?

Q: There seems to exist an unstated, though powerful, suggestion that one must become a monk or nun to attain enlightenment. I sense this especially in the Theravada tradition, and have seen it in this magazine and elsewhere roughly stated by various monastics who maintain that the whole point of monasticism is to display and preserve the human ideal that all practitioners should strive toward. They seem to imply that while meditation and other practices can help a layperson suffer less, a layperson is inherently spiritually inferior because his or her life cannot be free of attachment. So my question is this: Is there truly an impenetrable ceiling over laypeople with regard to liberation? Must you necessarily abandon your familial obligations to find complete liberation?

A: Early in my practice I surely thought that being ordained was more special than being an ordinary layperson, but as I look back, I think that I was projecting that specialness onto the ordained practitioners. Certainly, Suzuki Roshi never made me feel that there was something essential missing from my lay practice. He encouraged us to see buddha in everyone, and I felt that he even saw buddha in

me. And in the Zen tradition there are several very famous lay practitioners in the literature, for example Vimalakirti and Layman Pang and his daughter.

My immediate and simple answer to your question is, “No, there is not an impenetrable ceiling over laypeople with regard to liberation.” That said, receiving the monastic precepts in a solemn ceremony in the presence of your *sangha* and family members is certainly a great support for committed practice. You are taking vows in their presence, much as we do in weddings, saying, “This is how I want to live my life. Please help and support me to keep these vows.”

In our tradition we may receive the sixteen bodhisattva precepts as a layperson in a ceremony called *jukai* (literally “receiving precepts”) or *zaike tokudo,* which translates as “remaining at home and attaining the Way.” The ceremony for monastics (with the same sixteen precepts) is called *shukke tokudo,* which means “leaving home and attaining the Way.” For home leavers there is the addition of shaving the head, which is symbolic of renunciation, and receiving priest’s robes and bowls. Lay practitioners receive a smaller version of the robe, called a *rakusu*.

For some years now in our tradition, a number of the fully ordained priests (those who have completed their formal training and been recognized as teachers in a ceremony referred to as dharma transmission) have recognized some of their committed lay students as ready to teach and have done a ceremony with them, which we are calling Lay Teacher Entrustment. As far as I know, there is not an equivalent practice in Japan. I don’t know about other Asian Buddhist schools.

In my view, the whole point of dharma practice is to live your life in a way that benefits all beings. We aspire to liberation not for any self-centered idea but so that we can know more clearly how to be of maximum benefit. The Buddha gives us a pretty good idea of what we should be working on in the *Metta Sutra* when he says, “This is what should be accomplished by the one who is wise, who seeks the good and has obtained peace. Let one be strenuous, upright and sincere, without pride, easily contented and joyous.

“Let one not be submerged by the things of the world. Let one be wise but not puffed up, and let one not desire great possessions,

even for one's family; let one do nothing that is mean or that the wise would reprove." With this as our foundation, we can begin cultivating loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—the four "heavenly abodes." Or we can study and practice any of the great riches of dharma teachings, which we are fortunate to have so freely available in English in this century here in the West.

For the last fifty years or so we have also been very fortunate to have access to many excellent dharma teachers trained in many different Asian countries, as well as their Western students who are now teachers. Let us rejoice at our good fortune and practice diligently as either householders or home leavers to help alleviate suffering in any way we can.

NONVIOLENCE IN THE MIDST OF VIOLENCE

Q: Buddhism as a whole speaks eloquently on issues such as managing suffering and dealing with violence after it has occurred, with forgiveness, acceptance, and letting go. But in my experience, it has been largely silent on dealing with issues of violence as they are occurring. So here is my question: In day-to-day society—be it in a business setting, family setting, or more public setting—we often witness mistreatment such as emotional violence, bullying, and disenfranchisement being perpetrated against ourselves or others.

Does the dharma provide any teaching on how to deal with this kind of situation—not after it has happened, but while it is happening? Should we respond, and if so, how should we respond?

I ask this question because it seems that we are often advised to take the "nonviolent" approach, which is often interpreted as taking a passive, nonreactive approach.

A: A monk asked Yunmen, "What is the teaching of the Buddha's whole lifetime?" Yunmen replied, "An appropriate response." I have also heard this translated as "Teaching facing oneness," and I have been told that the characters literally read "one meets one" or "each meets each." In a situation such as you described, I think it means to

be totally present in order to discern whether there is a way to intervene without escalating the violence.

As for the Buddha's teaching on stopping violence, you might read the "*Angulimala Sutra:* About Angulimala" online at www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.086.than.html. Although the Buddha called on some supernatural powers to get Angulimala's attention and to prevent Angulimala from harming him, he clearly said to Angulimala, "You must stop your murderous ways."

In the ninth precept of the Order of Interbeing, founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, is the teaching, "Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice even when doing so may threaten your own safety." And the twelfth precept is, "Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war."

When you ask "Should we respond?" and "How should we respond?" you are bringing up the teaching of the Buddha's whole lifetime of practice and his response to "just this" or "things as they are," as Suzuki Roshi used to say. Our whole life of practicing the buddha dharma is to study how best to respond to whatever we meet with wisdom and compassion. My teacher often says, "Respond, don't react."

We cultivate the four immeasurables (loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity) and the six *paramitas*, or "perfections"—the virtues perfected by an awakening being in the course of her or his development: *dana paramita* (generosity), *sila paramita* (discipline or precepts), *kshanti paramita* (patience or forbearance), *virya paramita* (energy or exertion), *dhyana paramita* (meditation), *prajna paramita* (wisdom)—all to be able to respond to whatever we may meet in the most beneficial way. Moreover, the first pure precept is to refrain from all harmful actions.

So my answer to you is: Yes, we should respond to everything we encounter with an open and loving heart, without anger or judgment, trying to connect with the buddha in the person we are responding to. Falling into old habits of anger and judgment just puts us in a hell realm along with those who may be perpetrating the violence. I appreciate a prayer of the great teacher Shantideva, "May those whose hell it is to hurt and hate be turned into lovers bringing flowers." And I try to heed the warning of Mark Twain, "Anger is an

acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured."

You have raised a big question. How shall we respond? How shall we respond to life in each moment?

Learning nonreactivity and calmness is the teaching of a whole lifetime, so we need not be discouraged if we are not sure what to do or how to intervene to resolve an angry or violent situation. Asking oneself these questions means that compassion and kindness are already established.

At times, one's calmness alone will make an impression; at other times, one might need to call the police or Child Protective Services. In order to make the most skillful response, we need to stay awake and stay present and connected as much as we can in each moment. Above all, bring compassion to violence, even when it is directed at you.

LONG RETREATS VERSUS EVERYDAY LIFE AS PRACTICE

Q: At what point is it appropriate to consider doing a three-year retreat or very long-term, isolated meditation? How can we be of greatest benefit to sentient beings? Is it by participating in everyday family and community life or by practicing as a hermit yogi?

