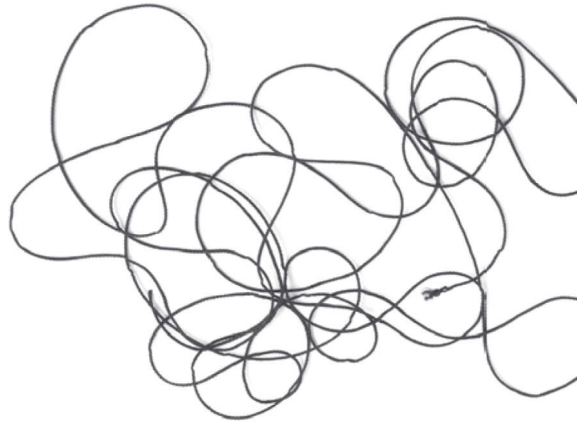




red thread zen

*humanly entangled
in emptiness*

Susan Murphy



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• *prologue* •

zen's saving grace



When the “western barbarian” Bodhidharma, who journeyed east from India to sixth century China, his reputation spreading fast before him, was brought before the powerful Emperor Wu, funder of temples and monasteries, Wu demanded, “Who is this person, sitting before me?”

Bodhidharma replied, “I don’t know.”

Who is this person who genuinely wonders, *Who?* as they write, or read, or walk, or talk? The vast emptiness that walks about upright in a human form—bones, flesh, hair, eyes, hands, feet—and feels waves of loneliness, desire, boredom, fear, overwhelming joy . . . who is this? Easy responses die fast and something else opens up, a rich and productive form of silence that is strangely embracing and unflappable, when that question is simple and steadily held.

Bodhidharma’s “I don’t know” comes ringing with the emptiness of his own earlier words, “Vast emptiness, nothing holy,” in which he also appeared completely at home. Yet these words also unseated the startled Emperor Wu, who had anticipated praise for his generous giving, or *dana*, recognized as “the first principle of the holy teaching”—nothing but vast emptiness, nothing holy?

Don’t mistake Bodhidharma for someone confused or lost in this “I don’t know.” His own student, Huike, begged Bodhidharma to

pacify his mind, to bring him to peace. When Bodhidharma asked Huike to bring his mind to be pacified, Huike confessed he'd done his utmost to search for it, locate and define it, but he could not find it. No fixed or final address or form to be found, for the one he called by his own name. "There. I have pacified your mind for you," replied Bodhidharma. And Huike met him at last, joyful in that "I don't know."

But "not-knowing" is not remote and cold as intergalactic space; it's thoroughly human, in a more wakeful state. Zen is distinctive in its resolute adherence to the unbreakable thread that warms and values this vast emptiness with mammalian and human embodiment, blood, passion, suffering, and all that comes along with that. Zen is peppered with koans and recorded exchanges that return us insistently toward the mixed, hazy, ordinary human world as the sole ground of freedom. But one koan above all venerates and makes this point comprehensively explicit.

A woman broke off from practicing the Mozart violin sonata she has loved for years to respond to a sudden heavy thud at the window—bird-strike. She ran outside to search for the bird in the deep drifts of snow and bring it into the warmth to tend it. She discovered the small, deep hole in the snow that contained a male finch, blood brighter than his red throat feathers bursting from his beak. But before she could lift him he fell back into the snow and grew still.

The tiny memorial she wrote for the blood-red finch that had pierced her heart was titled "The Red Thread," after the koan that, above all, marks the Mahayana bloodline of Zen and its foundation in the profoundly inclusive discipline that follows upon sturdy insight into the reality of no-self, no-other.

Drawn from Songyuan Chongyue's "Three Turning Words" that are encountered in the early stages of Zen koan practice when working with the Miscellaneous Koans, the koan poses a deceptively simple question that is lifelong in its remit: *Why are perfectly accomplished saints and bodhisattvas still attached to the red thread?*

While we may see into what it points to with relative ease, luckily that hardly helps, for this koan will forever scrutinize us as fully embodied human beings, with its timeless, ruthless, beneficial eyes. Instead of despising embodiment and the darker or more edgy

places in the range of human emotions and states, Red Thread Zen dares to say to everything that turns up, including even a painfully restless mind, *You are welcome here. You, just as you are, human and empty.* This is the perennial point where real practice finds traction.

Red Thread Zen takes a marked turn from much of what the world takes to be Buddhism. Enlightenment and purity, proffered in various forms as a perfectible state, does not survive the gaze of the koan. Fear and disdain for bodily life and death wither there. Strong feelings can be embraced as powerful entry points on the path of practice, sexuality is at home, even women are resoundingly welcome. After all, in the words of one woman's response to this koan, "Emptiness bleeds." Not one human being would be here without that fact. Painful grief, laughter, and joy are all alive in it, and so are the strange fruits that can come from darkness and despair. In that *Why*, we can unearth a deep inquiry into the nature of human being and personhood—you, me—and the compelling lifelong practice of bringing who we are into congruence with the immediacy of the world and its depths of discoverable reality.

Sometimes *red thread* is translated as *vermilion thread*. In its original medieval Chinese context, the color would have immediately signaled a courtesan, for women in this social role were obliged to dye their undergarments a distinctive vermilion. The original "scarlet women." The immediate connotation is sexual passion, lust, and love—and a vast baggage of gender and power relations tangled up with strong urges, stigma, shame, vulnerability, and inequality.

The character that renders *thread* can also imply *garment*, as in "nice set of threads"—clothes made of emptiness, nothing that does not wear them. More obscurely, it is also sometimes translated as *the line of tears*, evoking Guanyin or Avalokitesvara, and so connoting the true compassion born of the universality of suffering. Inseparably threaded are embodiment, life, pain, joy, bliss, despair, suffering, empathy, love, loss, and of course the inarguable fact of death, the certifying detail of all sentient life. Already such a rich mix of light and dark, delight and difficulty, affording little room for dreams of purity, but much amplitude for laughter and lament!

Let all this richness be present while also sensing what else comes along just with the elemental fact of mammalian biology, in the “red thread” that links the fetal and maternal bodies, its certification stamped on every human body in the naked fact of the belly button. The unconditioned care for the other that the newborn infant creates by sheer helpless presence . . . Bloodlines of lineage, family trees, and tree of life . . . The spill of blood emblematic to sacrifice . . . The passions with their strong demands on consciousness and understanding . . . The red thread impels a wide, liberating, and imaginative embrace of *all* of life, equally including its deeply informative hint of pain, darkness, and personal extinction.

How is it that all these manifestly rich and interwoven matters dwell in emptiness? How do we reconcile their vivid and even volcanic elemental force of life with “no-thingness”? How can something called “you” and “I” possibly arise and manifest in emptiness, complete with body, thought, and deep attachments?

Why is it that the most intensely alive and awake human beings cannot, could not, would not, indeed *must* not seek to cut themselves free of this messy, marvelous red thread?

And where does that leave certain culturally established, prevailing views of how Buddhism should regard life, the body, especially the troublesome female body, the equally troubling human passions, including love and hatred, and the likelihood of cooling and purifying the mind to the point where life no longer beckons much response at all?

Most spiritual traditions do their best to distance themselves as thoroughly as possible from direct and intimate contact with the fact of impassioned human bodily being, if not to declare open war on the flesh, and most pointedly on the female body that plainly bears this death-prone and distracting flesh into the world. Spirituality has trouble dealing with the fact that we arrive here covered in blood, let alone that *emptiness bleeds*—in women, roughly once a month throughout the procreative years of life.

The Red Thread koan is by no means the only one that invites an audacious and radical spirit of inclusion rather than renunciation as the path of self-mastery, though there is a demanding renunciation of preferences and presumptions in a practice of inclusion. Zen echoes

with presentations that shake the foundations of “nice,” such as the student who asks the great Yunmen (862–949), “What is Buddha?” and hears in swift reply, “Dried shit stick!” But for inviting us to see why truly awakened mind cannot possibly be separated one iota from the wholeness of earthy, fruitful, painful, shattering life, the red thread can’t be beat.

In its embracing of all human experience as radical opportunity, I find the saving grace of the Zen tradition—and its bold ability to discover itself anew in every place on earth, cultural specificity, circumstance of life, and mortal human body.

Just This Person

There is a marvelous moment in the parting encounter between Dongshan Liangjie (807–869) and his teacher Yunyan (780–841), when the words *Just this person* lets us see what wholeness might be right there on the cusp of life and death. It’s not just those strangely tender words that bring us home, but the “remaining quiet for a while” that ushers them into consideration.

The story is worth recounting in detail because of the natural build to its key moment, but also because of its telling resonance with the saving grace of the red thread of Zen.

A young Dongshan had made his way to the series of linked caves where the impressive teacher Yunyan lived. The relationship that unfolded, from the evidence collected into *The Record of Dongshan*, was touchingly marked by deep respect and implicit affection. Perhaps this is partly under the pressure of encroaching illness in the older man, for it is implied that after their time of encounter as teacher and student they will never meet again in this life.

So as Dongshan prepares his leave-taking, Yunyan asks him where he is going. This is not just curiosity about his plans, but equally a probing for how far Dongshan has begun to see past “here” and “there” in a clear and empty flowing reality with no front or back. Their to-and-fro exchange on the subject remains playfully ambiguous all the way up to Yunyan asking, perhaps a little poignantly, “When will you return?”

“I’ll wait until you have a fixed address,” says Dongshan. What is he confirming here? His awareness of Yunyan’s approaching death? A grave marks a kind of fixed address, perhaps the only one ever afforded us. The grave of the great Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu is marked with just one character: *mu*. No-thing. No name, dates, or other details, just the all-encompassing empty fullness of the word that is one syllable short of perfect silence.

Dongshan’s awareness goes even deeper there: There is no fixed address to be had in emptiness; any fixed idea of place and identity can only finally strand us in a world framed in coming and going, gain and loss. But at the same time there is death, loss, and grief. Dongshan is able to inhabit the resonant space that does not separate these out as two.

The moment between them closes with two tender remarks. Yunyan: “After your departure [implicitly *and after my passing*], it will be hard to meet again.” Once more, checking: Is it so?

Dongshan says: “It will be hard *not* to meet.” He cannot glimpse (as we shortly will) how much his own words foreshadow a great realization. But we must not miss the red thread woven here not only through the tacit warmth of connection between these two, but also through the open embrace of mortality resolving into the wholeness of reality. Who has not felt that strange sense of a life ending by spilling, through death, at once into *nowhere* (“no fixed address”) and *everywhere*. Not just into the persistent sense of sighting someone who fleetingly resembles the one gone, but equally into solemn moonrise, shiver of leaves, resonant latch of a gate opening, vivid dream of being face-to-face, unbroken expanse of evening sky . . .

And then, on the eve of leaving, Dongshan asks Yunyan the question painfully buffeting his heart. The way he poses it is this: How he should respond if, after many years, someone asks him if he can convey his teacher’s likeness (or “portrait,” or mind). In other words, has he yet seen with Yunyan’s eye of realization? The response is memorable.

After remaining quiet for a while, Yunyan said, “Just this person.” Don’t move too swiftly to the words, the way we habitually do. This “remaining quiet for a while” conditions, contains, and reflects all that

is conveyed in those utterly calm and inclusive words, *Just this person*.

We immediately learn that Yunyan's response leaves Dongshan strangely shaken. He is said to be lost in thought, to the point where Yunyan cautions him that he has now taken on the burden of "the great matter," and must become "very cautious." Very alert, very ready for what can fall into such an open state.

Then fall it does. Dongshan goes from his teacher, still "dubious," lost in the most productive form of doubt, able no longer to assume anything at all. And in that wonderfully dangerous, wide-open state, while crossing a river he glances down and his own reflected face glances back. With this, he "experienced a great awakening to the previous exchange." All doubts are resolved: His own unique face now intimately reveals the enduring likeness and mind of his dead or dying teacher and the entire open sky, his mind free, at large, and completely at home within "no fixed address."

Dongshan composes a poignant and exhilarated gatha of gratitude that admits, "Today I am walking alone; Yet everywhere I meet him." It continues, "He is no other than myself; Yet I am now not him."

Being starts with the body and does not end at the skin; one great, shared, "actual body" of being carries us through this life, with each of us realizing and actualizing that fact in distinct and unrepeatable mortal bodies. There's no place and no detail in which you can ultimately fail to find and recognize yourself. We share, at the most essential and open level of awareness, one Mind, earth-made, universe-made, while every mind is a singular, intimately personal reflection of that world and universe.

Born on the Same Stem

There is another way of phrasing it: "We are born on the same stem, but we do not die on it." Zen practice reveals us to be "born on the same stem"—our one shared empty nature pervades the whole universe. But the qualifier fleshes out the richness of the red thread that runs right through "*this person*"—"but we do not die on it." That empty nature is ever *existing* right here now. It's you and me. The

powerful offer of realizing this one stem of all that is *and* the fullness of the fact that no set of fingerprints can ever be repeated resound as one offer. Here is where a practice lies: living into this completely. *Just this person.*

Just this person is root and branch acceptance of being human, completely mortal and yet, in every moment, bounded by nothing. The word *just* admits us, in disarmingly humble, human fashion, to the loving and exacting depth of rigor demanded to start to realize this matter: mortal personhood, unbounded nature. *This person* (who is this self?) is a matter continually to be resolved, through conscious practice of fertile doubt and impassioned inquiry that will reach deep into a life.

And we uncover the mystery of *just this person* in each other exactly as freely and completely as in this self. Yangshan (807–883) and Sansheng (seventh century) expressed this vividly in their playful meeting with each other in Case 68 of *The Blue Cliff Record*. Yangshan asks Sansheng, “What’s your name?” Sansheng replies at once with his given name, “My name’s Huiji!” Intimate, personal, and true. Yangshan immediately claims, with impeccable credentials, “Huiji! That’s my name!” His given name is technically not Huiji at all, yet it is also intimate, personal, true to recognize himself in the name of the other. Sansheng pushes back mock-defensively, delighting in the free interchange and its deep implications, with his more formal ancestral name: “My name’s Huirang!”

And Yangshan simply roars with laughter.

Great laughter here cuts cleanly, healing the wound of “me, not you,” delighting in not knowing and never settling the question, “Is this one? Is this two?” A Zen man in Australia recounted the way a man called Lee with Down’s syndrome in his small town always responded vigorously, “Hi, Lee!” to anyone greeting him with, “Hi, Lee!” He was not being silly—except in the old meaning of the word, which was “innocent.” Lee simply had no trouble identifying himself in the other. And he laughed his head off too at the great fact every time he saw himself in the other person.

Such great laughter, and the serious innocence of play as well, conveys the depth of *Just this person*. So too can stillness and quiet. *Just this person*, we notice in the original story, is fully born through

Yunyan's "remaining quiet for a while." Realizing *just this person* takes all that we are and is always beginning (which means it is never ending). *Remaining quiet for a while* is the way to recollect all that we are and the stem we are born on moment by moment. That's part of Yunyan's very alive "quiet." But of course there's more.

To look searchingly into this *remaining quiet for a while*, or the true depth of practice, is to begin to explore the dimension of "self" Dogen calls "the actual body." The only words he himself could manage to utter, to convey to his teacher his own experience of falling wide awake, were these: "Body and mind, dropped away." As it happened, these very few possible words echoed back those uttered by his teacher in the dharma hall that day. "Let body and mind drop away." The trouble was these words found Dogen with nothing in the way and, with no chance of a warning, had taken him utterly seriously. All he could do in his wonderfully shattered state was to say, again and again, "Body and mind, dropped away."

When his teacher quietly confirmed him, drawing him a little way "back" toward what he once would have called that place of "you" and "I," that place where "self" continually restores itself, Dogen resisted any move from the edgeless place from which he fumbled to speak at all. The most he could say in reply as "Dogen" was this: "The dropped-away body and mind."

Body and mind dropped away: *not* because held in contempt or formal doubt, but because no longer held in defense against anything at all. Dropped away because there was nothing to hold on to and no possible reason to do so. Dropped away into the dropping away that is the perpetual revelation of this universe of unending transformation, in which this momentary body and mind have been manifested—or which has manifested this momentary body and mind. Dropped away, into such complete fit that there is no longer any place to put this complete body. No place where it is not.

The red thread is the saving grace of Zen because it holds out the fact of mutuality with such rigor: Mutuality of body with mind. Mutuality of this body and mind with its illimitable, empty context of being. Mutuality of form and emptiness, of intimate self and vast no-self. The red thread is the exquisitely human lifeline that heightens

individual life while constantly healing this very self back into its original wholeness, or un-dividedness.

This body and mind drops away into its own mortal fact, in time, yet also in every moment of being actualizes the entire body of reality. Just one small, dirt-rimmed toenail clipping brings the whole universe along with it. It has no choice. And yet there is a keenly felt difference that should pierce the heart of any half-alive human being—between taking part in this great fact that everything we are and do actualizes an undivided reality, and standing apart from it. The red thread that cannot be cut is what draws us to the place where this can hurt enough, stir us to life.

The kindness of the painful and beautiful red thread is that it points us insistently back in the direction of what is ancient, human, suffering, and mortal, yet infinitely and minutely *incapable* of finally excluding any other beings or any part of what is here with us. To practice with the red thread koan is to let it gradually grow the kind of holding power that is capable of rejecting nothing that is here while not straining to hold on to anything that is here.

In Zen terms, to have a practice is to live toward always rejoining a more complete appreciation of this radical inclusiveness. I would not hesitate to call this love, had the word not been trampled underfoot by overuse into something hard to recognize as its original all-demanding call on us. But love it is, and if the practice of this love grows to be the natural part of us, then including becomes realization, and intellectual appreciation of this fact accepts the role of alert attendant, following intently on behind.

Guilty as Charged

The red thread actualizes the whole garment or weave of reality for a human being. Another way to express this interweaving of mortal being and formless reality is the “actual body”—belonging to no one, while extending the complete grace of recognition to this one I call by my own name. Actually, Yunyan’s phrase “Just this person” deliberately catches the echo of a commonplace courtroom declaration of its time in medieval China. It plays with an echo of “Just this man of Han,” which meant “Guilty as charged.”

The utter inclusiveness of the red thread, to which everyone is attached and which no one can cut, allows all of us into full responsibility for what is manifesting. It suggests a quite testing readiness to say, “It’s my fault.” But this universally implicated state lives in us differently than any sense of blame, offered or received. It is instead a radical step past blame in the very act of offering a thoroughgoing admission of responsibility for one’s own being, or of owning the actual weight of our own actions and being—as just this limited and illimitable person. I, too, am this, it says, or this is also me. So “It’s my fault” is an act that realizes the simultaneous gathering in and releasing move of love. It is also a first sign of capacity to change the nature of our personal contribution to suffering. There are expansive possibilities implicit in the unlikely-looking offer of “It’s my fault.”

One of them is “my life is also your life”—vividly expressed in the food web of all life. To use Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1926–) term, we undeniably “inter-are” in every dimension of our being here—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. This fact of “interbeing” is a facet of the mystery Dogen called the “actual body.” I am constantly partaking in you, and you in me. Every moment of contact, communication, shared dreaming, sheer presence makes it simply clear. This is the source and fact of all empathetic existence and compassionate response.

And we are entirely human. “The elbow does not bend backward,” as the old Chinese saying puts it; the limits of being in this mortal, momentary form *are* our limits, poignantly so. And I am at best only dimly aware of my many blind spots. Blind spots are realized only when the collision occurs, or is narrowly averted. And repairs commence only with, “Ah yes. It’s my fault.”

“I” am freely aware that I am not other than “you,” to the extent I know that both “I” and “you” are blessedly empty. This leaves me both charged with keener need to be aware, to take and offer care, and “guilty as charged,” bowing to the entire charge-sheet of existence. “The dropped-away body and mind.” Not one of us is left out of that.

And so, at the deepest level, I am not other than *this*. The midmorning sun on the leaves, wind stirring them now, disclosing a

red and green parrot. The souging of that wind. The pleasant soreness of muscles after yesterday's long walk. All my fault. The whole of it—no other than “the mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun, the moon and the stars,” as Dogen discovered his mind to be, no other than that. Mind is no other than *this*. The deepest wisdom of all lies here, exactly the point where all possible drag caused by the usual baggage of the word *fault* disappears.

And then the informing principle in every moment and everything is revealed as love. Restoring that word to its full responsibility and power to turn us around and inside out. The riddle of human “fault” dissolves back into the natural place, of—well, knowing less, embracing more and more.

So what is this “me,” if I participate in you, and you participate in me? Even the most ordinary human conversation tests these waters of free interchange. Master Linji (?–866) famously declared to us, along with his assembly of startled monks at the time, “There is a true person of no rank coming and going freely” in and out of all our faces. That's our distinct human face he's talking about and all the many facets of human being. “Just this person” turns out to be completely distinct yet to possess no rank. It completely belongs and has no belongings. All his belongings were already given away when Yunyan broke the quiet to utter those words to Dongshan—leaving every gate in him yawning wide open to whatever happened next.

This persistent human sense of “self” is taken in Zen as the most intimate face of mystery—never ever to be cleared up, always to be made clearer, clarified as our moment-to-moment actual experience, in living “the actual body” of reality. Not one nanoparticle off from exactly what is happening in the most “ordinary” of ways. The actual body is inseparable from this mortal body, wondrous in its workings, ordinary in its commonplace nature, unending in its unfolding.

And so this book sets out to explore the many-layered ways in which Songyuan Chongyue's third Turning Word—“Why are perfectly accomplished saints and bodhisattvas still attached to the red thread?”—upturns anything called Buddhism in revivifying style and sets it back firmly on the ground of *being*—bowing deeply to being human, having a body—even a scandalous female body!—guilty as charged, all without the slightest flicker of apology.

Red Thread Zen meets us where we are now—some measure of Zen degrees west of where the tradition formed and grew for millennia in South Asia—and frees us (every time we may forget) from purely imitative or pietistic conformance to that. Meanwhile it opens pathways to realize and actualize the dharma in the ten thousand emergent ways of a world of ever more rapid and rampant change, and to respond coherently to the dramatic planetary emergency unfolding in its wake. Why? Because the red thread can be nowhere but now, in this heartbeat of love and fear for the world.

Perhaps the red thread of Zen fits the time so saliently because of its audacity in bringing the scandalizing radiance of emptiness into conjunction with the impassioned mood of the Western mind, opening both up to each other in happily demanding ways.

And when emptiness is brought to meet the concrete, doing, moving-off, and declamatory Western mind, an important note is always needed, sooner rather than later. Here it is:

“Nothingness” is not emptiness. “Nothingness” is conceivable only in opposition to “something-ness.” What Zen calls emptiness points straight to the heart of realization of being as it was from the beginning—blessedly fundamentally empty and free of all judging and condemning and confining “thingness.” Tipped out free from the always second-rate dream of separation, of you as opposed to me, of this separate from that, which second-guesses reality and “saves” us from its direct touch.

The fullness of this undivided reality is radiant, simple, and ultimately beyond words. And indelibly dyed and run through with the vivid blood-red thread of earthly human life. Chapter by chapter I will explore the most significant threads that entwine to create not just us but also this twisted, knotted, and unbreakable umbilicus and compact of connection, joining and saving all the many beings.

The path through the belly of this koan will be a somewhat crooked one, enjoying overlaps, shouts, stories, songs, and silence. No apology is offered for that which should not, cannot, *must* not be forced into words. No apology is needed, when the whole of reality is not just directly in front of our faces and under our feet, but the very face of who we are, most intimately and personally so, from even before the beginning. The red thread is the continuing invitation to

feel the wind that has ever been blowing directly onto the most personal of faces in the entire world.

Your own.

• *chapter one* •

body



This very place is the Lotus Land, this very body, the Buddha.

—Hakuin Ekaku, *Song of Zazen*

A man writes a poem about boarding a ship to cross the Atlantic. It's the twenty-first century, so the ship is entirely steel, the deck uniformly hums with machinery, and there is no creaking of rope and timber in sympathy and conversation with the roll of waves. A steel ship is stringently immune to life, yet a ladybug has accidentally stowed away in his cabin, tiny ambassador of all living things, trapped in a cold steel world. He makes what he can of a home for her in his all-steel desk of his all-steel cabin and brings her gifts of water and food.

However impossibly red her wings, and amazingly black her magic spots, still she dies soon in her all-steel world. The burial at sea that follows is in a matchbox—the sole remnant of living wood he could find on the ship.

Such insentient immunity to the sentience of all life is voluntary solitary confinement away from our human selves. “What is the true self?” asked Kodo Sawaki Roshi (1880–1965). “It’s brilliantly

transparent like the deep blue sky, and there's no gap between it and all living, bodily beings."

Carnal

The immediate and visceral carnality of the red thread is evident in this very body—yours, mine. It leaves out nothing of blood, tears, umbilicus, birth, baby tending, sensuality, lust, the double helix of DNA, shit and piss reality. Could Zen be any kind of practice if it withdrew to a safe distance from embodied life?

Practice is a deep and ultimately wordless conversation between body and mind. Zazen allows the persistent "I" of the mind and the more humble "me" of the body to reattune, come into synch, and fall away together into the deeper knowing that is not-knowing. Discursive mind can be very persuasive, but the body has no need to offer anything but what it is; it is by nature unable to be anything other than genuine.

When mind and body are opposed to each other, this irreducible honesty of the body becomes part of the trouble. Traditionally, uneasy distaste for the troublesome body was evident from earliest days in organized Buddhism. A corpse—to be exact, the corpse of a young and once beautiful woman—now corrupt and oozing with worms and decay was long considered the obvious and perfect meditation subject sure to turn monks away in horror and mistrust from lust and life. But the red thread koan assures us *no one* can cut free, this side of death. And that even death is it! More deeply, it lets us see how the wise ones consciously embrace and embody this fact.

How can this be humbly and richly lived while not indulging the dream of a separate self? Where, except in the brief and unlikely marvel of a human body, can realization ever take place? And if what is realized at that moment is sometimes called our "great body," a fullness of being that leaves nothing whatsoever out of it, what on earth is to be done with *that*?

This very body, uniquely yours or mine, able to suffer and bound to change and die, is our first and continuing point of intimate connection and free interchange with every other living being, and

with the wholeness of the web of sentient life. It is the place and context of waking up. “All beings, by nature, are Buddha/As ice by nature is water. /Without water, there is no ice,” says Zen Master Hakuin (1686–1768) in his *Song of Zazen*. “Without beings, no Buddha.” The essential nature of all beings is seamless, empty, and complete, he is saying. Even clouded human beings—necessarily embodied as we are in mortal flesh and encumbered by self-consciousness—are at every point, and just as we are, fully resolvable back into original congruence with the nature of mind we call “Buddha,” meaning fully awake in reality. And that it is the matter of beingness itself that “creates” Buddha—or permits the marvel of waking up to be the necessary possibility for every human being.

We are born not only covered in blood, vernix, and amniotic fluid, expelled from the birth canal of another warm, mammalian body, but still connected to the still pulsing “red thread” of the umbilical cord. That *will* be cut—first signal of our singular identity—but leaving its permanent trace upon the body, the belly button, the point on the stem where our individuation commenced. What a curious whirlpool of flesh is birth, signifying at once that we appear, like all that is, ultimately from nothing, and yet the singular lucky chance of existence is handed to us down through vast time from living body to living body.

Our human consciousness, with its gradual skein or membrane of self-consciousness, discovers itself in a highly socialized animal body. Socialized by skin-to-skin touch and profound dependence on an immediate, caring other, it also discovers itself in certain gradual strictures placed on the body that accord to social life, beginning in control of the bladder and anal sphincter muscles . . . and on it goes, the long passage of fledging into socially human identity. But from another point of view, this animal body is the wise fool here to continually inform human consciousness that it is grounded at all times in “right here, right now”—the place where we are, on the earth, warm, breathing, subject to gravity, and entirely mortal.

Yeats saw this as the melancholy human tragedy of being “sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal.” This particular animal achieves extraordinary feats—mortality-defying pyramids, gravity-defying skyscrapers, space-denying Internet, Earth-denying space

probes. But still the red thread cannot be cut. Even technologically extended, we remain creatures embodied at every point.

Mercifully. For the body belongs without apology to the universe and is the royal road back to full self-recognition. Only the mind resists admitting it is equally guilty as charged!

This Very Body

It is not just “the body” but *this* very body, the only one you will ever have, that is “the Buddha,” in Hakuin’s *Song of Zazen*. Waking up is the business of this very body, which belongs to the earth and the stars as much as everything else does. We wake together with the earth even as the earth wakes us, and when it wakes us we find the earth fully awake.

We meditate in a body that constantly makes it clear that because it is here in ever-changing circumstances, it will not always be here, nor always entirely comfortable. Bodies hurt, bodies are deeply joyful and full of sorrow, and bodies surely die; what gradually becomes clear is the fact that the rigor of practice—the agreement to be here willingly and to stay with that moment by moment by moment—is a loving act, provoked into being by these very facts.

On this planet at least it seems that only a being with a human body can experience loyalty to the inconceivable and let that ripen into waking up. Buddhahood is being-hood, conscious being-hood. Which is a consciousness shaped by being ignited on earth. So let’s take “This very body, the Buddha” as the human-shaped koan. There is nowhere to awaken but in this mortal bag of flesh and bone; therefore it is very good to take to heart what a miraculous business is this breathing body. And how mysterious, what it is, and does. Under the steady gaze of nonjudgmental awareness, this very body becomes very capacious and ceases to feel limited to the one who bears our name.

At the simplest level, it comes down to *you*. The whole of this comes down to you in your body. Your body is the original dharma gate and the very means by which you can be here. How did we ever become so commonplace about something like *being here*? Practice to a large extent is allowing the mystery of being here back

into awareness at a properly haunting, informing, and transforming level.

The most ordinary everyday level is where the body is so generous and so helpful. It constantly provides us with this rounding earthy measure of bodily life. Bodily life on earth, birth through to death, is what conducts us through all the seasons and circumstances of waking up. Our birth and death are occurring throughout this life, even throughout a single day, being born into this moment, dying into that one.

Birth and death flow through this breathing body breath by breath. But so also does play and art and learning and sex and passions and love and tears and grief and illness and accidents—all the many miracles of being wash through this very body. No wonder this very body is the Buddha, vessel of awakening, and the one who wakes. And the dearest thing about having this very body is how it establishes indissoluble kinship with all beings and all kinds of beings, as well as trees, oceans, even puddles. There is a sense in which even a puddle is a kind of two- to three-day being, depending on local circumstances of weather . . .

So this very body is the locus of our sense of kinship, of our share in one great life, in which everything moves surely together—all of which rests in the fact of this very body being mortal, not long for this marvel of a world. Because we live in a mortal body subject to all the usual suffering of a sentient being, we share the red thread that connects all beings. All of us, saints and fools, equally attached to the red thread.

If we don't understand that this very body is the Buddha, we become marooned in a spiritual vacuum dangerous to all life. To the extent that the Western spiritual tradition has been afraid to love the body, it has also been afraid of women, who bring such bodies into the world. And mortally afraid of death, because the body will die, taking me with it.

To the extent that a spiritual tradition seeks to find some way out of the death-bound body, a kind of death sentence is unconsciously placed not just on this life but on the living world itself. The world is seen as deathly and corrupted, despicable. A deep, rich, full-blooded engagement with the beautiful mutuality of all life is bypassed. We

see how our civilization substitutes a great many things—and I do mean *things*—for intimate experience of life, which must include sickness, aging, and death. Which means refusing to accord with the terms of the earth, which so clearly assures us: “This is a place where everything breathes and moves together, and everything passes through.”

Practice takes breathing to heart for a very good reason; the breath rises and falls without clinging to anything, it teaches relinquishment breath by breath. By clinging to nothing it sustains life, while breath by breath accepting extinction. If you struggle to understand form and emptiness, the breath is patiently teaching it again and again right under our very noses!

This Very Body, the Buddha

When we say “body,” how far does that reach? Zen is slow, decidedly indolent in fact, to limit sentience to animate life forms. This is not just because streamlets, creeks, rivers, glaciers, rolling waves, hills, mountains, ranges, pebbles, boulders, and cliffs all impress on the mind with evident character, presence, and those vivid creative powers we call “impermanence.” It is not just because weeds, bushes, clumps, waves of grass, and most dramatically trees stand up strongly with their life and disclose the breath of the earth and the life of the soil with such ease. And it is not just because the ecological agreements or balance slowly forged between the participants in a given place becomes a shimmering web of relatedness that acts like a supervening intelligence, a kind of shared sentience actualized in the practiced genius of every detail of any ecosystem we can manage to discern. A “communion of subjects,” as Thomas Berry puts it, “not a collection of things” at all.

It is because the reciprocal fact is this (and Dogen put it about as well as anyone can): *“I came to see that mind is no other than mountains, rivers and the great earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.”*

His words have power to draw us toward the experience of a mutuality that has no outside to it. Even the briefest experience of this complete congruence, held out and honed by the mind of

practice, is all but unspeakable—even while it can only sensibly be described as a state of brilliant sanity. To put it too soon or too much into words just divides it again.

And yet words themselves are part of the undivided nature of this reality. Just as much as the trill of a honey-eater, spoken words (it doesn't matter what they say or who says them) are also who I am. The red thread of living emptiness runs through them too like fire, though the fact that words have “meaning” tends to capture and lock on to our attention with formidable power. An open response that comes close to touching “no me, no you”—even in the presence of abusive words coming from the other—knows the empty nature even of such words, and abuse has trouble finding lodging.

The apparent indirectness of Zen—its radical leaps, the natural stretching and troubling of the way the mind habitually likes to proceed—flows directly out of the enormous fact of the marvelously free and empty character of all that is so immediately apparent. Empty, and yet immediately conscripted by the mind into words and categories at least once removed from all that's here, which is real, brief, and extraordinary—an inexhaustible mystery that addresses us most intimately and personally.

Mind

Dogen's words point to what is sometimes capitalized as Mind—or consciousness as it discovers itself when the strictures of separate mind and body fall away from us. When we see clearly, there is nothing at all that can be separated out, taken apart, or opposed. In Case 5 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, Master Xuefeng (822–908) says, “When I pick it up this earth is like a grain of rice in size.” Have a look—a grain of rice *is* the size of the earth—indeed, of the universe—in implication. To pick up something is to embody the whole earth; there's no choice in that matter. Even to think of the earth is to pick it up entirely. All this is the nature the great dream consciousness shares with the earth.

And that it is the universe that shapes this consciousness is an understanding that can be tracked to its resounding conclusion. We have a universe-shaped mind, or as Thomas Aquinas put it, we are

“universe capable.” When it becomes not a discursive path of fact but indelible experience in this very body-mind that Mind is Universe—*that’s* Dogen’s “the dropped-away body and mind.” Not dropped away as in transcended. Dropped away as in realized as edgeless, timeless, seamless, unending.

More humbly, just to breathe, to stand on the earth, to walk on it, to pick up its steady mutual conversation through feet and skin, to slide into it bodily in any body of water, to let any supposed boundary between earth-body and this-body grow more sweetly misplaced, to allow the full sense of “all beings, one body” to slip in unawares when the guard of thought is briefly off duty—all are intimations of Dogen’s dropping free from the insular self. This is the red thread that *cannot* be cut, the ever-present simple welcome back to where we all are. One body, home itself.

This very body that sits down and walks about also has its own ecology, hosting innumerable organisms throughout the body and all over its surface—a very striking way of understanding Daowu’s words, “All over the body are hands and eyes,” or Yunyan’s “Throughout the body, hands and eyes.” If you doubt me, examine some magnifications of the specialized mites, gut flora, bacteria, and parasites that occupy every niche of the terra infirma of this very body. Ridley Scott’s *Alien* begins to look harmlessly derivative!

But consciousness participates in its own microecologies in every breath-moment. The breath itself is spirit of mutual exchange with where we find ourselves: We breathe in the world and breathe out our “selves.” But the skin, too, drinks in the world: this tiny movement of the air, the swirl and caress of water, that small pocket of cool under a tree. Eyes, ears, nose, and tongue enter the continual “communion of subjects,” the living current of relatedness, that relieves us forever from the tedium of being part of any “collection of things.”

The local sense of “one body” emerges, too, with any glimpse of the intimate weave of innumerable relationships composing even the tiniest ecological system, a rock pool for instance. For that matter, a human family and its entire tissue of genetic and emotional relationships, extending far back in ancestral time, implicitly helps form any human individual. That person—you, me—is a singular

visible focal point in a fluid network of relational impulses (“your life is also my life”), passing to and fro in constant interchange of creative energy, both more and less consciously between family members through generations.

In the manner of a fractal, the pre-Buddhist image of the Diamond Net of Indra describes the whole revealed in every detail that composes it: Every knot in the net is a jewel, every jewel is a being or form existing throughout not just space but time, and every facet of every jewel mirrors every other jewel in the infinite net. I don’t recall anyone ever commenting on the color of the thread tying each knot and radiating out to link every jewel, but clearly, it is *red*.

Ecological awareness discloses not only that the whole comes along with each detail, but also that there is nothing static here: Everything moves together; the Net of Indra is a whole perpetually unfolding in time. Every “jewel”—being, form—is a dynamic entity, embodying time. “Time,” as poet Wislawa Szymborska advises:

*retains
its sacred right to meddle
in each earthly affair.*

Looking even more deeply, there is no body that is not time.

Sojourning Here

Jack Kerouac created a kind of accidental koan when he wondered, “Night and Day: why do they sojourn here?” Every body comes to pose this question, when it aches, collapses with pain, winces from the sharpness of becoming old, just as every body scintillates with the pleasure of water’s touch, sexual release, the beautiful loss of self in dancing, laughter, stillness. *Bodies* sojourn here in night and day, even while they hang out in eternity.

The *why* of this question, “Night and Day: why do they sojourn here?” is the mainspring, making “the obvious” into a question and releasing us into the *fact* of night and day, itself a great mystery. Night and day. An account of how there comes to be night and day

will describe the rotation of the planet as it spins around the sun—but that has no purchase here. This *Why?* lets us into the wonder of sojourning here together with night and day. Which is one unbroken, endless cycle. We have only a limited number of days and nights, but the cycle itself is all but endless. How can we really be separate from that?

Day and night, the fact of day “ending” and becoming night that “ends,” becoming day, provokes a sense of story. A journey from night to day or day to night, or one day to the next is a story shape—beginning and end and something in between—that birth and death apparently confirms, creating a very strong shaping to our human kind of consciousness. Karmic consciousness—the world of cause and effect.

In a way you could say the simplest version of what a “story” may be is this one: *Tick-Tock*. *Tick* opens a space that is resolved by *Tock*. Is this little tick-tock the tiniest yet most compelling story of all, time its very motor? Yet tick-tock is actually a recent human story; until a few centuries ago most people lived free of its clutches.

Tick-tock time has measurable power and authority. Once upon a time a child in Australia could stand in a red-painted public telephone box (keeping the door ajar with one foot to ease the stink of old cigarette smoke) and dial the free number for the time. Out of the heavy Bakelite receiver would come the sounds of a plummy BBC male voice: “On the third stroke, it will be 8:18 precisely. *Beep, beep, beep*. On the third stroke, it will be 8:18 and fifteen seconds. *Beep, beep, beep . . .*” So solid, adult, and irrefutable, and no need to pay for the call! You could even say any rude thing you liked to this impregnably British form of authority and get away with it completely—*anything!*

And suddenly you realize that all along this mysterious character was simply making the time up as he went. That in reality, a sense of being *change* itself could slide over your skin in ten thousand different ways, and not one of them answerable to unimpeachable BBC authority. When did we all agree to place ourselves between those little iron teeth of *tick-tock* and let it begin to chew our lives? Before tick-tock, there was day and night, sunrises and sunsets, the procession of seasons to sojourn with—rounded and productive in

time like the earth, and edgeless in its rhythm. Where does the turning of the earth begin or end? Cyclical time tells a never-ending story of one thing becoming another—not life ticking away as an eternal deficit account, life in increasingly bitter quarrel with time. Night and day sojourn here as *us*.

If there were no creative tilt to the earth's axis, the fascinating world of change, equal parts enlivening, enduring, and restorative, would be more bland, and even more likely to escape the attention of human eyes locked on to clocks.

In the great body of our life, everything moves together, and *everything* is passing through, rocks more slowly than us, butterflies more quickly. But rates of change are not the significant matter. The significant matter is that we *all* sojourn entirely together in change itself. We may resent sojourning here as time, noticing its plans to remove from us all that we love and unpick our cherished constructs of ourselves—the fragile and amazing production of time I call “myself,” tricked up from nothing. Do we cower in a kind of shame, in the implacable face of impermanence? Is the mechanism of time, the invention of human tick-tock time, an attempt to wrestle death and impermanence into some more manageable order, ostensibly at arm's length from our mortal selves?

Original Face

But then there's the matter taken up by the koan that asks of this very body: *What is your original face, before even your parents were born?* An intimate and piercing question about identity and true presence in the face of perishability. If you resist its offer of intimacy and eternity right here in every detail of being so briefly here, you might go down a garden path of thoughts about lineage, the human genome and evolution . . . And yet—not just time but all time up to now is intrinsically what we and every particle of matter brings forth—the entire universe story. Which makes us very rich in time indeed—or if you prefer, rich in impermanence.

What is the original face of *you* not just before conception but before even the universe was born? And can it possibly be separated from exactly right here now. “Original” draws us into the

darkness of origin, beyond the limit of what you can do with a knowing mind. What is your true face? Can you bring it forth now? Your personal and timeless original face is not limited by sojourning with night and day, or by abiding only now, in timelessness.

All things under the law of change appear to be all there is of time, and all of time is present in every single thing. Impermanence has no outside. The second-century Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (c150–c250) proposed that if no permanence can be found anywhere in this universe, which is nothing but impermanence, then actually there can be no impermanence either. Impermanence can exist only by reference to that which is permanent, which turns out to be nowhere to be found. So impermanence itself is unbounded, all there is, eternal.

Zen Master Dogen brings it home even more personally, saying we ourselves are time and are inseparable from all that is, which is also time. A tree is time. Mountains are time. A crackling twig in the flames is time. He calls this nature of things “being time,” saying, “There is nothing *in* time. Everything *is* time. Each thing is observably time . . . The time we call spring blossoms directly as an existence called flowers. The flowers in turn express the time called spring. This is not existence within time. Existence itself is time.” He goes on to say of this limitless well of being-time: “Spring with all its numerous blossoms is called flowing. When spring flows there is nothing outside of spring.”

We are just the burning, the fire of this life and death at every moment. Life is not followed by death. Life and death are one fire. In each moment, the moment before goes dark behind us. Death is not some moment still to come but keenly present in the breath just being completed. Every single *body* on the earth lives time fully this way. Every heartbeat knows nothing outside eternity.

Here is what Victor Frankl recounted of a meeting with a young woman in a Nazi death camp. The woman knew she was soon to die. She knew exactly what the death camp was. She was under no illusions and yet was curiously joyful. He talked with her and this is what she said: “I’m grateful fate has hit me so hard. In my former life I was spoiled and I didn’t take spiritual matters seriously.” She pointed through the clouded window of the hut to a chestnut tree,

where you could just make out two blossoms on one branch. “I often talk to this tree,” she told him. Frankl was startled and didn’t know how to take these words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxious for her, he asked, “Does the tree reply?”

“Yes,” she said.

“And what does it say to you?” he asked.

She told him, “It says to me: *I am here. I am here. I am life. Eternal life.*”

Mind Is Skin, Flesh, and Bones

To think just in terms of a whole composed of parts in separation is duly to discover your self within a world of separation. As a thought or something read about, no-separation is just another idea, however vast its intellectual consequences. But to discover no-separation as experience is to taste being profoundly clear and free within unbounded reality—a realization that can later be meticulously examined and further clarified.

To sense one body of reality in this very body, to see directly that everything moves together, to know for yourself there is no other, no self separate from anything at all—when this happens the ordinary calculus of mind abruptly and comprehensively gives way, leaving you staring onto unmediated reality, whole and complete.

What comes along with some totally “ordinary” thing—the sudden sound of timber dropped in a courtyard, a human sneeze in the smoky dark, crow call over a lake, crushed beer can picked up on a beach, the way the floor exactly meets the wall, or just the act of rolling over half submerged in sleep—is an edgeless completeness impossible to fully encompass in word or thought. The experience lights up in the delight of no-thought, alive in a human body.

Dogen, again, on this embodied Mind: *“Mind is skin, flesh, bones, and marrow. Mind is taking up a flower and smiling. There is having mind and having no mind . . . Blue, yellow, red, and white are mind. Long, short, square, and round are mind. The coming and going of birth and death are mind. Year, month, day, and hour are mind. Dream, phantom, and empty flower are mind. Water, foam, splash,*

and flame are mind. Spring flowers and autumn moon are mind. All things that arise and fall away are mind.”

It is impossible to overstate how remote this utterly receptive mind is from the usual state in which we look out from some “inside” and notice and identify this and that, this discerned as not that. We are entrained into founding “reality” in differences, and assigning words to the task of maintaining these differences, carving out things and ourselves, beginning in the word “I.”

Dogen reminds us of the injury this does: “When the self advances to confirm the ten thousand things, that is delusion. When the ten thousand things advance and confirm the self, that is realization.” Confirming our separation in the very act of confirming “things,” we pass entirely by the way their marvelously open, complete, and empty nature is in fact constantly confirming our own. Body and mind dropping back into the seamless unfolding, dirt under our toenails, blood thumping in our ears, we are home.

Wise Fool

So the red thread and this wise fool of a body are intimates. The body’s powers of self-healing and self-regulating make much of our so-called wisdom look effete and foolish. At every moment and in every circumstance—sitting, walking or lying down, giving birth, making love, or dying, laughing, or weeping—how wonderfully well we are always using it, this great empty body of reality from which no *body* can be carved out (even while minds can dream of separateness with consummate ease).

A body is complete as a pebble is complete, or a waterfall. “Knowing” less, it never stops responding. The socialized self soon learns to shrink from contact with piss, shit, vomit, snot, blood, sweat, and semen, from every issue of the body except tears, the physical signal of emotional connection, its finest expression—compassion. Meanwhile, this wise fool of body, knowing less than any of this, carries itself with the completeness of self-nature through every one of its expressive signs and stations of life.

Pregnant, the mammalian body is the very koan of intimacy or non-duality, vividly embodying and resolving the question that

realization confirms: “Is this one? Is this two?” *I won’t say.*

The miracle of human gestation, birth, and lactation fully embodies the mystery of not-two, and even less than one, as well as the mystery of compassion, as blood becomes milk, by way of a sweat gland specialized to the purpose. The depth of affinity and mutuality actualized here is dramatic, incontestable, and difficult to bypass. And yet—Buddhism has vigorously conformed to the strong desire of all the other great patriarchal religious traditions in its swift desire to do exactly that.

In Case 80 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, the very old Master Zhaozhou (778–897) was asked by a monk, “Does a newborn baby have the sixth sense [that is, full and complete consciousness] or not?” We can wonder in passing whether consciousness, any more than a potato, or perhaps a willow waving in a light breeze, can possibly “have” any number at all. But Zhaozhou kindly passes over that, seeing that the monk is probably not interested in babies but asking whether or not Zhaozhou can confirm him to be freshly alive and cognizant, after dropping away body and mind. In other words, “How do you see me?”

“Throwing a ball on the swift current,” Zhaozhou replies. The monk’s question itself skids and swirls onto the swift flow of change, as does the monk, and so it arrives back into his own hands. Yet meanwhile, though Zhaozhou is tossing to the monk part of a traditional Zen capping phrase, what an evocation of the marvelous sudden fact of newly arrived human life! From the mystery of another body, that itself came out of mystery, life is *here*, consciousness is *here*, thrown at every moment into reality and spinning like a ball on the swift, immortal current of being here.

The monk, possibly still fumbling in his head for the “sixth consciousness,” takes this back to his teacher, Touzi (1032–1083). “What does ‘throwing a ball on the swift current’ mean?” he asks.

“Moment by moment, it never stops flowing,” is the kindly, even reverent, but also cutting response.

All our attempts to capture it and tie it down, consciousness itself, “never stops flowing.” Nothing can. The flow can no more be stopped than the red thread can be cut.

Where Can I Put My Entire Body?

There is a line in a verse attached to one of the cases in the *Wumen-kuan* that asks, “Where can I put my entire body?” Well, at night when you are very tired, you know what to do with it and with complete expertise: You can lie down, you can rest it entirely, and what a beautiful thing that is. Stepping into the shower, then you know so finely where to put your entire body: right in the luxurious stream of warm water.

But this “my entire body” is actually pointing to something deeper. What galaxy can you find that is left out of your entire body? And where can you put *that*? Where can *anything* be “put,” when there is nothing outside of it? The fact itself takes care of everything. There is nothing to put anywhere.

Unborn

The mind of “This very body the Buddha” is mind in its most expansive, shared, interpenetrating, and interconnected sense—mind that pervades the whole universe, as in “Buddha nature pervades the whole universe existing right here now . . . in this very body the Buddha.”

This very personal body is equally the Unborn, as Zen Master Bankei (1622–1693) termed “original mind,” saying: “It was not born with this body, it does not die with its extinction, it is not male, it is not female, it is not good or bad. It is beyond all comparisons and thus we call it Buddha Nature, that which lies beyond all limitations, dividedness, comparison.”

Identity, fragility, mortality, and the unborn, the undivided—no one can keep them apart! Meanwhile our bones safely do know how to die, or to put it slightly differently, how to remain in loyal and complete agreement with the terms of the earth.

But bodies can be socially decisive matters—dictating exclusion and inclusion, domination and subordination. Female bodies, just the fact of them, scandalize all jealously guarded forms of male privilege. Bodies are apt to be socially embarrassing and widely held to be natural antagonists to the spiritual reach of human existence.

To this, Yunmen presents the lightning flash of “Dried shit stick!” when a monk asks him, perhaps innocently, “What is Buddha?” To this, a woman overflowing with the joy of waking up asks Hakuin, doesn’t he realize the great light radiates even in the contents of the latrine? There are few religious traditions that so vigorously see nothing to reject even in the fact of bodily waste. Bodhidharma’s “Vast emptiness, nothing holy” encompasses the holy fact of nothing rejected, everything included, in the light of emptiness.

Absent the mind of “this very body the Buddha,” the religious force of ecological mind is dangerously easy to miss—or in fact, speedily bypass—and the reality of this vast communion of subjects where we find ourselves, equal in all directions, one shared body of life, can find no lodging.

So “Where can I put my complete body?” Master Wumen (1183–1260) asks us. Putting completeness “somewhere” is as impossible as severing the red thread.

And so we bow to this body, undulating with the deepest currents of being, entirely vulnerable, at one with the earth in every breath, never outside the mystery, always inviting us in.

• *chapter two* •

sexuality



“**F**irst we will discuss the five obstructions. The first is that women are not able to become the great Brahma lord because that position is accomplished through purity and the body of a woman has a great many impurities. Second, women cannot become Chakra. Upon reaching the heavens their bodies become male because only the males can be lords of the heavens. Although Chakra has some desire remaining, that desire is quite light. Women on the other hand are extremely libidinous. Third, women cannot become demon kings. They cannot attain this position because demons are extremely hard, solid, and firm, while women are extremely soft and weak. As soon as anything unusual comes up, they are at a loss and have to seek help. Wise kings have hearts of great compassion and kindness. They teach people to maintain the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Deeds. Whenever women see something good occur to others they become jealous and this keeps them from having great compassion. Fifth, they cannot become Buddhas. Buddhas have ten thousand virtues; women have many evils. They are jealous and obstructive and their hearts are about the size of a sesame seed.”

This is part of a twentieth-century commentary by a Chinese Tripitaka Master, one Hsuan Hua (1918–1995). As Sallie Tisdale comments, in quoting this stentorian voice of authority, “there’s a lot

more where this came from.” If this kind of discourse about women were not so persistent and commonplace in traditional Buddhism, it could be safely laughed off the stage of history as the pernicious absurdity it is.

How can it possibly be reconciled with insight into the emptiness of self? You must turn yourself inside out even to make the attempt. When you try to argue that you are so vastly right, you’re already vastly wrong. And when you disavow the humanity of women—or of any gendered category of “otherness”—you disavow your own.

As the Diamond Sutra says, “If there is even a bit of difference, it is the distance between heaven and earth.” Mind in its complete state finds “male” and “female” exactly and equally empty. At the essential level, not even a bit of difference.

Within Buddhism, masculine rights and preeminence for spiritual realization have been as vigorously held to be unquestionable as in most of the world’s “great religions” arising in the Axial Age and enduring (and being endured) all the way down to now. Buddhism may lack the particular burden imposed by a claim that the one God is male, but that has not even slightly hampered its virile rejection of women from any standing in religious life, in a way that flies fiercely in the face of its own direct religious experience (not dogma) of no self, no “other”—of reality undivided.

Laughing It Off the Stage

A friend traveled to Myanmar on a cultural and religious pilgrimage to several of the great temples and ruins of Theravadan Buddhism. The party was composed largely of women, led by a much-loved, robed monastic—naturally, a man. Everyone came filled with gentle fervor and gratitude and felt rewarded and astonished, especially by the huge ruined temple complexes of Bagan.

She returned with some exquisite photographs. Lone graceful boats poled across water mirroring a golden sunset sky. A gaggle of young boys, ten, eleven, or twelve, faces radiant with expectation, bedecked with flowers as they lined up for symbolic initiation for one week as a monk. No young girls in that photo. No photo could capture the sharp fact that even the oldest and most venerable

female practitioners were obliged to offer full obeisance to these febrile children because they were male, yield priority to them in every circumstance, and simply serve them. Meanwhile they were never to pollute food by handing it directly to a monk, and never expect to be admitted to the inner domains of temples.

When staying on the grounds of the monastery, the women guests were to use only the special low-slung washing line strictly reserved for women's clothing and to carefully wash and hang out male clothing only on the special high-slung line. Yes, it comes to this.

My friend returned to Australia laughing at the absurdity—venerating an even more ancient tradition than Buddhism that women reserve for themselves in order to manage the continuing flow of insult to their sex, while helping to constantly disavow or cover up its secret injury. Laughter that gives up all hope of a better past and just barely keeps open a vision of a different possible future. Clear-eyed laughter, but seldom permitted to reach male ears lest it unveil and threaten to expose the vulnerability that such relentless overstatement of male importance makes so plain.

Indelibly Red

It is only very recently in its long unfolding that traditional Buddhism has been seriously challenged for its derogatory teachings on women. At the monastic level, restrictions on women are still legion. South Asian Theravadan Buddhism still largely thwarts or openly withholds from women the right to ordain as nuns and remains firm on the impossibility of fully realizing Buddhist teachings in a shameful female body. Future rebirth as a male is still proffered quite seriously as the sole hope for a woman to realize her self-nature.

In other words, in this desiccated view, “her self-nature” is a phrase that simply defies all sense.

The vermilion silken underwear allocated to “scarlet women”—prostitutes, courtesans—was the first connotation to leap from the image of the red thread. Immediately, the “bind” of carnal passion, lust, sex, sexual obsession, rejection, betrayal, and of course the burden of children, household duties, and filial ties of the heart that

may be the result of sexual passion would spring to mind. The necessity to cut yourself free from all such bondage in a deeper quest of liberation was taken to be self-evident. “Home-leaving,” as monastic ordination was called, quite forcefully meant abandoning and stepping free from all that maintained ordinary life as a householder, leaving family, children, women behind, just as the Buddha did, ceasing love of all “worldly things” that might hold you back from a goal of final transcendence of the humiliating fleshly cycle of birth and death.

In this light you might be tempted to mistake the koan for a rueful sigh about the impossibility of cutting free completely from the pull of sexual feelings and all their egregious consequences, so as to fully awaken, finally unencumbered. That would reduce it to a wry “joke,” rehearsing yet again the pernicious wish of women to undermine the will of men who would make an assault upon the spiritual heights. Heights of realizing self-nature that must be comprehensively ruled out to all women by virtue of a degraded and infinitely suspect female nature.

For this to survive even the briefest scrutiny, a glaring exception to the otherwise absolute and undivided nature of non-dual reality must be brutally forced. In the name of “purity,” the prosecution of male privilege and female subordination must be firmly kept sacrosanct while remaining comfortably untroubled by insight. That we find no hint of deviation from this querulous insistence also in conservative Christianity, Judaism, or Islam hardly needs saying.

This is precisely what the koan turns on its ridiculous head. It shakes off every rank prejudice and preference, obvious or hidden, that clings tenaciously to gender difference—a difference vividly and immediately stigmatized by the telling stain of *red*. Turn all stigma upside down, the red thread koan demands!

Suddenly, all that has been so violently elbowed away and pushed down at last has to be faced as a dharma gate!

“Gender” fully intends to be a gender-neutral word but quickly reveals itself as a code or weasel word for all that is being socially constructed as nonnormative—that which is not heterosexual and male. Women “have gender” while men are simply human, and the maleness that automatically inheres to the status of “human being” is

so deeply assumed it becomes difficult to notice. Meanwhile femaleness, by definition, is burdened with a clearly problematic possession of gender, as is any other category of social or biological gender identity that “deviates” from the heterosexual male norm, which alone enjoys a status untroubled by the word *gender*. There is mankind, which is essentially male, and then there is homosexual, bisexual, transsexual . . . and that persistent majority of human beings we call female.

“Gender” begins to be revealed as the hurt and harm that everyone must endure when one gender is secretly or quite openly restricted, derogated, despised, and even persecuted. This old, dangerous, and too easily violent uneasiness is often attributed to the difficulty of being certain, as a male, that the child you support is your own genetic offspring and not that of another male—a need biologically based but deeply ramified in property law. But when you start to look there seem almost infinite shapes and layers to the all-pervasive fear that underpins the patriarchy.

Is This Two?

Whatever may be the roots of male privilege and female subordination to that socialized “fact,” it is undeniable that this mental split point-blank refuses the heart of the teaching that form is emptiness and emptiness form. Wisdom begins where dualistic mind goes dark with not-knowing, generous with no-preferences. Compassion and all other insight flows from that merciful dark.

The burden of religiously couched misogyny that women have traditionally been told to bear and the degree to which it has handicapped their ability to walk the path would be hard to overstate. The effects are not just obvious but subtle. As bell hooks has pointed out, it is difficult enough to arrive at the transformative point of yielding ego and “self,” but consider how you are placed if nothing in the social order has ever implied that you even possess a sovereign self to yield.

Then comes the demanding balancing act, of acknowledging you have been exploited and victimized, in a way that does not renounce your own agency and simply confirm and deepen the exploitation.

Discovering what hooks names as the sense that we can never be completely dehumanized by “others” is critical to taking into your own hands the matter of collectively redeeming a profound social injustice.

We all enter this life from a woman’s body, and not just life but death is born with each of us. Everything that bears some association with this fact seems tainted with abject social fear, embarrassment, or disgust—such as menstrual blood, birth itself, sometimes even lactation, even the corpse that life will finally deliver into the world for every one of us. These things must be hidden, veiled, buried, made taboo, called unclean; their uncanny power to render meaning ambiguous must be carefully segregated from the “cleansed” domain of social order and power.

Which tends to remove or restrict women quite literally from the social order right along with the blood, mortality, and sexual allure their bodies signal, as a kind of ambit claim to relieve male tension a little more thoroughly. And with that removal, women lose their subjecthood, are assigned a status approaching objecthood, become reduced to a body with powers that must be heavily circumscribed and put to very particular productive but limited use (or the social order crumbles).

The doctrinal perversions created to enforce this exclusion of women could hardly be more tortuous or perverse. A fundamental distortion of the dharma has oppressed and restricted the spiritual expression of countless women for centuries. And yet in some of the rare surviving accounts of talented women of the Way we can find an especially penetrating and playful wisdom, one that may be discoverable only when all doors are shut in your “gendered” face.

We could call it the structural outsider’s view: a particularly robust, resilient, sharp, and agile intelligence that is forged in social exclusion. The “outside” position paradoxically also affords an enticing whiff of freedom. The dominant group, race, class, or gender itself is riddled with unacknowledged anxiety about positioning within the privileged group, with an undertow of nagging fear and shame for the injustice dealt to those excluded. The structural outsider is by definition not only free from the anxieties of power and position but also placed in the ringside seat to observe it. Along with the

penalties and vulnerabilities of exclusion comes a perspective not available to anyone tightly geared to the system of privilege and reward—offering a chance for thought beyond the frame, and a sense of exactly the spanners that need to be thrown into the works.

The shared pain of subordination and exclusion can grow solidarity and generate considerable creative energy: The many arts of living well with little are practiced out there, beyond the pale. The outsider also has an excruciatingly detailed view of the lack of clothes on the emperor. Stigma is designed to cause suffering, but frank laughter can swiftly render it undone. Finally, in every site of oppression on earth, who better to see through to the emptiness of any arbitrary discrimination than the class of human beings asked to pay its bills?

Such discrimination has rendered “Women in Buddhism” a kind of painfully elaborated non-story, though valuable scholarly efforts in recent years have begun to recognize, call out, and actively recover the “lost” or carefully erased actual story, such as Rita Gross’s *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, Sallie Tisdale’s *Women of the Way*, and Grace Schireson’s *Zen Women*. More recently, Florence Caplow and Susan Moon’s *The Hidden Lamp* retrieved one hundred koans from dharma exchanges centered on women and invited brief commentary from one hundred Zen female teachers and writers.

As a result we finally get to meet the mind of at least *some* of the exceptional women who have always been part of the course of Buddhism despite its deep antagonism toward them—people who had to be unusually motivated and gifted to surmount the many barriers denying them access to the teaching and the right to practice.

We must mourn the fact that we’ve lost all access to the minds of numerous other women ancestors who have been carefully wiped from the records. But we can be confident that those whose traces somehow survive the hostile indifference of traditional Buddhism toward women were people who had to be fearless in insisting on awakening, with great strength of will and qualities of endurance and forbearance.

And so a long-hidden treasury of exceptional female ancestors, both nuns and laywomen, begins to reappear, and long-silenced

female voices start to carry forward the red thread of a refreshed, robust, and resilient dharma—one that sees not just past but all the way through “gender difference.”

What Kind of Place Is This?

Wuzhou (meaning “No Attachment”) was the dharma name Zen Master Dahui (1089–1163) gave to a rare female student—a married laywoman, Miaozong (1063–1135), who later went on to become a nun. Even more rare was the permission he granted her to reside on the grounds of the temple in one of his guest rooms. Perhaps less rare than is usually acknowledged, some key figures of the time such as Yuanwu, compiler of *The Blue Cliff Record*, were known openly to have lovers—a significant breach of monastic vows. Dahui’s “breach,” in the eyes of his head monk, Wanan, was a breach instead of monastic *rules*. Perhaps it was murmurings at the time about Yuanwu’s behavior that made Wanan so easily nettled by Dahui’s apparent regard for Wuzhou. Or perhaps he was quite simply jealous or sexually stirred.

He complained loudly, but all his disapproving noises failed to excite Dahui. “Even though she is a woman,” Dahui said, “she has strengths.” Meanwhile this woman with unwanted strengths was lodging in Dahui’s guest quarters! Wanan wanted Dahui’s scandalous permissiveness rooted out before everyone came to grief! So Dahui suggested mildly that he could always go and interview the scarlet woman for himself. Wanan reluctantly agreed.

He took his attendants with him, but when she saw him coming, Wuzhou’s first query was, “Is this a dharma interview or a worldly one?” When Wanan replied, “A dharma interview,” Wuzhou told him to send the attendants away, and went back into her chamber for a moment. Then she called out, “Please come in.”

What followed is one of the more unusual dharma interviews in the records of Zen. When Wanan stepped past the curtain he found Wuzhou lying naked on the bed with her legs apart, while looking straight at him unflinchingly. He pointed between her legs and said, “What kind of place is this?”

What kind of man is this? In another context, “What kind of place is this?” might be a neutral opening to a dharma encounter, in which one person tests or confirms the clarity of insight of the other. But in a context so heavily loaded with the presumed “wrongness” of a woman in the place of the dharma, and with her well-known devilish sexual nature completely exposed to view, Wanan’s words sound mangled by some fear. Sounding more like *What the hell are you trying to do (to me)?*

But Wuzhou calmly offered him a teaching right in the *place* of her scandalous display. “All the Buddhas of the three worlds and the six patriarchs and great monks everywhere—they all come out of this,” she said.

“Would you let me enter, or not?” asked Wanan. Is he flirting with her, scorning her, pushing her, testing her response, uncertain where the dharma interview is going now, or how securely he stands in it? Probably *all* of the above; in any case he is certainly not on the front foot.

“It allows horses to cross; it does not allow donkeys to cross,” she informed him, and then turned her back to him. The interview is concluded, with Wanan left to wonder exactly who interviewed whom.

Wuzhou very deliberately echoes the words of Zhaozhou in Case 54 of *The Blue Cliff Record*. When an importunate fellow told Zhaozhou, “For a long time I’ve heard about the stone bridge of Zhaozhou. But I’ve come and found just a simple log bridge,” Zhaozhou replied, “You see only the simple log bridge, and you don’t see the stone bridge.” When the monk then asked him, “What is the stone bridge?” he was really asking “What is Zhaozhou?”—for Zhaozhou, the town of Zhaozhou where his temple stood, and the great stone bridge for which the town was famous, all bore one name.

“Donkeys cross, horses cross,” was Zhaozhou’s characteristically generous and yet piercing reply, that left that monk in a place where he was likely to examine himself far more carefully. All are waved over, all beings cross over in the sense of nature sharing one vast Buddha-nature. But if you are a bit of a donkey you might approach Zhaozhou with your self so loudly in the foreground that you are

bound to fail to see, in the little old man and his happily shabby temple, a monumental opportunity to meet with clarity.

Wanan faltered, embarrassed, and left the room. Later Dahui heard what happened. "It is certainly not the case that the old beast does not have any insight," he remarked about Wuzhou. It is good to find it mentioned that "Wanan was ashamed." Perhaps *not* a complete donkey, then, after this finely judged encounter with exactly what kind of place this is, and how thoroughly the red thread leads straight to the heart of the matter.

Male bodies and female bodies abound, but still there is no place to put my complete body!

But of course Wuzhou is perfectly aware that in the social realm, the conformation of a baby's genitals is the foremost distinction, determining status effectively from birth, the "little bit of difference" that in so many cultures assigns women a place far short of full humanity. The many millennia in which women have been classed as mere chattels for exchange between men has bruised and crushed thousands of generations of lives.

Buddhism occupies an interesting position as the last "great world religion" to collide with the West and its (relative) emancipation of women from legal and customary subordination. Only very recently in its long unfolding has traditional Buddhism been seriously challenged in its frequently astonishing teachings on women, and at the monastic level the old restrictions largely prevail, including staunch denial of the right of women to ordain as nuns.

The shabby pretext defending this has been that only women can ordain women, and the old female monastic orders died out centuries ago, burdened by the low status of women and starved of support. That this leaves women stranded indefinitely in what is literally no-man's-land does not need its self-serving quality pointed out. Rebirth as a man is still seriously proffered as the avenue for a woman seeking to practice.

But as Buddhism comes west, the arbitrary nature of its shameful gender-based discrimination suddenly becomes too visible to deny. A moment of such disruption can create a rich surge of fresh energy, discovery, and charge for the dharma. The word *compassion* suffers overuse in Buddhist circles. But if we translate compassion into

words like *We're fully discovered and revealed only in each other*—surely that extends to the most basic “other” in the social arrangements of humankind: the other sex.

Shameless

You need to proceed against the grain of customary thought to see how a deeply valued tradition can function with such a dazzlingly conscious blind spot. And how easily we go quietly along with that, overlooking its failing. Yet at a very early point—in the Vimalakirti Sutra—its functional blindness was skillfully exposed and critiqued with the cleansing force of laughter, in a scene between Shariputra and an unnamed goddess. Nameless, yet again . . . Perhaps the only safe way a female can be present if she is to conduct such a forensic scrutiny of gendered power relations.

Shariputra sometimes seems the eternal straw man among the disciples of Shakyamuni—designated to ask the obvious question we need answered—as in the Heart Sutra, where he’s there to learn the wisdom of diamond-cutting clarity, known as Prajnaparamita. In that moment, the Buddha sits listening and looking on, while the embodiment of compassion—Avalokitesvara—sits deeply in the state of Prajnaparamita to deliver the famous healing words of emptiness: “[He] clearly saw that all skandhas are empty, transforming anguish and distress . . . Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form . . .”

It’s noteworthy that the ideal of compassion began as a male figure, Avalokitesvara, in India, but slowly gender-shifted as he/she moved east, growing suggestively feminine as the Chinese incarnation Guanyin. Whether lithe and graceful or stocky and matronly, Guanyin is not a lissome girl but always fully mature in feel. To actualize compassion is a fully adult matter. But whether male, female, or happily sitting somewhere in between, it is *compassion* that articulates the heart or core of wisdom, the Buddha respectfully listening. Meanwhile, Prajnaparamita, meaning the “perfection of wisdom” incarnate, is depicted as female in form. And finally, the root meaning of the Sanskrit word *shunyata*, emptiness itself, is

“womb”—evoking the great fertile dark unknown from which we all come bodily forth, and to which we all fold back in.

The layman Vimalakirti dwells in a small and humble room with the remarkable capacity to house the many thousands of wise ones who come to be with him—each venerable seated on their own generously proportioned lion throne! It is here, before a cast of thousands, that Shariputra encounters the goddess charged with the task of freeing him from attachment to the perceived difference to which discrimination most unconsciously clings.

The goddess immediately challenges him. “You’re afraid. You are bound by all sorts of habitual thoughts and desires.” In response he offers an immediate counter-challenge that implicitly questions her right to challenge at all. “Well, why don’t you change your female form?”

Surely she knows her female form is the intractable impediment that binds *her* to habitual thoughts and unruly desires. Who, or more importantly, *what* does she think she is? Sallie Tisdale comments that right here is the very problem that Shariputra is structurally unable to see as a male: Gender for him *is* form, solidly so; the *emptiness* of such form whizzes straight past his privileged perspective.

The goddess answers calmly, “I have been here for twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of femaleness. I have not been able to find them. How can I change them?”

Just as a fixed self becomes harder to define, the more deeply you search for it, so, too, something called “gender” cannot be found—even though the entire social order has been set to rest on its supposed innate difference. To put it another way, gendered identity, too, is empty. Vimalakirti’s canny goddess offers a lovely upturning of the doctrine of innate maleness and femaleness, and with it the pendant doctrine of the innate inferiority of femaleness. Shariputra is suddenly free to see right through it—transparent at last. If he can.

However, when Shariputra makes it clear he staunchly believes gender is form—fixed and solid, far from empty—she is forced to take drastic measures. She turns the startled Shariputra into a woman, and herself into Shariputra. Canny move. Let him experience the free interchange of forms that is emptiness. Then she

asks the now female Shariputra, “So, why don’t you change your female sex and turn yourself into a man?” After all, this is the way a woman is able to experience awakening, under the rules. And someone who a moment ago was a man should have no trouble being completely free of the limitations of being a woman!

“I can’t,” he says, suddenly deeply wishing he could see that gender was actually empty after all. “I don’t know how I got this form,” he confesses. There it is, *I don’t know*: the gate of freedom from such tyranny.

Well, who knows? Who knows even where this “I” who calls himself or herself Shariputra came from in the first place? Shariputra plaintively begins to experience the painfully arbitrary nature of carving up humanity by gender and the trap it sets for all of us.

To bring the point all the way home, the goddess proposes that if Shariputra could again change out of the female state, then all women are also unlimited by their female states. That all women appear in the form of women is just as categorically empty as the way Shariputra now appears in the form of a woman. “While they are not women in reality, they appear in the form of women. With this in mind, the Buddha said, ‘In all things, there is neither male nor female,’” she reminds him.

Finally the goddess relents and ends the play, returning to her original form, which also returns Shariputra to his. She teases, “Reverend Shariputra, what have you done with your female form!” He confesses, “I neither made it nor did I change it.” Form is empty; self-nature is neither made nor changed. He now begins to see where it is that he really dwells.

And while Shariputra adjusts to his newly stretched mind, Vimalakirti quietly praises the unnamed goddess who so skillfully taught the categorical emptiness of gender discrimination through free exchange, back and forth, of so-called fixed sexual identity.

This classic Buddhist sutra steps us right through the way gender discrimination erects and enacts a staunchly dualistic mind with painstaking thoroughness; however, Buddhism itself remained unscathed and staunchly able to maintain its harshly dualistic mind, when it came to women.

Do You Still Have That in You?

A nun asked the old Master Zhaozhou—who'd have been somewhere between 80 and 120 years old at the time—"What is the deeply secret mind?" Zhaozhou just reached across and squeezed her hand.

How interesting. Lying between these two is a world of apparent religious and gender inequality—so what might reaching across and offering this squeeze signify? To read it as a sexual advance is a snare for the unwary and would be like responding to the red thread with a wry, somewhat sexist smirk. This old man is *very* old, and the teaching literally touching, very gentle. The deeply secret mind of Zhaozhou is right on show and hides no unspoken overture. But still it lets her check to discover if *she* is clear enough to know his mind at that moment or not.