A: I have no direct personal experience of long solo dharma retreats, as the Japanese Zen tradition in which I have trained puts great emphasis on training in close interaction within a group. I have spent many years practicing in a residential *sangha.*

I do, however, have two friends whom I deeply respect who have trained in other traditions in which solo retreats are highly valued, and they have shared with me some of their experience. First, they chose to do a solo retreat (months, but not years) because their teachers recommended it. Second, they planned ahead with their teachers a daily schedule of meditation, meals, work, study, and devotional activities (prostrations, chanting, and so on) that they

followed meticulously. Both are now mature and respected dharma teachers, and they both continue to do solo retreats.

As you suggest, motivation is a paramount consideration. I hope you continue to make choices in your life guided by your question, “How can we be of greatest benefit to sentient beings?” Each of us has different karmic tendencies and conditioning and circumstances, so there is no “one size fits all” answer to your question of whether participating in everyday family and community life or practicing as a hermit yogi is of greater benefit. Also, one might find that the most appropriate response to this or similar questions may change at different times in one’s life. That is why it is helpful to make significant decisions in consultation with a teacher whom you respect and who knows you. If you have already made a commitment to family life, the whole family should be included in such a decision.

I am confident that if our vow is to live our life so as to benefit all beings, we will find a way to cultivate the wisdom and compassion necessary to do so wherever we may be practicing. And I think the three treasures of Buddha, dharma, and *sangha* are invaluable supports in fulfilling our vow.

UNDERSTANDING THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS

Q: In dharma talks, the causes of suffering are often discussed, as is the cessation of suffering. I have been a Buddhist for about eighteen years, and while I feel I have an understanding and acceptance of the causes of personal suffering, I find it difficult to understand the causes of suffering when we suffer *for others*. Such suffering is not due to ignorance or attachment. It’s raw pain when I see an animal beaten or a child abused or prisoners tortured. The suffering of others makes me feel so helpless. How can I accept this?

A: The pain you speak of when you witness the suffering of others is what we mean when we speak of compassion (to suffer with). It is a natural feeling because of the inherent connection of all beings. And what a cruel world we might live in if we did not have the capacity for compassion.

Like the Buddha, you may have been working on this question since you were a child. As a child, he went to watch the spring celebration of the first plowing of the fields to prepare for planting, and during the colorful celebratory festival in which his father ceremoniously made the first furrow, the young Siddhartha noticed that the plow cut through the underground homes of the insects and worms and exposed them to the birds, who then ate them.

Even today, as we consciously make an effort to live a life of no harm, we discover that we cannot literally follow the first precept of not killing. We must either starve ourselves or eat food that has been alive. Even if we are strict vegetarians, the life of living beings can only be supported by food that has itself been alive.

The important work for us, then, is to remain aware of our intrinsic connection with all beings and to continuously cultivate our capacity for the beneficial mental states of loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. How we actually live this precious life we have been given is the most important point. Although we may fervently wish to end all pain in the world, as many before us have wished, the best we may be able to do is not add to it. If we add judgment and anger to the situation, it can only increase the suffering.

My latest inspiration for how to live is this quotation attributed to the Dalai Lama: “Every day, think as you wake up: ‘Today I am fortunate to have woken up. I am alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all of my energies to develop myself to expand my heart out to others for the benefit of all beings.’”

PATTERN OF BEING ARGUMENTATIVE

Q: It seems that sometimes I can’t tolerate interruptions to my self-absorption. Irritations, big and small, intruding on my desire to settle into the false comfort of ego can seemingly produce a “me” that is argumentative, difficult, and short-tempered. I’m guessing that I’m not alone in this. How can we engage emotional provocations and

self-centeredness in ways that turn us toward dharma practice and life?

A: I would say you have already taken the most important step toward answering your question—that is, noticing a habitual pattern that causes a painful result. I am guessing that you noticed this habit while observing your thoughts in meditation. Until we can see for ourselves that our own actions of body, speech, and mind are creating the pain, we think that someone or something outside ourselves (over which we have no control) has to change in order to put an end to the pain. When we notice that it is our own thoughts that make us want the world to change, so as to accommodate our own desires or aversions, we then have choice.

We can cling to that thought, believe it, feed it, and watch it grow from irritation to rage, or from attraction to thirsting desire. Or, in zazen, we can note the first arising of the thought, remember that it can lead to severe pain, and decide to let it go by returning our attention to breath, posture, or physical sensations (which are all occurring in the present moment). In other words, we can see that we do have some control over which thoughts we feed and cling to and which ones we let go.

This is easier said than done. Many of us have some pet thoughts and attitudes, especially about “me” and the world according to “me,” and we are very reluctant to let them go. It is useful when we hear ourselves insisting on our point of view to say to ourselves, as my teacher often did, “Maybe so.” He also said, “You don’t have to invite every thought to sit down and have a cup of tea.”

In addition to letting go of painful thoughts, it is very beneficial to cultivate positive thoughts. In this regard, one teaching I deeply appreciate comes to mind. It is the cultivation of gratitude. This life of ours is a gift. There is a teaching in the Tibetan tradition that everything we have comes to us through the kindness of others (including our bodies), and we have had so many rebirths that all beings have been our mother in some life. Therefore we should be as grateful to all beings as we are to our mother in this life.

Meditation is the key resource for studying our mind and cultivating more skillful habits of thought.

WRATHFUL TEACHERS

Q: Is it ever appropriate for a teacher to be wrathful with a student? If so, how can wrathfulness be used effectively to teach a student, and when is it potentially harmful? How does a student know when a teacher's wrathfulness is skillful means rather than a symptom of the teacher's own problems?

A: A great deal depends on the mutual trust already established between a teacher and a student. When I began to practice with Suzuki Roshi, I was very unsure of myself and sometimes self-disparaging. In that circumstance he was very kind and encouraging, sometimes even complimenting me on the sincerity of my practice.

There was an event in the history of our *sangha* in which Suzuki Roshi was wrathful with the whole *sangha,* and I would call that incident quite skillful as well, because it was so rare that we never forgot it. I was not present because it was my husband's turn to sit *sesshin*. During *sesshin* one morning, the person who rang the wake-up bell misread his clock and rang the bell an hour early. Then he realized it and went around saying, "I'm sorry, it's an hour early. Go back to bed." The only ones who went to the zendo were Suzuki Roshi, my husband, and one other student. An hour later the bell rang again and everyone else came and began to sit zazen. Then Suzuki Roshi began to speak, growling, "You are all foxes and badgers sleeping in your zazen caves. When the bell rings, get up and go to the zendo! Tell me, Who is priest and who is layman?"

I think we all learned from this how important it is in Zen training to follow the schedule completely. Do whatever is next. Don't pick and choose. *Just do it!* But more important, I think, is my appreciation of how completely Roshi threw himself into showing us the spirit of wholehearted practice. He exhausted himself for us to be sure we *got it,* that this practice was not some exotic trip or a passing fad but a matter of life and death that required an equal commitment from us to meet him completely with our whole heart.

ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Q: I am a recent practitioner of the dharma. For the past ten years I have been living in a harmful marriage in a country across the ocean from my birthplace. My husband is a very angry person, and he takes out his anger on me, criticizing me and punishing me. It's very hard even to discuss splitting up, because he immediately brings our children into things. I just read on your website that it is foolish to stay in a bad marriage, but I am worried that our children will be damaged by a divorce, and I know my husband won't let me go easily. It's quite possible he will become even more spiteful and abusive. To some degree I think everything I've been through has led me to the buddha dharma, so in a sense, I am grateful for my suffering. But I do need more peace in my life ultimately. Can you please give me some advice?

A: When I read your letter, all my old, habitual, feminist alarms went off: "Angry husband!" "Abusive marriage!" "What are her rights with regard to custody and child support?" and so on. Then I remembered that you had presented this question not to a militant feminist magazine but to *Buddhadharma,* expecting a response from a dharma teacher. I asked myself, where are the dharma teachings of loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity in my response? What is the most compassionate response for this whole family?

Certainly I agree that remaining in an abusive marriage is not healthy for you or your spouse or for the children. First, your husband's anger is in itself an affliction, and by indulging it through abusing you, he causes you suffering, sets the stage for unwholesome karmic retribution, and sets a very bad example for the children.

However, there are two ways to end an abusive marriage. One is to end the marriage; the other is to end the abuse. There must have been some shared affection when the two of you decided to marry and when you conceived the children. Sometimes the demands and responsibilities of supporting and caring for a family, or different

cultural expectations, can overshadow the love and affection that created the family.

Disappointment and old habits of fear or anger or blaming may all arise. If you can agree that your marriage, as it is, is not sustainable and that you would like to find a way to save it for the sake of your own happiness as well as that of your children, you may want to work with a trained marriage and family counselor. My European friends assure me that there are counseling resources for couples who encounter these kinds of difficulties in Europe as well as in the United States.

For the sake of the whole family, including your husband, I think you have to be courageous and clear that if he is not willing to work with you on ending the abuse, your only option will be to end the marriage. He needs to understand that whatever he may perceive as your shortcomings, you cannot stay with him to work on mutually satisfying solutions unless he is willing to work on managing his anger, which is not only intolerable to you but, as I said, an extremely bad example for the children.

I can personally attest to the value of asking for help when difficulties arise in a marriage. My husband and I ran into some difficulties in our marriage after some years. It was upsetting and embarrassing and humiliating and all that, as I had thought of myself as a good wife and mother and so forth. But we had to admit we were in trouble, and we benefited greatly from working with a trained counselor who helped us to identify unskillful habits, communicate better, and restore goodwill and trust in each other. We each had to take responsibility for our own contributions to the difficulties and not just blame each other. It was also at this time that we began our dharma practice, partly driven by the fear that our marriage might be failing. Our marriage continued happily for a total of sixty-three years, until my husband's death in 2011.

SEXUALITY IN *SANGHA* OR COMMUNITY

Q: Sexuality doesn't seem to be discussed much in Buddhism, yet it's a powerful biological drive that can be destructive, especially within *sangha.* How does one deal with one's sexuality on an individual level, within *sangha,* and especially with Buddhists in a teaching role?

A: It is my experience that sexuality is much discussed, although perhaps more in one-on-one conversations between teacher and student or in precept study than in dharma talks.

It is true that sexual energy is powerful. Suzuki Roshi once said that sexual energy and artistic energy are very close to zazen energy, "but they've already split off and taken form." They have set up an object of desire. So my first response to your question of "How does one deal with one's sexuality on an individual level?" would be, "With restraint and mindful attentiveness." Note how your mind can grasp an attraction and make it into an obsession—or not. Notice how you can decide to feed the fantasy—or not. I would also suggest talking with your teacher if you are attracted to someone before initiating a relationship. I always suggest to my students that they develop a friendship first before proceeding toward a romantic involvement.

The third grave precept is "A disciple of the Buddha does not misuse sexuality" (another translation is ". . . is not sexually greedy"). In our guidelines for residents practicing at San Francisco Zen Center, the precepts are referred to as follows: "All residential practitioners are expected to practice in relation to the sixteen bodhisattva precepts. . . . In addition, all residential practitioners agree not to initiate a sexual and/or intimate relationship with any other resident at the Zen center until both parties have been in residence at the practice center for at least six months. This agreement allows each new resident the opportunity to fully engage in a concentrated period of practice without distraction." There is also the understanding that if a student finds himself or herself attracted to another student, he or she will talk with a teacher before initiating an intimate relationship. This is one way of handling sexual issues in a residential *sangha.*

Nonresidential practitioners, especially if there is teacher-student involvement, should try their best to find another, uninvolved, teacher with whom to discuss any sexual situations or problems of which they are aware.

When training teachers, it is very important to teach them not only about the ethical restraints necessary to carry out the role of spiritual advisors but also about projection and transference. We should understand that students often project some ideal onto a teacher and "fall in love" with the projection. Teachers in training should learn how to recognize and avoid the pitfalls of both negative and positive projections in the teacher-student relationship, and teachers of teachers must be very clear that if a sexual attraction occurs in a teacher-student relationship, the teacher may not act upon the romantic relationship unless or until the teacher-student relationship has ended. Even then, a break of six months to a year is desirable to work on projections or other emotional issues pertinent to a student-teacher relationship.

In the traditions in which the teachers are celibate monks or nuns, sexual difficulties are referred to the most senior teachers. In other traditions, I think it is important that all teachers have some peer group where there is mutual trust and respect and where ethical questions can be discussed openly and freely. Questions regarding appropriate or inappropriate sexual conduct are frequently discussed, for example, at meetings of the American Zen Teachers Association and at meetings of teachers who share a particular lineage.

FIXING OTHERS

Q: Someone very close to me is going through a great deal of psychological difficulty and can't find her way in life. I feel strongly that she would benefit from being able to take her thoughts less seriously, something I feel I've been learning from meditation. Yet she is clearly not ready to take up Buddhism or even meditation, although in the long run I think she might. I would like to help her out

now and to help her find her way to the path. How can I do that without seeming to preach Buddhism or trying to make her take up an activity she doesn't feel ready for?

A: It is very difficult when someone close to us is experiencing emotional difficulties, and it's quite natural to want to offer the person what has been helpful to us. However, the most helpful thing may be to give your friend the gift of listening. If you can offer your friend your full attention, expressing your care and concern free of judgment, it may give the person an opportunity to explore with you what is happening with her or him. A friend once said to me in exasperation, "*Blanche,* I don't want you to fix it, I just want you to listen to me!" Although I often remember her admonition and the passion with which she said it, I still fall into that old habit too often.

If your friend can see a growing capacity for kindness and compassion in you as a result of your own practice, the person may become curious enough to explore what it is you are doing. The most important thing is for you to be able to see your friend's wholeness as well as pain. If your care is tainted with judgment, it will be hard for the person to hear your genuine concern. It is said that the near enemy of compassion is pity.

I certainly agree that we all benefit when we take our thoughts less seriously and recognize them as just thoughts rather than reality itself. In the Soto Zen tradition, Dogen Zenji's instructions say, "Think of not thinking. How do you think of not thinking? Nonthinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen."