Perhaps not. "Do you still have that in you?" she asks. This feels a little like Wanan's cross-examination, from the other side of the divide this time, and with a more respectful tone, but the terms nudge the same matter. Is she stuck in "You're a man, I'm a woman"? Or is there perhaps a more tender and genuine undertone of inquiry here—"You're a very old man, and a deeply enlightened one. The unbreakable red thread, how does it sit with you now?"

In a very different encounter, a nun living in solitude in a wild hermitage was rudely confronted by a monk who saw her and demanded, "Do you have any followers!" "Yes," she said. When asked where they are, given that she seemed to be completely alone (and vulnerable), she replied, "The mountains, the rivers, the whole earth, the plants and trees, are all my followers." He couldn't believe his ears. "Aren't you a nun?" he asked, adding rudely that he saw her as only a layperson. "You can't be a monk!" she replied. Furious, he told her, "Stop mixing up Buddhism!" "I am not mixing up Buddhism," she calmly replied, and when he insisted she must be, she sorted him out this way: "You're a man. I'm a woman. Where has there ever been any mix-up?"

That wily nun left the man to explore his own small desert island of strictly gendered identity, round and round, until he could stumble upon the ocean of essential nature, in which not only are all forms

empty, but emptiness is brilliantly, tenderly, poignantly, and minutely coming forth in endless varied *form*.

So how will Zhaozhou's nun find herself in the place where everything is already swimming, free? Well, Zhaozhou points her in its direction. "It is *you* who have it," he said.

Will she cling to a residue of having and not having, of "me in here, you out there," of "you're a man, I'm a woman"? Or see that she has possessed in completely equal measure all that she seeks with the words *your deeply secret mind* from the very beginning. It lies open and free in all directions and it is indeed you who have it.

Gestating the Spiritual Embryo

Let's look in on another conversation about the deeply secret mind, how it is nourished and grows fruitful. Qiyuan (1597–1654) was a Chinese nun, student of seventeenth-century Zen Master Shiche Tongsheng (1593–1638), and their exchange is interesting for the beautifully equitable balance we see between master and student, as they reflect together upon her deep and fully confirmed realization.

Shiche walks Qiyuan back through every stage of the process, starting with "Buddha Nature is not illusory. What was it like when you were nourishing the spiritual embryo?"

Qiyuan replied, "It felt congealed, deep and solitary."

He then asked her, "When you gave birth to the embryo, what was it like?"

Qiyuan said, "It was like being completely stripped bare."

"When you met with the Buddha, what was it like?"

"I took advantage of the opportunity to meet him face-to-face."

Shiche said, "Good, good. You will be a model for those in the future."

If you've encountered Women's commentary on *Mu*, the first case of *The Gateless Gate*, you will have heard about swallowing a red-hot iron ball of great doubt—you can't digest it, can't spit it out. All you can do is endure with it, until *Mu* radiantly breaks open.

Shiche offers a very different way of holding radical uncertainty—though a heavily pregnant woman may well feel she is carrying a

very large, red-hot iron ball in her belly at certain moments! Completely at ease with each other and untroubled by “man” and “woman,” Shiche simply inquires, “What was it like when you were nourishing the spiritual embryo?”—an unapologetically female and embodied way of understanding the universal process of giving birth to the unborn dimension of mind.

While this unborn quality is inseparable from who we are, to have a serious practice is to nourish faith in that and bring it to conscious birth in direct experience. The pregnant body is a beautifully natural image for the non-dual mind that has no you opposed to me and is not one, is not two.

Qiyuan reports that the process “felt congealed, deep and solitary.” At this point, it’s not unlike what Wumen says, “You’re like a mute person who has had a great dream. You know it for yourself but you cannot say a word”; you are productively mute or tongue-tied at this stage. Pregnancy is itself a strangely deep and solitary dream state in its way—of having a living being moving within you yet whose face you cannot know. You can say nothing about them yet you know them so intimately they finger your own ribs.

“Congealed” is also interesting. In a chrysalis, the worm who spins the deep and solitary cocoon about itself becomes a formless soup that congeals in its own time, to emerge abruptly as a fully winged being with fantastical eyes, shimmering in texture and color. Unimaginable from the perspective of the long and deeply secret pupal dream.

In response to the next question, “When you gave birth to the embryo, what was it like?” Qiyuan says, “It was like being completely stripped bare.” It is pellucidly clear, very simple, unadorned, plain, and has always been in full sight, bright, in front of us all the time. Stripped as bare as that. Suddenly, it’s the judging mind with all its obfuscations, its onerous picking and choosing, its having versus not having, that appears unfathomable, the truly strange dream.

Finally Shiche asks, “When you met the Buddha, what was that like?” “I took advantage of the opportunity to meet him face-to-face,” she replies. To work with *Mu* is to take advantage of the opportunity to know the mind of Zhaozhou when he said “*Mu*.” Her forthrightness and simplicity is entirely to the point, and her teacher simply says,

“Good, good, you will be a model for those in the future.” This is not vitiating admiration. He is saying this sets the course for your life, the riverbed for your life to flow in from now on. Take care with it.

Fearless

The power of a river can lie very quiet—just the coiled muscle of current, moving vast volumes of water with no great sign of “doing” anything at all. But the kind of women drawn to study with the vigorously reforming eighteenth-century Japanese Master Hakuin, who was known not to turn women students away, could easily be a sharp spring wind moving briskly through his space, rustling his calligraphy paper on the way.

Satsujo was a mere sixteen-year-old when her devout layman father began taking her with him whenever he went to visit Master Hakuin. Her parents urged her to pray to Kannon, bodhisattva of compassion, that she may one day find a husband. It’s not recorded whether this was because they doubted her beauty or worried her spiritedness might be a possible obstacle, but in any case she took the practice up day and night in all her activities and one day experienced an awakening. Her father looked in on her and found her sitting happily on a copy of the Lotus Sutra. “What are you doing, sitting on this precious sutra!” he demanded.

“How is this precious sutra different from my ass?” she asked.

Hakuin must have heard about her precocity and gave her a koan. “How do you understand this?” he asked her.

“Would you please go over it again?” she asked. But the moment he opened his mouth to speak, she put her hands to the floor and made formal obeisance, saying, “Thank you for your trouble.” She then walked out, leaving Hakuin with his mouth half open.

“Oh dear,” he said in delight, “I’ve been trounced by this terrible little woman!”

And when Asan of Shinano broke through Hakuin’s koan, the sound of the single hand, coming to him saying, “Even better than realizing Hakuin’s sound of one hand, clap both hands and do business!” Hakuin immediately took up his brush and swiftly drew a bamboo broom, handing it to her as a gift. Asan immediately

snatched his brush from him and added, “Sweeping away all the bad Zen teachers in Japan—starting with Hakuin!” Hakuin smiled in approval.

How can you not love the fearlessness, joy, and freedom of the dharma that effortlessly comes forth, when the dead weight of gender constraints are lifted from women of the way! And there’s that saving laughter again.

Girls are clearly blameless in being born female, boys blameless in being born male. Men are as deeply bruised and limited as women are, though in different ways, by the relentless gender bias all humanity is asked to suffer; the privilege awarded to males is a loss of humanity in different form, one less easy to recognize—leaving it a deeply mixed blessing.

One final story of the way reality shatters this arbitrary social inequality comes in the backstory to the career of Master Zhuzhi—the practitioner of One-Finger Zen, in Case 3 of *The Gateless Barrier*.

The story erupts when a nun with the dharma name “True World” simply walks in unannounced through the door of the hermit hut where Zhuzhi is meditating. True World is wearing a sedge hat—one of those big woven hats that keep out sun and rain, while almost completely hiding the face. In she barges without even the courtesy of taking off her sedge hat—a further upturning of protocol—to where obviously highly important practice is underway.

Hat left on, and a woman—all that is worldly, uncouth, and out of place—storms right into the place of intended realization. But we know it is *true world* that’s walking in, wearing the hat.

What she does next is highly ritualized: She circumambulates Zhuzhi as if he were a stupa, circling him three times, which is a ceremony usually followed by three bows to the floor and a few other flourishes. But in this case, all that is dispensed with. At the end of her third circumambulation she simply stands before him and says, “If you can say an appropriate word, I will take off my hat.” To remove your hat, of course, signals recognition of being in a wholly shared social space. It may even mean a little more. That this nun will share his hut with him in other ways as well—an interesting challenge. So can Zhuzhi meet her there or not?

Zhuzhi can't say even a single word. True World patiently and forthrightly does it all again: walks around him three more times, furnishes the same invitation, and once again finds him struck dumb. She does it all once more—after all, every folk story demands the offer of three chances, three wishes—but Zhuzhi remains dumbstruck, a boulder of indecision. So True World simply turns on her heel and walks out. How clean and direct. After all, True World has nothing to offer a monk who can only sit there.

The moment she leaves, Zhuzhi at last stirs, thinking, “Gee, maybe I missed something really important.” He goes to the door and calls after her, “Look it’s going to be dark soon, why don’t you stay the night?” A bedfellow might be comforting on a cold night—there’s that too. True World turns and faces him, saying, “If you can say an appropriate word, I will stay the night.” (In fact, one true word and true world would be with him forever, and never come or go away.) She’s asking him for what is genuine, without a single self-saving thought coating it. He has no such a word, and so she leaves.

In his commentary on the case, Robert Aitken (1917–2010) says, “[Zhuzhi] was downcast. He felt he had been defeated by True World and thought, ‘I am going around this matter of realization the wrong way. I need a good teacher.’” Zhuzhi packed up his gear to leave but then, because it really had grown dark, sat nodding over his pack waiting for the dawn. Suddenly the deity of the mountain came to him—no doubt in a dream—saying, “Don’t leave. A great Zen Master will be coming here soon and you can consult with him.” So he unpacked his gear and stayed on, and within a couple of days a really interesting teacher who became his master, Tianlong (748–807), did in fact turn up.

But hadn’t a great Zen teacher already turned up? I’m interested that Robert Aitken makes no comment about that. And as we see, “true world” stands on no ceremony, and its offers and challenges are *always* worth accepting, because even in this generous life of ours, they are not issued indefinitely.

Great women Zen teachers appeared all over the map of the way. Some left indelible traces that could not be expunged from the records; some appear with teaching brilliant and sudden as lightning but their names were either not sought or left unrecorded; some

arrived in great teaching dream stories, like the one just visited; some names are well-known but recorded only in the context and under the patrimony of a male (such as Lingzhao, the crystal clear and luminous daughter of the somewhat more laboring Layman Pang). Unknown, untold others can reach us now only in dream, but that is the vivid vermilion-tinged dream of a dharma as profoundly feminine as it is masculine, and as profoundly clear of all such little bits of difference.

Instead of confirming ancient prejudice, the red thread has the welcome audacity to insist that the entire generative and imaginative power and mystery of desire, sex, fertility, and birth cannot possibly be held separate from realized mind. These are gates to awaken even important monks and sages from a defiling dream of purity and separateness—and as they constitute the last bastion of unearned privilege and secret fear of life, they are especially potent gates. There are endless latent discoveries lying waiting in this deeply tender and often painful fact. We can only welcome the fact that it is no longer quite so possible to pretend otherwise.

That saving redness of the thread—its plainly carnal, passionate, female, bodily, and all-too-human connotations—can be embraced and seen all the way through to where it empties into plain, all-embracing equality. Its offer is a profound depth of seeing that many until now have never felt the need to reach for, secure in their societal male bias, nor glimpsed the possibility of doing so, locked in their deeply unequal circumstances.

But the dharma, red right through from the start, has *no color* to be claimed or wielded discriminatively anywhere at all. Leaving no one missing from the record at all.

• *chapter three* •

you



*Who made who, who made you?
Who made who, ain't nobody told you
Who made who, who made you?
If you made them and they made you
Who picked up the bill and who made who
Ain't nobody told you
Who made who
Who made you
Who made who
Who made who
Yeah
Nobody told you*

—AC/DC

“**W**ho do you think you are?’ was an old schoolyard taunt—and a surprisingly good question. You awake as a being that is *being* itself, verb not noun, with no fixed substance, no boundary. “What is Buddha?” someone asks. “Who are you?” is the reply.

“What is this self?” (or even more simply, “Who are you?”) is the fundamental koan, echoed a thousand times through the records of

Zen. *Mu* is another way into the whole territory of *Who?* but offers “you” no handhold—it has already generously swallowed hands, feet, nose, eyes, mind, mountains, rivers, and the whole great earth.

Or Linji: “Everyone! There is a true person of no rank, coming and going from the faces of each of you. After a while, it never goes away. Who is it? Look, Look!”

That one is too humble even to have a name, or gender, even though it is as present and distinct in detail as our own faces. Names—and even “me” and “you”—make a kind of cut in the flesh of intimacy, in the wholeness of the world. But they also call us into being. Perhaps it is ranking—this is better, that is unsatisfactory—that so fillets the whole moments of life and leaves us stuck with the slivers of better and worse. The true person of no rank can recognize none of the peculiarly human sense of being exceptional or entitled that seems to come all too easily, leaving us so isolated, an exile among the species of the earth.

“It comes and goes from all our faces,” says Linji—sometimes clear to us, sometimes fogged, sometimes brilliant in the flash of an eye or a baby’s smile that knows us, sometimes glinting in the dew on grass or the smell of rain on dust. Then a crow utters a sound over Lake Biwa—and suddenly the true person of no rank looks out steadily through our face.

The Koan of Human Being

“I” is the koan every human being is working on from very early days, the everyday undeclared mystery of “I am.” No one can elude it completely; our consciousness of self, identity, self-conscious awareness—once you turn to look at it—is strange all over the earth. If this consciousness of self is not completely limited to us among the animals, then certainly it is unique in the tremendous life of its own that it assumes in us, consumes in us. A lifetime’s worth! There’s reason to suggest that it not only marks us out among the species, but also threatens to alienate us from the earth and exile us from the community of all beings.

And “You” is the koan that both brings “I” into being and heals it back into relationship—into a communion of subjects, instead of a

world contrived by thought into a collection of things. The red thread is what conjoins “you” and “I”—and confirms them to be not two and even less than one.

Children have a beautifully fluid sense of “the other.” A small girl rushes away down across the beach ahead of her mother joyfully singing out, “/ am the beach! / am the sand! / am the waves!” What is “other” can be so close to being no other at all that even *you* can sound too distancing—touching on rude. I once watched two small children playing with a ginger kitten named Sweet Dreams, who frisked repeatedly out of reach and finally skidded under a couch to escape their competing demands and to pat at an interesting-looking drift of dust.

“Sweet Dreams, Sweet Dreams, where are you?” crooned the little girl.

“Don’t call Sweet Dreams *You!*” her little brother reproved.

Children generate natural koans with ease. I was completing peaceful midmorning laps of a pool one morning when a busload of eleven-year-old boys arrived from a local school and began plowing and churning noisily up and down the lane next to me, setting the lane markers wildly bobbing. A plump boy came puffing heroically to a stop at the end of the lane, ripping at his goggles, saying to his friend who was about to take off, “I can’t see with these goggles!”

“They can see *you* but,” his friend shot back with a grin.

“You,” the very signifier of relationship, can be the most tender of words. After all, there is no love without the word. When we feel affectionate toward something inanimate, it soon starts to become a *you*; familiarity breeds a mutual belonging. We’re people—when our heart’s stirred by something that also settles it deeply, *you* comes to our lips. When, after some time away, I come back over the brow of the hill and can see our green roof down there among the trees, mist twisting and rising from the valley below, it’s not so much *I’m back* as *You, here!* In that moment, who is who?

A sense of presence calls up the sense of “you.” Trees, mountains, creeks become presence, everything grows presence when we become present ourselves. There is a mysterious “thou-ness” to the earth, the natural world, and all its intimate detail. Clouds, stars, trees—even that dark, emu-shaped hole at the heart

of the Milky Way in Southern Hemisphere skies; relationship forms with whatever calls us up, if you're human. And is most completely realized when you and I, and the idea "you" and "I," are experienced as marvelously empty.

Another story. A woman deep in a Zen retreat took her koan *Mu* into a walk among redwoods—trees so high the encounter with them is with huge soaring trunks, sough of wind, that piney smell with just a hint of mold, and the gray-green gloom of branches knitted together far out of sight.

Sunlight broke through here and there. Without warning, for no reason, the solid fact of *trees* shifted into transparent, shimmering energy that surprised but did not startle her. There seemed to be no one there to startle. A bell rang, and this no one made her way back inside. She noticed the delicate scent of urine that always lingered in the cedar of the women's bathroom—but noticed it now with something like affection; opinions about such things were gone.

Something in her resisted wrangling this nameless experience into words of her own but silently asked the redwoods and slight stink of pee for any words of their choosing. Whatever spoke simply said, "*No other.*"

"No other" brings us to what the red thread so richly confirms, which is how passing strange are *being* and *emptiness* (the *and* is provisional; it disappears): Your life is also my life, the red thread makes clear; our intimate connection to life and to every other being *cannot* be cut; no being exists except in relation to every other being; and beingness is legion upon the earth. In the largest and most generous sense, for every one of us, there is *no other*.

This "only I, alone and holy" leaves no one out, because it radiates out from the joy of "no-self." Consciousness generally sets about identifying and singling out "things" relative to "me." Realization heals this divide and finds the clarity of each thing exactly in its no-thingness—its emptiness or seamlessness, its robust wholeness with all that is. In this sense, "you" is the place where "no other" is discovered and resolved.

Language stutters a bit here, no doubt because language itself serves largely to discern and articulate tangible distinctions within what is undivided. Terms enact these perceived or persuaded

differences and go on to subtly replace what first inspired the act of naming, as with a river, tree, or pebble. Yet as Leonard Michaels points out, “The magnificent horror of the volcano, and the blinding, silvery beauty of the rain were there long before terms.” Rivers, potatoes, faces, toenails, cesspools, orange blossoms all survive their “termination” in words with perfect ease, and happily exist, just as they are, free of the restraints we let names impose. Who is imposed on at that moment?

Potatoes, for example, offer no objection to being called—well, anything of your choosing. Please, check this for yourself. They remain entirely themselves, continuing with their own quiet, unbroken Zazen (all the while growing eyes and wrinkles and shoots) that has no intention to trouble anyone.

When we approach anything just as it is, minus names or terms, presence can begin to enter awareness—though who is who at once becomes less easy to sort out. Take a plane tree growing in a city street. How commonplace, how simply *there* they are, until you stop to be with one, its actual presence. The trunk—suddenly you see how huge it is, so smoothly curved and richly patterned, with unfathomable shifts and spots of color in the bark. The twisted knotty root, powering from the pavement, worn and scarred in places from contact with the human world, but indefatigably itself. So present, and yet, when its presence is admitted, its startling *thusness* admits you to yourself more intimate and nameless, and this mutuality makes clear “There is *no other*.”

No other, because there is no self, yet this no-self is personal. Emptiness is entangled not just with the red thread of body, sexuality, bleeding, passions, suffering, and mortality, but also with “you,” “me,” and the relationship called “love.”

Love remains blessedly quiet as a word, in Zen, and I am grateful for that fact. Left so rarely sounded, it is freed to speak itself eloquently in the open, unspoken offer of the self that marks maturity in Zen. Realization experiences the full charge and gift of being here, and this is of inestimable value; but realized behavior is what finally counts. I have no trouble calling all of this love, but better than using the word is seeing its action.

When the word *love* is overused, its currency is debased and slips into self-adornment. Un-debased, *love* is a word that inspires and also chastens action and seems to know what's needed faster than thought. We endure a slow destitution when the word is hollowed out by overuse: What can take hold or thrive among hyperinflated expressions of "love" and cloying, stumbling detours of sentimentality? I think of the disturbing proliferation of teddy bears and other cuddly toys in recent times to mark the place where raw adult loss and empathy attempts and somehow fails to be expressed. Possibly fails even to be coherently felt.

The Koan "You"

Zen came west in the twentieth century and met with a worldview that, among other ideas foreign to its place of origin, once had strongly at its center a personal God, usually addressed by the personal pronoun *him*, and a fundamental understanding that this God is loving—indeed, is love itself. If this worldview has suffered the attrition of a steadily desacralizing, secular worldview across several centuries, the idea of unconditioned love persists as an all but sacred residual reference point for what is right, true, transforming, reconciling, and redeeming. In other words, love is still held forth in the West as the closest thing to salvation—though a tin-pot rival has emerged in the avalanche of digital devices and their vaunted connectivity (with which they distance or replace real contact).

The cultural orientation of Asian Zen was carefully distanced from this word *love* that nevertheless flows as bloodstream through the red thread. Confucian ideals of filial duty, mutual dependency, and subordination of the self to social cohesion blended readily with a Buddhist ideal of equanimity understood as achieved nonattachment, the cooling of the passions to a neutral universal friendliness no longer disturbed by an ungoverned self. Add to this a monastic setting that enacted an ascetic removal from the world, and a formal, diplomatic distance from *love* becomes complete.

Not that this in any way could have truly stopped in its tracks or ever severed all that the red thread signifies and brings to life! But

the vigor of the Western ideal of love—taken to the level of ultimate and redemptive mystery in the term *the passion*, meaning the loving and sacrificial suffering of Christ, but also valorizing romantic love as personal salvation—presents a very different energy. Two waves coming together at different angles, colliding and unifying in the same moment . . . Zen meets the West, and in that context “you” (and “I”) now has a charge upon it that was far less intense in its Eastern context. “You” becomes a vital matter to resolve in the Red Thread koan.

Self and No-Self

Zazen generously doubts and in doubting heals the sense of a separate self, letting us into the shared, inclusive, undivided emptiness revealed in everything met in a wide and unassuming attention. This realization of “emptiness” overflows with fullness and vivid detail emptied of the confining view of “separateness.”

Traditionally Buddhism has had little to say about the personal “shape” of this embodied experience of replete emptiness. It’s a remarkable moment: No self in front of anything and yet someone breathing, laughing, crying, or agog in wonder. What may we say about the vestigial yet utterly distinct sense of self that remains, no longer troubling anything at all? A perfect fit. This personal self belongs more completely in the experience of no-self than it could have dreamt. No wonder it’s called “coming home.”

But though we live conscious of that experience, and practice to heighten consciousness of what it means and asks of us, we are imperfect human beings, finding our way home in constantly changing circumstances. Sharp, painful, grievous events are on the menu for all of us. A penetrating response to the red thread comes in the form of the haiku that Issa (1673–1828) wrote upon the sudden death of his beloved two-year-old daughter:

*this world of dew
is the world of dew ~
and yet*

Even this astonishingly enveloping and convincing self is as impermanent as the dew, and adult acceptance of the fact has little choice but to grow, *and yet*—people matter infinitely. Their loss tears us open, rips a formless howl from us. Issa's "and yet" embodies all that is human and struck nearly dumb by loss, right there alongside life as one continual, inevitable letting go.

And yet! Every being we love is irreplaceable and matters terribly. Personhood matters dearly. Character—or the way realization forms us and learns to walk upright in the world, in the most ordinary and understated way—matters, and the particular way clear action radiates out effecting change in ways that can't and do not need to be tracked or counted, this, too, is inexpressibly dear. We're not here long; try to notice and remember some details of the ones you love.

Could you ever come to the end of the value of a human being? It's difficult not to see practice itself as a personal act of love in response to the desire to realize and inhabit this mysterious gift of personhood in the fullest possible way. "You." "I."

So the Western tradition, given its social and religious history and its recent near-obsessive fixation on individualism, retains a heartfelt human need to address and belong to the universe in *personal* terms—to evoke "I" and "you" right here in undividedness. Whether this is completely universal on the earth by now is impossible to say, but a "person-shaped emptiness" seems to be our natural threshold—or final strong-hold?—before an even further dropping away, to where even *love* is too limiting a word for what opens to us and as us. Where love itself is gone, fallen away into a completeness that can find no edges of any kind.

If this Western sense of "person" diverges from the Asian roots of Zen, there is reconciliation right within that tradition: for the Red Thread koan opens the way to a fully embodied, human, *person-shaped* embrace of the vast and intimate reality we call emptiness.

The Heart Sutra tells us, "Form is no other than emptiness," which means such an "I" and such a "you" cannot possibly be limited or separated in that vast and intimate reality. But equally, it continues, "emptiness [is] no other than form." In other words, "I" and "you" vividly appear, along with kittens called Sweet Dreams and gravestones for two-year-olds. The Heart Sutra brings this right

home: “Form is *exactly* emptiness, emptiness *exactly* form.” These two are not even “two.” Indeed, they are even less than something that can be called “one”—for that would have an outside to it.

Realization is an opening that feels too edgeless in its reach even to be called love, or still to contain something solidly “me”; and yet an unnameable, objectless sense of love feels like the final jumping-off point—while also marking each step of the way. Bodhicitta.

The emptiness includes this mystery called *you*, and every *other* subject—every other “you”—with complete, impartial equality. This is the red thread nature of human awakening. And although every category lies empty, still, when we wake up empty it is also intensely personal; we awaken *in person*, “Just this person.” And are never more thoroughly ourselves than when we do.

So there is you, and emptiness of you—impossible and simply true. And where does that leave trees, stars, hills, kangaroos, and great elks? Not to mention gut flora, mycelium threads in the soil, earthworms, and splendid blue wrens?

“E”

Someone who easily responds to such a question is the late Bill Neidjie (1920–2002), Aboriginal stockman, road worker, and songman, whose long stream-of-poetry essay titled *Story About Feeling* tells us about belonging simply by chatting and singing seamlessly with the living world.

*Well I'll tell you about this story,
about story where you feel . . .*

*Listen carefully this, you can hear me.
I'm telling you because earth just like mother
and father or brother of you. That tree same thing.
Your body, my body I suppose,
I'm same as you . . . anyone.
Tree working when you sleeping and dream.*

*That star e working there . . . see?
E working, I can see.
Always at night, if you lie down . . .
look careful, e working . . . see?
When you sleep . . . blood e pumping.*

*So you look . . . e go pink, e come white.
See im work? E work.
In the night you dream, lay down,
that star e working for you.
Tree, grass . . . working for you.*

Neidjie doesn't use *he*, but *e*, which is a rendition of his vernacular speech but—by leaving the *h* silent, achieves something brilliantly inclusive: “E” is genderless, and so close to his key word *feel*, feeling, that in the flow of words a natural affinity softly forms. Many indigenous Australians use “this fella,” “that fella”—not names—to alert you to significant nodal points in the intricate network of relationships that make up *country* (a very different word from *landscape* or *environment*, for it evokes the entire web or kinship bond of landforms, creatures, trees, bushes, berries, rocks, stars, and people, including their ancestors' teeth and bones that together delineate and bring country up alive).

This fella and that fella may be male or female yet also genderless; and like *Story About Feeling* their avoidance of fixed name allows relationship to stand up clear and uppermost; they slip past being objects and step forward as subjects. Is “e” *he* or *she*? No one needs to know. We're gracefully ushered inside the reality of a communion of subjects with fluid boundaries and released from seeing the world as a collection of colliding or competing *things*.

And like “e,” these subjects (including us) have no rank—where's the rank to be found between hill, tree, star, “e” . . .? I enjoy how “e” elides all difference also between *he* and *me*. (Dongshan's “He is me” echoes tantalizingly here.) Neidjie's “e” offers a simple and natural-feeling entry into vast kinship of equal belonging and is comfortable in its person-shaped openness. But *simple* does not

imply “easy.” Bill’s life was one of hard laboring and hard-won comfort of belonging in most simple things through disciplined awareness of the natural world and how it spoke to him and how it needed answering.

Not unlike the conversation the earth will open up with a person grown deeply still and internally quiet, in Zazen.

That vast equality is a healing for human beings; it heals the cut we make between human and everything else, so that being here is the same as coming home. There is no rank in “e.” Just true person.

I Have Already Become like This

Case 41 from *Transmission of Light*, collected by Zen Master Keizan (1268–1325), is one of the few places in the literature of Zen where a question about self-nature is raised as a question about love. Master Tongan Daopi is approached by a monk who comes quoting an old text: “I do not love what worldly people love.” Flourishing this classic statement of ascetic Buddhist understanding of the perfection of cooled desire, he challenges his teacher by then asking, “I wonder, Your Reverence, what is it that you love?”

Daopi replies, “I have already become like this,” words that awoke his student to what love is, far beyond where questions can be raised.

“I have already become like this” is a properly strange and oblique-looking kind of reply. Is he avoiding the question or freely revealing himself in a complete response to it? A quick glance might see one kind of boast (I aim to live in the place free of all attachments) being met with another, even more grandiose (don’t worry, I dealt with all that long ago). But no, Daopi is meeting and directly responding to a very good question: “What is it that you love?” Ask it sincerely of yourself and you will know why it is that you practice at all. Sometimes it can be hard to say why we practice, but if we check it with that question, it becomes plain.

When you ask such a teacher a question like this, you can find you have asked yourself a whole cluster of inextricably linked great questions: What is this self? What might self-relinquishment look

like? What's the place of love in all this? The action of love—what might that look like?

This monk became Daopi's successor when he heard and realized Daopi's luminous response, "I have already become like this." Clearly, it met and dissolved every one of these implicit questions thoroughly. And to be so open to the response, this man obviously came not with arrogance but genuine wonder. Daopi must have seen the force of these questions latent in the monk and the query that he framed: "I wonder, Your Reverence, what is it that you love?"

"I already have become like this" has no grandiosity in it. The response is graceful and skillful because humbly true. It's a bit like conceding—I am that stone halfway across the paddock. That shadow of a bird crossing the open ground. The grief of that neighbor across the way still brokenhearted by the loss of his closest friend. The woman bent over planting rice whose row veers off toward her crying baby. I share my nature freely with that and with the trees on the hillside, he is saying. And with that run of notes just now from the currawong, and the quietest gurgle of water still audible in the creek, and . . .

In the thorough conceding of self you can feel in "I have already become," love as a thing apart has vanished together with Daopi as a thing apart—only to turn up embodied in every bright or solemn detail. He's asked about love but doesn't name anything he loves! Does he sidestep love this way? Or reveal its nature and natural movement in a way that lives unrestricted even by that word? He leaves it entirely to us to uncover in our own being what "becoming like this" might be, whenever resistance to being here lies low or mercifully is gone.

The first time ever I heard Daopi's reply I thought of those deep green stones you see at the bottom of a steadily flowing creek, rounded and edgeless, rolled over and over by water flow until all resistance has been taken away. Water and stone come into complete agreement: stone with the character of water, water revealing itself in the shape of stone. Becoming more and more *like this*.

You Are Welcome Here

A practical way to invite yourself into this mystery of how “you” belongs in emptiness is to offer the welcome and so become it. “You are welcome here”—or shortened just to “Welcome”—is a practice that looks gentle enough, but then so does unceasing water flow: Just ask a river stone! Welcoming this breath, this feeling (pleasant or not), this edge of thought, this sigh of the wind, this next breath is the practice of noticing in the very act of not resisting but making welcome. But can you really say who makes whom welcome?

The longer form, “You are welcome here,” quickly reveals a mysterious twist. *You* are not only taking the part of the host, which places you fundamentally at home, welcoming each thing intimately, as “you.” You find each thing that arrives in open awareness says equally roundly to you, “*You* are welcome here.”

There is no way in the end to tell the you who offers the welcome from the you who is welcomed. Whether you accept each “arising” (feeling, sound, sight, taste, touch, smell, or thought) reluctantly, tentatively, willingly, curiously, or lovingly has no bearing on the matter. Still each one is not anything but *you*—in person. And of course the underlying question constantly in play is, *Who is that? Who is who? What if not knowing was the greatest intimacy?*

This is a gently comprehensive but also fierce way of continuing to wake to the constantly changing ten thousand faces of *being*; it more and more deeply inhabits the discovery that everything moves together, nothing is fixed, and every subject/object distinction grows more and more difficult to sustain when you open and widen in Zazen. “You” is the name, almost, of intimacy itself.

Dongshan’s own face reflected in creek water let him see he had the likeness of all that is, in every detail . . . His question to his teacher, “Do I have your likeness?” now broke clear. Yunyan could well already have died, yet Dongshan truthfully can say, “He is now *exactly* me.” Which now no longer possibly can contradict, “But I am not now him.”

Don’t mistake this for the way we carry loved people in our heart and bones and even look at the world through their eyes from time to time. It is a deeper point of realization. The timeless and the karmic

are *not two*, despite the warning word *but* that kindly stops us in our tracks to ensure there is no spurious claim of oneness here. Not one. Not two. Realization is not divided and divides nothing at all. The remarkable thing here is how human is this intimacy that is so vast. Yogi Berra's accidental Zen teaching offers itself here: "When you come to a fork in the road—take it!" It's *you* that swallows every divided possibility, swallows the universe whole.

So Dongshan's "he," Bill Neidjie's "e," every human being's "you/me"—all of us—can stand free and empty of any ancient dream of separation. Like Dongshan, we must walk our path, entirely personal, but still we meet intimacy ("him," "e," "you") everywhere, we are enfolded in it—all of us, making our own way home.

"You are welcome here" turns no suffering or joy away; it leaves us less immune to the groans and sorrows and injustices, revealing "He is now me." This lies right at the heart of the matter of intimacy and the red thread that cannot be cut. Expect to find it painful. Expect to find it joyous.

Who Is Who?

In Tomas Tranströmer's poem "Baltics" he writes about a harbor channel suddenly becoming eccentric with out-of-season jellyfish—genus *Aurelia*. He describes them pumping themselves along "with calm consideration," or drifting like flowers after a sea burial. And yet they are untranslatable, he says, and must stay in their element, water:

*If you lift them out of the water
all of their shape disappears
As when an indescribable truth is lifted out
of the silence
And formulated into a lifeless mass yes
They are untranslatable*

Our element is human, and so we call the untranslatable water we swim in "love," a passionately human word brought into being by

a genus that began as a very small and tenuous mammal indeed—radically undefended except by its wits, when dinosaurs still thundered and twittered on the earth. We branch from a very small tree-shrew ancestor, standing shivering in its small bones, only so high, clinging to refuges in bushes and grasses. And down through that little character's descendants in an immensity of time the word *love* came into the world.

When I was a child I made pilgrimage with my brother and sister to the natural history museum almost every Saturday morning when we first moved to Sydney from a small Queensland town, which had a small but remarkable museum that was completely outclassed by its big-city equivalent. The first thing I'd marvel at was the blue whale skeleton that hung the entire length of the reception hall ceiling, but the secret sacred site that drew me every time was a tiny, dusty, stuffed tree shrew, eyes huge, clinging to a branch in a dark glass case, above a small handwritten notice that announced, OUR EARLIEST PRIMATE ANCESTOR.

It's not so difficult to dream your way out of the bone-bowl confines of this skull and begin to see through the wide awake eyes of *the other*. It's our human schtick, and infinitely worthy of keeping up.

We discover ourselves in ten thousand other forms that life inhabits. *You* is the word that embraces recognition, and recognition initiates love. The net of Indra, the extraordinary recognition of everything existing only in the light of everything else—is this startling x-ray of the nature of reality also a revelation of the peculiarly human gift we have of discovering ourselves in the other? The first glimpse of "me," and every one that follows, is caught in the mirror of "you"—in other human beings, and in beings at large.

Robert Hass speaks about newborns when they first come home from the hospital, their wide staring eyes, wet mouths, fat uncontrollable tongues. "I thought they responded when I bent over their cribs because they were beginning to recognize me. Now I think it was because they were coming to recognize themselves," he says.

The startling thought *me* dawns in such moments as the sight of the strangely waving feet in front of your face, which turn out to be catchable at times by someone who is fast turning out to be "me."

But “me” gets easily lost at first and is best checked up on by checking up on “you.” R. D. Laing surmised that small children don’t get up at night to see if *you* are there; when they wander in asking, “Mummy?” they are actually looking to see if *they* are there.

A baby in a passing pram can flash you an inexplicable smile that, like *Mu*, knows you better than you know yourself. When we practice Zazen, these little shocks of being recognized arrive all over the place. They find us—but not as who we *thought* we were. What gets caught red-handed when something cuts through is the true person of no rank, slipping in and out of our faces (but never going away).

These are moments when something hardened starts softening and breaking up, when some long-foregone conclusion that has shaped or left your life misshapen starts to crack up. It usually starts with “I . . . ,” or “This is . . . (wrong, hurtful, disrespectful, etc.),” but the true person of no rank does not begin with “I” nor proceeds to rank things right or wrong.

So, it is love that pulls us out of separateness into the eloquent immensity of a silence that embraces the whole of it. It seems too big for any human attempt to contain or limit it. *Love* may be our most unlimited word but *it* goes beyond *love*. It finally has no name, no address, no birth or death in karma. Even while it is *you*.

“Like this” may be the best anyone can do, when we can no longer say who’s who, let alone who made who. It cannot be pure, it cannot be stained, and there is nowhere and nothing in it in which we cannot see and recognize ourselves more truly.

• *chapter four* •

passion



Someone of deep realization—how is it that such a person is sitting on the point of a needle?

—Miscellaneous Koans

I was participating in what slowly became a most remarkable land-healing ceremony with an Aboriginal elder. After painting himself up he began carefully applying ochre markings to my forehead and shoulders as well. I asked why I needed them. “So the spirits can see you,” he said, mildly surprised by the question.

Though Dongshan spent his whole life at the temple, he could not locate so much as a trace of the local tutelary earth spirit in the grounds of the temple, search though he might. But one day a monk was scattering some leftover grain in front of the kitchen. Dongshan saw this and chastised him angrily: “How could you be so wasteful of community supplies!”

At that moment the earth spirit detected Dongshan and paid him homage. It seems he’d been keen to do so all along. He just couldn’t spot him until this tiny flare of anger lit up the human landscape.

Dongshan, like the elder teacher who said, “I have already become like this,” was difficult to see clearly, if you were looking with earth-spirit eyes that take in a seamless reality, a concordance of

infinitely woven and fluid relationship, rather than a vast array of discrete “things.” Beings were already hard to see as separate from the earth, through the eyes of an earth spirit. And Dongshan had become more and more “like this,” making him an especially tricky customer. But at that moment, Dongshan became visible, as a man roused to anger and intent upon restoring the frugal practice of the monastery to the mind of someone in error. A person of right and wrong appeared for a moment—and the earth spirit finally could see the lineaments of *human* being.

Mind you, that frugal cast of mind *is* the mind of the earth: The precursor to the Kyoto Protocol was the Stockholm Conference, and here is its official final statement issued in 1972:

Life holds to one central truth: that all matter and energy needed for life moves in great closed circles from which nothing escapes and to which only the driving fire of the sun is added. Life devours itself: everything that eats is itself eaten; every chemical that is made by life can be broken down by life; all the sunlight that can be used is used. Of all that there is on earth, nothing is taken away by life, and nothing is added by life—but nearly everything is used by life, used and reused in thousands of complex ways, moved through vast chains of plants and animals and back again to the beginning.

Dongshan’s anger in one sense was in accord with a passionate subduing of himself to the mind shared with the earth. No wonder the earth spirit paid him homage. But how interesting that it took a moment of the “passions” to let the mind of the earth spot Dongshan! A moment when the point of the needle unseated Dongshan just enough to break into anger and become visibly human. And a moment when the point of the needle no doubt reached the monk, in a valuable way.

Anger is one of the most interesting of the strong emotions that Buddhism traditionally works to extinguish, because it can save as

well as destroy. “This must stop!”—the roused clarity of indignation at abuse or exploitation, the nonnegotiable “No!” that’s a first move of stopping and ameliorating harm and damage to people and the earth—can be a surge of empathic and compassionate anger that knows clearly what must be opposed at a critical moment.

Yet even that anger can grow caught in right and wrong. When we are so very right we are already subtly wrong. Anger motivated by what is completely clear and clean right to the bottom is rare upon the earth. Especially since we are all so implicated in each other. In the case of harm to the earth, for example, who among us is without damage to the earth and can cast a first stone? As Robert Hass posed the dilemma, that leaves no one and nothing out of this critical moment in human time and its only means of resolution: “*We are the only protectors; and we are the thing that needs to be protected; and we are what it needs to be protected from.*”

Actually Dongshan’s anger accords closely with this closed loop of understanding and mutuality that encircles the earth; it was on behalf of the sanctity of *community*, and the complete naturalness of protecting that which protects, that he chastised that startled monk.

As we struggle to make a demanding turn from “subduing the earth” to recognizing and subduing the alienated “extractive” mindset that overwhelms the ability of the earth to self-renew, anger can both rouse and divide people in their responding. Like all the strong emotions, anger remains an informative yet tricky character. While it can rouse people to action, anger is unlikely to evoke much of the real depth implicit in “a communion of subjects,” which motivates the collective strength of community.

And like all the strong emotions, anger is complex, occupying a wide spectrum of energy and ways of living out that energy. There’s the anger that slowly eats the soul, brutalizes others, kills or suffocates lives, including the one consumed by it, or prepared to indulge their rage in grandiose terms. Anger dismisses boundaries and is aggressively prepared to judge and invade another. There is cold anger that immobilizes relationship, hot anger that scares, bottled anger that hangs in the air as threat, passive aggression that plays the victim and denies all knowledge of any destructive agency . . . Hot or cold, anger is painful to feel, a most painful needle to sit on,

painful to suffer as its victim. Momentarily satisfying to explode, immediately shameful when the impotence within it is so openly displayed. And even more shameful when you recognize its impact on the ones you love.

And yet . . .

Frailty in Emptiness

The passions—including the powerfully compulsive ones—are all intensely human dharma gates. Animals display many of these strong states along with us, but perhaps what makes the passions human, and certainly what makes them dharma gates, is that we identify them, can ponder them, resist or indulge them, avoid or form a more self-aware relationship with them—and in orthodox Buddhist terms, can ideally pacify, cool, and subdue them to the point of “blowing them out.”

But the Red Thread koan exposes the deeply instructive entanglement of human frailty with boundless emptiness; rather than bowing to Buddhist orthodoxy it reasserts that even the most realized states of mind are not detached from the vermilion thread of vividly human life, its hot states, cold states, terrors, and wonders.

Zhaozhou opens the door to this radically inclusive mind when he said, “Buddha is compulsive passions, compulsive passions are Buddha.” Might they be gates to awakening? What kind of open response might find them gateless and beckoning toward more complete life, rather than closing shut upon a besieged-feeling self and sending it on a search for purity?

His words draw awakened mind and strong states of emotion into a congruity to be discovered, identifies a mutuality to be explored. Zhaozhou is daring us to realize these two as not two; to see how they cannot be separated, but arrive exactly together. To see compulsive passions and Buddha mind as empty, inseparable, and at home in the plenum. Equanimity is nothing if it recoils from this. But this is just the start of the human business with the passions.

A monk asked, perhaps rather shocked, “In whom does Buddha cause passion?” If Buddha is compulsive passions, what hope is there for anyone! What can be done with endless blind passions?

They're painful, frightening, tearing down your careful equanimity. How can we escape, get clean as a whistle, pure as snow, scot-free from all such suffering? Zhaozhou "reassured" him, "Buddha causes passions in all of us."

The monk asked, "How should we get rid of them?" Zhaozhou simply turns the question round as a light that illuminates the monk's fear and may let him see through it: "Why should we get rid of them?"

Even if we could escape the strong currents of feeling that come with being alive, this side of the grave, what would that leave of us? Realization itself is a kind of marvelously coherent register of *ecstasis*: a quietly but deeply impassioned refining fire of awareness. The path to it and beyond is strewn with bright and solemn feelings, emotional and physical pain barriers, through which to see always more deeply into the nature of this self. Realization is not a finalized state but just initiation into practice in a new, more exacting register.

Bodhicitta, the desire to awaken, the motivating force of every step of practice, is itself a constellation of strong emotion and discipline—a kind of rigorous love and loving rigor. And it is human—a humanness shaped by an exceptionally focused intention to no longer stand subtly apart from *this*.

Wave after Wave

Xuedou (1105–1192) said, "The dragon's jewel is found in every wave; looking for the moon, it is found in this wave, in the next." I find this a beautiful image of the ever-shifting sinuous movement of luminous mind as it freely swims and rides the very element of "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," in wave after wave of human circumstance.

Dragons are said to enjoy their jewels. Though no dragon has ever mentioned why, in every culture dragons seem to possess jewels, sometimes guarding them very jealously. The implication is that these are the jewels of great price, inviting great effort to reach for them. I take the dragon's jewel in Xuedou's words here to be *prajna*, the adamant human faculty of awakening. "Looking for the moon" means seeking enlightenment; the moon in the night sky is

the old way of evoking “the mind awake,” the light of clarity brilliant in the dark of non-differentiation.

Dragons, which, from a Chinese point of view, call up the most creative energy of earth and of mind that flows direct from the mysterious source, or Dao—are themselves found always in waves or ripples of water or cloud, never more than half-emerging, never separable from their element and self-nature, now appearing now disappearing but always present in wave after wave, ripple after ripple.

In every wave of circumstance that troubles or rocks the heart, it seems worth really looking hard: Is that dragon, is that wave? Can difficulty ever be separated from dharma gate? Pablo Neruda once remarked, “I have never seen a wave I did not admire.” This is exactly the sense of curiosity, wonder, and inevitable gratitude that builds when practice is seen not as a dream of purifying the mind, but a radical move of noticing and including—the mind and heart that ultimately can find no outside to Mind.

But from the orthodox Buddhist point of view, even the human experience of love that weaves us into life is viewed with formal reserve and wariness. Infinite pains are taken to remove the heat of passion.

The four “Brahma Viharas,” or “noble abodes” of the heart, skillfully parse love into the forms it takes when self-centeredness and self-consciousness have been tamed, lie low, or drop away: They are the responsive and impartial states of loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. All four rest in tranquil awareness, many careful steps of perspective away from the powerful bonds of attachment to another being—marking even a carefully practiced distance from sheer love of being here alive, or fulsome embrace of difficulty as also marvelous, a thing of wonder.

Indeed, from a traditional Buddhist perspective, the final attainment is stepping free forever from the hellish tedium of life after life on the wheel of suffering. The wild, mixed, and hazy forms of human love, seen with these eyes, are snares of attachment that fatally bind you to the wheel of life and death. It’s not hard to see where the sexual pull of women becomes essential to despise; men naturally aim to be Buddhas, but women by nature plot to hold them

back with love, children, the daily round of a householder's responsibilities . . .

Love is not simply posited as a negative emotion, as the undeniable beauty of the four Brahma Viharas makes clear (as long as "equanimity" is understood as deeply generous tolerance rather than "detachment"). But any form of strong, earthy, or "worldly" attachment to another must be avoided, as doomed to be transient and contingent. So the bonds of love are a hindrance to be removed by seeing through to their transience, and the thirst of clinging can't be slaked but can be cooled, by reflecting on the corruptibility of that which is desired. What fades is contingent, what is contingent is mixed, lacks purity. End of story.

Mixed

Yet we live inside contingency. If you yearn for something pure, the universe is *pure* contingency. Nothing that is will last—everything is momentary, brief, but also interdependent, empty of any shred of separation. Love—the deep bonds of human attachment to another, to home, to the earth itself—along with the pain of impending mortality, is surely the source of human yearning to preserve what is most dear and yet plainly impermanent. Meanwhile love is also what draws us past the locked-in mind that fears falling into the unimpeded shock of realizing ourselves empty of any shred of separation.

Conventional Buddhist understanding identifies dukkha—suffering, anguish, emotional craving—to arise exactly where we let ourselves get caught in the jaws of attachment and impermanence. Suffering is seen at this point to be indistinguishable from an impossible yearning for that which might be unchanging, non-contingent, in the face of the clear revelation of the universe: that one thing is continually becoming another within an untraceable weave of colliding, coinciding, and interacting influences. Karma. Or if you like, implacable cause and effect.

Yet, Nagarjuna said (in words that anticipate Zhaozhou's "Buddha is compulsive passions"), "Whatever is contingent is naturally at ease." Nagarjuna was the second- or third-century founder of the

Madhyamaka stream of early Buddhist philosophy of emptiness (shunyata), and part of the Mahayana revolution within Buddhism. So where's the "naturally at ease" within the savage fact of our precarious, contingent lives? To *be* contingency and to know it, to embrace our sheer precariousness without reservation, seeking no escape clauses: The way of ease opens there.

Love and Clarity

Perhaps that is a way of seeing what love might be without the fear that underpins a dream of purity, and divides reality accordingly. What would clarity be, without love? "A thousand-year-old peach pit"—here's a glimpse of what such desiccated purity might look like in a human being. You can almost imagine the newspaper headlines: GRANDMOTHER OF SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD BURNS DOWN HERMITAGE!

There was an old woman who regularly gave alms to a hermit living in a little hut she let him use. For twenty years she sent somebody to take the hermit his food each day and wait on him. One day she decided to really find out how it was with the hermit down there in the hut, so deep in his practice. So she told her seventeen-year-old granddaughter to take the food to the hut as usual, but when she got there, to sit on his lap and embrace the monk, asking, "What do you feel now?"

The young girl carried out the old woman's instructions to the letter. But when she hugged him, the hermit sat stock-still and intoned, "An old tree on a cold cliff. Midwinter, no warmth." The girl went back and reported her findings to the old woman, who said, "For twenty years I've supported this vulgar good-for-nothing!" She stormed over to the hut, threw the monk out, and to leave him in no possible doubt, burned down the hermitage!

Perhaps that dead, lifeless monk, as he presented himself to what he knew was a test, really had extinguished the fire and dried up the juice of his being, realizing the ideal of a thousand-year-old peach pit, never in danger of true life. That sharp-eyed old woman recognized an imposter, a monk sunk in quietude, sidestepping difficulty, mouthing pieties. Waking up is not dying to life but dying to

a narrow view of it, waking to its unbounded quality, living into the fact of “no self, no other”—and that’s a love story!

Dogen identifies the four virtues of a bodhisattva very simply: Giving. Using loving words. Completely forgetting the self. Living by helping others. The old woman had practiced some of these but found no sign of them in that monk. Her fire scorched him even before she struck the first match. Did her anger betray the four virtues, or realize them vigorously? In any case, she certainly invested no time in a dead masquerade of sainthood—and that’s already a relief!

What can clarity be, without love? Or love be, without clarity?

Human consciousness is strewn with influential feelings, the wonderfully arresting and troublesome “passions.” Why, asks Zhaozhou, should we get rid of the great challenge they throw at our feet. His *Why?* also sweeps up *How?* If we can’t in fact get rid of *any* of the infinite dharmas—momentary circumstances (including ourselves) that compose singular reality, expressing the universe—we have no choice but to meet the difficult ones directly. To face them not as we would have them be, but as they are. Seeking to purify the mind of defilements evades meeting the singular reality that cannot be defiled. When Dogen said, “There is an ocean of bright clouds. There is an ocean of solemn clouds,” that entire ocean is us.

Anger usually carries a delicate freight of intelligence that needs quiet, unhurried unloading. Such as, “My anger actually tells me not that someone is wrong but that I am afraid.” Possibly then, “My anger threatens to leave me afraid so I lash out before I get there.” “My anger hides from me and only shows itself to others.” The discoveries can be painful, since so-called negative emotions can often be the richest and most valuable intelligence about the self-protective behavior that has painfully confined us.

Sometimes the delay with which this intelligence can arrive makes me think of the second brain that dinosaurs were thought to need. Their brains were at such a far distance from their vastly long tails. Central nervous system impulses might take too long for the creature to respond and protect itself in time, so a second brain somewhere in the tail was kindly hypothesized. The theory was

probably more applicable to us. Our own emotional blindness is so hard to see that surely our organs of intelligence about negative emotions must lie far behind us on some far-distant dinosaur tail, only haphazardly and sometimes catching up with us later in time.

But when it does arrive, a spark of emotional intelligence can certainly save the many beings in our immediate reach of a lashing tail. To act upon the anger before understanding can arrive clouds the moment and cuts off all inquiry. Waiting and not reacting, painful as that can be, is where the open response begins that realizes “no-self”—completely at ease in contingency. Or as the Heart Sutra puts it, “With no hindrance in the mind, no hindrance and therefore no fear, far beyond delusive thinking, right here is Nirvana.” Some translate *hindrance* as “walls”—walls in the heart, walls in the mind.

Zen Master Shibayama (1894–1974) said, “You cannot study Zen apart from your actual self here and now.” What is this volatile human being? What part of it is not me? And is every part of what I find irritating or painful or threatening in other people not also me? This state of “knowing less” is the agreement to sit on the point of a keenly informing needle, which means it is very alive and fluid looking and questioning. Fairly quickly things grow calmer and in growing calmer grow more interesting, less caught in the undertow of strong feeling. An endless fight with the world is abandoned, and there’s more air to breathe.

Hot and Cold States

The koan that most pointedly addresses the latent ability to meet yourself completely in pain and difficulty is Case 43 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, “Dongshan’s Heat and Cold. A monk asked the teacher, “How can we avoid heat and cold?” Can’t we move somewhere safe from the humiliating extremes of being human?”

Dongshan said there was. “Go to where there’s neither hot nor cold.”

The monk was keen to explore the point with Dongshan. “Where is that place where there is neither hot nor cold?”

Dongshan replied, “When it is hot, kill yourself with heat. When it is cold, kill yourself with cold.”

“Kill yourself” is exactly the practice of letting difficult feeling provoke the skillful move of allowing it to be what it is, clear of judgment or refusal. This eases fear from the feeling and contraction can shift into something more expansive. The feeling is there without “me” importantly up in front of everything, and so what feels hot is just hot, and cold is just cold. Hot or cold pain, grief, anger, waves of emotional energy can just be, ripples passing through, the chance for insight building in their wake.

The very idea of the passions as a “dharma gate” opens the entire world of human experience (sometimes also called suffering) to the light of curiosity and something more like loving acceptance of reality. Dharma gates are not just countless, but every one of them has beauty—even when they open in extremes of shame, pain, anger, or grief—because they will not and cannot exclude human failings as the struggle to become more congruent with reality.

So there can be a strange blessing in being knocked off balance by the “hot” or “cold” extremes of circumstances, into something more interesting and generous than a carefully acceptable sense of “me.” Anger brings a ferocious slamming shut of the heart, even though it can be as hot as love. As Ram Dass suggests, the moment you close your heart to anything in the universe, that thing has you—and has you at the mercy of yourself.

But what about when you’re hammered by the strong emotions—anger, hatred—coming from another person? Managing responses then, and even sorting out “me” from “you,” becomes even more demanding in that swirl of current and countercurrents.

An Open Response to Such Abuse

The eighteenth-century Master Torei Zenji (1721–1792) in his *Bodhisattva’s Vow* allows *no* particle of matter, no moment, to be an exception to the “inexhaustible radiance” of just what is. He takes this right into the heart of experiencing hatred and aggression from another and turns that powerful emotional maelstrom in a remarkable direction: “All the more, we can be especially sympathetic and affectionate with foolish people, /Particularly with someone who becomes a sworn enemy and persecutes us with

abusive language. /That very abuse conveys the Buddha's boundless loving-kindness." Torei's life and practice was strongly shaped by feeling and dealing with anger and with turning it away from harm and towards discovery. If he can find something generous in the moments of being so strongly confronted and conflicted by anger and hatred, it's worth getting interested.

But there's something scandalous and a little perverse at first glance in daring to call such abuse a "compassionate device" to liberate us from suffering we have caused others, and from the "mean-spirited delusions" we've used to shield ourselves from that fact "from the beginningless past." "Beginningless past" does not imply a state of original sin, by the way; it's just the honest admission "We don't even know we're doing it, much of the time." As social beings sensitive to negative opinion, we seem to come equipped with a tireless public relations agent always ready to contrive a more self-flattering reality.

Torei calls the alternative to this protective or deflective reaction "an open response to such abuse"; with this, he says, "we completely relinquish ourselves, and the most profound and pure faith arises." It's a pretty strong challenge: to open your heart in the hell of another's enmity.

Thomas Merton's definition of faith is "self-donation"—the self, given away. Torei calls on faith to access deep confidence in the nature of reality but also tells us that faith opens us to reality when we can faithfully give ourselves away—and there we can discover no one to feel abused, no one to feel confronted. He describes this remarkable lifting of all weight from the heart. "At the peak of each thought, a lotus flower opens," and every point of consciousness reveals the open sky: "We see fully the Tathagata's radiant light, right where we are."

Right where we are, with the words *I hate you* ringing in the air.

Torei—and life for that matter—expects us to rise to the occasion of being human. We're asked to be "particularly sympathetic and affectionate with foolish people" who offer only enmity and abusive language, accepting that as a radical opportunity to realize the power of getting out of our own way. This can sound like the job description

for sainthood, and arguably abuse intended to break the spirit of another human being must *a/ways* be named and refused.

But an open response does not rule out also openly identifying harm. Its remarkable quality is that when someone hurls abuse and you manage to let that ricochet clean through without finding you on the way, it leaves not a single trace of acrimony or disturbance; instead the ground of what can happen next is oddly tender, intimate, and open, touching “no self, no other.” The preemptive strike of anger in response to an insult simply fails to arise when there’s nowhere for insult to lodge. The open response is really the gift of not-knowing. Strangely at such a moment, the main feeling left in the air is a mild concern for the person. “I hope you’ll be okay, this is dangerous for you.”

Torei’s *Vow* of the bodhisattva is not directing us toward the need to be compassionate with foolish people, but stepping us through the remarkable *function* or workings of prajna, which turns things completely around. This turning is not a matter of letting someone’s anger remind you to “be compassionate”; that just resurrects a sense of self in the form of a “giver” of compassion. He’s identifying something far more compelling: How suffering an attack can actually yield the radical move that cannot help but transform suffering, as a deeply imperiled “me” drops away into wide-open state of no-self.

It’s My Fault

Layman Pang (740–808) and his irascibly clear-eyed daughter, Lingzhao, were walking through the city, both carrying handmade baskets for sale, when he tripped as they were walking over a bridge. The Layman tumbled, baskets went flying, and he fell facedown, sprawled on the road.

Lingzhao immediately flung herself down in the dust alongside him. He exclaimed, “What on earth are you doing?” and she explained, “I’m helping.” Pang said approvingly, “Lucky there was no one to see you.” It’s always lucky when you’re helping and compassion is so natural it passes unobserved even by yourself.

This story usually makes people laugh uncertainly—perhaps because Lingzhao is so shameless in actualizing realization right

before her more famous and esteemed father, in this as well as in other stories. But Lingzhao's action is just a complete non-“thinking” accord with the realization of “There is no other.” In a way she let him see him, even more outrageously, “It’s my fault (that you fell down).”

Don’t mistake this for taking the blame, appropriately or even inappropriately. It’s one step clear of the world of blame. From the perspective down in the dust with him, when things “go wrong,” we all fall down together. She offers herself without demur to the moment of things going awry completely in the spirit of “There is no other.”

“It’s my fault”—especially when it is not in any obvious way my fault but appears to be someone else’s—has surprising power to lift the constriction of my heart or mind. It’s a lively companion koan to Linji’s evocation of Great Doubt, “Whatever confronts you, don’t believe it.” It clears the way, lets everyone back in. In that light, “It’s my fault” is an embrace of the generosity of not-knowing, making that available as a kind of daily talismanic koan that, kept close at hand, can turn misfortune to lucky break in any thorny encounter with another.

The passions may rise endlessly but they come to our notice one offer at a time—often a compounded offer, but nevertheless what appears is one chance at a time. Just to offer “It’s my fault!” inwardly to a confounding moment when strong feelings are erupting can almost playfully turn a moment of feeling strongly confronted into a fascinating chance to rediscover open and unbounded existence.

This is not to load yourself with blame or guilt; in a far more playful move it simply lifts from the other person the load of judgment and blame before you can settle it on their shoulders. Despite the loaded-looking word *fault*, it’s not a heavy koan: It sees fault grow transparent, more see-through. The surprising thing is how rapidly the situation lightens. It’s playful—seriously playful, like Lingzhao with her old dad.

So “it’s my fault” finally comes down to the lovely gesture of just allowing what is to be what is, wiping away “fault.” Not only does fault begin to disappear but *my* grows hard to hold on to as well, along with a sense of “me” as opposed to “you.” It grows harder to

find the one who must be blamed, or to know the actual use of being “right.”

The open response is a process of coming clean with a fundamentally blameless reality, and a little more congruent with it. The blamelessness of the clear blue sky and the leaves turned to the wind is very clear and simple. To be a little more congruent with that is ease within contingency. So the open response of “It’s my fault” is a very simple pocket-size koan that seems to open a rich vein of inquiry every time I let it enjoy the situation a little more. Each time it lets me recognize myself in what I felt to be so out of kilter and riddled with compulsive passions.

To paraphrase Torei Zenji *extremely* loosely: Even the moment of a curse is a chance to fall out of hell.

Hazy Moon

This unnameable mystery we call self-nature is shared by every being and indeed, as Torei puts it, by “each moment, each particle of matter.” It may be relatively easy to lend ourselves to that possibility. But the implication that this radiant self-nature is also shared by every *state* of being, every inner emotional detonation of feeling and poisonous thought and act, every mood, even the long-form moods that we begin to call “personality” . . . This requires that we acknowledge and include the most dire human failings, fallings, collapse, and limitedness as empty, equal, and open—still attached to the red thread. To value them as radiant with self-nature, in thoroughly human form.

Pablo Neruda’s autobiography is wonderfully titled *I Confess That I Lived*. Events overtake our best intentions in almost every moment of conscious life. When you closely examine the dream of purity it is almost always revealed as an attempt to manage some form of self-hatred founded in fear.

If we are unaware of this—and sometimes even if we are—terrible things can be enacted in the name of purity, in some ways more injurious than the things that can flow from grotesque self-indulgence. And we can do terrible things to *ourselves* in the name of purity. It sometimes feels that every hurtful act is the secret export

to others of some discomfort, disgust, or impurity we find intolerable in ourselves. So the pursuit of a mind and heart swept clean and pure is a form of curse that is never owned but endlessly passed on.

Perhaps the deepest meaning and intent of the great human archetype of a lost or sundered paradise is the tremendous joy of finding it again, complete and at rest even in the very teeth of every “problem.”

Of finding not purity restored but something more like joy reconciled—reconciled with what we are and have ever been. This would be a restored state of creative peace with human frailty—with humanness itself. Such a reunion with who we really are is not recovered purity at all. It’s actually meeting ourselves *whole*. And that has to include every particle within the great, rich, hazy mixture that we human beings are.

The richly telling expression in Zen for this dearly important matter is “the hazy moon of enlightenment.” Dogen’s successor, Keizan, wrote an exquisite account of it:

*Though we have vast billows ranging
to the clear blue sky in autumn,
How can it compare
to the hazy moon on a spring night?
Some people want it pure white,
But sweep as you will,
you cannot empty the mind.*

“Though we have vast billows ranging to the clear blue sky in autumn”—that’s an image of vast emptiness, all the forms of the world just vast billows of emptiness, as far as you can see right to the great autumn sky. A very dynamic image of everything at rest in wave after wave of change, ocean after ocean washed by bright clouds, solemn clouds.

The clear blue autumn sky is the sky of everything given away. That generous no-self—pure gift. That’s a tremendous matter, in Keizan’s eyes, and true. But not yet fully habitable. Human beings can’t be there long. Autumn implies the marvelous, fruitful dropping

away of body and mind. But the dropped-away body and mind needs human eyes, hands, feet. The absolute quality of Keizan's image—brimming to the point where sky and ocean can't be told apart, has yet a tinge of purity that can and will bedevil human beings.

Spring comes with drifting seed and mushroom spores, the lovely dust of new life pushing into the air, the easing outbreath of the earth after the desolation of winter, the dreams and tender confusions of human beings floating together with this softening haze.

Referring us back to the bracing image of autumn, Keizan asks us to consider: "How can it compare to the hazy moon on a spring night?" I hear him placing beyond praise a moon of awakening that is deeply hazed with humanity. Nothing is wasted if it's truly and humbly human.

"Some people want it pure white, but sweep as you will, you cannot empty the mind." It doesn't take long to learn in meditation that if you work to empty the mind of everything by sweeping each thing away, you simply fill it with sweeping each thing away. Luckily, you cannot empty the mind or heart; wave after wave, it never stops flowing; in wave after wave, moon appears.

It is human-shaped, the realization of emptiness that sets us free. We are blessed indeed, with the hazy human moon of enlightenment.

For us, the perfection of each moment is found right in the innermost midst of imperfect life. How could it be otherwise? We are each other—and so an impure, mixed, and marvelous thing from the beginning.

As human beings, we're everything our consciousness can possibly include—wonderful and terrible. Sometimes I think the greatest danger on the planet is the unearthly human dream of perfection itself. Have a look around you. Go back as far as you like in human history and have a look at how millions have died at the hands of the perfection plans of others, and how many are dying of that right now, even just in the name of someone else's "perfect lifestyle." How the planet itself is beginning to die from our toxic dream of a perfect life—a perfectly easy and comfortable, technologized, and disembodied life in which the troubling thorn of

embodied being and its natural precariousness and tumultuous emotions can be extracted from human life and set aside.

A dream of emptying the mind secretes a fear of the mind and its prodigious productivity, and with that a fear perhaps of reality and its ceaseless change, the troubling fact of one thing always becoming another, and therefore the disappearance of one thing after another. To sweep the mind clear is a dream of purifying reality itself, at some level, bringing it down to the measure of a very human fear. Suffering after suffering arises exactly here where reality, un-“corrected,” is seen as something unfairly to be suffered.

What emotion can possibly ever be simply or completely negative? Love itself is a “difficult emotion,” which can fuse even with hatred, envy, deep self-doubt. Longing can be a difficult emotion, fused with fear of loss or rejection. If we find ourselves to be unworthy of love, love can be a terror greater than death.

Every one of the difficult emotions that visit us and disturb a settled account of reality equally bring with them the power to restore concordance between no self, no thing, everything present, in heightened form. The harmonic resonance of the whole is there to find even in the circumstances tossed to us by “the passions.” The practice of meeting them fully is the first move toward “become like this”—like the underlying agreement all things have always had with each other, a perfect fit.

And so human nature, and its surface mismatch with our deepest self nature, causes passion in all of us—invaluable passion, if we know how to quieten things down enough to tune accurately to such a wild-looking signal.

Rumi’s image of the subtle presence of this indelible self-nature in which everything rests, even in the midst of uproar, is “the quiet bright reed song,” that continues (like the stars) through night and day. It can’t die away, even if we die, but when it dies from awareness, he says, we die. *We fade, in the midst of life.*

So let us roundly cherish the hazy moon of spring, the essential humanness of realization, the provenance of this opening into what is most entirely ourselves. Not the good bits, not the bad bits, but all of it, all of us. What can possibly defile *all of it*? As Emily Dickinson said (though she forgot to begin with “Luckily”—)

*All —
is the price of all—*

And when we let that *all* touch and bring us back to rights, all is given.

• *chapter five* •

care



*The Bodhisattva must live by the sufferer's standard,
and must be effective in aiding those who suffer.*

—Gary Snyder

Zhaozhou was asked, “What’s the most important matter for which I must take responsibility?” He replied, “Though you search to the end of time, you’ll never single it out.”

Care is no more—and equally no less—than the natural and deeply human response to becoming more awake. Realization offers no escape clause from the relative world of suffering and harm, or the moments when we must determine wrongdoing and decide—at least provisionally—what is right or helpful to do and needs to be done. While knowing that being “absolutely” right is always already heading toward a wrong.

Any glimpse into the non-dual, empty depth of being has to be continually reconciled with choices between one course of action and another. Realization affords the perspective of “your life is also my life,” and offers some breathing space—“I will rely on not-knowing and approach aware that I can never fully know or judge you or your motivations.” It can provide the means to inhabit the wisdom of “It’s my fault,” and the ground from which it is possible to offer an open

response even in the face of abusive words. What it cannot do is float free from the relative world in the face of active harm, enslavement, injustice, danger, global warming, desecration of the earth, and any other form of conscious evil.

From an emptiness perspective, no final right or wrong can be found—“form is emptiness”; but this truth is met and fulfilled at every point with “and emptiness is form,” which finds that everything matters.

To attempt to live just from the first half of this perspective, form is emptiness, is an absurdity open to the rationalizing of criminality, floating free from any moral ground: “This act of utter violence is empty . . .” Zen, shamefully, has not been immune from such spiritual literalism; Brian Victoria’s *Zen at War* project, for example, disclosed its florid presence in the utterances and behavior of some esteemed Zen masters during the intensely militarized period of Japanese aggression before and during World War II.

Any genuine degree of self-mastery is a continuing effort to integrate the realization experience that sees emptiness into humble, nuanced awareness of lived human complexity, and the contradictory impulses of the self. The ethos of care that the red thread brings to light is informed at every point by the bodily, warm-blooded, human shape of emptiness. It is not a simple matter of applying rules. “Self-nature is subtle and mysterious,” as Bodhidharma’s words throughout the Zen Precepts ceremony remind us with every one of the ten “Grave Precepts.” It is self-nature, the bright, awake mind that wants to realize itself fully in what is happening, and how it is responding.

Every vow we take in the forming of a practice to deepen self-awareness has “I” in it, but that “I” is the place where form and emptiness know each other, where no-self intersects with this one with my name. The red thread is not for legislating. It is our direct plumb line into the depths of the great matter as human beings, to touch the most subtle undulations of our being and our circumstances, arising together.

A West Australian Zen teacher, Ross Bolleter, was walking with a student while wearily hearing some lengthy complaint against another student who they saw as failing to keep a precept—Not

Misusing Sex, perhaps. They were abruptly stopped in their tracks to avoid stepping on two leopard slugs entwined in a slippery frenzy of mating, right on the path before them.

“Legislate *that*,” said the teacher. The student fell silent.

The old meaning of the word *human* was neither neutral nor merely descriptive. It meant “humane”—which is to be actively caring and protective toward the rights and needs and suffering of other people and creatures. Another of those words, together with *frugal*, we will need to restore to the lexicon of any civilizational resistance to the slowly burning planetary crisis of our time.

A seventeenth-century Polish Hasid asked his followers, “How can we know when night has ended and day has begun?” They volunteered various possibilities. “Is it when you start to see the individual trees step out of the darkness of the forest?” “Is it that moment when you can’t tell cloud from the morning mist?” There were more attempts, but no, it was none of these. “How can we tell, then?” they finally asked.

“It is the moment when you look into a stranger’s face and can recognize your own,” the teacher finally said. “Until then, the night is still with us.”

There’s generous tolerance for the other in the word *humane*, even when the other threatens our best-laid plans and expectations. Tolerance is a state always in modulated and negotiated tension with discomfort; its level rises in direct proportion to “forgetting the self,” as Dogen describes the wonderful difficulty of substantiating a self, once you try to do so. This self has feelings, sensations, thoughts, a history, a name, tax file number, and knows the night to put out the rubbish bins, and yet when you look deeply there is no final origin, edge, limit, or fixed address for that which you call by your own name. But its true face now swims into view wherever you look.

This is the widest possible sense of self, enticingly unknown in its depths, a fact shared by all of the other billions of us on the planet. Which transforms the encounter between self and “other.” Forgetting the “self” begins to be a process of meeting and sensing the other as implicated in your self. What wakes up is a sharper sensitivity to suffering and frailty—yours, theirs—and a lessening of interest in needing to be “right.” Taking care of things seems more to the point.

We are surrounded by thunderous examples of exquisite silent design and millennial-old care. The impossible way that ancient dragonfly wings work, or the amazing rear rudder winglet of the common housefly, for example. The miracle of the way the human heart-lung works in every one of us who still lives. The fact that fingernails and bird feathers share a common origin, as do the epithelial cells of skin and brain—that infinitely enfolding surface of “touch.” The shapes of that tree in the wind, the decisive curve of the swallow’s path . . . It never stops offering.

“I place my feet with care / in such a world,” remarked the poet Wendell Berry.

The Sufferer’s Standard

The Song of Solomon says, “I sleep, but my heart wakes.” Or, I “forget the self” and caring naturally appears. Gary Snyder’s koan-like demand, “[We] must live by the sufferer’s standard,” begins to resolve when we look at things this way. “Must” may sound like an injunction taken out against errant humanity; but I hear in it something more engaged and engaging, like “There is no choice.”

The Mahayana impulse has as its heart a stubborn willingness to be with suffering, to stand in natural solidarity with it and remain (even painfully) present to it rather than to retreat to a distance from worldly matters, with the final goal arriving in a Nirvana free forever from the bittersweet torment of endless rounds of “birth and death.” That escape attempt is very understandable, from the point of view of the experience of suffering; yet paradoxically avoids the exacting point of view that suffering affords.