Although I have found that Zen practice is not something someone can do because someone else thinks it is a good idea, you might mention how much help your practice has been to you. If your friend shows any interest, you could invite the person to join you on a visit to an introductory meditation class if there is a dharma center or temple or group in your area that offers instruction. Or, if there is a dharma discourse offered by a teacher you respect, you might invite your friend to go with you to hear it. Let your offer be in the interest of sharing something you value with someone you care about rather than something you think will fix what's wrong with the person.

INTERFAITH MARRIAGE

Q: I'm considering getting married, but I'm concerned about how this might conflict with my practice (she is not a Buddhist). How can you come to terms with attachment and ultimately renounce it *and* be married? I'm confused. Please help if you can.

A: You say you are "considering getting married." Does that mean that you have spoken of marriage with your intended? Is she also "considering getting married" to you? If it has gone that far, I assume that you have shared with each other the values and concerns that are important to each of you and that there is significant common ground. I think that is very important to a lasting marriage. Perhaps some of the qualities she appreciates in you are informed and supported by your Buddhist practice and understanding.

You mentioned that "she is not a Buddhist." If you have discussed your own values, concerns, and beliefs with her, she ought to have some sense of the importance of practice in your life. Your concern seems to be that somehow your practice and your marital obligations might conflict. Suzuki Roshi said to me once, "Sometimes when wife begins to practice, husband gets jealous like she has new boyfriend." If this might truly be an issue, you owe it both to yourself and to her to sit down and discuss how you think your practice might affect your married life. I'm thinking of retreat time, *sangha* involvement, formal time with a teacher, your personal meditation practice, and so on. In other words, would the level of your involvement allow for ordinary family life? Since marriage means a most intimate commitment, do you see your continuing practice as supporting and encouraging the development of qualities that would make you a more present and responsive husband (and perhaps also father)?

"Nonattachment" does not mean that we cannot love someone or be committed to a spouse or family. It means that we have understood that all conditioned things are marked by impermanence, not-self, and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). Therefore, we do not cause ourselves misery by clinging to an idea of a substantial, permanent self or other, because we know that everything is changing and contingent on myriad causes and conditions. We make

our best effort to stay in the present moment and to respond compassionately to whatever is directly in front of us rather than cling to any idea. If you have an idea of marriage as something that might interfere with practice rather than as a relationship that enhances your practice opportunities, you might have a concern for self in the back of your mind.

It is good and useful to examine our ideas of who we think we are and to realize that *any* definition limits whatever we are to less than the totality of *just this,* which includes the whole universe and is vaster than we imagine or are able to imagine. And it is useful to notice that clinging to ideas of practice, or of oneself, leads to suffering. So moment after moment, we make our best effort just to practice nonattachment or nonclinging in every situation.

PRACTICING GUILT OR GENEROSITY?

Q: I consider it a bodhisattva practice to make my family and my job my top priorities. But ego makes me feel angry about sacrificing myself, instead of feeling good about being generous. I think I would feel lots of guilt if I didn't behave in a way that helped others—especially my loved ones—feel happy. So am I practicing guilt or generosity?

A: It is very hard for me to answer your question in the abstract. Perhaps you have an exceptionally difficult and demanding family situation with an undue amount of responsibility resting on your shoulders. Or you might be trying to live up to an unrealistic ideal or saintly model of a bodhisattva. Or you might just have a habit of guilt-tripping yourself.

It is good that you are reflecting on your motivation. Even the Dalai Lama tells us that he begins his day by checking his motivation. If he needs to continue to cultivate his bodhisattva vow after fourteen lifetimes as the Dalai Lama, you and I should not be surprised that selfish thoughts arise in us from time to time. So never mind the guilt. Just see it as a mental habit that does not lead to happiness (don't you find that to be so?) and do your best to let it go as soon as

you notice it arising. If you can cultivate gratitude for this human life, seeing it as a gift, then your generosity to others will not feel like “sacrificing” yourself as much as it feels like passing on that gift.

What is this “self” you are sacrificing, and how are you sacrificing it? What is this “ego” that “makes you angry"? Where is this “you” that becomes angry? Does it truly exist separate from those “loved ones?” And how is the happiness of your loved ones different from your own happiness? I suggest that you investigate the story you are telling yourself to see how well it fits what my teacher called “things as they are.” I also suggest that you inject a little humor into your ruminations. (For instance, “This train of thought always takes me to a hell realm. I don’t think I want to get on it today.”)

I think you must be familiar with meditations on loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, as well as the *Metta* (Loving-Kindness) *Sutra*. If you have a tendency to suffer with anger, you may find these meditations beneficial.

REBIRTH AND NO SELF

Q: The doctrine of no self seems to contradict the idea of rebirth. Did the Buddha address this contradiction? How do teachers reconcile this when teaching students like me who’ve grown up with a modern Western mind-set?

A: The notion of rebirth is associated with the understanding of cause and effect, that is, the understanding that all volitional actions (karma) will bear fruit (*vipaka*). In other words, actions have consequences, but intention is critical. Actions taken with a wholesome intention will produce a wholesome result, and actions taken with a harmful intention will produce an unwholesome result. If the action does not mature into a result in this lifetime, it will do so in a subsequent life. Thus, rebirth. The teaching that if we initiate a cause we will experience the effect is important in encouraging ethical conduct and virtuous actions aimed at reducing suffering in the world.

The question is: What is reborn? I once asked a teacher, “What continues life after life?” He responded, “Never mind what continues life after life. What continues moment after moment?” The Buddha taught that our entire experience is accounted for in the five aggregates (*skandhas*): form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. There is no “person” to be found, in the sense of a permanent essence or underlying substance.

In response to your question—“Did the Buddha address this contradiction?”—I recommend an interesting discussion of the Buddha’s response to speculative metaphysical questions in chapter 10 of the *Early Buddhist Discourses,*[1] which includes “The Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire,” Majjhima Nikaya 1.483–88. Basically the Buddha said such questions do not lead to liberation from the cycles of rebirth, so he did not dwell on them.

The bodhisattva vow to live for the benefit of all beings and Suzuki Roshi’s admonition to see buddha in everyone inspire me. I see the teaching of rebirth as simply a support for morally wholesome conduct, and the teaching of no fixed or permanent self as a description of the constantly changing world I see all about me.

ILLNESSES OF THE MIND

Q: Is there a Buddhist perspective regarding practitioners who become afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia? Since the mind is the primary tool with which we work toward the realization of buddha nature and enlightenment, what does it mean if one loses that mind, or loses the capacity to practice, long before one dies?

I’ve been able to find teachings and information on Buddhist skills for caring for loved ones with dementia, but I cannot seem to find anything on the potential quandary of practicing Buddhism if confronted with dementia oneself. What happens to our right effort if we lose the ability to practice or to work with our mind? And what happens to the skillful means we developed for our own death?