Suffer (from a root word conveying “undercarriage of a cart”) literally means to bear or take the weight of something, and such willingness shapes a more creative, attuned, and effective response to any crisis. We begin to live by the sufferer’s standard when it grows impossible to avoid saying, “This, too, is me.” So to live by the sufferer’s standard is to stand in natural solidarity with all sentient beings, who by nature will suffer, and die. This means admitting to sharing the responsibility for the pain and the grief and the damage

of our interwoven lives and actions. Which in turn yields the generosity of care.

In his final hours, the poet Bashō (1644–1694) saw that his followers were busy trying to catch and remove the many flies crawling avidly on the window screen next to his bed. His last amused words were, “The flies are delighted to have a sick man around unexpectedly!” He died not long after. I love his candid connection with his own impending mortality, and that he takes some wry consolation in the joy of flies drawn to the odor of his own decay. Pesky flies, himself, no great difference. His followers were distressed and tried to drive the flies away but Bashō was glad to find someone made happy by the scent of his own mortality.

The four noble truths of traditional Buddhism delineate what was actually termed “*the truth* of suffering.” The *fact* of suffering is easy to establish, although for good reason, *experience* can be a useful substitute to keep at hand for much of what is bundled into the word.

Jack Kerouac even had the audacity to substitute the word *joy*, creating the Four Noble Truths of Joy: There is a truth of joy; there is a cause of joy; there is no end to joy; and there is a path to this no end to joy. This is no idle or disrespectful wordplay but a vigorous upturning that takes care to reveal something vital about how suffering empties into the full range of joy, which is so wide and so whole in nature even grief’s agony can live there. I think of lament, and how close it lives to both agony and joy at once. It’s a marvelously mixed universe, this human being.

But our own difficulty, recognized and borne, is the gate to the *truth* of suffering—that suffering is not singular but is the life of all sentient beings, and this understanding opens up into intimacy of feeling with the other. And so through the gate of suffering, love appears, and the mystery of who we really are brightens exactly where the sense of “me” softens and loses its painful edges in the sharing of suffering, the realization of its *truth*.

Knowing less about “me,” I inhabit and sense more of what I am. “I” joins hands with the Unborn. And as Linji said, “When you know who you are, you can be of some help”—or as Snyder puts it, “be effective in aiding those who suffer.”

To be still attached to the red thread is to fully accept the mixed and vulnerable nature of human beings, and that the business of clarity is an endless one. To see that it cannot be cut is to stand in solidarity with that fact. Whereas to set out for a beachhead of purity or stainless perfection, en route to a final destination of stepping free from regrettable life itself, is to condemn the red thread as a restraint upon purity and perfection that must be cut away. When all the time it is the human bloodstream of self-nature, that has no beginning and can have no end.

It is an inextricably mixed world: Plaque forms on the teeth; bacteria urbanizes in sink scum; minute creatures populate even our own eyelashes, generally causing no offense in their miniscule lives; weevils add valuable protein to stored white rice; and the propensity of human beings is to perpetually seek to move off to something more comfortable from what is happening in the unflinching present. In such a world, suffering appears in the midst of great beauty, and beauty in the teeth of tragedy. It is the mixed, relative world that we're here to embrace and serve, if we're to make the fullness of the mystery clear—that not only is form emptiness, but emptiness is form. The alternative, of banking upon the absolute, is less than truly human.

And it is a good world. The rain drips from the gutter in twos and threes. Floating clouds draw dark pools of shadow across the vast monolith of Uluru (Ayers Rock), that huge tuning fork of red-thread color, without even slightly troubling it. The people we love are infinite mysteries, worthy of our deepest and most aware care before they pass from our reach. The ability to suffer may be our secret dearest treasure, the very source of care.

In the record of Zhaozhou appears mention of an older woman—name once more unrecorded—whose exceptional clarity attracted many students. When her beloved granddaughter died, she wept openly and loudly in front of everyone. People were shocked. “A master like you, and you weep? Impermanence is just impermanence, why mourn like this?” She scolded them soundly, saying, “Of course I weep! These cries are for all beings. Listen, listen!”

Later, Zhaozhou heard about this and asked, “How can anyone lose by crying out?” The cries of the world after all bring Guanyin into being, usher compassion into the world, manifesting the benefit of all beings. And even before that, the cries of this grandmother were complete; when you cry with your whole body and mind, is there any crying at all? How can anyone lose by being what is, without resistance?

Vows Cry Out

Our cries do not compromise self-nature (nothing can); they acknowledge and place love and loss and redeeming care right at the heart of it. A heart convulsing in grief is intensely personal, and yet at bottom belongs to all; open, raw, and unrestricted, it reveals beyond doubt that all beings suffer pain, bringing them into focus, seeding fellow feeling. When suffering is seen clearly—and seeing clearly means being with it undividedly—then its simplest truth becomes clear: I do what I can to help. That steadfast preparedness to be with suffering—of others and of ourselves, no longer so simple to tell apart—wins us back the wholeness of the world.

So how can anyone lose by crying out? By being human to the hilt? Resentment is futile. The suffering we can't avoid is an offer to find the truth and value of forbearance on one side, and the grace of other people's love and care on the other, and the undividedness at the middle of both. The truth of the suffering of others interpenetrates the truth of our own suffering. This is so elemental it hardly needs stating and yet becomes puerile when offered as talk of a “need to feel compassion.” The value and truth of suffering finds its source in the real fact pain offers: that we're all in this together; and deeper in, there is *no other*. No-self is compassion, which is just the natural outcome of no-other.

This realization appears steadily with every move of not rejecting pain and suffering, like groundwater filling the aquifer. Or more suddenly, like a dam breaking, and a river flowing free. But in every case it's our personal vulnerability and brevity, together with the fact that reality has no boundaries in it and is entirely shared, which realizes the truth and value of suffering.

“The sufferer’s standard,” Snyder’s interesting phrase that turns it toward koan, can imply a benchmark (set at the point that acknowledges the suffering of all sentient creatures); or a banner taken into a struggle, clearly seen by all. The example of Christ sets the sufferer’s standard high in a Western context (which once meant “Christendom”). Christianity is strong on the imperative to aid those in need and to heal suffering, identifying with the sufferer in an unqualified way. Whereas Buddhism originally was, and often remains, more directed toward relieving and escaping one’s own *personal* suffering.

The red thread checks this impulse, confirming together with all life that we all move together, and we all fall down together. And here the word *standard* draws attention to the actual call that the suffering of others makes on us personally, how the truth of suffering sets the gold standard of our full humanity. And how a lack of response to it, once admitted, leaves us wanting. We live comprehensively distracted from so much of the shrouded or carefully distanced suffering that supports our way of life—and we live with a conscious or disowned burden of fear and shame about that. The shame, when it penetrates, is a call, to report as one who will respond.

We know no life is possible without each life falling into death, no uprightness possible without the pull of gravity holding us secure in our bone structure, drawing us steady in every step and finally falling back in the end to the earth, and this is the original solidarity. Everything moves together in this universe, things hurt, and nothing that exists will endure. To humanly realize (make real) that solidarity is the vow that is a practice.

The bodhisattva vows and all the precepts arise here to inspire and precipitate such a healing movement of mind—healing the wound in consciousness. Each is saying in effect: It’s a tender and extraordinary reality; every being is also you; every act has consequence; in such a world, place your feet with care.

When Zhaozhou was asked, “What is the fact for which we must bear responsibility?” he replied, “Though you search to the end of time, you’ll never single it out.” Nor will you ever single out yourself. Along with that, there’s no time to single it out; *it* is always happening

only now. But what maintains this as a humanly beautiful struggle every day is living toward a vow.

A Maori friend once told me he learned from his elders that you should not wear your carved Aotearoa greenstone or *pounamu* neck pendant to a bar, or use bad language in its presence. You have to *hold yourself* toward your *pounamu*. All appropriate and fit responses flow naturally from that. The *pounamu* makes sure.

Vows are like that, too: You hold yourself toward them, live your life toward them, and they make sure of you. This matter is held lightly but firmly. In indigenous Australia, the most highly significant sacred sites are rarely entered; but for miles around, all ceremonial or teaching sites face resolutely in their direction.

A vow asks that I hold myself toward life with awareness and respect, and in this way moves life in a more intent direction that's subtly but remarkably different from "just coping." Not only each of your immediate relationships and actions but the wider, larger fate of humanity and the life of the world begins to live in you and to ask searching questions, beginning with *Who is this?* And what is it, to *become like this?*

The prompt and implication of every vow that shapes a Zen practice is an aspect of the red thread that cannot be cut: We're all in this together so thoroughly that we discover who we are only in the presence and reality of each other; which means taking full responsibility for our actions. And all of the vows of "refuge," of homecoming—such as not killing, not stealing, not speaking falsely, not being stingy, not indulging in anger, not praising the self while abusing others, practicing all good—arise naturally from this generous and life-giving fact. We say, in each of the vows, effectively, "I aim not to live at the expense of others." And asks, "Can I love what I'm doing if I know it harms the life of another being?"

Reliable

So it is a kind of process of becoming a little more reliable. Thich Nhat Hanh spoke of a deep meditation in which he asked the earth a deeply intimate question—one that surely secretly nags everyone on

earth by now—which was “Can I rely on you?” The earth replied, after remaining quiet for a time, “Can I rely on *you*?” Nhat Hanh searched his conscience closely before he answered, “You can *mostly* rely on me.” And the earth responded with the beautiful economy of means that comes naturally to a mutual relationship, “And you can *mostly* rely on me.’

Mostly able to be relied upon. *Mostly* is important. We are not saints, but human, and mistakes will be made and—in the presence of a vow—will make good use of us, each one the chance of fresh discovery. In this respect, every one of the vows is a sharpened awareness of the dharma gate of “mistake.”

The Vinaya (literally “the discipline,” the “leading out”) is the 227 disciplinary rules and renunciations intended to form and conform the conduct of male monastic life, and the even more ramified and numerous 311 rules apparently required by the innate unruliness of female monastics.

A young man heard about this formidable set of regulations and asked a Chinese nun, “How on earth do you manage to keep all 311 precepts?”

She replied, “I keep only one precept.”

The young man, shocked, asked, “What is that?”

“I just watch my mind,” she said.

Every vow is the act of “just watching your mind,” knowing your mind, realizing your mind, sharing that mind. At the moment of realizing a serious mistake, the vow kicks in and says something like what Torei Zenji says in “The Spur for a Good Horse”: “When you slip, get up again. If you don’t get up, you will die there.”

“Slipping” might be giving way to anger that is destructive and lashing out and setting ripples of harm in motion. Until you know you’ve slipped, you haven’t really hit the ground. In fact, the vow kicks in with the very sense of something dying, and opens the question of what rising to your feet, right where you are, might require at such a moment. The rising begins in the vow recalled. So much of human business in the world is a matter of carrying on harming, with all due diligence and agility being put to the task of remaining functionally or strategically unaware of any such thing.

But knowing we have slipped is the only possible start of not dying there. And always getting up—recovering something of the unimpeded intelligence of the self that does not end in “me”—is the impetus of living toward “vow.” Nothing can ever dream to “Legislate *this*.” Reality is empty and unbounded, and equally revealed as what we are. At the same time, we leave real footprints on the earth—our own, in person. A vow attends to both sides of this matter, and is subtle: It faces toward something of great value without defining or hardening into any “object,” any more than it attempts to define or limit *you*. In response to the nudge of a vow, we acknowledge the red thread of unbreakable relatedness, and live toward the fact that it “cannot be cut.”

Each of the Great Vows or Bodhisattva Vows of Zen recall no-self in the act of taking care of the very alive forms of mutuality that continually create, confirm, and resolve the sense of “self” and “other.” Of course each Vow is “impossible”; each presents a koan, or matter to be resolved, rather than legislated commandment or rule. But it is the valuable difficulty of an apparent impossibility that ignites and generates the heart’s energy to resolve and respond:

“The many beings are numberless; I vow to save them. Greed, hatred and ignorance rise endlessly; I vow to abandon them. Dharma gates are countless; I vow to wake to them. The awakened way is unsurpassed; I vow to embody it fully.” Each of these “Great Vows” marks a kind of ceremonial site of human response toward what is, each of them asking you to face and hold yourself steady toward a central matter of ultimate importance: *This*, the wholeness of reality, the red thread of humanity and all life utterly entangled with it.

They may appear to stand alone but in every human interaction suggest a single process like a forming and breaking wave. The wave begins to swell with the first great vow to pay attention and hold in your body and mind responsibility toward all sentient life. *Save* is variously translated as “wake” or “carry across,” as in bring into the presence and response of a more awakened mind.

This wide-open mind is instantly occluded by greed, hatred, and ignorance. “Ignorance” is a far deeper matter than being accidentally or strategically unaware of the effect of your actions. It’s the original

wall in the mind and base of all fear—the view that “I’m in here and you’re out there,” and greed and hatred are easy once the wall is in place. Greed, hatred, and ignorance create the gulf between self and other that fosters all our human harm and havoc. But equally, each “slip-up” prompts this second great vow of *noticing*—the first move of abandoning what kills or diminishes life. The wave grows definite, now, steadily shaping attention and response, delineating a practice of Mind.

Abandoning greed, hatred, and ignorance is the noticing turn toward recognition of a dharma gate—the third great vow—right there, exactly in the pain of noticing and the gathering of a deeper attention. The third great vow—to walk through every dharma gate, or to let all experience become a chance to open a radical glimpse of self-recognition—is the wave cresting and beginning to break powerfully as the fourth great vow, which is to fully embody and actively live the “impossibility” of a more and more awake and inclusive mind.

Every act of mercy (for the vows—like practice itself—are an act of love and mercy toward life) releases and brings the awareness of no-self to the project of creating a more brilliant human sanity, right where you are, starting with what’s in front of you. So a vow is a talisman, always in reach, in the life-long realization process of “Just this person.”

Which is really just the human being folding back more deeply into the terms of the earth, and the overflowing emptiness of reality, *this*.

The Wounding

There are quite a number of wise stories about the humble monk, Shunryu Suzuki (1904–1971), told by his American students. One story goes that one day at Tassajara monastery, a student finally broke the tacit silence and asked just what is the actual meaning of those mysterious Sino-Japanese words chanted each morning during the formal act of putting on the rakusu, the small garment hung around the neck to signify the patchwork robe of the Buddha.

In English, the vow translates as, “I wear the robe of the Buddha, the formless field of benefaction, the teachings of the Tathagata, saving the many beings.” When the student asked, Suzuki simply said, “I don’t know.” But his assistant teacher, Katagiri Sensei as he was at that time, began vigorously searching through books for an accurate translation. Suzuki gestured to him, *Stop!*

And then he turned to the student, pointed to his heart, and just said, “It’s love . . . it’s love.”

It *is* love’s call on us that impresses the whole meaning of practice into our being, just as practice itself is the vow to willingly let that take place, and even to wound us in the process of opening further. The “Shodoka,” or “Song of Freedom,” has the beautiful words: “The Buddha Nature jewel of morality is impressed on the ground of my mind. And my robe is the dew, the clouds, the fog, and the mist.”

The “Buddha Nature jewel” is your true self recognized beyond doubt, but here it is called the jewel *of morality* that is “impressed on the ground of my mind.” There’s a most delicate hint of a wounding accepted in that word *impressed*. The jewel of your own self-nature is pressed by realization into the most tenderly open ground of mind and heart and leaves its indelible mark or impression. And with the desirable wounding of awareness that is called waking up, the robe of practice is nothing grandiose or separate but as natural and fluid as the dew, the cloud, the fog, the mist. Which is also to say that it has the *tacit* grace to express the form of no form.

When you turn your heart back to what it is you love, it’s always there. And that means in the end that we have no choice but to accept the wounding that comes with love and naturally agree to take care of things. Morality is not an abstraction somewhere out there but the matter of how we relate to the effect of everyday actions of our lives. And so it’s serious, it’s love—and when we fail to respond, it’s the abnegation of love.

Such a robe is exquisitely subtle and ordinary, dissolving even as you look at it. There’s no fancy parading in it. Zen rids itself of the stink of any special trace of accomplishment. Realization is simply the resumption of our own most natural being. After all, what can be special about that which is revealed in every detail of the universe?

When nothing can be singled out as sacred, everything's embraced that way with no great fuss. Sometimes few or no words express this matter best—like Ryokan's legendary moments of barely broken silence.

Ryokan (1758–1831)—the wisely foolish mendicant monk, poet, and calligrapher of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—was staying by special invitation with relatives one time because they hoped his presence would correct the difficult, wayward behavior of the son and heir to the clan. But to their surprise, for three days, Ryokan said nothing to his nephew whatsoever. Then, when it came time for him to leave, he sat at the doorway and called to the lad to help him tie on his straw sandals. Yasuki's mother hid behind a screen to listen; at last Ryokan's sorely needed wise words were to be delivered to her son! But no, silence prevailed.

However, as Yasuki bent down to tie the sandals, he felt the splash of something wet on his neck, and looking up, he realized it was Ryokan's tears. Ryokan silently stood up then and left. Fortunately, such tears are inexplicable. When tears fall from no-self, who is asking whom for forgiveness? Who owns the regret, compunction, helplessness, or shame that's in the air, and set free? But in any case, after this the boy was very changed.

Another time, during rice-planting time, Ryokan was visiting some people when to everyone's shock the crazed priest Chika broke into the house, caked with mud from the fields, roaring drunk and seething with envy. Chika was always proclaiming to anyone who'd listen that he was about to start his own school of Buddhism, loudly disparaging people held in high esteem—especially the widely loved and revered Ryokan.

Without warning he began lashing Ryokan with his heavy, water-soaked belt. Ryokan had no idea what this was about and made no attempt to escape, which made people even more alarmed. They finally managed to pull him into another room to safety and to physically subdue Chika before bundling him out of the house.

A little while later, at dusk, heavy rain began falling. Ryokan came out of his room only to inquire with some concern, "Did that monk have his rain gear with him?" He never said anything more about the incident.

*Some throw stones, some beat him with sticks
He retreats then stops, and calls to them aloud
Since this fellow has left the world
No one has heard from him
But the wind and moonlight that fill the night
For whom do they reveal their purity?*

This is the final stanza of Ryokan's poem in praise of his favorite character in his beloved Lotus Sutra, which he knew intimately. Never-Despising-Anyone was, in his eyes, the very embodiment of the bodhisattva's faith in the value of all human beings. This happily foolish character offered full prostrations before every person he encountered, confirming his belief in their intrinsic capacity to awaken. Even when people chased him off with blows and ridicule, Never-Despising-Anyone just said, "I cannot despise you since you will become Buddha!"

The Noonday Demon

In our digitally "connected" world, there is a constant feed of suffering streaming into consciousness as news, often difficult to distinguish from "disaster porn," that in fact feeds upon the human fascination with perpetually breaking news of disaster, famine, war, terror, tragedy, and gross stupidity, preferably happening somewhere safely "else." Letting it flood in can deaden response, to the point of making it hard to feel or speak of it; too close to the bone and it is hard to have it spoken about. To keep it mute or hold it completely at bay is to be left heartless and sterile, protecting a self that feels far too small, avoiding at all cost being reached by the point of the needle, which in fact has no "somewhere else." Distraction—moving off from the needle—is the usual recourse.

The seven deadly sins, or destructive states of mind—usually identified as pride, envy, wrath, gluttony, lust, sloth, and greed—were originally eight. The eighth, held to be the worst of all in the early medieval mind of the desert mothers and fathers, was "acedia." Sometimes it is now rolled up into "sloth" as spiritual laziness, but in

fact it cuts to a deeper matter, the self-saving, self-diminishing tendency of *always moving off* from discomfiting states of mind. All gathered powers of concentrated attention lightly yielded up to a shallow impulse.

However it devises to squirm or to crawl crabwise off from what it had intended to stay with, the momentarily relieved mind becomes slowly weighted down with the creeping heaviness of sadness, melancholy, self-disgust, and depression. Which is difficult to bear; along with the failure to remain as intended in concentrated yet openhearted attention, the painfulness of that fact urges even more moving off. Irresolution deepens, reliability collapses, the will withers. Gradually, acedia recommends its baseline, ambit move—of moving off from all responsibility.

It seems worth becoming sensitive toward this haunting “noonday demon,” as it once was called—the irritable and subtly nagging restlessness that afflicted prayerful focus in the sixth hour of the daily monastic schedule, around noon, when suddenly it began to seem a far, far better idea to wander over and see how that monk in the next cell was doing, instead of praying sleepily yet resolutely through the fog of being . . . or to just quickly check on the recently notified status update of a friend on Facebook . . . or to click on that link that offers seven ways to know if you have an eating disorder, or . . .

Dogen said, “When you know the place where you are, practice begins.” But in a trackless, dreamlike torpor of the mind, awareness arrives and settles nowhere quite. The Internet fits this mind of acedia just as though it were custom-made for it, right at the moment when we have the strongest and most compelling reason to be highly alert, finely knowing the place where we are, and seeing with painful clarity what’s going on in our civilizational overreach and climate crisis.

Acedia may be literally the deadliest “sin” at such a moment. It is the dark side of the moon, utterly from the practice of staying with difficult or painful things and resolving the discomfort into “this, too, is me.”

Love Becoming Complete

Finally, let me try to touch the mysterious twist in the red thread—of love completing itself in the very act of injury caused to wholeness. The red thread clarifies our fully human entanglement in emptiness—one unending and fruitful mistake, our peculiarly human ritual, of completing love.

A Daoist text, *Discussion on Making All Things Equal* by the remarkable Chuang Tzu (370–287 BC) (Zhuangzi in Pinyin), predates Zen or Chan in China by many centuries yet has many points of strong accord with it. One passage in the discourse walks us, as though along a deep inner timeline, from the original mind of vast equality, where nothing can be carved out from anything else, “forward” to the mind of complexly contingent forms of understanding which separate one thing clearly from another. And it asks, is there a kind of necessary injuring of wholeness within consciousness itself that is needed, in order to draw care, and indeed love, into being?

The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point where some of them knew that things have never existed. Those of the next stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought that there were boundaries but recognized no right or wrong.

Then, the fascinating rider: “*Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured. And because the Way was injured, love became complete.*” While a classical Daoist interpretation of the word *love* sees attachment as fatal ignorance of the undividable, nevertheless Zhuangzi’s three-thousand-year-old words, heard in the context of the Western mind, lay bare the red thread of humanly embodied realization.

“But do such things as completion and injury really exist or not?” Zhuangzi finally asks, returning us toward the mind of vast equality from which he started out.

We can all at least faintly recognize the earliest stage of recognition of the Dao in which the passage begins. When we were

one- or two-year-olds, we did not “know” that things had ever existed. We just met each thing for the first time, and in a world in which everything arrived with the equal force of “I am,” and nothing was amazing because everything was.

Nothing quite exists at first in the way that adults have them exist—fixed, differentiated, secured, tied down. But then, to quote Saint Paul, “We put away childish things”; by slow degree, things separate out and form a hierarchy of importance. With that, we slowly adopt some form of “face”—a socially functional mask that gradually in time hardens into what is understood as adult sanity. And by then, that earliest oceanic flow of mind and world starts to be viewed through a kindly, nostalgic, and slightly patronizing haze as a lost, child-like, golden age of being.

In the earliest stages of this process, boundaries were there (though remained a little magically soft between things), but still we recognized no absolute divide of right or wrong. “When right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured,” says Zhuangzi, touching the archetypal nerve of human unease and immediate sense of how that must be ordered and safely managed. The doctrine of original sin may stir in some minds, here. But actually, Zhuangzi is pointing to how we may disturb or mentally destroy something closer to original blessing, which is the undivided flow of what is, what is happening.

Consider how the mind of right and wrong can deeply injure the wholeness of an encounter, the resilience of intimate relationship, the openness of another human being. The moment we’re so very right we’re already starting to be wrong. The Way that we injure by becoming a person of right and wrong is the ordinary way, of birds and ants, shadows, rocks, and clouds. It’s the way of lying on the heartbeat of the earth at night and freely counting the stars in the sky. The way of attending and including the *whole* of the circumstances that concern us to the point where we can freely say, “It’s my fault.” It’s the mind of subtly accepting what flows undividedly, without seeking to divide it. “The great Way is not difficult,” as many have repeated. “It just avoids picking and choosing.”

Zhuangzi contends that right and wrong injured the Way. This is not to say that we were driven from a paradise of being in full accord

with it, but to imply that at any given moment we can injure the unfolding of things with a mind of right and wrong, condemnations we try to make stick—including condemnation of ourselves, of what’s happening, what might happen, what has happened. And even of what won’t happen; that, too, can be up for condemnation! “It’s just not good enough!” In extreme and puritanical forms, the wrongness of rightness—its tyranny—is very plain.

Injury can range from the terrorist’s obscene sense of the rightness of mass carnage, down to the smallest act of closing someone out by taking offense. Even when no offense has even been offered, we injure the openness of reality with an offended sense of “rightness” in all the countless guises it can assume—some highly noxious, some just so trivial they fritter lives away. Most simply, this tone of dissonance lays waste to much of life and limits the chance to be fully alive and at ease in each passing breath. At this level, it’s so simple it’s almost brutal.

The mind of right and wrong is often an anxious scrabbling for security or to attempt to control outcomes, render them less threatening—refusing to face up to disappointment, change, and loss with no shrinking away. Yet what does security come down to? The original Latin root, *securus*, means people “free from care, quiet, at ease.” True “carefreeness” stays close to what cannot be insulted by events, avoiding weighting all events with personal implication. To take sufficient care to avoid collecting such heavy baggage is to assume the courage of adversity, the stance of love. Its action rests in the Dao and responds from there.

But the end point of this falling into dividedness, we learn, is remarkable and unexpected: *Because the Way was injured, love became complete*. If we accept this as pointing directly into our human entanglement with emptiness, how does injury *complete* love?

Immediately, the formative Western archetype of Christ presents the same deep logic: the one who takes the ultimate wounding and sacrifice of self in order to complete the ultimate healing of the world. True, in every shamanic tradition, a healer accepts a near-mortal wounding or illness as the transformative opening of the path. Love

is realized in such sacrifice, acquiring the power to turn harm toward healing, grief toward praise.

This matter of how love becomes a little more complete appears in small things, too. Consider how the difficult things in life draw up resources in love. They draw up as well an ability to sacrifice self-interest for something bigger than this self. Staying up all night with someone who is sick, putting plans aside to stand by a person in need, giving up your comfort, your food, your house, your bed, to shelter another. Unhesitating sacrifice—giving up your life for another in some form great or small—takes place at the dissolving point of self. When that is willing, and conscious, it has transformational power. It resurrects something more alive than small self-comfort, gives life another chance, lets love be present and felt.

The strange logic here is that redemption needs betrayal and betrayal opens forgiveness: Thus, because the way was injured, love becomes complete. The meaning of redemption is not even on the horizon, until betrayal has singed your life. There's an ancient Jewish contention that redemption is older even than creation. The injury to creation opens the way that will complete the love realized in the matter of deepest human value: redemption itself.

But it also seems to hold true that the human grasp on love is always close to being shaken. Each time that happens, we darken; and yet every darkening brings with it new potential. Because love's been more completely revealed—even in its very betrayal—we can now see it with more clarity. The mended bowl can have its own surpassing beauty and value. At least it has that chance.

So difficulty is less a problem than a necessity; it makes the Way genuine. Right and wrong are mysteriously *needed* to injure the Way so that love can appear and we can let love complete us. Our difficulty, our wounding, turns out to be made to exacting human order. And the suffering that clarifies what is true harm forms the entire ground of moral response and ethical choice, of deciding what wrongs are crying out to be righted and what a fitting action might be. And so love defines care, and in doing so, becomes more complete. And this becoming goes on and on without end. Can the mind ever truly “fully awaken”? Perhaps in exceptional

circumstances, just for a time—but it is vital for human beings always to smile at any such absolute proposition.

Masato Ogata is known in Japan as a philosopher-fisherman who used to live on fish from Minamata Bay and suffered crippling neurological damage (known as Minamata disease) from the infamous mercury waste pollution that corrupted the flesh of the fish and shellfish of those waters. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the Chisso Corporation manufactured acetaldehyde used in the production of plastics, and mercury from the production process spilled into the bay. At the time, Minamata residents relied almost exclusively on fish and shellfish from the bay as a source of protein. Though no one knew until decades later, the heavy metal bioaccumulated in the food supply. Ogata knew Chisso bore full legal and moral liability for the harm but in the end he chose to say: “Chisso is me.”

Following Ogata, in the light of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, “Tepco is also me.” Every one of us has authorized Tepco in some measure—lived in tacit agreement with the premise of Tepco that unlimited energy is worth the hazard of virtually unlimited risk—and so nuclear waste is also me. Unlimited level of demands upon the earth is also me. Though we search to the end of time, we’ll never single out our responsibility, let alone ourselves, from the whole shebang. If we can’t go to that fact, we can’t make the vital move, which is to acknowledge this is a crisis and move society toward a compact with the earth’s renewability. Until “global warming is also me” is said, no honest moves with lasting traction can appear. A crisis is a deeper form of healing trying to bring us to earth. And to care becoming ever more complete.

A final glimpse of the strange logic of love “becoming complete” can come from Zen Master Raven, that old stooped alias for Robert Aitken. Raven conducted Zazen meetings and discussion under the tall spruce tree in the forest, and a wide assortment of animals gathered, and pondered together. Gray Wolf was one of those people who “seemed to attend meetings against her better judgment.” Practice always draws diffidence, stiffness, fear, resistance to the surface—where there’s finally a chance to notice and heed the real force of a life-restoring hunger.

One evening she came by anyway and said, "In every service I renew my vows to save the many beings, but really how can I do that?" Raven said, "It's your precious keepsake," leaving great latitude here to discover just how the questioning heart that a vow brings into being may become a precious keepsake. In any case, Mallard piped up and asked, "How can a vow be a keepsake?" Raven said, "It reminds you of a loved one." Gray Wolf sat back and said nothing further. It seems there is considerably more road of self-saving resistance stretching on ahead for Gray Wolf.

So—it reminds you of a loved one. Who is that one? What is this self? Can it possibly be separate from the breeze and the leaves, the shadows playing over the faces of the people, the feelings in your own heart?

Including even the darkest doubts, the most savage, torn feelings?

• *chapter six* •

torn



Ought we not, from time to time, open ourselves to cosmic sadness?

—Etty Hillesum

Only when faithfulness turns to betrayal, and betrayal into trust, can any human being become part of the truth.

—Jellaludin Rumi

The compounded grief of human existence that gathers in human bones and minds can feel bottomless and unresolvable. Water birds duped by climate change into failing to migrate south in time, trapped fast in their thousands by ice in frozen ponds. Ancient ice shelves breaking up with vast finality on the Antarctic coastline. The Great Barrier Reef, largest living organism on the earth, having too little time between massive warm-water bleaching events to maintain resilience and starting comprehensively to die, tearing down a vast web of dependent life with its decline. And a heavily pregnant woman on a sinking boat full of African asylum seekers, her waters breaking as she flounders into the Mediterranean sea off Lampedusa, giving birth as she drowns, her dead baby discovered

later trapped in her leggings, still attached by the umbilicus . . . And on and on.

And the lies, greed, fear, and aggression that blatantly form most of the public discourse about such matters, leaving us collectively stranded in literally absurd and ineffectual relationship to what is really happening. Sometimes, having lament torn from our throats is the only way to sound our full depth of humanity. Being made suddenly keenly aware of how life tears us can become what heals the gap between self and other, and allows the whole world, agonizing and beautiful at once, to reveal its unwavering intimacy. For the red thread runs equally brilliant with pain, sorrow, grief, and joy.

This, Too, Is Me

Dongshan was down by a creek with a monk, side by side, silently washing their bowls in the water. Two birds suddenly flew down and took hold of the frog sitting on a rock in front of them, tearing it in two as it flew off. “*Why* does it come to this!” was the cry ripped from the throat of the startled monk. But Dongshan offered him no avenue of escape.

“It is only for your benefit,” he replied.

What possible “benefit” can be realized in the fact of unavoidable, intractable pain? When it singes and darkens our minds, how far can deep anguish be recuperated into meaningfulness? Can it possibly even deepen, into an untrammelled understanding of what it is to live?

Sharp events in some form will tear us all away from comfort—and even from life itself—at some point. And such events will tear from anyone who is half alive a cry of “*Why* does it come to this!” Who is this we call “we,” born when lament welds “me” indissolubly to “you” through the shared recognition of the tearing quality of life? The red thread—there it is again: *All* life is torn when life is torn, and that can tear us open to each other.

The monk and the frog in that split moment were torn together, one body of pain. Does the benefit begin right there, in the cry torn from the throat of the monk, that spills him beyond the boundaries of

himself, faster than thought, and earlier than pity? Clearly, compassion depends on understanding through directly sharing the suffering of other beings; and love, in the unsentimental sense of the word, is an act of paying unflinching attention.

But in that cry of *Why!* we shouldn't miss the generous darkness that the Daodejing says is at the back of all things, the dark of nothing, the holding-power of not-knowing. This "darkness" is not sinister, although it ruthlessly holds out no exceptions. There is something fertile in becoming lost for explanation: "I don't know" can be the most scrupulously honest words we ever come to utter. And when they come shorn of self-pity, not knowing opens things wider. "I don't know" is the beginning of yielding to the reality of what is happening, and painfully parting company with the narrow view of a preferred outcome. The "dark" at the back of true compassion is that it is empty of "you and me," empty of all divisions. Preferred outcomes are a barrier here—alternative realities deftly engineered to keep us safely clear from even the need to be solid with the commonality of suffering that compassion reveals as reality.

Crises are moments when our "proofs" against reality fail and fall away, and we suddenly recognize that there is no base to rely on. When we can no longer be proofed against precariousness, we have no choice but to join it. Finally! Strangely, giving up the dream of a solid and unassailable self you find yourself at home, at last—unroofed, and yet taking your ease in the flux.

Any trace of self-defense in the monk's impassioned protest, "Why does it come to this!" has to give way to that wide mind of not-knowing. Until then, it just obscures the clarity.

The Tiger's Kindness

Huineng (683–713) said unequivocally, "We need to attend to the nature of all things as open to the Buddha-work of enlightenment." Not the nice or attractive or easy things but *all* things open in the direction of the fierce benefit. And fierce it is, this face of the cosmic sadness that lives in every human being, holding in our hearts that we, too, shall come to shattering grief, that everything and everyone we love, including ourselves, shall disappear from the earth. Can this

possibly be exactly the unlikely place in which refuge is offered? And is this part of what forms the complexity of any cry of pain—that it ushers into consciousness a fullness that had been obscured by the understandable wish to be safe? Even the tearing quality of a human cry is involved: Painfully torn, we begin to hear with our eyes and see with our hearts.

The monk's distress and Dongshan's response to it is echoed in a Korean tiger koan that pads through the rich territory in which fear may become openness, betrayal become trust: *The tiger fears the human heart. The human fears the tiger's kindness.*

Human beings in constricted states of mind are dangerous to each other and to life on earth; we've probably never been better placed to see that clearly than in the present, comprehensive human and environmental crisis our actions have been generating. But I sense the tiger's fear for us is not without compassion, for a constricted and ungenerous heart is a kind of dying in the midst of life. That shrinking heart can't see any kindness in the tiger—the fierce and inclusive embrace of awakening that takes our smallness and its suppositions away, and leaves us free and at ease, and more generous and kindly within our fundamental precariousness.

The late activist and poet Daniel Berrigan (1921–2016) advises, “Start with the impossible, proceed calmly towards the improbable.” Proceed with the strength and kindness of the tiger, I would add. To embrace the tearing as “only for our benefit” or accede to kindness in the ruthless tiger looks impossible, then improbable—and then?

And then it becomes more possible not to be afraid of being afraid, and not to be appalled at being appalled. To proceed without bargains and conditions placed upon reality. When I inhabit distress and grief more fully, bearing and containing it, it yields an open dharma gate. *Here* is the silent way of the tiger's kindness, all-devouring, leaving nothing behind of “me,” or very little, to trouble the air.

And so the tearing, that is part of every life on earth, can become a closing of the wound of existence. The benefit—as in donation, gift, support—of painful consciousness is a severe one. It does ask that we rigorously give up the dream of a self safely separate from the “rest” of reality and safely exempt from unavoidable anguish. But in

return it gives us back the world whole, more able to include suffering and joy, terror and wonder, torn frogs and shocked people, and two at least half-satisfied birds, free of self-pity. And this is its terrifying grace.

So “It is only for your benefit” is the start of a deep inquiry into who this is that feels and cries out, how infinitely interwoven and mixed with all the others that it is, and how our vitally mixed nature is the exact and exacting challenge that yields to a sense of inconceivable grace: *This, too, is me*.

“This, too, is me” is a strong demand to admit to a quaking human heart; little wonder we easily retreat to small fabrications of reality that seem a safe lookout onto the vast fact of impermanence. It’s not easy to feel the amplitude inside an offer of unsafety, of no base to rely on; though it’s not difficult to come across the need to do so, for the fact swims ceaselessly into view. But the kindness of the tiger begins in a roar that clears away all hope of “making sense,” of recuperating what is happening back into something that looks habitable for a small and shaky sense of self. That’s mercifully gone, leaving a deafened silence, in which *knowing* we don’t know may stir into life.

I think of a *Far Side* cartoon from past years, which has a typically gormless scuba diver down under water, crouched safely inside his “Don’s Discount Shark Cage,” its label suggesting complete protection from great white sharks. A great white shark has just swum into view, and is now idly circling and eyeing the man inside the cage with interest. The man is just beginning to notice the remains of other Don’s Discount Shark Cages caught here and there on the head and flanks of the shark . . .

And Yet

In Case 6 of *The Gateless Barrier*, Shakyamuni Buddha picked up a flower and simply twirled it in silence, in front of the crowd of people gathered to listen to the dharma. Just one small flower, twirling. There was a mystified wait to hear the explanation, but if it came at all, it came from the disciple Mahakasyapa, whose face (it is said) cracked into a smile. No explanation would fit a flower, let alone the

twirling of it between human thumb and fingers, or a smile of recognition. That recognition doesn't stop anywhere but flows out to cover heaven and earth.

Take any flower in hand and ask yourself, "What universe does this come from?" What extraordinary planet is it in which this, too, could possibly have appeared? I'm looking at one now, a smallish flower that does not know its name or need to, and here is much to marvel at: The way the parts of the stem are beautifully nestled in upon each other with lines, veins of red, running through them, growing deeper here at the throat. And then from the middle of the benevolent open petals, an erupting flourish of monumentally sculptured pistils. What planet is this, with what wildly creative mind that led to . . . *flower*?

And to frogs torn in two, birds briefly satisfied in search of food, startled monks, and words like *It is only for your benefit*? And yet the smiling silence of the twirling flower and the protest at the frog ripped from life, and all the tearing that floods into a heart in this precarious world, are one flowing reality, one realization. Nothing is spared and nothing falls outside of the tiger's kindness, of the red thread that cannot be cut.

For Mahakasyapa, that humble flower and its silent and equally unaccountable twirling stopped him in the ordinary tracks of his mind, and for the first time he knew for himself who he was and where he was. He lived right to the moment—which is always now—of creation itself. The propensity and ability to stop comes from close and undivided attention that walks us in a human body right to the edge of emptiness, where our small deposit of "knowing" this and that dwindles, and disappears, restoring astonishment about where and what we are and bringing our selves and our beleaguered planet vividly back to life. To have ever taken it for granted—there's the real cause for astonishment!

Robert Aitken said, "Our practice is not to clear up the mystery, it is to make the mystery clear." What we call realization is simply when we let the mystery clearly reach and recognize *us*. It is a matter of mutual recognition, and reunion.

An odd couple, at first glance: limited human beings with minds that grasp and finesse difference with astonishing facility; and an

undivided, illimitable, and unfathomable universe. In both, the tiger's kindness. But that's where we find ourselves, hurting at the mismatch, learning to become the reconciliation of these two as even less than one. In this, too, the tiger's kindness. This is the mystery that practice sees clearly, and there's nothing on earth that doesn't freely display it—just take any silently eloquent flower, the wonder of a human hand that holds it, the way it can be gently turned upon its own stem, and cease standing apart from it.

It's no less on open display in the stars at night. As Psalm 19 begins so memorably, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words. No sound is heard from them, yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the earth."

Koans are a human way of letting speech touch the inconceivable. Not speaking it as in laying it out, but speaking with its voice, speaking with its mind, making the mystery clear in human words, simple flowers, and the brilliant Milky Way—together with the deep "dark emu," the hole of blackness that from an Australian point of view lies nestled within its blaze.

Issa's cry, "And yet!" upon the death of his infant daughter, though it was hinged upon a very classical acceptance of the passing away of all things, confirms—like the weeping of the Zen Master for her dead granddaughter—that until we can awaken, beholden to the vast equality *and* pain of all that lives, to the point where we can truly see "there is no other," we're still asleep.

From that point of view those two words *And yet* essay how deeply we are human. Our human bonds, our human commitments and responsibilities to each other first of all ground us—on the earth and of the earth. But then they also impel our responsibility toward the earth and all other sentient beings. And *that* is where Zen sees true waking up.

Until then, I'm a little reminded of what Ezra Pound said about T. S. Eliot, after he and a group of friends gathered the funds together to buy the poet out of his dreary job at the bank so he could devote himself full-time to poetry. Years later, Ezra Pound reflected mirthlessly on this enterprise, saying, "Yes. And so Eliot led us out

into the desert, where he ascended into heaven—in a chariot built for one.”

Issa’s memorial haiku is open to anguish as the chariot built to carry home all beings. Suffering and love—is love even possible without fully investigating and offering ourselves to the fact of cosmic sadness, holding back nothing of our selves from its truth?

Why Me?

In the book of Job, Job famously rails against God for the huge concatenation of his personal suffering, demanding God account for it. “Why me?” on a vast scale, though who among us doesn’t recognize that protest of the heart? But God replies with a question from left of field. “Where were you, when I laid the foundations of the earth, when the morning stars sang together?” Is this a dismissal of Job’s complaint in the vast scheme of things, rendering his personal suffering an insignificant detail upon the great work of creation, a nagging mosquito needing to be slapped down to size?

While the scale of things here is not an insignificant detail, I see the question as a profound offer to Job to drop free of the (absurd) smallness of “Why me?” If God is saying, “Who do you think you are?” then it’s in the form of an invitation that reaches all the way to the true self, not separate in the slightest detail. The implication then becomes, “In what way are you *not* also there with me in beginning-less time? Let the force of pain reach through to that—and find yourself participating fully, not a jot separate from the whole of this.”

This is not unlike Zhaozhou’s “Though you search to the end of time, you will never single it out”—the true self, the fact for which you must accept responsibility. When you search back earlier than conception and way past beginning and end, will you be able to single yourself out from anything at all? Complete frog, tearing, hungry birds, gulping, cry of pain, one vast benefit seen *whole*.

Like the invitation offered to Job: Why wrench yourself separate from the wholeness of what is poured out, which is you. Why shirk belonging to this completely—right to the very foundations of the earth? Living hurts. The depth of the hurt is the height of the joy. It’s possible to discover not just consent to the fact of suffering, but a

consciousness within suffering with no victim in it. Realization is the kind of blow to consciousness that arrives as the *whole* of this—the whole of what we are and what this is—in a form recognizable simply as your own most intimate self.

As an eleventh-century Chinese philosopher administrator, Zhang Zai (1020–1077), expressed the matter, “Heaven is my father and earth is my mother and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in its midst. That which extends throughout the universe, I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe, I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.”

The extended heartfelt cry that breaks off, short of subject or object, “*And yet*”—*that’s* where life lives; it is where we find our humanity and our creativity, right in our own pain, that we share with each other, the red thread of the pain and joy of the earth and all her creatures. Every pang of fear and anguish for the collapsing biome of the earth is a prayer that the pain of the earth will wake our own pain in time, and joy in responding. We have to depend on the precipitous state itself, and the fierce anger and love that it awakens, for our survival and the well-being of our planet.

“And yet!” tears the heart open to hold and include more of the whole. It is also a cry of awe, astonishment at seeing how deeply the red thread invites us into this, even in the tearing—ultimately, the needed “blow” to consciousness. And it implies an always-unfinished business. As Dogen says in the Genjo koan, “This realization continues ceaselessly.” Not only is the universe unfinished business, and each of us likewise, so also is the ongoing reconciliation and waking up. We are *always* coming home; there’s nowhere else to be, and nothing else to do, in a living, human body. We never finish passing through the human-shaped gate of “And yet.” Or of “Why does it come to this!”

Hide in the Flames

And so despair and praise, lament and joy, dark and light—the red thread of human completeness cannot keep these apart. They disappear into each other.

There's an old saying that "When the Buddhas have difficulties, they hide themselves in the flames." A monk came quoting this saying to Zhaozhou once, asking him, "Where do you hide yourself [when you have difficulties]?" Zhaozhou composed a poem in reply:

*He says the Buddhas have difficulties,
I say he has the problem.
Just watch the way I avoid difficulties:
Where is it that they follow after us?
"Yes" and "No" are not spoken,
Coming and going are not coming and going.
I have spoken about the dharma of difficulty for you.
Now come and get to know me.*

"Just watch the way I avoid difficulties," he offers. Where are there no difficulties to be had? How does Zhaozhou at ease remain congruent with Zhaozhou in difficult circumstances, so completely that each Zhaozhou disappears into the other? Is this some state of saintly immunity from difficulty—or just the end of trying within endless change to bend and fit your life to preferred outcomes, the end of living in the place of "coming and going" where "Yes" and "No" are spoken? Is that where difficulties follow after us?

Zhaozhou's way of "avoiding difficulties" is the way of not supposing something, or, if you like, "not picking and choosing"—and so not knowing that there is any difficulty at all. When anguish is accepted as it is, minus opinions about it, in such an open response there is no longer quite something to call anguish, and no longer quite so much of a "me" in difficulty. There is just what is happening. Declining the reactive "knowing" that rises up when we're feeling strongly confronted is defaulting to the unknowing fullness of "Just this person," that (even in tears) has nothing sticking to it.

The *not*-doing of standard-issue reaction is the subtle move of hiding in the flames of difficulty. When someone else asked Zhaozhou, "Please point out the way of true ease," he replied, "Pointing it out makes it uneasy." You can't "point out" your complete being. The subtle move of not believing that there is anyone here to

be confronted has nothing to be pointed to—literally nothing. Pointing out emptiness makes it a thing, and that erects a barrier. Everything is made uneasy, forced to strain, when the full and complete empty nature of reality—that cannot be pointed out from everything else—is resisted.

We shrink from the tiger’s kindness in those elemental feelings that invite us into it completely. The immediate bodily feelings of intense vulnerability—fear, anxiety, grief—usually produce a strong state of disavowal. “This can’t be happening!” But if you hide yourself completely in the flames of an experience so strong it tears your small self from its safe moorings in the world of “Yes” and “No,” and of coming and going, the tearing becomes an opening. A chance to find an ease that lies beyond “safety,” where you are no longer holding yourself apart.

Vimalakirti—the mythic layman whose tiny ten-by-ten bare room could seat many thousand bodhisattvas, each ensconced in their own jeweled lion-throne, without it ever being too spacious or too crowded—is the figure of inclusive ease. His name means “undefiled repute” or “pure name” in Sanskrit. When he was sick one time, someone asked him “Why are you sick?” Vimalakirti replied, “Because the whole world is sick.” Living hurts. Beings fall sick. If sentient beings can fall sick, then I am sick. If they dance with joy, that’s why I dance with joy. Not one can be excluded. Not one of them is “not me.”

A further clue to Vimalakirti’s great ease lies in another koan. A monk asked Daojian, “In a past life, Vimalakirti was the Golden Grain Tathagata. Why then did he return to life and study the dharma as a disciple of Shakyamuni?” Daojian replied, “Because he had no notions of self to contest.” No notions of self—there’s the abundance of the Golden Grain Tathagata.

With no notion of self to contest, the world opens as one in which nothing bumps into anything else. There is a huge and by now fabulously blue old grouper living in the rocky inlet where I sometimes go to swim. He seems very at ease and accustomed to people worshipping him from above, muted by some elephantine breathing tube filling the mouth, eyes fixed upon him from behind the slightly fogged goggles of wonder . . . Just sometimes he lets you

close enough to tickle his luminescent scales. But—like the schools of multicolored fish that follow him slavishly to take advantage of the way he tears the algae from the rocks, unearthing fine clouds of food—he *never* bumps into you.

The accord with circumstances evident in such thoroughgoing lazy ease, the affinity of grouper, water, tail-flick, and some elemental form of trust, is so natural that truly you can say, “nobody knows.”

The Boat Is in the River

In Case 51 of the *The Book of Equanimity*, a monk named Elder Jiao came by the river to visit Fayan’s monastery. Fayan asked him, “Did you come by boat or land?”

Jiao said, “I came by boat.”

Fayan asked him, “Where is the boat?”

And Jiao replied, “The boat is in the river.”

Later, after Jiao had withdrawn, Fayan turned to an onlooker to that exchange—which of course includes us, now—and asked, “Did the monk who just came have the eye or not?” Well, did he?

Elder Jiao lies so low in his replies that we might miss his clear eye completely, just as the subtlety of that luminous old grouper also eludes all direct grasp. The koan is one of the quietest in the records of Zen. There is a drift of testing in that understated question, “Did you come by boat or land?” Coming or going is not in play in this monk when he replied, “I came by boat.”

Coming by land—would that be questing for something? Coming by boat—would that be more like giving way to its natural flow instead? We say too much even to ask. Just hide in the flames: “I came by boat” has nothing whatsoever that can be added to it or taken away. And when asked, “Where is the boat?” with a tiny drift of an implicit request to “Show me that most simple way of ease (that pushes against nothing at all),” Jiao does show him: “The boat is in the river.” *Entirely* in the river. Nudged and directed only by the current, pushing or demanding nothing at all.

Close to the end of his long, distinguished life, of working to collectively unearth the natural genius of deeply oppressed people with them to help them lift it into learning and action, Paulo Freire

was asked by someone, “What is the most important thing?” Freire responded, “The beautiful, daily struggle to be congruent.”

In Jiao’s reply I hear a deeply resolved congruency—or complete fit with circumstances. *Congruent* is a term from geometry. Only when two forms conform to each other so exactly that one completely hides the other, edge to edge completely coinciding, may we call them “congruent.”

To call this work of coming into congruency a “beautiful” struggle, and to admit that it makes itself anew on a daily basis, is very fine. To name the struggle as one of “becoming congruent”—with mixed human circumstances, with the deepest nature of this self, *and* with the fact that these “two” aspects cannot in even the slightest detail be taken apart—names the entire business of a Zen practice.

“The boat is in the river”—there is the complete congruency of self and circumstances, including even the most violently painful. “The boat is in the river.” There is the depth of a long practice. Lament and joy, congruent.

• *chapter seven* •

dark



*When the black bird is released at midnight, it flies
covered in snow.*

—Zen saying

*Oh night that guided me, Oh night, more lovely than
the dawn*

—Saint John of the Cross
(from “Dark Night of the Soul”)

The darkest states of being—grief, bitterness, hopelessness, depletion, and despair—equally belong to the red thread of life that can never be cut. Silence, too, has its own dark around it—an eloquent, pregnant power to convey the empty fullness of reality by leaving words unsaid, allowing a deeper intimacy to become present.

Gen is a Sino-Japanese word meaning “dark” with the sense of “empty.” Mind like an open sky, replete—nothing lacking, nothing at odds, nothing outside, an infinite net of relationship, with nothing able to bump into anything else. And nothing left out of it—not even the darkest and most lonely states of human bafflement and despair, and the depth of persistence these states can awaken, the dharma gate that opens in mute courage.

Solitary and Destitute

The case that touches the matter of great persistence in the face of inner poverty is Case 10 of *The Gateless Barrier*, “Qingshui, solitary and destitute.” A monk came to Caoshan (840–901)—who, together with Dongshan, is seen as founder of the Soto or Caodong stream of Zen. The monk said, “I am Qingshui, solitary and destitute. Please, give me alms.”

Caoshan said, “Venerable Shui!”

The monk said, “Yes, sir.”

Caoshan said, “Oh, you’ve already drunk three cups of the finest wine in China, and still you say you have not moistened your lips?”

Caoshan’s response to a heartfelt request for alms—for teaching, for succor, for something that will ease a parched state—looks strange. Caoshan calls Qingshui’s name, and when he responds, dismisses him as someone rolling in riches. What is the fine wine poured out for all of us, even in the darkest and most emotionally drought-stricken hours of our lives?

There are several ways to see Qingshui, and all are instructive. Some see him as a petitioning monk, well-known for visiting and challenging teachers with a barbed question or presentation as an invitation to dharma combat. In this light, his opening words are testing: “Can you offer teaching to one such as me, dwelling alone in emptiness?” Shadows move freely over the ground as the day goes on, but they raise no dust. Moonlight reaches to the bottom of the pool, leaving no trace in the water.

You prod him but hardly find him there—a little like the somewhat troubling man “who wasn’t there” upon the stair. If this is what Caoshan sees in Qingshui, he reaches right in and tweaks the nose of any posture of “emptiness”—by simply calling the monk’s name. “Venerable Shui!” and without a thought, Qingshui responds, “Yes, sir.” Ah, a rich man after all, says Caoshan.

Whatever his state of mind, such wealth as his is the kind we cannot help but possess from the beginning. There is a piece of wordplay in “the finest wine in China,” since that phrase referenced a particular wine company, the ideographs of which imply “the wine of no color and form”—very much the wine poured forth all the time.

There's no way to avoid it moistening your lips. But when and where in their exchange can we say, beyond doubt, that Qingshui drank such wine?

Or is Qingshui someone simply confidently clear that a truly rich human being has nothing at all and *knows* it, resting in that fact? In that light his solitude is simple completeness—a state of needing nothing, true-nature being coextensive with the universe. Can you be lonely, with no gap between you and all that is? In this light he comes saying, “I am solitary and emptied in the best sense, can you help that prosper?” From this point of view, Caoshan and Qingshui just share their wealth as equals. It's like one of them saying, “How wonderfully empty-handed we are,” and the other saying, “Overflowing!”

Yamada Koun (1907–1989), Robert Aitken's teacher, commented: “Solitary and poor, alone and destitute, how true. Every one of us is solitary for everyone is the only one in the whole universe, one with the whole universe. At the same time so richly endowed that every one of us is extremely poor. For as I repeatedly tell you, in our essential nature there is nothing, there is neither subject nor object.” As the Heart Sutra says, of our rich endowment, it has nothing to be singled out; no form, no color, no weight, no place to stay. In other words, essential nature is devoid and free of all signs, all distinctions, the same way the breeze, the ocean, the sky is free of all parts. But Yamada continues, “On the other hand this void has limitless treasures, it can see, it can hear, it can laugh, run, eat. In a word it is limitless, empty and limitless.” Vivid, at every point.

When another teacher was asked by someone in the assembly, “What, where is my self-nature?” he replied, “I can't see you, just step forward.” As the monk walked forward the teacher said, “How wonderfully well you are using it!” Though we can live a life without knowing this treasure, even so we cannot avoid using it freely, in every breath, gesture, action, thought. And while we may be encumbered by our ignorance toward it, *it* is not encumbered.

Poverty of Spirit

But what if the monk comes in genuine, extreme need, and Caoshan is offering exactly the compassionate move that may help him stumble into his own abundance? *Then* the koan shines a valuable, searching light into the dark, exhausted, falling-down states known and shared at times by all of us in some measure.

This is the place where everything has grown barren and become an echo chamber of all your doubts. Where you can find no light or feel any possible way to move. Then “Qingshui, Solitary and Destitute” points to the mystery of great persistence within exhaustion, uncovering the secret spring of courage, conviction, and even love hidden in that; above all, how abruptly a destitute state can drop away to reveal inexhaustible reality.

The “dark night of the soul” is that darkening of mind and heart in despair at feeling stripped of all resources, having no means of nourishment in reach, nothing you can do to save your self. This coming down to nothing with nothing to grasp at or reach for is curiously rich in its poverty. Meister Eckhart said, “For he who is truly poor is he who wills nothing, knows nothing, and wants nothing,” shining light upon what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, the first of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.” The words surely reach further than saying a hard life of material poverty earns the greatest reward in an afterlife. They imply that something of infinite value becomes available to an emptied, resourceless state of being.

When the monk asked Zhaozhou about the mystery of his own true nature, and how to touch it, the response “*Mu*” turns the monk about to face the wide-open state of “is not,” “does not have”—complete poverty. *Mu* opens exactly there. Like Linji’s “true person of no rank,” having nothing left to cling to, there is at last infinite room for everything to be present, equal and undivided.

Difficulty itself seems to make grace more possible. The dream of the self dies hard; we live in considerable fear of losing our selves; that this self, so detailed, intimate, and apparently central to everything, will disappear is the difficult news we all must accept. But it is there, at the end of our tether, when there is no more room to move, and truly nothing to lose, that the entirely unexpected opening

move of the heart occurs—though oddest of all, there was never anyone holding anything back except us.

Poverty of spirit implies a person who also is right at the end of their knowing. At that point there is at last no possible way to move off. The experience of being at the end of your resources is the beginning of the experience of actually being in reality. There really *is* nowhere to go and nothing to have, which leaves the heart humble—its most natural and open state, closer to the earth under the sheer force of dispossession.

Dark Night

This state—equally excruciating and promising in character—has been called the “dark night of the soul.” The phrase comes from Saint John of the Cross, the Spanish Christian mystic and *converso* Jew who composed the poem and long meditation of the same name. The poem, in the form of a fragment, starts at the point when the long, dark, suffering “night” has already emptied you of all possessions—thoughts and feelings you can rest in. So it begins in the unknowing act of yielding and breaks off at the point of complete self-surrender. Beyond that there are no words.

Its yielding is depicted as a secret assignation with the Beloved in the depth of a dark night. You slip from your darkened house—habitual life and mind in which all now lies sleeping and inactive; guided only by a light of yearning, that quite naturally finds the secret stairs you somehow always forgot were there. In that now lovely darkness you pass out into the garden—original wholeness, Garden of Gethsemane becoming Garden of Eden—and meet with the Beloved who waits for you out there under the cedars.

The imagery and action of surrender now begins to take yielding past the point of no return. This yielding or dropping away hinges on the tiniest, all but involuntary move of the heart, which cannot be summoned, and with which the entire cosmos seems to concur. The Beloved “stays” with you—all moving off has ceased—but is still “sleeping,” close to your heart, “that is reserved for him alone.” The deep meditative state of single-minded, one-pointed, unmoving, and

agenda-less open awareness aligns with this. No longer “doing” a self.

Then—a tiny movement. You caress the Beloved, some most natural expression of the blessedness of such openness, and with this minute gesture of your heart, a tiny breeze stirs from the cedars in accord with the caress, growing a little stronger and blowing down from the turrets, just enough to shift the locks of hair of the Beloved.

With this, the Beloved moves gently and mysteriously to “wound” your “neck” and all thought and sensing is then suspended. I take this wounding as the blow to consciousness that realization experience is and from which it flows; its complete suspension of will and of all possible “doing” accords, too, with the *jhana* states of deep, ardent self-relinquishment, that last as long as they wish. And then:

*I remained, lost in oblivion;
My face I reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased and I abandoned my self,
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.*

The dropped-away body and mind. The poem breaks off into silence.

John of the Cross comments: “Even though this blessed night darkens the spirit, it does so only to impart light in all things. And even though it humbles us and reveals our miseries, it does so only to exalt us. And even though it impoverishes us and empties us of all our possessions and natural affections, it does so only that we may reach forward divinely to the enjoyment of everything in heaven and on earth, all the while preserving a general freedom of spirit in them all.”

It is a most subtle pivot, an inner turning or metanoia—which is the unbidden, unpredictable culmination of that “darkening of spirit,” despair turning into complete donation of self, there being simply nothing else to give. Having no more ways left to try to save yourself, without *knowing* how, you give your self away—and then all is given. The grace of existence is yielded when you yield to it; it stirs as the

answering breeze when you stir in this deep act of love that is unknowing, unconditioned.

But the crux of the “dark night,” what makes all this possible, is the nadir of being emptied by circumstances, with nothing coming back to meet you—a despair so dark and formless you no longer know any way to move. All signals, all systems are down, there is no will left except to endure. It is dark, dark, empty of promises, with no bargains left to make. It is the place where resistance dies, a desert experience—whether in the offering of the self to the unknown called Zazen, or in prayerful search for God. Some all but unaware inner concession to the unknown takes place; the end of knowing and reaching for something becomes the beginning of resting in what comes, what is—relying on the unknown.

And then—between exhaustion of effort, and a subtle wisdom of dropping all effort—the full giving way into all that is.

Blessing Unawares

In Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” the turning comes when he’s the sole survivor on the ship, now totally becalmed—“a painted ship upon a painted ocean”—with all fresh water in the boat used up . . . “Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.”

There’s Qingshui, solitary and destitute. Water, water everywhere, the finest tea in China poured out even in human despair, and yet he’s parched. The mariner likewise is completely alone and solitary, all the others dead. Strange lights curl about the rigging at night, the wind died to nothing days ago. Now nothing stirs. And then, for no reason at all, the mariner looks down and in the shadow of the boat can see into the water to the strange, beautiful creatures, sea snakes and fish, at home in their element—and “he blessed them, unawares.”

To bless something unawares is one of the most beautiful descriptions I know for the involuntary accession to the flow we call grace, the giving away of the self that joins the self with it. It’s not that you receive a blessing; it’s that, before and beyond thought, you simply give it. Your guard is down and you allow your moment of existence itself to simply bless and be blessed by *what this is*—in

this case, mysterious creatures living their strange lives in the water. One moment before, marooned in deep and dark despair. Now . . .

Just that non-thinking move of the mariner's heart changes everything. Wind stirs, sails creak, rain starts to fall, the buckets on the deck collect the rain, the ship begins to move once more. There is further expiation of his senseless crime still ahead, but the curse of the dead albatross drops from his neck. The empty buckets on the deck now brim with sweet rain, like Qingshui's request for alms fulfilled. The ancient mariner was not requesting anything at all; all petitioning of fate had been exhausted; just a tiny act of inadvertent love flowed, earlier and older than thought. And that is exactly the blessing.

The instant Qingshui responds to his name with "Yes, sir," he has nothing impeding him, which is equally so whether he lives in the light of that fact or outside it. His name is called and his response comes unconditioned, blessing him unawares. Call and response are so close to being each other you can barely tell them apart. Grace can't help following grace.

Yet consciousness of this is not lightly won. We need a strong practice to face strong fear, such as the blackness of feeling arid despair, or facing extinction. And exactly on the other side of that strong fear is everything we ever needed, granted from the beginning. *Women's* verse for the case tells us what it takes: "With the poverty of Han Tan"—a legendary beggar figure—"and the spirit of Gou"—a famously brave general—"though he can hardly sustain himself, still he dares to compete with the other for wealth."

Having nothing, barely able to sustain himself, still nothing can stop Qingshui persisting, enough to place himself at the feet of a great teacher and say, "Truly, I have nothing left. What is your teaching at such a moment?" Just in coming—solitary and destitute and yet with a remarkable courage—he is already receiving alms. Even in asking, "Please, give me alms," he already dares to sip the finest wine in China.

So—where is this finest wine in China that has been drunk by this Venerable Shui? Stretching your legs out when you are tired at night, there it is, finest wine in China! Breathing in, breathing out, there it is again, limitless wealth, coming from nothing. Qingshui comes all the

way home through the door of spiritual poverty, and through his own spiritedness, that sees him all the way through that necessary destitution, also making sure he does not miss its necessity.

Others have been known to tumble right through in the fiercely exacting way in which extreme physical pain can darken the mind beyond “better or worse,” “inside and outside.” Or the mind-opening, scandalous “impossibility” of death, the most ordinary, everyday, and complete fact life can present. All ways home are good. But arriving empty-handed is essential.

I Won't Say

The old, sober word for human beings was *mortals*. For the “grave matter” of life and death is the quick of our lives and the fulcrum of awakening—sometimes known as “the Great Death.” But no amount of explanation by another will ever open us to that.

Case 55 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, “Daowu’s Condolence Call,” takes place in the context of a funeral. The elderly Daowu, accompanied by Jianyuan, his young attendant, visited the house where a death had occurred, to offer condolences and conduct the funeral rites, over the coffin, right there in the room. In the middle of proceedings, Jianyuan suddenly rapped loudly on the coffin and demanded, “Alive or dead?” Daowu replied, “I won’t say either living or dead.” Jianyuan asked, “*Why* won’t you say?” And Daowu said, “I won’t say, I won’t say.”

On the way home, Jianyuan burst out again. “Your Reverence, please tell me right away. If you don’t, I shall hit you!” Daowu simply said, “If you like, I will allow you to hit me, but I’ll never say.” Jianyuan hit Daowu, knocking him to the ground. Yuanwu’s commentary on the case reports that blood was spilled.

Some time later, after Daowu had passed away from other causes, Jianyuan sought out Daowu’s dharma heir, Shishuang (807–888), and told him the whole story. After hearing it through, Shishuang said, “Alive, I won’t say, dead I won’t say.” Jianyuan asked, “*Why* won’t you say?” Shishuang replied, “I won’t say, I won’t say.” And hearing these words this time, Jianyuan finally rang clear.

What the formal case leaves out is that after being knocked down and injured by Jianyuan, Daowu advised him, “I think you should go away for a while,” adding, “I fear that if the monastery’s director of affairs finds out, he will make trouble for you,” and he spirited Jianyuan safely away from harm. Some time later, Jianyuan was passing a temple when he heard a workman reciting the Avalokitesvara Sutra about the Bodhisattva of boundless compassion. He was struck to the heart by the words, “To those who would attain salvation as monks, he appears as a monk to expound the dharma for him.”

To those who deeply long to resolve “Just this person,” compassion itself appears in some form to reveal the matter. *Not* by preaching, however—there’s not a single word of preaching in “Alive, I won’t say. Dead, I won’t say”—but by presenting the matter complete and fully embodied: “I won’t say,” there it is; “Let’s get you out of here before someone tries to hurt you,” there it is again. Compassion finds entry wherever a genuine gap of longing to wake up opens up inside a human being. And compassion lives in not-knowing, not-saying, and no-one to know.

In this case, the gap in Jianyuan seems to lie in the impossible fact of death, alongside some glimpse of that which is left entirely undisturbed by such disavowing fear. Alive or dead, one or the other! Which is it! We perish, the one we call by our own name must face the vast forever before and behind us that is completely unknown and does not seem to include us at all. *And* sustained attention to the moment of existence breath by breath discovers the Unborn with no discernible beginning or end, and that there is no outside to this. But for Jianyuan, this is still too fragile to have any viable relationship with the astonishing fact of mortality. He’s split, impelled by the dharma of emptiness (no old age and death) while being scandalized by mortality (and also no ending of old age and death). How can these two be one?

After mistreating and losing Daowu, and beginning to track the opening of compassion, he could finally hear Daowu’s identical words, this time spoken by Shishuang, and awaken to these two as even less than one. He cried out, “At that time I was wrongly

suspicious of my late teacher. How was I to know that this affair is not in words and phrases!”

And he and Daowu met at last, on the far side of “I won’t say.” Life and death and unborn self-nature were now resolved as Jianyuan; to live congruent with limited, mortal circumstances in full view of the limitless.

Sometime after that, he appeared in Shishuang’s meditation hall with a hoe over his shoulder as though setting out to plough a field, and walked from east to west and west to east—from sun up to sun down you might say, or from one edge of darkness to the other. Shishuang asked, “What are you doing?” and Jianyuan said, “I’m seeking the sacred bones of our late Master.”

Once, his ferocity knocked the old man down. Now his ritual play expresses the depth of his respect for Daowu—intent to fully unearth and inhabit those bones himself.

Shishuang replies by evoking the overflowing emptiness that comes forth with bones and flowers and animals and all of us: “On the billows of the great ocean, white caps swell to the sky. Why do you search for our teacher’s sacred bones other than that?” Each of us are momentary billows of the ocean of essential nature, which never goes away. What is there to seek?

Jianyuan just says, “That is good for my training.” I’m reassured to see such firm, pragmatic, low-key gratitude. Enough of great enlightenment, let’s put it to work!

There’s a calm that comes from knowing who you are, and relying on what is happening—as natural as the fine, exacting lacework of decay in all the late leaves of autumn. When the right puff of wind comes they are floating away on it, wind and leaf—one flow.

The fiery quality in Jianyuan, though it had to be borne so painfully by his old teacher Daowu, was borne with compassion, for he saw how intent Jianyuan was upon unveiling the full splendor of Mind. Which is a completeness that knowing words cannot assail. Daowu’s “I won’t say”—like Yunyan’s “After staying quiet for a time”—is silence brought to meet the full strength of his student’s demand to *bring* it to words, to deliver him from unknowing. But Daowu’s words themselves speak a most eloquent and forbearing

silence. The apparent refusal in them is more than an invitation into the productive dark of having and knowing nothing; it is that state itself, speaking *and resolving* the question, “Alive or dead?”

The Buddha referred to the question of what happens when we die as one of “the imponderables.” Is that what Daowu’s “I won’t say” is implying? You can freely explore that dimension but it misses Daowu’s “Won’t say.” He won’t say even when he’s taken by the collar and thrown to the ground and beaten. He takes his refusal even to the grave, in order to take care this student’s realization with completeness.

When the self-protective shell of “knowing” can be induced to drop away, life and death stand forth revealed clearly, inseparable and empty. The mystery made clear. It is of passing interest that *myein*, the Greek root of the word *mystery*, means “to seal the lips.” In ancient Greece, there were specific, elaborate rituals of entry into contact with “the Mysteries” for example, the Eleusinian Mysteries, at the end of which initiation you took an oath that sealed your lips forever about what had been revealed.

When we have a genuine glimpse of reality, words are at home there, too. Daowu’s very words, “I won’t say,” light up the dark of Jianyuan’s “Alive or dead?” If you try to fillet “alive” from “dead,” that just traduces the matter; with all the compassionate means and desire that you can possibly bring to the task, it remains sealed from the limiting power of words. Yet Daowu’s “I won’t say” expounds “Not alive, not dead, and also no ending of alive or dead”—but with skillful words that will draw Jianyuan past himself and all his need to “know.”

His resolute silence here tends realization—it is the powerful holding of a line that Daowu will not cross. Instead he waits with patience for Jianyuan to cross to meet him on the ground of *I won’t say*. Silence is the possibility that might raise an echo of this undivided state within the other. Daowu’s silence roars, in “I won’t say!” Jianyuan’s questioning is full disclosure of a fiery doubt and longing. Daowu ensures that it bears fruit.

The pointer to Case 55 asks us, “Is there a way to help people by letting out a continuous path for them to walk, or not?” *I won’t say* appears at first glance to offer an obstacle rather than a continuous path for anyone to walk. Then again, every dharma gate looks just

like that, and makes clear what Marcus Aurelius said: “Let what stands in the way become the way.”

Silence

Of course, whatever confronts you, there is your entry—to knowing less, seeing more! In *I won't say* I hear something of the silence of mountains, which strengthens people. There's a verse whose source I've lost that beautifully evokes the deep unknowing that can begin to form and inform us in a strong silence; we start to share a little of the silence of mountains, wind, stars, or rain, which knows the human silence of “I won't say”:

*Like Vimalakirti, she shuts her mouth,
following the Old Way.
All day long, she sits within the gate;
she does not tell anyone her inner treasure.
When she sees the Blue Mountain
through the verandah, and recognizes it—
she feels she has spoken too much.*

That's a mind so quiet the slightest stirring feels rough. The stillness and silence inside us is our closeness to the inconceivable. It's a richly darkened “don't-know mind” coming slowly alive, which is more penetrating and farseeing than knowing mind can dream of, and a treasure that cannot be told to anyone. Koans forensically unpick the usual ways of making up the world and our selves that previously seemed to work quite well, and draw us into greater vulnerability to the real.

This vulnerability can feel a little edgy or threatening, which in turn can make us subtly self-protective and hostile to the koan's open invitation. A guarded retreat from vulnerability is different from simple fear of imagined failure. It partly overlaps with the existential vulnerability we all share, in some measure, with Jianyuan, toward the nonnegotiable fact of life-and-death. But at such a moment, guardedness is decidedly not your ally.

Jianyuan seems equally drawn and hostile toward that necessary vulnerability—and by extension, to the thought of giving away all his possessions, in death and in “the great death.” The prospect is fascinating, unfathomable, and indigestible all at once, and he longed to shake out of Daowu something to strengthen rather than demolish his small toehold in an existing framework. “I won’t say” holds open the resounding silence into which Jianyuan could fall away one day—or not. That was Jianyuan’s business, not his teacher’s.

It is wise to trust the intimate darkness that grows stronger when you consent to live on the cliff edge of birth-and-death. Every teisho holds out a measure of “I won’t say.” Teisho is not offered to explicate anything at all. Like Daowu, teisho entrusts you to your true nature more deeply than to your discursive mind.