A: I don’t know of any explicit teaching on practicing with dementia, except perhaps this mention from Judith Lief in her book *Making Friends with Death,* where she wrote: “I remember hearing the renowned Tibetan teacher His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche talk about getting older. He was in his late seventies at the time. He said that as you get older, you go to extremes, and fundamentally you have only two choices: extremely vast mind or extremely petty mind. There is less and less room in the middle, so you have to make a choice; you can only go one way or the other. Khyentse Rinpoche’s own choice was clear: he continuously radiated that vastness of mind.”[2]

I am grateful that I have not yet personally had the experience of dementia, except for occasional short-term-memory lapses. However, my uncertainty about the very question you have asked is an inspiration for me to practice diligently—now, while I can.

I have had occasion to observe some practitioners who are practicing with dementia. One is a student who had practiced quite sincerely with me in the past but whom I had not seen for a while. She told me that she had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and wished to work with me while she could. I suggested that we study precepts together and sew a *rakusu* (a small dharma robe worn by lay practitioners who have taken refuge and received the sixteen bodhisattva precepts in the Soto Zen tradition) in preparation for *jukai* (the ceremony for receiving precepts). Her sister kindly brought her to the center to study and sew with me regularly. What I noticed was that her sincere intention was clear in the midst of her confusion with details, and her disposition brimmed with gratitude and sweetness.

Then there is a dharma sister with whom I began practice in 1969. As her Alzheimer’s progressed, she bubbled over with childlike affection, greeting all old acquaintances with enthusiastic hugs and delighted expressions of love.

The third person is the great Cambodian teacher Maha Ghosananda. The last time I saw him was at a large dharma teacher’s gathering at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. He clearly seemed to be affected by some kind of senile dementia. When I approached him to pay my respects, he was sitting alone, smiling

broadly. As I came closer, I was overwhelmed by a palpable physical experience of him "suffusing love over the entire world, above, below, and all around without limit," as it says in the *Metta Sutra*. Seeing directly that such a result is possible with a lifetime of practice, I am inspired to practice even more diligently. As Suzuki Roshi said, "Zen is making your best effort in each moment forever."

BALANCING STUDY AND PRACTICE

Q: I've been struggling with the balance between study and practice. How should I go about setting up a plan of study for myself? How do I decide what I should study when there is so much material out there, and are there things that I absolutely must study before going on to more advanced material? Also, do you have any suggestions on how I should balance practice and study? Is there an ideal balance between the two?

A: I wish I knew a little bit more about you so that I could answer you more specifically. For example, in what tradition have you been practicing? Are you practicing with a teacher or a *sangha,* or are you on your own? If you do not have access to a teacher who knows you, then I would suggest that you begin by studying the teachings of contemporary teachers in the tradition that you are practicing—teachings that are directed to practicing students. That is, rather than studying writings about Buddhism, study the writings of teachers who are actually teaching their students, face-to-face. There are so many now.

Below is just a small sample from one tradition. When I began to practice in 1969, there were very few Buddhist books in English, so I couldn't distract myself by reading about practice rather than doing it. Regarding your question about balancing practice and study, I would focus on practice, with study as a guide and encouragement to practice. Ultimately, it's all about how you live your life moment by moment, so do learn about the basic teachings of the Buddha but don't make an intellectual exercise out of it.

If you are practicing Zen, I would recommend *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, or his *Not Always So*. Or try *Returning to Silence,* by Dainin Katagiri; *The Way of Everyday Life* or *The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment* by Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi; *Taking the Path of Zen* or other books by Robert Aitken; *Everyday Zen* or other books by Charlotte Joko Beck; *The Art of Just Sitting,* edited by John Daido Loori; *Subtle Sound,* by Maurine Stuart; *Zen Is Eternal Life,* by Jiyu-Kennett; *The Three Pillars of Zen,* by Philip Kapleau; *Opening the Hand of Thought,* by Kosho Uchiyama; or books by the Chinese Chan masters, such as Master Sheng Yen or Master Hsuan Hua or the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

I've only mentioned books from the Zen tradition, since that is where I have the most experience, but in the same vein of teachers teaching their students, I have learned much from Chögyam Trungpa, Pema Chödrön, and, of course, His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the Vajrayana tradition, as well as from Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Sylvia Boorstein in the Vipassana tradition.

As mentioned earlier, in Buddhism you will hear of the three treasures or three jewels: Buddha, dharma, and *sangha* (teacher, teaching, and community; or awakened one, truth of how things are, and those who practice together). If you do not have a teacher and practice companions, you may want to look for an opportunity to do some retreats or visit an established community for a period of time as a guest student in order to deepen your practice and speak directly with teachers and other students of the dharma.

LIVING THIS LIFE

Q: In Zen Master Hakuin's "Chant in Praise of Zazen," he says:

And if we turn inward and prove our True-nature—
that True-self is no-self,
our own Self is no-self—we go beyond ego and past clever words.

My question is, if there is no self, who is it that keeps getting reincarnated? Doesn't the idea of reincarnation imply that there is some integrated thing or self that can be referred to as existing and that passes from one life to the next?

A: As you might imagine, many of us have wrestled with this question. I believe the Buddha declined to discuss it. As I recall, when he was asked, he said that it was speculation that was not conducive to liberation. I myself cannot answer this question, but I will respond to it as best I can.

I cannot even say what is being referred to by this personal pronoun "I," which I keep using because I don't know how to compose a sentence without a subject. I confess to being agnostic about past and future lives, though I have read many accounts, particularly from the Vajrayana tradition, that sound rather compelling. But I must respond to your sincere question with only my actual experience and not with speculation.

Someone once asked a Zen master, "What happens when you die?" The Zen master responded, "I don't know." The person then said, "What do you mean, you don't know? Aren't you a Zen master?" He replied, "Yes, but I'm not a dead one."

Before we become too concerned with what continues life after life, we need to ask, what is it that continues moment after moment? What is this "self" that we think we are? Can you find it? Can you show it to me? What is it? Where is it? Is there anything apart from the five *skandhas*—form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—that can be pointed to? This is what Hakuin Zenji is speaking about in the poem you shared.

Can you find *any* integrated thing that can be referred to as existing? Or is the arising and passing away of everything in each moment dependent on the causes and conditions present in that moment?

The founder of Soto Zen in Japan, Dogen Zenji, said in *Genjo Koan,* "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened by all things."

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said, "You exist as an idea in your mind." To me it actually seems that I exist as a whole cluster of ideas in my

mind, which includes all the ways in which I identify myself. When I don't limit this whatever-it-is with any definition, it may be possible to experience the unlimited vastness of *just this one,* which includes the whole universe.

When a student once asked Trungpa Rinpoche, "What continues life after life?" Rinpoche replied, "Your bad habits." In fact, as I understand the functioning of karma (which is simply the Sanskrit word for volitional action), what continues is all habit energy, "good" or "bad." If one believes in rebirth and the teaching that all actions have consequences in this life or subsequent lives, one will strive to live a life of nonharm, which will be of benefit to oneself and to all. So even if you are wrong, everyone benefits. On the other hand, if one believes that there is no rebirth and that there may be actions for which there will be no consequences, one may be tempted to act in ways that seem to be beneficial to oneself even if harmful to others. If we are wrong, there may be dire consequences for us.