Mu doesn’t say. It doesn’t say woman or man, clean or dirty, good or bad, alive or dead. It is too dark toward opposites, too empty and untrammelled to be divided. It can’t say alive; it can’t say dead. It can just say “you”—just as you are, all that you are.

Xuedou said, “I am going to offer you some reckless words, and I want you to listen recklessly.” Listen to the same offer in Daowu’s “I won’t say dead, I won’t say alive”—just as you might listen to it in the rain or the wind or the trees. And let it ripen you and become clear, as it will unless you fight it off. There’s a strong element of “fighting it off” even while hotly pursuing it in Jianyuan’s “*Why* won’t you say!” Daowu won’t even say that!

“I won’t say” is the act of *allowing* the inconceivable. So with a deep and impossible question like “What is *Mu*?” or “What is this?” or “Alive or dead?” or “Where do we go?” or the apparent barrier held out in “I won’t say,” we come to the point where the looking is so intent it is no longer “about” a “something” anymore. The darkness is dark, dark. The more we sit, mute and incapacitated, with a question like “Alive or dead?” the more it softens us into the singular act of surrender that lets us tumble to it.

The Blackbird Released at Midnight

After two or three days of a seven-day Zen sesshin, I once found myself in a painfully dark and arid place. Instead of expanding into the silence I was unaccountably just enduring each long, dragging moment. What had so decisively alienated me from the people, the form, the whole idea of being on retreat, that usually I loved? I simply could not bear myself, or this, or whatever was what. My heart went gray, bleak; I sat on a hillside staring down at the people apparently going about their business during a break, drinking tea, washing clothes, sitting quietly. How calmly they went about something so patently empty and ridiculous.

I longed to fashion an escape with honor. But I couldn't lift my heart even to the effort of engineering a credible story. I trudged through vast days, interring my humiliating despair into the silence.

In the early morning dark of the third or fourth day there was finally next to nothing left to do, feel, or care. Settling into my place, I dimly noticed through the dusty window a frail, emaciated spider, dead in its own web. Exactly. You couldn't put it better. And yet, I felt for the way it moved a little, helplessly reanimated by a gust of wind. I don't know if that tiny gust of fellow-feeling let me concede some burden to the plain fact of what was here. Did it somehow let me back in from standing apart?

I don't know. But when I had settled, facing the dim white wall once more, somewhere behind my turned back in smoky kerosene lamplight came the miracle beyond all knowing: *A woman sneezed*. For no reason whatsoever, that wonderfully involuntary human-animal-bodily cry—brushed with recognition of just whose characteristic early morning sneeze it was—unseated my heart in my chest and set it streaming out upon an inexhaustible sea of rich and nameless feeling. I stared into that white wall right through into an eternity, suffering astonishment bigger than joy.

And then came the final straw. *The woman blew her nose*, somewhere back there in pure mystery, and that was it. The endearingly human trumpet cry, the heavens opening. The ground of me dissolved and left me swimming in joyous grief that healed all it saw and lasted days. Everything existed just as it was in blameless and seamless perfection. It broke my heart. People broke silence

from time to time to ask, a little anxiously, “Are you all right?” I could only shake my head in silent tears. Of course I was!

Luckily I had no idea that this was a form of “realization.” It was just the very clear resuming of what had always been going on, right under my nose. It was several years before any teacher thought to test that clarity. But clear was simply natural. Tested or not, “passing” *Mu* or not, who is there in that clarity even to be concerned?

I now see the value of that fierce and unaccountable withdrawal of all the ordinary props that left me so vulnerable. Grace comes in strange forms. “Impossible” seems to be part of how a human being becomes able to fall back into fullness, through some fortunate, utterly ordinary blow to consciousness. I’m indebted forever to the ordinariness and humanity of those two most humble of sounds that delivered such fierce *coups de grâce* in the dark. The tiger’s kindness, picking me up, then carrying me away.

The red thread does not abjure our depths of despair that darkens and depletes all hope of clinging to the known or controlling what’s in play. When the mind darkens, things no longer stand distinct and apart. They lose their names—and you no longer can move to name them. Exhausted, at last you let them be. “You” are no longer able to move an inch, let alone “advance and confirm” anything at all. No longer standing at bay from anything.

And then, anything can happen, and it does, for that’s how the world rolls the stone from the tomb. As Huineng reminds us, “The nature of *all* things are open to the Buddha-work of enlightenment.” A piece of timber is dropped in a yard outside and falls right through the heart of the vulnerable listener. A small tile flies from a straw broom as someone sweeps, and goes *tok!* against the bamboo. A crow cries across Lake Biwa where a man lies in a boat. The way the floor exactly meets the wall, or the cliffs glow with inner light for a brief time just after the sun leaves them, or a dislodging sneeze succeeded by the merciless devastation of a nose blow . . .

Fortunately, *nothing* can save you when you have helplessly or willingly ceased bargaining at last. The edifice of thought constructed by oppositions and difference just falls away.

And the blackbird that flies free in such merciful dark now flies *covered in snow*. All difference healed into a singular intimacy that

finds no black, no white, nothing that can be “other.” Not only does the white upturn the blackbird’s “blackness,” but also snow presents us with the “form of formlessness.” Each snowflake is uniquely crystalline; snow flies up, down, sideways with equal ease, all of it snow, and its blanket of thick white eases all difference from form. A general amnesty of healing consciousness.

An awakened state may supplant habitual or relative mind for hours or days before fading back into all that’s here, but the view beyond the frame of *difference* is indelible and can be strengthened and explored by further experience and accurate sounding in koan upon koan. It becomes the natural resting place of the mind in meditation and reference point of ethical choice. Realization is peak experience. But realized behavior is all that humanly and humbly finally matters.

We’re drawn deeper into resonance with the human shape of emptiness, the darkness behind all things, through the continuing, productive experiment of watching the mind. It’s not especially hard to let the experience of no-self, or “just this person,” grow pale, tendentious, unlived. The beautiful struggle to be congruent is a daily one, for reality never stops flowing, and nothing ever repeats.

• *chapter eight* •

mortal



A monk asked Yunmen, “When the leaves wither and the tree is stripped bare, what is that?” He replied, “Golden Wind [the deity of Autumn] is manifesting herself.”

*Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.*

—Emily Dickinson

How strange that death and its inconsolable grief so defy mortal reason that we mainly pass them by, with a maneuver of mind executed so skillfully we hardly notice. In Australian vernacular, we “pull a swifty on ourselves” . . . almost every day.

I recently saw a beautiful exposition of the undividedness of life and death in the film of a funeral that was taking place on a marae in New Zealand for a Maori serviceman killed in Afghanistan. His body was repatriated; no Maori would lightly consent to be buried anywhere but Aotearoa. The coffin was carried to the entrance of the community marae, where it was greeted with a ferocious haka, danced by some twenty powerful men.

The reverberation of a New Zealand haka reaches ruthlessly deep into the chest; nothing is held back from its exhortation of an incontestable truth. Fierce bodily stance, gesture, grimace, and powerfully controlled breath and shout attest a complete authority in the matter at hand; a haka brooks no resistance.

At the start of the haka, the cries were “Kamate, kamate!”—“It is death. It is death!” And as the haka went on, those cries became “Kia-ora, Kia-ora!”—“It is life. It is life!” Life, it is death! Death, it is life!

Just try resisting this truth that carries you right to the brink of life-and-death (the only place any complete breath ever was drawn)! Where life meets death is exactly where knowing meets unknowing—and of course this is also the beach where the waves of grief deposit us, debris from a shipwreck. This is where we have to go to meet it.

Then everything went quiet, the coffin was lifted and carried into the marae, formally received with sung waiatas and eloquently formal accolades, then finally laid in silent state, the people gathering around it in ordinary, crying, laughing human ways. The living in company with the dead.

The one who’s now passed from reach into death’s mystery is, for one last time, strangely present, for just that time. Death has been propitiated back into the warm reach of life, the ancient amnesty has been restored, and it becomes possible for a short, shared time for the dead to be present through the presence of all who loved them. A marae is already a kind of house for a community bigger than “just family.” A death, like a birth or marriage, restores kinship in ceremony.

Storytelling broke out around the coffin as it always does, weaving the semi-random community into one garment. Any good funeral draws people nearer to the fact that we share one body—one precious body of reality, one red thread.

Mortality has been inseparable from life from the moment life invented sexual reproduction with its sharing of two sets of DNA, creating completely unique individuals—and in the same breath, individual extinction. “*Who*” gets born, together with personal death. Individual mortality is the sculptor that brought us into distinct being, carved each of the evolutionary “choices” that discovered what

tended to favor survival, and ultimately has shaped the mind that can consciously look upon and ponder death—or shy from doing so. That refusal may dampen life and blunt all contact with the astonishment of being here for the time we have, but still death comes. Life takes care of that.

Zazen is a kind of voluntary “stopping for death.” It faces us toward the ultimate bottom line of unceasing change and a self with no substance and can open the experience of the self, extinguished—transformative revelation in the midst of life. Even a small softening or falling away of the sense of “self” is its own reward. But still our literal death remains the dazzling face of the unknown we can barely look at, only dimly see into. The informing experience of no-self looks upon personal extinction with relative ease, and walks with it unhindered. And yet . . . This side of death, life wants to live.

No Coming and Going

“Coming and going is not coming and going,” said Zhaozhou, in explaining how he avoided difficulty by hiding completely in its flames. Birth and death is also empty of birth and death. Living this fully, many Zen characters of the past did not hesitate to stop right where they were for death!

Take Lingzhao, the Pang daughter, for example. The question left to consider by her extraordinary preparedness to step into death is, did she ever live apart from the empty fullness of life and death? When we utterly accept what is here, we liberate wild, native mind, mind as wide as space, and ruthlessly true to reality. And Lingzhao was deeply schooled, deeply wild.

The Pang family is both famous and rare in Zen annals as a kind of traveling family road show of living at ease everywhere in exigency, “like a leaf in the wind,” in Pang’s words. Pang (740–808) and his fiercely loyal daughter Lingzhao walked the Way without monastic support or protection, making bamboo baskets for a living, visiting temples, living on the road and in caves, while the Layman’s wife and son, who also achieved realization, seemed to stay back and subsist on the land.

The Layman famously gave over their house to become a temple, when all four family members “attained the way of true ease,” and then for good measure he piled all their household possessions onto a raft and sank it in the middle of a deep river. The Layman was no home-leaving monk but this was certainly a home-leaving that left room for no second thoughts! Layman Pang began study under Xitou and went on to study with Mazu (709–788), the other great teacher of his time, and, accompanied by his loyal daughter, moved around on constant pilgrimage testing his Chan against all comers, starting with himself. Lingzhao and he appear completely equal in clarity, all accounts balanced—except when she seems to cut even more incisively. Does she do so, here?

The story goes that the Layman was formally preparing to die while sitting upright in his meditation chair. He spoke to his extraordinary daughter, Lingzhao, saying, “Check the height of the sun for me, and let me know when it’s noon.” Probably to get her out of the way so he could slip from life without her protests. But Lingzhao told him, “The sun has already reached its zenith and there’s an eclipse!” The Layman took the bait and went to the door to look. Meanwhile she slipped into his chair, raised her hands reverently palm to palm, and passed away before him in his place. He looked back, and saw that it was he who had been eclipsed.

He *smiled* when he saw what had happened, it is said, and simply commented, “My daughter has anticipated me.” But he postponed his own passing for seven days to attend to her funeral rites, then died exactly as planned, although—thanks to Lingzhao—not *quite*. Both father and daughter appear thoroughly at home with the electrifying scent of mortality, which awaits us all when final push comes to shove. But this most filial of daughters slipped into his place, completely comfortable with what he was willingly facing. After all she’d lived wide-awake on that cliff-edge for years.

Yet this show of bravado has a kind of one-upmanship about it, consciously in play not just between them but with all of us, that leaves me doubtful. When Lingzhao upturns the natural order of child and parent mortality, she surely takes falling down together with her father “to help him” a bit too far towards zealotry.

At the natural end of their lives, in past days Zen masters often composed themselves in meditation and willed the complete dropping away of body and mind; physical death and Great Death finally fused, meeting and parting completely one. Is that why Lingzhao in healthy midlife seems able to step as freely and firmly into death as someone getting onto a bus? The timetable is usually unpublished and out of our hands but the sole destination for every life remains the same and beyond question. Yet how can she so little care for her life?

Death is an amazing matter, a completely unavoidable and yet all but unthinkable prospect from the perspective of being “me.” There will come a time when my socks will be left behind, still folded in the drawer, but I will no longer be me, let alone in any position to use them. With what mild steadiness each thing holds up this marvel, this fact. Take a look in your own sock drawer, if you doubt me, or at the coffee cup next to your own hand, that may well survive you with complete ease.

All our possessions, given away—and yet nothing ever missing. The frogs down at the pond, the smoke haze bluing the mountain, the first star just pressing through the scrim of cloud . . . there they are, all our possessions, given away already.

The very awareness that contemplates this “unthinkable” matter came out of the same nameless, seamless source we fumblingly call “impermanence” into which we all will duly “go back in,” as indigenous Australians call it. Which is marvelous enough. Yet even more marvelous is how this fact sits happily for much of the time alongside a yawning gulf in credibility toward it, as events continue to overtake us. Until death (or realization) kindly stops for us, and the huge surprise yawns open, right at our own two feet.

What if our death is not a prospect ahead of us, a date we unknowingly circle over every calendar year, but as close and constant as this breath and heartbeat? *This*. When we slow down we have a chance to stop for what is so constantly modifying even the eyes with which we are looking.

The moment before this one—where is it now? And where and how can that line—“before”—ever possibly be drawn? The bottom line is always only *here*, which when we look for it, is too wide to be

located. The next breath and the next are little more than a plan. If you want to make the gods laugh, tell them your plans, goes the old saying.

“My daughter has anticipated me,” says the old Layman. Life anticipates death in every breath. But looking even more deeply, what on earth does *not* anticipate and fully reveal this “me” and plainly has always done so, once clinging to “me” has loosened its white-knuckled grip or been thoroughly given away? “When the wind blows, the downy willow seed floats away.” What can actually fall outside the exquisite order of anticipation in a universe as ripe as this one?

Every birth, bloodied and astonishing, presents beyond doubt the vibrant, squirming, mewling birth of death—even there, the exactitude and mutuality of push coming exactly to shove. And those eyes opening for the first time to air, light, faces, sounds, and the long procession of moments that will form a sentience shaped by eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—at that moment of birth they gaze, clear and unblinking, with *no* eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. No “me.” Just this.

The whole of human civilization has been called one long footnote to the fact of death. Without awareness of death there’d be no art, music, cities, philosophy, war, poetry, or even Zen. But every animal body—including our own—is shaped by knife-keen intelligence of this. The cat, stretching, reveals it with an enviable completeness, and so does the small mouse, both midscurry and at the instant of the cat’s pounce in the front garden: If life is good, death is the complete sanction of that “good,” the no-base that everything relies on entirely. And which love relies on, in its going beyond even “love.”

When Arthur Koestler was facing imminent execution in a Spanish prison during the Civil War, he later spoke about what suddenly went through him in front of the firing squad: “I must have stood there for some minutes, entranced with a wordless awareness that ‘This is perfect—perfect’ . . . Then I was floating on my back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence. It came from nowhere and flowed nowhere. Then there was no river and no I . . .” Is this a

glimpse of Lingzhao's mind as she gathered herself completely—and

...

It is a challenge, a great and productive risk, to live each day in complete agreement with that! Yet few of us actively want to die, to lose this miraculous life, and probably none relish growing frail or feeble in body and mind. Yet we seem prepared to squander it in a deathly existence that sits "safe" just short of this reality. Right now I pick up the scent of an approaching storm, feel the light declining even through my skin, hear the birds quietly muse over a growl of thunder, rumbling closer this time and rippling through me as I hear the panicked squeal of distant car tires in the wet. *This* is beyond praise. I would not lightly miss a moment of it, and to give it away would seem sheer stupidity that beggars the mind. And so—practice offers itself. Every breath of Zazen brushes the revivifying recognition that when death is let right in there's less and less death to be found or feared.

The great Master Linji gave away "the secret of the matter" in these words: "If you want to be free to be born or die, to go or stay as one would put on or take off a garment, then you must understand right now that the person here listening to the Dharma has no form, no characteristics, no root, no beginning, no place (s)he abides, yet (s)he is vibrantly alive. All the ten thousand kinds of contrived happenings operate in a place that is in fact no place. Therefore the more you search, the farther away you get; the harder you hunt, the wider astray you go. This is what I call the secret of the matter."

At peace with time and impermanence. Life has no long or short seasons in that place.

*In the orchard of Spring
there is neither long nor short;
The heavily flowering branches grow,
each according to its length.*

That's my best memory of a Chinese poem I read as a teenager, when searching frantically for solace soon after my friend died when

he drove his motor scooter at low speed one ordinary, wet, workaday morning into the truck in front of him when it braked suddenly. Perhaps he was glancing over his shoulder at that instant to overtake or change lanes and didn't see that the truck had stopped. The car behind contained a doctor who rushed to give medical aid in the grinding peak-hour traffic. But this dear and funny irreplaceable human being, just twenty-two years old, was already dead. Gone back in. No longer here. Impossible.

My teenage heart protested violently. But the inexplicable was instantly complete and implacably confirmed from every direction. Even to the point where I was crossing a busy road on my way to university, some weeks later, and recognized his car, approaching the pedestrian crossing. His very car, and in that huge stream of traffic, it stopped for me to cross. And a perfect stranger was driving it.

The words of that ancient Chinese verse gave my grieving—for our mortality, my own as much as his—a little air to breathe. I didn't understand why the poem “made sense” of the impossible and the senseless, but it did. And delivered my first half-adult glimpse of the mystery of “just ourselves /And immortality.”

Later I might say about it that the length of a life is beside the point of our encounter with mortality. How long is any life, apart from too short, and exactly its length, and no-length at all in every moment? But then it was just a matter of becoming more able to concede that “death,” suddenly so close and personal, was even humanly possible.

Arising and Vanishing

Jianyuan might have been only about eighteen himself when he accompanied Daowu to that funeral. He was certainly young—young enough to demand to know, to have it be right, to knock his old teacher to the ground with his impassioned demand, which feels to have grown from a similar need to breathe some reconciliation into the space where we must live, where it seems at first that alive and dead cannot both “be.”

Likewise, Hakuin was young and fervent when he learned of how the great Yantou (828–887), some eight centuries before him, had lived and died—and like Jianyuan, found himself unable to be reconciled.

Yantou lived through the intense ninth-century Tang dynasty persecution of Buddhism by a fanatical Daoist emperor, and the precipitous collapse of public order that followed the fall of the dynasty. When the monks in his monastery heard that armed bandits were about to attack, they fled, leaving just Yantou inside, seated alone in meditation. The bandits ransacked the place but found nothing left of value and, in a fury, ran Yantou through with a sword, right as he sat there in meditation. As he died, he gave a great shout that was said to have deafened people for three miles and been audible for ten.

Whose arising and vanishing was that vital, mortal, awakening roar? “It is done. Don’t waste this life!” No shout of defeat, but a full and complete response to the vast tragedy of his time—and only for our benefit. Where’s the great awakening shout now that we need to speak to us and through us? Must it take everything we so love about this one earth and life to be torn away to the bareness of grief and loss, before we can see the value of holding on to nothing and letting everything in, blessing the earth by coming into full accord with it?

The teenaged Hakuin heard this story of Yantou’s death and despaired. If such a truly great master could come to such a terrible end, what chance did an ordinary monk like him have? A few years later, he hid himself away inside a temple shrine in order to plunge deeply into resolving Mu, working on it ceaselessly by day and night.

Around midnight on the seventh or eighth day, the muffled boom of the temple bell reached through him unawares, and with it the great shout of Yantou echoed through him, “clear,” he said, “of even the finest dust.” He ran out shouting, “Old Yantou is alive and well!” His teacher listened to his joy but would not say, urging him to let it go deeper still; and a little while later, it did. Hakuin, deep in meditation, clumsily knocked over an earthenware pot on the front steps of a house as he wandered down a street, and it shattered into pieces. This brought down upon him the wrath of a furious woman,

who beat him with her broom and knocked him half-unconscious to the ground, where the final clarity rushed to meet him. His famous calligraphy of a broom, inscribed with the words “the broom that swept away my trash enlightenment” marks the spot of his fortunate Great Death.

Yantou’s shout that awoke him eight centuries later seemed to break through Hakuin unimpeded one last time. On December 11, 1768, it is reported that he awoke from a sound sleep, gave a great shout, rolled over on his right side, and died. His final, treasured calligraphy featured the character *Midst*: “Meditation in the midst of action is a billion times superior to meditation in stillness” are the words he wrote on it.

The power of Yantou’s shout to undo the seal of life and death was heard more than once in his own lifetime, actually. In Case 43 of the *Book of Serenity*, Luoshan asked Yantou, “When arising and vanishing go on unceasingly, what then?”

Yantou gave a great shout that swept clean all philosophical or technical inquiry in the monk, and then he asked a wonderful question, “Whose arising and vanishing is it?” Who is this who is, and who dies? And do they? Who owns even your next breath in?

That earthshaking shout of Yantou—if you hear it, it is you. So who can own it? That shout sweeps away owning, arising and vanishing, and any last attachment to “me.” But long before the question is asked, it is already answered in the way one breath—or one thought, one cloud, one human being—vanishes as another arises. Who can own the empty flow? And who can possibly offer something so limiting as liking or dislike to the marvelous flow of arisings? Hatching, birth, blossoming, new things, exciting change, unexpected discoveries . . . Easy to love. It’s the vanishings that seem to temper us. Especially the final vanishing we all face into. Who is ready to own that one? And what will we do with it, while we still have time?

And yet opens the way. We’re empty *and* entirely human, and this wants no transcending.

Falling Flowers

There's a radiant phrase encompassing this, traditionally used in the funeral ceremony for monks and nuns: *I went out following the scented grasses, I came back following the falling flowers.* The whole flow of a human life is here—everything given, everything also given back, and natural grief turned to natural praise. There is poignancy within acceptance, acceptance nudging poignancy, the intoxicating fragrance of love and attachment emanating from those things and beings that are so dear to us, and we stride out young, spirited, loving even the incessant change that brings so many new things, so many scented grasses, flooding into mind and senses. Scented grasses—full of promise, and also short-lived, yielding their heavy seed heads, yellowing to the winter chill. And falling flowers—even the most delicately beautiful creations of time fall to earth. In both there is (with equal fragrance) the deep melancholy of looking toward death and relinquishing one by one all beloved things. But falling flowers has the perspective of deeper experience, of knowing that what we most deeply love—the people, the places, the capacities of our lives—all yield to the impermanence that bring severance and loss. Including the final loss—our life itself.

The words imply a state of being at ease everywhere like a leaf in the spring wind. Each moment is our birth, each moment also our death; this is an open secret, everywhere apparent in every moment, lived by us whether we lean into realizing it or not. The falling flowers—the continual evidence that nothing lasts—this has an equally dear, human offer inside it, which is concordance with the passing-through-ness of all things, including this painstakingly composed sense of a separate self that feels to be at risk.

Allow a Tasmanian Zen student and poet, Ron Moss, to explain scented grasses:

*children's laughter
a weekend father
with sticks in his hair*

And falling flowers?

*fresh grave
the rain goes deeper
into the earth*

And did you notice—you may freely swap them over without harm to either? Scented grasses full of falling flowers.

When the head of our university department was dying from a brain tumor, those of us who loved him rostered ourselves on to help with his care. Someone always had to be with him since he could experience fits at any time of day or night. He'd been an accomplished philosopher, always forensically reasoning his way to a carefully measured grasp of everything of importance. Now, that did not work so well, and the unmistakable love he finally let himself recognize and accept in his days of dying became the revelation. He grew soft in our presence, amazed with himself in this state. Finally he was in a hospice, and the last few hours I saw him alive were already the time of coma, rasping breath.

Alone with him for a time in the hospice room, holding his hand, breathing together with his harsh uneven breaths, I glanced down and saw his slippers, carefully placed as a lined-up pair next to the skirting board. They were still very new, and possibly the finest pair of slippers in Sydney, the luxurious lamb's wool lining barely showing the impress of a foot. Those slippers were the full measure of love and grief, scented grasses full of falling flowers—never to be worn in by him. Hospitals must be full of gifts like these, gifts of helpless love, now stranded by death.

He died, just a few hours later, gone to where you no longer need slippers.

What?

There's a case that's oddly playful (given its theme and context) offered by Yuanwu in his commentary to "Daowu's Condolence Call"—"Seven Sisters in the Forest of Corpses." Seven wise sisters planned an outing. All over the world, seven sisters is always a very interesting start to any story, I've noticed. One of the seven said,

“Sisters, instead of going to a park to enjoy the spring flowers, let’s go together to see the charnel grounds” (sometimes translated as “the forest of corpses.”) The others said, “That place is full of decaying corpses, what is such a place good for?” The first women replied, “Hmmm, let’s just go, very good things are there.” Strange.

When they arrived, one of them pointed to a corpse and said, “There is a person’s body. Where has the person gone?” Now everyone who has ever been with a dead body has felt that acute question rise in their chest. Where have they *gone*? Clearly not here, leaving just their powerful resemblance, yet also changed, slowly and yet without relent becoming ever more subtly unfamiliar. “Where has the person *gone*?” is the cry.

“*What!?*” another cries out, perhaps involuntarily. Sometimes it’s like that. A question that rises out of pure exigency draws a response as immediate and equally free of supposition. And there’s the beauty of its immediacy: Nothing can be attached to “*What!?*”—no forethought, no afterthought, the expostulation itself is life-and-death completely alive with nothing in the way.

“*What, what!?*” and with this, not only the one who cried out but all seven sisters immediately “realized *the tolerance of birthlessness*”! I love the craziness of things when they are suddenly set right way up. Birthlessness, not mortality, is that which we slowly draw into more complete tolerance, acceptability! Setting out to picnic in a testing tolerance of mortality, the seven sisters stumble through “*What!*” right past themselves into tolerance of the scandalous, consoling fact of the Unborn.

We may laugh at the extravagance of such a bulk awakening—a little like a Moonie mass wedding in feel—and yet there’s something true here, we do wise each other up in contagious ways and get enlightened together. And this “*What!*” that comes from nowhere and no one is replete, holding yes and no entirely equal, with coming and going and no coming and going now impossible to wrench apart. Everything is present, life-and-death no longer opposed or unopposed but simple and seamless, a perfect fit in that question cried out, and a perfect fit in that expelled breath: “*What!?*”

Just as they finally were for Jianyuan, when Shishuang spoke Daowu’s infinitely kind words, “I won’t say.” Sometimes a thrown

word can simply clear every barrier and shatter us in the best possible way—granting the Great Death where we tolerate living unbounded for the first time.

In a hundred years, all of us will be gone and barely remembered; in a way, we practice this forgetting of the self in Zazen, not as a threat, but rich offer. We relinquish ourselves as an act of trust, founded on the gift of life itself, its provenance forever mysterious. And discover ourselves clear in all things, in the very act of self-forgetting.

Who is there left to say anything, about such a matter as this? Love disappears here, too, into the fact itself, with no outside to it. In one of Robert Aitken's *Zen Master Raven* cases, Mole asks her old teacher, "Why don't we ever talk about love in our discussions?" Raven simply asked her, "What would you like to say about love?" Mole stared back at Raven, and Raven was silent. Love became complete. *This* has no words to explain.

So the dark fact of mortality itself can be the flint from which life and realization are struck and can blaze. Impermanence and death are bound into every twist of the red thread, which signals *life!* Here is human being! Here is unbreakable connection! Exactly where here is death! Does this begin to reveal the promise that fruitfulness, ripeness, and decay, all of the melancholy marvel of ceaseless change that we call life-and-death, brings forth at every moment?

Opening Flower

I had a student who began to meditate only when he knew his death was not far off, just months perhaps, though he could not possibly admit that yet in words. He told me, "I really want to learn to meditate. I have to get some peace." He was living his dying deeply afraid of death, eking life out in exquisitely managed agonizing pain, deathly afraid of dying. Close to the end, ambushed by reality, he at last asked me in despair, "I can't stay here and I can't let go! What can I do?" I said, "I have to go home for a few hours. Do you think you could try, even just for one brief moment, to turn in the direction of what you think your death is, while I'm gone? And when I come back, tell me what you saw?"

When I returned, he was changed, his face streaming with silent tears—of joy, and not self-pity. I said, “So, you looked.”

“Yes,” he said.

“What did you see?”

He pointed to the vase of orange zinnias, brilliant as van Gogh’s sunflowers, directly in front of him on his tray table. “It was like that flower there, opening right in my face.” And a moment later, “No, that’s not it. *I* was that flower. *I* was the flower opening right from my face.” And he was able to let himself die a few days after that.

But not before he had his two dearest friends bring his favorite two kinds of outrageously smelly cheese and an excellent bottle of red wine, which they all relished as they listened to the Bach cantata he most loved—having the party of his life. And as a tiny footnote to that story, those two who tended him so closely through his minutely resisted journey to the other side of Daowu’s “I won’t say dead, I won’t say alive,” spending so much time face-to-face with each other across their friend’s death-bed, fell in love.

Openings are like that. We all fall into them.

Meeting

Finally, the profound verse written by Nyogen Senaki (1876–1958) for the case collected in *The Iron Flute*, “Where can we meet after death?” The iron flute has no holes; it is a bit like Zazen that way, a bit like Mu, a bit like reality: It has no holes in it—yet you play every tune in the universe on a flute with no holes.

The case, an interesting encounter between Daowu and Yunyan when Daowu was lying ill, is surpassed by Nyogen’s verse, which faces directly into the timeless peace and reunion that’s wide open to us at every point in our brief time in a wild universe:

*True friendship transcends intimacy and alienation;
Between meeting and not meeting there is no difference.
On the old plum tree, fully blossomed,
The southern branch owns the whole spring,
Northern branch owns the whole spring.*

True friendship in the end is intimacy with ourselves, which is intimacy with the other, in every form. The resolving of “meeting and not meeting,” of life with death, and of life and death with *no* life and *no* death. True meeting transcends all that would divide us. Between meeting and not meeting this matter there is actually *no difference*—a matter wide enough to investigate all your life.

“The old plum tree, fully blossomed.” Do you know that old tree yet? Amazed by the marvel of all its infinitely varied branches? The man who opened like a brilliant orange flower facing the huge sun of his own death finally saw the infinite branches clearly *and* knew from whom they branch, just in time, in his last few days of life. That’s a complete lifetime by the way. You can know it now, in any moment, because it has always been you—the old plum tree, fully blossomed. Ancient—but the blossoming is always now.

On the old plum tree, fully blossomed, the southern branch owns the whole spring, the northern branch owns the whole spring. This goes far beyond its passing allusion to the Northern and Southern schools of Zen and their contest over sudden or gradual realization. Sudden realization *is* gradual in its illumination of the whole life; gradual illumination *is* sudden at every point; and besides, every breath, every step’s the entire matter.

But the generous, eternally open point here is this: The heavily flowering branches of all that comes forth in the infinite spring have no north or south, no long or short. Our mortal life that must duly end owns the whole spring, and the unborn one with no beginning or end owns the whole spring. Even every blossom, every petal, *is* the whole spring.

Even that final, rasping outbreath—the whole spring.

• *chapter nine* •

laughter



*If you have time to chatter, read books.
If you have time to read,
Walk into mountain, desert and ocean.
If you have time to walk,
Sing songs and dance.
If you have time to dance,
Sit quietly,
You happy lucky idiot!*

—Nanao Sakaki

It is recounted that Shunryu Suzuki was walking out of the zendo once to meet the person who was waiting to give him a ride to Los Altos. A woman at the top of the steps called out to the driver, “You be careful now. We don’t want to lose our treasure!” Suzuki turned and clapped his two hands together very loudly, calling out “No more!”—then threw his head back laughing, still cackling as the car drove off.

Car accident, bang, gone! Great laughter. That great laughter of Suzuki confirms that to be alive is pure bounty, pure precariousness, only given moment by moment and only really given if really received, with empty hands. When we cling to it, we lose it, and time

—tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock—is our enemy. But when we give it away freely, life is one extraordinary unceasing gift. And we are the very body of time, unfolding its mystery as ourselves, dwelling nowhere, bringing forth that mind. It comes from nowhere and is inseparable from the wind, the stars and the crickets.

Yamada Koun said, “There’s no greater service we can do on this earth than to let the ego diminish in zazen, so that the infinite life within us has a chance to take over.” Suzuki’s laughter is the self utterly delighted in its relative diminishment. It was Thomas Hobbes (of all people) who found laughter to be “our sudden glory.” Life might be short, nasty, and brutish in his eyes, but the expansive, unbounded eruption of non-malicious laughter drops the weight of self-importance for a glorious moment and restores the open sky. Laughter is as natural as waking up; like tears, it begins to dissolve the boundary called me/you and roll away the stone of the tomb we make of our selves.

The temple of the ferociously gifted Zen Master Hakuin was situated near Mount Fuji with many poor, hardworking peasants as near neighbors, and Hakuin broke custom to welcome them on equal footing with his monks, if they came to attend talks or chat with him. Many were devotees of Pure Land Buddhism, with a practice of *nembutsu*—the act of constantly mentally repeating the name of Amida Buddha as the way to ensure rebirth in the radiant Pure Land of no suffering.

An old woman, known in the records simply as “the station lady,” heard Hakuin give teisho in which he said, “Your mind is the Pure Land, and your body is Amida Buddha. When Amida Buddha appears, mountains, rivers, forests, and fields all radiate a great light. If you want to understand, look into your own heart.” The old woman took this scandalous suggestion—Amida Buddha; it’s *you!*—deeply to heart, saying “This is not so hard!” and pondered it day and night as she went about her business. I love the way she bravely plunges in, right in the midst of her endless chores.

One day as she was washing a pot after breakfast, great light shattered her mind. She dropped the pot and ran to meet Hakuin, laughing hard and shouting out, “Amida Buddha filled my whole

body! Mountains, rivers, forests and fields are all shining with light. How wonderful!”

“What are you talking about!” Hakuin asked, delighted. “Does the light shine out of your arse-hole?”

Small as she was, she gave him a huge push, saying, “Hah! I can see *you’re* not enlightened yet!” She took his richly coarse and approving testing nudge and more than nudged him back! Then they both fell about laughing, getting enlightened thoroughly together.

The great laughter that erupts from time to time in deeply serious cases in the Zen literature is the merciful abyss into which conceptual thought plummets and vanishes, leaving the infinite life to take over for a revelatory moment or three. In Case 46 of the *Book of Serenity*, Deshan Yuanming (908–987) addressed his assembly, and said, “Extinguish every conceptual thought, and all Buddhas in the three worlds will be unable to open their mouths (literally, their mouths or tongues will be stuck to the wall).”

He continued, “But there is a person who will give a great laugh. If you can recognize that fellow, you will have accomplished your study.”

Have you met that person yet, who can do nothing but give the great, generous laugh? The scouring laughter of Zen sweeps away spiritual clutter and restores us fully to the hazy moon of our mixed, impure human condition, right alongside the serious playfulness of the very idea of a practice—that which roams and experiments freely in the open world of birth-and-death.

It’s a kind of childhood mood, this laughter state of mind. You’ve quit the confines of something narrow, offered yourself to ants, water flow, curiosity, the great empty sky. You’ve placed yourself in easy reach of the marvelous ordinary—the wonders of the more ordinary and deeply consoling face of life that begins to appear exactly as we give away resistance. And there’s just pure play left as what we “do.”

Zen gives us back a strong taste of that childhood mode of openness, savored now with adult depth, and poignancy. Zazen taken seriously makes it possible to take our selves very, very lightly—that’s its beauty. Like all play, it’s entirely serious, and therefore entirely approachable with humor and fun. Though there may be giggling, interrupt a children’s game and you’ll quickly learn the high

seriousness of play. But push yourself hard toward “something special” in your practice, and you’ll find how easily you can mark time for years in an earnest netherworld, a mere facsimile of the real nature of letting go.

Ordinary

Ordinary is a subtle word in Zen. The expression *ordinary mind* comes up strongly in Case 19 of *The Gateless Barrier*, Nanquan’s “Ordinary Mind is the Dao,” which scrutinizes the demanding difference between pushing or promoting yourself toward some kind of special state or attainment, and directly embodying what is already completely on offer.

In this case, a young Zhaozhou asks his teacher Nanquan (748–835), “What is the Dao?” implying “How should I realize the matter, how should I proceed?” As Buddhism came to China, “the Dao” rapidly and naturally became interchangeable with Buddha Nature, essential nature, or original self. *Dao* remains a word that, like *Mu*, remains unattainable, being possible only to embody. It is sometimes translated as “the Way.” Which leaves it equally beyond explanation even as we walk it. Yet walking it makes it very clear.