Therefore, it is prudent to live a moral life and to live as though there were, in fact, future lives in which beings will in some way experience the consequences of actions in this life.

PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS

Q: Buddhism says that there are all kinds of beings out there—buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities—but I can't perceive them. Is there something wrong with me? How do I work with this discrepancy? What do I need to do to be able to feel or perceive them? What will it do for me when I can?

A: My initial response to this question was, "buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities" I understand, but what is this "out there"? I don't want to make light of your question, but perhaps you have a preconceived idea of what such beings might look like as objects—objects somehow separate from yourself as another object.

My understanding of a buddha is one who is fully awake to the nature of reality as it is, one who has such clarity and skill in means that he or she inspires beings to awaken. One aspect of an awake

experience of reality is that self and other are not two—Suzuki Roshi often used to say, “Not one, not two.”

The particular “bodhisattvas” you may have heard about are exemplars of the perfection of qualities we value and cultivate in our practice. For example, Manjushri, the perfect-wisdom bodhisattva, cuts through delusion with his sword, freeing beings to clearly discern the nature of reality. Avalokitesvara, “Hearer of the Cries of the World,” the boundless-compassion bodhisattva, has a thousand hands, with an eye in each one, to see and lend help to suffering beings whenever and wherever they may be. Samantabhadra, the shining-practice or great-activity bodhisattva, who sits on an elephant, demonstrates a constant awareness of his vow to practice with all beings in each activity of life. Both he and the female form Samantabhadri are sometimes called the bodhisattvas of love—not a romantic kind of love that prefers one object over another, but the all-encompassing, selfless love that recognizes our constant, complete connection with all beings.

Is your concern that you don’t perceive these ideal exemplars? But can you perceive moments of wisdom or compassion, true kindness or selfless activity in the beings right in front of you, or in yourself? Are there beings who, by the way they live their lives, inspire you to make an effort to live with greater kindness, compassion, and equanimity? Suzuki Roshi encouraged us to see buddha in everyone. Indeed, Dogen Zenji teaches that “all being, whole being is buddha nature.” According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra,* when Shakyamuni Buddha awoke, he said, “I now see that all beings, without exception, have the wisdom and compassion of the awakened ones, only because of their delusion and attachments they don’t realize it.”

If you and I want to realize and actualize awakened mind in this very body we have been given, we need to understand that we have everything we need right here. There is nothing wrong with us, nothing we need to “get” from “out there.”

STILL SUCCUMBING TO EMOTIONS AND OLD HABITS

Q: I've been a Buddhist for more than twenty years, and I've done a lot of meditation practice. But I've never experienced any real peace or absence of thoughts in my meditation, at least for more than brief moments here and there. I've also had the benefit of many wonderful teachings, and yet I still succumb to my emotions and old habits. More and more I find myself asking "What's the point?" What should I do about this?

A: Your question comes up for many of us. When we first begin meditation practice, quite naturally we expect some result. We may begin with a motivation to "improve" ourselves, to get something we think is missing. Meditation practice certainly does affect us, but not necessarily as we plan or expect.

You don't mention whether you have worked with a meditation teacher or with a group, whether your practice has been continuous or sporadic, or whether you have done long guided retreats. Each of these can be of significant help in dealing with the usual perils and pitfalls that come up for all of us.

Though it is helpful to have some goal at first, it is that very goal-oriented self that turns out to be the main problem. Suzuki Roshi said, "You are perfect just as you are," "You have everything you need," and "Just to be alive is enough." It took me a long time to see the truth in this.

Since you have been meditating for more than twenty years, it is probably important for you to become intimate with that part of you that is calling you to practice. As Master Baizhang said of practice, "There is one who requires it." Coming to know that "one" is coming to know our true self, our deepest nature, which is deeper than any of our wants, dislikes, judgments, or goals.

As for not experiencing the absence of thoughts: none of us do. Just let them come and go, like scenery from a train window. We don't cling to them or reify them, we just return to the breath and posture.

At times, all of us succumb to emotions and old habits. In meditation practice we acknowledge them and notice where we feel them in our body. If we offer our breath and kind attention to the physical sensations, we make room for change. Habits run deep and are hard to change. Master Dongshan said to his teacher, Yunyan, “I still have some habits I have not yet eradicated.” “What have you been practicing?” asked Yunyan. “I haven’t even been practicing the four noble truths,” responded Dongshan. “Are you joyful in this nonpractice?” “It is not without joy,” said Dongshan, “it’s like sweeping excrement into a pile and then finding a jewel in it.” If even the ancients were like this, maybe there is a jewel in that pile for each of us.

STATE OF MIND AND PRACTICE

Q: I’ve been practicing in the Theravada tradition for six years. About seven years ago I was diagnosed with dysthymia (chronic mild depression), which occasionally escalates into full-blown depression. About two and a half years ago I began taking antidepressant medication to control the deeper depressive episodes. The first medication I tried helped for a while and then seemed to quit. The one I’m using now keeps the deep depression at bay, but I think it’s destroying my mind. I’m finding it difficult to concentrate, my memory is deteriorating, and I’m becoming somewhat apathetic.

My state of mind is interfering with my meditation practice. My doctor wants me to give the medication another three months, but I’m afraid my mind will become mush and there will be no hope for my enlightenment in this life.

Since becoming a Buddhist, I’ve wanted to ordain in the Theravada tradition and devote the remainder of my life to intensive practice. But I’m married. I’m also concerned that my current state of mind would lead to failure as a monastic. Any ideas?

A: Practice is to see clearly what actually *is,* as it is. Our effort is to stay with our actual present-moment experience, moment after moment, and not to be distracted by hating what is or wishing for an

imagined fantasy of some experience other than just this one, as it is.

This is not what we want to hear. Most of us, at least those not born into an Asian Buddhist culture, have come to Buddhist practice because of some aspect of *dukkha* in our lives. I have not yet met anyone who diligently practices because she or he is too happy or content. (While *dukkha* is usually translated as "suffering," it is derived from a word that signifies the off-centeredness of a hole in a wheel, thus producing a bumpy ride. So something feels "off" to us, is uncomfortable or needs attention.)

I wonder if, when you started to practice six years ago, you hoped that meditating would end your depressive tendencies. After some years of serious practice, it seems that you have found that meditating can show your state of mind—how it changes, resolves, and changes again to something else. This is exactly the Buddha's teaching of impermanence and no self. You, and indeed all of us, have the painful state of wanting suffering to be gone. Meditation introduces us to our suffering time and again. Only the determination to accept what comes, exactly as it is in our bodies and minds, leads us to see that the wish for what is to be different is *dukkha* itself. Accepting our whole being as it is—its pain, both its physical and psychological elements—is the beginning of equanimity.

You seem to have an idealized notion of monastic life, as if leaving everything that is difficult about your present life and just devoting yourself to meditation would somehow relieve your difficulty. But as the saying goes, "Wherever I go, there I am." The reality of monastic life includes strict inner and outer discipline, little sleep, simple food, and much work on every level to benefit all beings, to help us realize no self, interdependence, and dependent coarising. It does not preclude depression—we all come with our inherent tendencies. Poor memory, apathy, and inability to concentrate are symptoms of depression. It's hard to pay attention when you are depressed and worrying about your mind ending up as mush. On a strictly practical level, you might want to ask your doctor if the prescribed dose of antidepressant is adequate, or explore with your teacher or therapist whether there may be difficult emotions underneath the depression that need your kind attention and care.

Traditionally, in addition to becoming aware of the existence of such feelings, the Buddha taught the practice of meditating on the four immeasurables to help us with such feeling states—not so much to eliminate them as to show us we can equally have feelings of loving-kindness, compassion, pleasure in other people's happiness, and equanimity. We can learn that it is possible to work with our anger and fear rather than pushing them away or being ruled by them.

You and your life as it is need loving attention. If you sincerely ask for help, it will come, though perhaps not as you expect. You don't mention your teacher or a similar connection. Dharma friends can offer real direction and an opportunity for you to discuss your concerns face-to-face.

CONSTANT THINKING

Q: Do buddhas think?

A: The short answer is, yes, buddhas do think. However, I have a bumper sticker on my car that says, "Don't believe everything you think," because so often we identify with our thoughts and set up a self there. We can become quite emotional about being "right" and get into heated arguments and conflicts defending our point of view.

Perhaps if we've been told in meditation instruction not to get carried away by our thoughts, we get the idea that we are supposed to stop thinking. A student once said to Suzuki Roshi, "I just can't stop thinking. What should I do?" Roshi replied, "Is there some problem with thinking?"

The Pali canon is a vast collection of examples of *how* Shakyamuni Buddha thought, and all of the vast literature of teaching and commentary over the last twenty-five hundred years from buddha ancestors of many countries and cultures are examples of how a buddha thinks. A buddha's intention is to free beings from suffering and distress, so he or she clearly observes which actions of body, speech, and mind lead to peace and happiness and which lead to misery and teaches others what he or she has discovered. It

is up to us, then, to train ourselves to relinquish thinking that leads to suffering and to cultivate thinking that leads to happiness.

For example, in the *Dhammapada,* Shakyamuni Buddha teaches:

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind, and suffering follows
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows
Like a never departing shadow.

"He abused me, attacked me, defeated me, robbed me!"
For those carrying on like this, hatred does not end.
"She abused me, attacked me, defeated me, robbed me!"
For those not carrying on like this, hatred ends.

Our effort in zazen is to observe our own thinking and to notice any habitual thought patterns, for example, how often first-person pronouns (I, me, mine) show up. We might notice that in our mind we often set up a boundary between "this" and "that" or "me" and "not me" or "self" and "other." We could explore just where such a boundary is, or if there really is such a boundary outside our thoughts. Could we make it bigger to include more? Could we let it expand to include the whole universe? Or we might notice a habitual tendency toward self-deprecation or self-aggrandizement or a tendency to make judgments about others. Then we can observe whether any of these habitual thought patterns results in peace or stress.

As soon as we notice a stressful thought—such as greed, grasping, craving, envy, aversion, ill will, anger, fear, hatred, or delusion—we can train ourselves to recognize it as unwholesome and let it go.

As soon as we notice a wholesome thought—such as connection, love, kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, gratefulness, generosity, enthusiasm, or devotion—we can train ourselves to recognize it as wholesome and cultivate it.

“Who is it that notices these thoughts as wholesome or unwholesome and responds for the benefit of all beings?” This is an example of how a buddha or bodhisattva thinks.

As we observe our mind at work, notice that it isn’t what comes up but how we think about it that makes all the difference for ourselves and all beings.

LIFE-THREATENING ILLNESS: ACCEPTING IMPERMANENCE BUT HOPING

Q: I received a breast cancer diagnosis in January and have almost finished chemotherapy, which will be followed by radiation treatment. Many cancer survivors say that attitude is key to survival. I understand that having hope and a good attitude, eating the right food, exercising, and so on can probably help, but there is always the possibility that the cancer will recur. Some of this disease is purely genetic; good diet and attitude may make no difference. So I’m confused about where to stand between accepting impermanence and having the hope and desire to live until my old age, which may help my recovery.

A: I see no conflict at all between accepting impermanence and also wanting to live as long as you can. After my own experiences of near-fatal illnesses, it is exactly where I find myself. However, I have one feeling of caution as I read your letter. It is the possibility that if you were to have a recurrence, even after following all the best medical advice available, you might blame yourself because “you didn’t have the right attitude.” Please don’t set yourself up for a guilt trip.

An encounter with impermanence can make one acutely aware, for the first time, of one’s own mortality, and this can be terrifying. As Master Mumon said in one of his commentaries, “You’d better pay attention to what I am saying, or when it comes time for the five elements to separate, you’ll be like a crab in a pot, scrabbling with all eight arms and legs to get out.”

The great teacher Nagarjuna said, “In this world of birth and death, seeing into impermanence *is bodhicitta,* the mind of awakening.” It can turn one’s mind toward practice, as it did for me. I became focused on the question, “How do you live if you know you’re going to die?” In my search, I was introduced to Zen practice and met Suzuki Roshi. He seemed to me to know what I needed to know, and I began to practice with great enthusiasm, like a drowning person grabbing a life preserver. So my experience of a critical illness actually gave me the gift of practice.

The one thing I’ve learned in this life that I want to give to others is this gratitude for everything, including the gift of this precious human life. I hope you will enjoy your gift of life for as long as it is given to you.

GOING FROM ONE TEACHER TO THE NEXT

Q: For the last five years, I have been committed to meditating daily, either at home or at the zendo I currently go to. I also participate in our monthly daylong *sesshins, zazenkais,* and week-long retreats. Actually, practice has gotten to be almost addictive.

I respect and admire my current teacher, but recently I participated in a *zazenkai* with a teacher at another zendo and really liked her dharma talk and the *sangha* members. I originally chose my current zendo mostly because it is near my home, making morning sittings convenient. But after hearing this other teacher’s dharma talk, I got a sense that a teacher-student relationship with her would be more supportive and nurturing.

I feel I’m being disloyal toward my current teacher for considering moving to another one. Yes, “it’s a poor workman who blames his tools.” Am I just imagining that my practice would grow and strengthen with another teacher? What if it really would? I find myself going from one teacher to the next—a few years with one, a few with another. Living in New York, I am fortunate to have a variety of Zen teachers from various schools and backgrounds available to me.

How do you know if you should be with one teacher or another?

A: Your question is very difficult to answer and at the same time very important. As I read it, I was right with you until I came to the part where you said that you find yourself going from one teacher to another. That sounds painful to me. It impedes the development of an intimate, trusting, teacher-student relationship that can facilitate the total surrender of "forgetting the self," "dropping off body and mind," or whatever words we may use to describe the full and complete relinquishment of self. It also suggests to me that you may be hoping to "get" something from a teacher (or from practice) to add to "your" self rather than to let go of any idea of self that separates you from the inherent completeness of the true self.

Suzuki Roshi many times admonished us to sit "with no gaining idea," to "make our best effort in each moment with no gaining idea." This has been a major koan for me. What does it mean to make total effort with no gaining idea? Notice that any gaining idea implies that *just this* is not complete *as it is*.

So the first quality I recommend in a teacher is that he or she sees buddha in you and in everyone. Also ask yourself, do you aspire to *be* like your prospective teacher? Does he or she only talk about wholehearted practice or do it in everyday activity? My first teacher died, and I have had to choose other teachers over the years. Some have been more eloquent than others, but in each case, I believe, how a teacher actually lives is at least as important as what he or she says.

It's also important to find a teacher who can be kind and encouraging when you need encouragement and tough and strict when you are being self-indulgent or self-satisfied. Both the kindness and the strictness are indispensable.

I am happy to know that you have been practicing wholeheartedly with your current teacher and *sangha.* For the benefit of all beings, I wish you many more years of committed practice. I also wish for you the joy of finding and settling on a teacher-student relationship that you can commit to without reservation. That depends as much on you as it depends on the teacher. It is fine (and a part of the Zen tradition) to visit many teachers. But at some point you need to "dig one deep hole instead of many shallow holes," as Suzuki Roshi once said to us.

If you are truly drawn to a new primary teacher and decide to change, that is also all right, if you take care to inform your current teacher of your decision and express your sincere gratitude for all of his or her care and effort on your behalf. You sound like a person who has made a commitment to practice. I sincerely hope that you find the confidence to also make a commitment to a teacher.

TOXIC PEOPLE

Q: Buddhism stresses having compassion for others, trying to reach the "soft spot" in their hearts in order to communicate with them. However, recently, in my own life, I have come to realize that there are people who do *not* wish me well and, in fact, actively pursue harming me in some way. Devious and manipulative people *do* exist, and being in their presence can feel truly toxic. In fact, I've experienced real physical symptoms of illness and weakness when in the presence of such people for too long a time. Is it ever permissible to stop trying to connect with this type of person and just remove oneself as much as possible from his or her negative influence?

A: Indeed, the teaching of the Buddha does emphasize compassion for all beings, as well as the wisdom of no self, as attributes of an awake being. However, I have never seen compassion described as "trying to reach the 'soft spot' in others' hearts in order to communicate with them."

In an issue of *Buddhadharma* (Summer 2006) there is a dharma talk by Master Sheng Yen. On page 42 he says, "Compassion is not sympathy, compassion has no fixed recipients, and compassion is without a goal. Compassion is impartially benefiting all sentient beings in just the right way."

As I understand this teaching, if we are not clinging to self, and if we are impartially compassionate (literally, "with suffering"), we will intuit "just the right way," necessary in *this* particular circumstance to benefit *this* particular being. This can happen because we are actually one with all beings, and if we experience this nonseparation

when we are with the suffering of this being, we will know what to offer that can actually be of benefit. Compassion might be described as meeting each being in each moment with the question “How may I help?”

We Buddhist practitioners are constantly working with the edges of our ego or idea of self in the world. The great teacher Dogen Zenji said, “To study Buddhism is to study the self.” This work is how we come to know the nature of ego, which is essentially a reactive phenomenon. Reactivity is just that—a result of our feeling some kind of impingement, whether internally or externally. In the extreme case, when we are feeling overwhelmed and not sure how to act, it is okay to take a step back, to remove oneself and let the feelings, thoughts, and body settle. The whole process can then be quietly examined. It is not necessary for you to connect with everyone you meet, nor should you feel that this is a condition of your practice. You are completely free to choose whom you wish to spend your time with. What you are describing, though, is a particularly painful situation. A spiritual friend might be of great benefit in helping you to further explore these issues.

NOTES

PART ONE: SEEDS

1. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* edited by Trudy Dixon (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1970), 21.
2. Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992; reprint, 2004).
3. From www.dalailamaquotes.org.
4. From Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with Wolves* (New York: Ballantine, 1996).
5. From www.wic.org/letters/dalailama.htm.
6. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, 29.

PART THREE: SEEDS OF ADVICE

1. John J. Holder, trans. and ed., *Early Buddhist Discourses* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publications, 2006).
2. Judith L. Lief, *Making Friends with Death* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001).

BIOGRAPHY

ZENKEI BLANCHE HARTMAN (born 1926) is a Soto Zen teacher practicing in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. From 1996 to 2002 she served two terms as coabbess of the San Francisco Zen Center. She was the first woman to assume such a leadership position at the center. Blanche Hartman is now living in retirement at the Zen center's City Center. A member of the American Zen Teachers Association who continues to lead *sesshins,* Blanche is especially known for her expertise in the ancient ritual of sewing a *kesa,* the cloth robe worn over the left shoulder. Hartman has become known for her attention to issues women face. She and her late husband, Lou Hartman, had four children, eight grandchildren, and a number of great-grandchildren.

Blanche was born in Birmingham, Alabama, to nonpracticing Jewish parents in 1926. Educated in the Catholic school system in the early 1930s—and impressed with the religiosity and faith of one teacher—in 1943 she moved to California, where her father served in the military. After taking up biochemistry and chemistry at the University of California, she married Lou Hartman in 1947. In the late 1950s she found work as a chemist, though by 1968 she began questioning the direction of her life. She and her husband began sitting zazen regularly at the Berkeley Zen Center in Berkeley, California, in 1969, and in 1972 the two entered Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. The couple lived at all of the other San Francisco Zen Center sites, including City Center and Green Gulch Farm. (Lou died in 2011, and Blanche continues to live at City Center.) During the 1970s, Blanche received training in Nyoh-e—a traditional method for sewing Buddha's robe—in the lineage of Sawaki Kodo Roshi

from Kasai Joshin Sensei, formerly of Antaiji. Blanche is fundamental to the spread of devotional sewing practice throughout North America. She and Lou were both ordained as priests by Zentatsu Richard Baker in 1977, and Blanche was given the Buddhist name Zenkei (meaning “inconceivable joy”). In 1988 she received *shiho* (dharma transmission) from Sojun Mel Weitsman, and in 1996 she was installed as coabbess of the San Francisco Zen Center. This was the first female abbess of the City Center; she served just after Tenshin Reb Anderson and Sojun Mel Weitsman. One reason Blanche accepted the position of coabbess, serving two terms from 1996 to 2002, is that she understood the need for women to have a role model.

According to the author James Ishmael Ford, “Hartman is seen as a quiet and yet compelling leader exercising her authority through her simple and pure presence, a true heir to Suzuki’s Dharma.” She is known to be particularly involved with advocacy for women and her concern for children, with the *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* stating that she “has offered various special teachings for women.” In 1992 she led an all-female practice period at Rinso-in, Suzuki Roshi’s home temple. This is the first time in the five-hundred-year history of the temple that women have conducted a training period there. She has also led women’s all-day retreats at Green Gulch Farm in Mill Valley, California. Additionally, she has honored lost and aborted children by performing a ceremony attended by grieving women centering on Jizo Bosatsu, the bodhisattva whom Japanese Buddhists revere as a savior of souls from the hells and a protector of children.

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