Nanquan replies, “Ordinary mind is the Dao.” Ordinary mind itself is “how to proceed.” But still caught in his mind of having somewhere *else* to get to, Zhaozhou asked, “Should I try to direct myself toward it, or not?” Nanquan said, “If you try to direct yourself, you deviate.” Can you direct yourself to where you are? But if what you seek is where and what you already are, then how do you proceed in practice? So Zhaozhou persists. “How can I know the Dao if I don’t direct myself?” In reply, Nanquan comprehensively wipes away trying.

“The Dao is not subject to knowing or not knowing, attaining or not attaining. Knowing is delusion, and not knowing in the ordinary sense is blankness. If you truly reach the genuine Dao, you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space. How can this be discussed at the level of attainment and not attaining, affirmation and negation?” Zhaozhou found these words very helpful in touching the genuine Dao.

To truly let being *be*, moment by moment you must firmly let yourself give way over and over and recover the poise of resting in circumstances, just as you are, minus your “knowing.” That’s a deeply absorbed act of *allowing*, or “Great Doubt,” requiring your whole mind and heart to remain with it. Linji’s “in your face” presentation of Great Doubt is “Whatever confronts you, don’t believe it!” Then he relents, and lets Great Effort and Great Faith come to the party as he continues, “Whatever arises, shine your light upon it. Have confidence in the light that is always working inside you.” These are instructions for a life of deeply serious, playful engagement with mind, meeting point to point with the real.

Which resolves into the most everyday yet accomplished marvel of “ordinary mind” that prospers in every circumstance, as Wumen’s exquisitely simple verse makes plain:

*Spring comes with flowers, autumn with the moon,
Summer with breeze, winter with snow.
When idle concerns don’t hang in your mind,
That is your best season.*

The Chinese compound character that gives us *ordinary*, in Nanquan’s “ordinary mind,” means “usual” and “everyday” but has its root in a sense of “constant” and “eternal.” So this is mind in its most natural, original, and resolved state. Because there is nothing to attain, it is the natural mind we already possess that practice lays bare. But let no one doubt the depth of accomplished “play” happening at this level.

Fooling About

The famously humble mendicant Zen monk Ryokan (1758–1831) is a kind of intimately fleshed-out Japanese patron saint of ordinary mind, though he’d laugh his head off at such praise.

Although he completed training with a fine teacher who formally recognized him as his dharma heir, Ryokan refused a place in any religious institution. He was a scholar of the Lotus Sutra and

Vimalakirti Sutra and a nationally loved and revered master calligrapher. He was also the regular playmate of all the local village children, regarding this as an important part of any day. He knew the demanding and supreme art of cheerfulness in a life that ensured he endured loneliness, hunger, and privation. He was in all of this a generous, faithful, and curious master of himself. And though a poet and calligrapher of great note, he vigorously declared that he couldn't stand the poetry of poets, or the calligraphy of calligraphers.

You could say he wandered the hills of ordinary mind for the forty years from the time he left the monastery to the time he died. Toward the end he did settle in a small hermitage attached to a monastery but that was because he physically could no longer maintain the routines of a wandering life. Being a guest of reality is a routine as various and free as the clouds in the open sky, and as subject to attrition as moraine in the mouth of a glacier.

*Who was it said "Names are the guests of reality"?
These words have come down to us from ancient times,
But even if people know that names aren't real,
They don't see reality itself has no root.
Names, reality . . . both are beside the point.
Just naturally find joy in the ever-changing flow.*

And he let the valley stream show how it's done, this serious ease found in "not directing yourself" toward a single thing, which is the mark of an unflinching respect for the flow.

For Ryokan, as we saw earlier, the tutelary protector of such an open response was Never-Despising-Anyone—so much of his life one continuous bow to the bodhisattva he loved best in the Lotus Sutra. The undertaking of never despising anyone may be pretty demanding practice, but its beauty is that it avoids judging and replaces that with being curious and friendly instead toward the other. That crazy bodhisattva of Never-Despising-Anyone bowed to all comers, even people who grew abusive. Another story in the Lotus Sutra tells of the forgotten jewel secretly sewn into everyone's robes by someone who has loved them, so we always have with us

the treasure to fall back on when hard times come to visit. Every bow of Never-Despising-Anyone to you or me simply urged us to find the jewel we have always possessed, if unwittingly, wherever we are. Do you know that jewel yet?

A serious and telling playfulness can be found in this, as in much of the life and doings of Ryokan—though in the story, Never-Despising-Anyone more commonly was met with blows and cruel laughter than with a deep bow in return. A Zen student—an attorney in Oakland, California—spoke of the time he had to pass a black man in the street who was impartially shouting random abuse at every passer-by, calling everyone by the forbidden word, *Nigger*. When he drew abreast with the man and received the blast, he simply said, “Thank you.” The crazed state of things was accepted respectfully and passed back as sanity, an exchange immediately recognized by the black man, who smiled. Everything was set in its right place, equal and open. The black man let him go past, then resumed his wild business.

Ryokan was able to bow deeply to hard times—he had to be, with a life that included frostbite, hunger, scant possessions. He also suffered illness at times and a completely human measure of loneliness, but he had the ability to see suffering not as something that afflicted him or consumed his mind, but just as ordinary, offering no personally directed insult or intent. Ordinary mind remains open to suffering, while balancing that in remaining interested and alert to the feelings and needs of others. Holding his suffering lightly, though realistically, he could allow the suffering of others and hold that, too.

But above all, this lovely practiced fool made very plain how playful ordinary mind is—how original and stream-like in the inventive way it flows around whatever obstacle it meets. And like a child, imaginative, curious. There are dozens of stories in the loving accounts kept by the people who encountered him that show his talent for playing with children. He made lists of what he held to be Essential Things because he was always leaving whatever he had behind in people’s places. The list *a/ways* included a cloth ball to play with whenever children appeared. Also leg guards, elbow guards, things that helped you move through rough terrain, his staff,

of course his bowl, and if he was lucky some sort of warm cloak or raincoat.

And the list would always end with the admonishment, essential to all lists: “Remember this list, or you will really get into trouble.” A great fool (like any of us) is always living close to trouble—trouble is the very medium of our human artistry, surely. Trouble: Now you see it, now you can find nothing to call astray! Ryokan accepted all offers, even hardship and trouble, living out a pure, creative spirit of play.

Children loved his thoroughly exploitable availability to them. In one game they would call out, “Ryokan, one kan!” and he would tilt back a bit as if in great surprise, and then would come “Two kan!” and he’d obligingly tilt just a little further back; “Three kan!”—the tilt would grow more thrillingly precipitous; and so they would count him down, merciless and laughing, until he toppled backward to the ground. Then they would set about thoroughly burying him as though he were dead. Ryokan would hold his breath to the point where they grew genuinely worried. Finally, when tears were coming and concern beginning to reach a satisfying pitch, he’d burst from his grave.

Dead, but completely alive!

He also played hide-and-seek tirelessly with them. One time they abandoned the game, carelessly forgetting him when their mothers called them in from the dark for supper, when it’d been his turn to go off to hide. Very late that evening, a woman went to fetch something from her barn and was startled to find Ryokan still crouching down in the dark behind something in one corner. He put his finger to his lips and whispered, “Shhhhhhhh! Or the children will find me!”

Ryokan’s playfulness expresses the dreamlike, imaginative, poetic, and ever-curious nature of the ability to depend on unknowing, the pure form of spirited *play* inside it:

*Everyone eats rice,
No one knows why.
When I say this now,
People laugh at me.
They laugh, that’s just fine;*

*Laughing is something I like too.
Laughing and laughing, we won't stop;
We welcome Maitreya here and now!*

Maitreya is the Buddha still to be born, the Buddha always arising, always waking up. Possibly always laughing, too. Certainly laughing with Ryokan at the idea of ever being other than here and now. It's also the impartial friendliness of which the Buddha spoke—the essence of the empty begging bowl, accepting what is offered and received. Thereby holding firm to the impartiality of the dharma, its intrinsically friendly willingness to discover what is rather than decide what should be. Just moving exactly together with *this*, there's the highest form of accomplishment.

One time he discovered bamboo had started pushing up through the floorboards of his verandah. He grew very concerned that as it grew taller in time it would get to the thatched roof and experience problems forcing its way through, so he burnt holes in the thatch for it. Unfortunately, the whole roof caught fire in the process, so Ryokan held a funeral ceremony for the roof. He then fashioned a new decking system with unusual sliding floorboards that could be eased aside as new bamboo shoots arrived needing headway, and dispensed with having any roof at all—perfect solution!

One of the several times his tiny hut was broken into and ransacked, all Ryokan had left was the bed mat on which he was sleeping. Waking to sense the presence of the thief, he thought, "Poor bastard, after all his trouble he's not going to get much here." So he pretended to roll over in his sleep to make the bed mat more available, and it was duly eased away from under him and taken by the thief. And of course there is the story everyone knows, about returning home to find a thief standing looking disappointed by the stripped-bare hut of Ryokan, offering nothing to steal; feeling sorry for the thief, he stripped off his robe and gave it to the thief, who fled, leaving Ryokan shivering on his bed, feeling even more sorry for the thief, who'd forgotten to take the moonlight lying thick upon the windowsill.

Within all this he was soundly and generously at rest in circumstances—like keeping one leg stuck out of his covers for the

mosquitos, since they needed to live, too—which sums up so much of this hard, leisurely, and radically shared life. He clearly took seriously the poem given him by his own teacher when he was leaving the temple forever, at the age of thirty-two:

*Ryokan, how nice to be like a fool;
Then one's day is grand beyond measure.
Free and easy, letting things take their course,
Who can fathom it?
I therefore entrust to you this staff of wild wisteria.
Wherever you can lean it against a wall,
Let it bring peace on a noontime nap.*

Ryokan kept his mysteriously shaped wisteria staff all of his forty years of wandering, “walking along” with its support, “following the drifting dream to its source,” as one poem put it. He lived a life replete with nowhere to go and nothing to attain, for after all, as Zhaozhou discovered, where is there to go to get all that we possess? Wherever we go, there we are, and wherever we get to, still there never was anywhere to be but here. To push against this, “we deviate.” To *not* push against it, that’s a lifelong practiced ease.

His direct evocation of this subtle, relaxed, and deeply accomplished ordinary mind, which can only be discovered:

*All day long I read the wordless scriptures,
At night I practice no-practice meditation.
On the riverbank a bush warbler sings in the weeping
willow.
In the sleeping village a dog bays at the moon.
Nothing troubles the free flow of my feelings—
But how can this mind be passed on?*

How will you and I inherit this rich legacy? Or perhaps more searchingly, what trivia will we let steal our lives so thoroughly that we fail to see the moonlight in the window, and let ourselves be stolen away, again and again.

This ordinary mind is *just* accepting (and in accepting, revealing) the gift that is always on offer and has no limit. This mind is at home in all its seasons. When you are at home you know how to find your way about in the dark without bumping into things, and you can welcome others. Ryokan brings to mind the opening lines of Bob O'Hearn's free-form version of the "Shodoka: Song of Freedom": "Here comes Mr. Natural, / at ease as you please, / walking the talk by keeping quiet / and letting his feet do the speaking. / Not running toward or away, / just walking on."

As Zhaozhou said, "When the straw sandals wear out, you just walk on." Practice falls away from "practice" and vanishes into something simply natural, and even as this life runs toward its end, the great freedom still is that you *just walk on*. When Ryokan passed away in January 1831, a final poem was found among his things. Listen to how delicately it echoes Wumen's beautiful verse to "Nanquan's Ordinary Mind":

*What will remain as my legacy?
Flowers in the spring;
The cuckoo in summer;
And the crimson leaves of autumn.*

And the great shouts, the laughter, the cries of grief, the high-pitched burble of children's play, the hum of contented voices half drowsy in autumn sunlight . . . All the falling flowers of human being.

• *chapter ten* •

hands and eyes



All over the body are hands and eyes.

—Zen Master Yunyan

Keizan Jokin was the successor of Zen Master Dogen (1200–1253) who brought Dogen’s dharma out of monastic seclusion and into the hands of ordinary people, including peasants and women, even bestowing dharma succession upon the brilliant nun Ekyu. His verse for Case 37 of the *Transmission of the Light* evokes the mystery of a human life making its way in emptiness:

*A solitary boat is making its way
without oars in the dim moonlight;
Turning the head, one can see motionless
waterweed on the old bank.*

Your true self has no name and also *your* name. The solitary boat of this life makes its way in the flow with the no-oars of realization; emptiness has no hands and eyes and so needs ours. When we turn to consciously regard it—the beautiful, daily struggle or practice of becoming a little more *like this*—we see eternity (the old bank, the waterweed) completely undisturbed by our passage toward or wake

that follows realization. Moving boat, and old bank in its eternal stillness. With what delicate poignancy Keizan lets the one slip through the other unhindered, both discerned in the dim moonlight of human clarity.

Zen Master Bassui (1327–1357) said of the Unborn, that core of us that knows no change within a world of change: “It was not born with this body, it does not die with its extinction, it is not male, it is not female, it is not good or bad. It is beyond all comparisons and thus we call it Buddha Nature, that which lies beyond all limitations, dividedness, comparison.” And from this comes the assurance of Guanyin, the deeply at ease embodiment of our own portion of universal compassion, in whose comportment we recognize the chord of compassionate responsiveness that cannot *not* hear the cries of the world.

The limitless body that’s sometimes called “great body” is identical with this *unborn* core of all that is, while having human hands and eyes and sometimes pretty dirty feet, as well as human tides of life and feeling flowing through it. Mortal and Unborn, as with life and death, meet and touch in every step we take. Like children playing skip-rope in sunlight—feet and shadow, touching, touching, then again touching. And like the way we come into being on the in breath and give ourselves away on every out breath. Our very breath never stops interweaving birth and death. We are woven of birth and death. Life and death touching, touching and then touching is the only way there is to walk, skip, and dance along the path.

The bodhisattva of universal compassion—Avalokitesvara, Guanyin, Kannon—is sometimes depicted in the pose of “royal ease”: one arm extended and resting gracefully on one knee raised from her seated posture. But other times she has eight or more arms radiating from each of her shoulders, implying unlimited readiness to hear, see, and respond to distress in the world, with the clear-eyed, intuitive immediacy the Diamond Sutra calls “non-thinking.”

Looking closely, you find the palm of each open hand is engraved with an open eye. Insight into emptiness and the action of compassion arise together in fitting response to just what is needed—inseparable. This radiant availability and good fit with

circumstances is the healing antidote to all aloofness, inertia, indifference, denial, distraction, or dissociation from real pain.

We sit to realize what it means to be human. Actually, any Buddha image is in essence an equals sign, clearly establishing that “You’re a human being. You, too, can realize fully if you really care and commit to this deeply enough.” Buddha figures exist not to be worshipped or propitiated but to remind how it isn’t so good to go around speaking and acting half asleep, bumping into things as if we’re not a good fit here. That when we awaken we find nothing that can really bump into anything else.

Eight-Tenths of the Answer

In Case 89 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, Yunyan is once more sharing dharma conversation with his fellow monk, Daowu, when he asks: “How does the Bodhisattva Guanyin use all those many hands and eyes?”

Daowu gives one of the most tender and low-lit replies in the annals of Zen: “It is like someone in the middle of the night reaching behind her head for a pillow.” So close to no thought at all, the lovely sense of just doing the most natural thing in the world to restore ease.

Daowu wonders how Yunyan sees it. “How about you, how do you understand it?” Yunyan offers an intimately human glimpse of that body of reality—that cannot possibly leave out this very body—and how naturally it manifests responsive connectedness. “All over the body are hands and eyes.”

They talk on a little, Daowu suggesting playfully, “That’s well-expressed but only eight-tenths of the answer.” I think of a child I once saw allowed to play with a retractable tape measure in a carpentry workshop when school holidays had complicated life for his hardworking father. The boy vigorously subjected all kinds of things, large and small, to measurement, each time finding excitedly, “Five! It’s five!” And each time, his father approved with lovely seriousness. “Yep, five it is.”

Yunyan is at ease with this—it’s all five, anyway—and plays back: “How about you, elder brother?” “Throughout the body, hands and

eyes,” says Daowu, implying—teasingly?—that we need a more complete summation.

But can it be more complete? All over the body are hands and eyes, throughout the body, hands and eyes. No inside, no outside, no way to measure or gauge this body. And no way to limit or hold back the response of hands and eyes.

If all over this very body of awakening, and the entire, empty body of form—are hands and eyes, if that is what compassion might be, is this a glimpse of the fleshed-out, actualized, live, inhabited body of awakening? From the heart of non-thinking, we meet the unexpected directly—or as the Diamond Sutra puts it, “Dwelling nowhere, [we] bring forth that mind.”

This mind is fresh and fitting, because as Linji tells us, “When you know who you are, then you can be of some use.” That knowing of course is always fresh with unknowing.

When the response is as natural and unpremeditated as Daowu’s words imply—“Like someone in the middle of the night reaching behind her head for a pillow,” self dropped away without stirring into thought to act so completely appropriately—then everything in the world is made a little more comfortable and at ease. This is what the bodhisattva of compassion does with the precision and effortless of her many hundreds of thousands of hands and eyes. Which are in consonance with events, to the point of *doing* next to nothing at all.

Consider your own hands closely. How strange they are, have you noticed? They move like this and then like this, with no effort of thought carrying out this marvelous activity. They’re formed with equal effortless aplomb on the same skeletal life blueprint that gives fins to sea mammals, paws and clawed feet to land creatures, and are scarred and shaped particularly by your life, the way you hold a pen, the kind of work you do, the injuries, arthritis, piano-playing . . .

Contemplate the many hands that have worked to form and house your life, beginning with the fact that you were born into a pair of human hands. Hands received you, cradled, touched, and soothed you, they were entirely necessary and enough at that moment. With just an ordinary measure of good luck, hands have

stroked your brow, snatched you from danger, prepared and cooked food for you, sewed clothes, built houses, made a bed for you . . .

Hands can harm as well as ignite trust and love, but consider especially the times you have been touched by hands that see you, truly see you, or those moments when you have touched another with hands that really see them. We need that kind of touch to live. When you touch with hands that truly see the other, that is Guanyin—and will be hands that clearly see the other as not other to yourself.

The Work of Hands and Eyes

The many hands and eyes that carry out the natural action of compassion are not complicated by complaint or the mind of right and wrong, any more than are the rocks and welling waves, or the petrels wheeling above them in and out of squalls of rain. They belong to that which clearly sees no way to stand apart from the way things are. And so they collaborate with the whole in the same way any ecosystem is collaboration—a deeply experienced improvisation of many lives in balance and concert, reaching gradually into every corner of a place in any long and undisturbed undulation of time. *This.*

As we know, *this* is a word that cannot be limited but is the relinquishment of any limiting move. *This* leaves nothing out, refuses nothing, is a state of affinity and co-arising. Distinctions are clear and beautiful, but not pitted or ranged against each other, in *this*. Which is why it describes such a comprehensive and unsentimental embrace of the action of love—“I have already become like this,” just this person, no rank, simply at home.

Each year on the day in Easter known as Maundy Thursday, a strange scene unfolds in Westminster Cathedral. The Queen of England puts on very special gloves, takes a bowl full of water complete with silver dipper, and approaches five or six selected pensioners, who no doubt have already had their feet scrubbed and disinfected. The silent pensioners are seated on special high seats like shoeshine chairs, offering the Queen access to their feet with no bending, let alone kneeling, required. She comes slowly by each

one, tips a little water over each foot, before drying them most briefly, in distant echo of the original example of profound humility. On the eve of his death, Jesus stripped off most of his clothing and knelt before each of his disciples to wash and dry their dirty, dusty, gnarled feet. Some protested saying, "It's we who should kneel down and wash your feet." And when he said, "Well, then, you can not be one of mine," they said, "Then purify all of me, not just my feet." Yet just those feet are the whole matter.

I find that first-century scene to be an elemental pointer to the heart of human emptiness, its warm-blooded mystery: Master and servant, lord and disciple, completely gone, dissolved into each other, leaving us all with the blessing of *no difference*. In doing so it honors and lifts up the lowliest, humblest and most unapologetically human part of the body. Look at your feet, how genuine they are. Feet are so unashamedly what they are and what they do, in constant touch with the earth. These travel-worn bare feet were now so tenderly touched, skin-to-skin contact.

Here is an untroubled sacrifice of all self-importance—delicately foreshadowing the preparing of a body for burial. And central to this scene of care is water, source and constituent of all life. The scene embodies a radical gesture of "become like this," in a form inseparable from the truth of suffering. It presents a complete undoing of self and other while so intimately affirming "you" and "me." It is calm, timeless, and directly facing reality with no flinching away—love stripped bare of any imposture. Above all it is most "ordinary" with no self-conscious doing of something "good." The true person of no rank has nobody looking on. *Throughout* the body, loving hands, awake eyes.

All strict protocols about a rabbi not touching anyone, let alone the dirty feet of a disciple, considered a profane part of the body—all gone, washed away. Worldly and unworldly, purity and impurity, along with self and other—all dissolved by this touch. Whereas the Queen's Maundy Thursday ritual washing of the feet, meant to signal a profound reversal of "commoner" and "monarch," not only retains but also rigidly restates difference and distance. It is riddled with imposture and sanitized into impurity.

Hands and eyes appear all over and throughout the body when awareness shifts toward becoming *like this*, resuming our original, intimate agreement with reality, the self all but forgotten. Helping hands and seeing eyes appear in a calm and unshakeable embrace of reality that has no preferences, makes complete room for the other, whoever they may be. They serve with no thought of doing so, taking the most modest of positions, congruent with the way that everything moves together, and doing what needs doing. Utterly proving the unbreakable nature of the red thread.

Mazu described such action this way: “Benefit what cannot be benefited, and do what cannot be done.” Nothing is benefited or done to the extent that there’s no you or me intruded in the benefiting and doing. “It is only for your benefit”—Dongshan’s startling words when the frog was torn in two and his fellow monk cried, “Why does it come to this?”—were also thoroughly dangerous words, in the light of Mazu’s “no benefit.” Dangerous in the best of ways: They invite you to become *like this*—congruent. When you see that you *are* this, the benefit is realized: “You” and “me” dropped away into everything moving together. The red thread is the constant benefit of what cannot be benefited.

Containment

Since everything moves together, when we know ourselves *like this* then we have access to a measure of constancy, assurance, and ease and can be of some help.

Walt Whitman lets us see how the work of these hands and eyes throughout the body looks like, in the context of the whole earth, in “A Song of the Rolling Earth”:

*The earth does not withhold, it is generous enough.
The truths of the earth continually wait,
They are not so concealed, either—
They are calm, subtle, un-transmissible by print,
They are imbued through all things,
Conveying them selves willingly.*

. . . *The earth does not argue,
Is not pathetic, has no arrangements,
Does not scream, hasten, persuade, threaten, promise,
Makes no discriminations, has no conceivable failures,
Closes nothing, refuses nothing, shuts none out.*

The nature of the earth ultimately teaches *only* containment—including all, shutting none out. Containment is, like practice, a creative act grounded in acceptance of the *wholeness* of reality. Containment informs practice exactly as practice reveals containment. To the extent that we don't actively concede the containing nature of the earth, it will catch us up with what we have been failing to notice, in drastic form.

Containment implies practiced and practical inclusiveness, a strong, demanding spiritual poise of openness toward the world. "Containment," of course, also includes *you*, just as you are—just this person. This equanimity is its coherence. It grows more possible to be with what is happening and to more calmly rely on that even in apparent disaster, or the approach of death. The rest, once you look, is conjecture, denial, wishful moving off.

To see the coherence and inclusive power of the red thread is to begin to trust and follow the serious dictates of the heart, even though circumstances may provoke powerful feelings that are hard to include and contain. That very difficulty is part of the value and intelligence strong feelings serve. The inestimable late Daniel Berrigan warned us, "Don't be afraid to be afraid. Don't be appalled to be appalled." Nothing that matters has ever been saved by turning away in fear or disgust.

The containment of the earth is its ecological coherency, the beauty of that vulnerable and yet exquisitely formed and continually reforming tendency toward relatedness—which is self-healing. All of which is a pointer to the thing called a practice. As Basho said, to become a poet (or congruent with reality and able to speak that), learn from nature and follow nature. If you look to the natural world, you will see how to become *like this*—open, un-opinionated, poised. Walt Whitman, again:

*I swear the earth shall surely be complete
To him or her who shall be complete,
The earth remains jagged and broken
Only to him or her who remains jagged and broken.*

To be asleep to the undivided essential nature of reality is to “remain jagged and broken.” Look closely at any oiled or polished timber floor or tabletop, and see how the grain of the wood reveals all but the very cells of the tree it came from, the secret inner life that formed them. And every one of those cells came into being from nothing, into this that we casually call table, or timber floor. We walk on it just as though we know all about that. But every tiny grain of being in that floor came out of a small seed possessed of the entire intelligence of that tree, and that minute capsule of such complex intelligence itself came out of . . . nothing. That completeness!

Everything comes out of everything else (which is *nothing*) and ultimately goes back in, is freely offered, and completely given back. This no-thing is the entire strange matter we call being, existence, the entire dance of form and energy. It is one vast cooperative matter of *hands and eyes all over the body* of reality. How do we dare take for granted the infinitely ramified and inexplicable *being* of the earth, and of trees, and of each other, and of grass, of fingernails, spiders, leaves, and dust! Inert toward the miracle of being, we leave our own finely receptive hands and eyes idle, dead, closed.

Whitman also famously said, “I contain multitudes.” People quite quickly come to realize that the meditation seat—commonly a cushion just a little less than one meter square—like Vimalarkirti’s small room, easily contains multitudes; not just the multitudinous, shifting faces of this possible “self,” but all beings throughout space and time sit here with us, *included*, contained. Those many beings we vow to save must be wondering as deeply as we are right now just what it is that we will do, how it is that we will lend emptiness our many human hands and eyes, in the work of restoring completeness to the jagged and broken way we have regarded the earth.

The Iroquois Way is the understanding that “the earth and I are of one mind.” The Iroquois leader known as Peacemaker, founder of the Iroquois Confederacy, committed to the proposition that “We

must not let our strong understanding die from the earth.” Peacemaker addressed the United Nations in Geneva in 1977, beginning his speech with the words “We are shown . . .”—not “We know,” “We assert,” or “We hold it to be self-evident,” but the deeply gracious “We are shown . . .” reminding us quietly that this showing has indeed been happening continuously from the first light of consciousness on this planet, all the way up to now. If we choose to turn toward it.

He said: “We are shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the vegetable life. That we are close relatives of the four-legged beings. In our Way spiritual consciousness is the highest form of politics. We believe that all living things are spiritual beings. Spirits can be expressed as energy forms manifested in matter. A blade of grass is an energy form manifest in grass matter. The spirit of the grass is that unseen force that produces the species of grass and is manifest to us in the form of real grass.”

He goes on to clarify the politics demanded of us as one body, a deep, planetary communion of subjects rather than isolated individuals competitively pitted against the rest and struggling to survive. He says, “Righteousness occurs when the people put their minds and emotions in harmony with the flow of the universe and the intentions of the good mind. The principles of righteousness demand that all thoughts of prejudice, privilege, or superiority be swept away, and that recognition be given to the reality that the creation is intended for the benefit of all equally, even the birds and animals, the trees and insects, as well as the human beings.”

It’s a stark and bitter fact that across the world a politics geared to exploit every nook and cranny of angry fear is evident at exactly the moment when “minds and emotions [put] in harmony with the flow of the universe and the intentions of the good mind”—or throughout the body, hands and eyes—are the only politics that will save the earth.

Or more precisely, that will save us from ourselves.

Not-Knowing Is One Mind

The not-knowing of Guanyin is the antithesis of thoughtlessness; it is instead the seamlessness that wakes us up and into which we reawaken.

Zen Master and poet Ikkyu (1394–1481) realized the true nature of his entire body while lying in a rowboat in the dark on Lake Biwa, when across those darkened waters came the sudden cry of a crow: “Aaarrrrrrgghhhhhhk.” And suddenly Ikkyu had nowhere to put his entire body, right there in that small boat, vast lake, huge night sky, miraculous sound. Later, he wrote:

*hearing a crow with no mouth
cry in the deep darkness of the night
I feel a longing for my father before he was born*

Crow-cry can have so many quasi-human edges in it, uncannily suggesting (and somehow all at once) homelessness, nameless sorrow or regret, an indeterminate edge of fear that might be exile, some kind of bitter strength (that Mary Oliver called “the deep muscle of the world”). This makes them powerful prophets. In the Australian indigenous dreamtime crows can fly backward when they wish; crows are carrion eaters, opportunists that turn a cold eye on those same proclivities evident in us. Or so it can feel, when they choose to let down three, slow, soul-withering comments as they trawl the open sky, three deepening tones of dark contempt—cark carrrk caaaawarrk!!!

But in that rowboat on the lake it is a crow with no mouth that kindly restores to full life an ear with no Ikkyu. So wonderfully, humanly empty. Leaving no one here to “know”—which would be to replace what is, the whole of it, with petty mental moves of this and that. Ikkyu’s “longing for my father before he was born” that surges through with grievous joy brushes the great koan, “What is your original face since before your parents were born?” Which in turn so delicately touches the fertile dark of our being—our shared unborn Mind—that lies open, infinitely earlier than conception.

What is the original face of this very body, the Buddha, older than father . . . older than crow, lake, stars? That crow-cry from no thing at

all into no one at all plunged him into the great, sustaining longing that wakes up in us when we are brushed by the real. “Hearing a crow with no mouth”—there was no crow at that moment, and certainly no Ikkyu. The mouth that speaks these very words has no tongue. And the longing is the most productive form that gratitude can ever take. Bodhicitta—the human longing to be present and complete in your own *entire* body—discovers throughout the body, hands and eyes.

Ikkyu’s depth of seeing brings together human longing and the inconceivable; that’s what restores our full immediacy of ready hands and eyes, renders us able to be of some help. Len Anderson’s poem “On the Nature of Things” brings a squawking crow completely at home in unknowing together with the grievous joy of the moments when “I will never know what I am” is exactly what brings us home, right where we have always been:

*The squawking crow
flies down from the redwood tree
to tell me
he is not a crow.*

*Not bird, not passerine bird
of the family Corvidae,
nor mind nor body
nor thing.*

And not a crow.

*In fact, he says,
he hasn’t even been
discovered yet.*

The poet goes on to speak of the longing to know that can seize a child’s wonder and draw him toward a dream of completeness—of climbing marble stairs to a magical room where he will be able to open and read *The Book of What Each Thing Is*. But he also already

knows that although golden light floods down from that room, it will remain forever too high up ever to reach.

Not to worry, crow tells him, the black of his wings is deeper than any book.

As a child, one afternoon I fell asleep in late afternoon sun on a small balcony right next to my curled-up dog and dreamt that a small cloud of fairies came down to exactly where I was lying, now wide awake within the dream, to place in just my hands the all-surpassing, jewel-encrusted book that I knew contained the secret of what everything *is*. In my dream, I accepted the book in astonishment and drew it open. The page that fell open had marvelous, untellable images—goldembossed, gorgeously colored, and . . .

And the moment the sunlight fell upon the open page, as my eyes rushed to absorb it, the page faded to white, faster than thought. I turned one more page half open but saw the appalling fading immediately beginning and snapped the book shut. Better to have and hold the treasure, complete and unknowable, than jeopardize and lose it with my hunger to *know*. I think of Robert Aitken's warning: "We are not here to clear the mystery up; we are here to make the mystery clear."

And All Beings

Joanna Macy and John Seed created the powerful ritual of "The Council of All Beings," many years ago now. In a recent incarnation of the ritual in New Zealand, together with about twenty adults and a dozen children, we asked ourselves to find within us a being who has no voice in the human world, and to sense what that being needed to bring to the open attention of the Council, to which the two-legged ones were also allowed to be present—at least to listen very quietly.

Among those who turned up and gathered when the Council was called to order were Siberian tiger, a desperately polluted river, rock, fox (who is called pest only because some human brought him to a place where he is misplaced), and many others, including a couple of imperiled frogs. It is always transforming to hear the spontaneous and deeply wise, clear words that issue from the Beings, when

humans offer them complete presence and respect, and give themselves genuine access to the pain of an overstressed earth being shared by everyone on it.

The presiding tiger faced with extinction finally asked for summary words of advice from the Council to hand on to the two-legged ones, about how to respond to the fate of the world. One of the frogs hopped forward immediately and said that it was really very simple. It came down to just two words in fact, that even any human being could remember.

And the words were: *Love it! Love it! Love it! Love it!*

But just as with Daowu and Yunyan, the other frog in the circle, who also had a distinctive frog-song that was exactly equal with any other frog, offered not so much a correction as a clarification of how to actualize this unimpeachable advice.

And the words were: *Live it! Live it! Live it! Live it!*

And Yet

But what of the countless and endless contesting thoughts that arise in the human mind? How do they fit in with mountains and rivers and feelings, with the many hands and eyes throughout the body? Can we say a sentence like *thoughts, feelings, mountains, rivers, oceans, twigs, bears, ants, wombats*? Is it possible thoughts simply take their natural place as evanescent arisings and vanishings just like every other creature here on earth? When we can open to that, it's plain our human kind of thinking is born of the earth, too, and is entirely in the right place. It belongs; it's not an enemy.

The *Enmei Jikku Kannon Gyo*, or *Sutra of Timeless Life*, chanted in deep recognition of the wisdom of compassion in Zen settings all over the world, says, "Morning my thoughts are Kanzeon, evening my thoughts are Kanzeon." This doesn't just invoke a state in which at every moment my thoughts turn toward compassion. It says, "Thought after thought arises in mind, thought after thought is no other than Mind": these thoughts are also nothing but Kanzeon herself.

This is something not just to look into but *practice* into. We'll never extinguish the prodigious talent of the mind to produce

thoughts, and why should we, why would we? A *relationship* with thought forms the holding-power of practice; thought is encountered but there is freedom to choose how to hold that thought. Taken as reality? Or held open, held with the power of question. The whole subtle, rich, and even poetic experience of practice opens from this skillful move.

But thoughts themselves are inseparable from this very body. So it is not a matter of fighting your mind and doubting its trustworthy nature, but of finding vast (unrestricted and awake) freedom in your very nature just as you are. Not purified of thought, but just as you are in this very joy and sorrow; at home here on the earth within an ocean of bright clouds, an ocean of solemn clouds. Because we do come just as we are to realization. Mortal and undefended, unborn and sprouting two hands, guided by eyes that see past separateness, to repair harm and heal injuries, the ones we may find in front of us, the ones we strew behind us in our wake.

For now, as Peacemaker might say, we are being shown by every single one of the so-called ten thousand things and the many beings that constantly ask us to wake up: Be here. Love it, love it, live it, live it!

All of them, crow, frogs, wind, twig, stars are constantly showing what being here really is. Each is the Morning Star piercing the clouds of mind to reveal this very self, hands and eyes throughout its body.

• *epilogue* •

the teisho of the actual body



True attention is rare, and totally sacrificial.

—Flora Courtois

Benefit what cannot be benefited; do what cannot be done.

—Zen Master Mazu

A recent cartoon showed a man in a torn and threadbare suit enthusiastically explaining to his three small children huddled over an open fire in a cave, “Yes the planet got destroyed. But for a beautiful moment in time we created a lot of value for shareholders!!”

The entire direction of an extractive “growth economy” is to gear ever-rising population levels to ever-rising levels of wealth extraction from the limited resources of the earth—and also vice versa—regardless of the logical impossibility of the very proposition.

Add to this the fact that Western modernity is the proposition that the things of humanity stand proudly alone, apart and against the flow, demanding a rightful admiration, that human lifestyle is rightfully wrested from the earth and aggressively proclaims its independence from the web of life, which is viewed as an impediment, a mere

backdrop to defiant self-expression, or a shameful failure to impose the will more completely.

A “modernized” economy is one in vigorous retreat from the old humiliation of bowing to the actual, physical terms and nature of the earth—witness the exploding economies of China, India, Brazil, parts of Africa, which together with the indolent sense of self-entitlement of the rich nations is sacrificing the future coherence of the biome of the earth on which all life actually depends. All the while ignoring the crushing poverty of the majority of human beings, and all on behalf of a brief burst of great affluence possible for a relatively small minority of people.

Now add to that the comprehensive attention-deficit disorder known as the digital revolution, which further severs its heavy users from that real feedback loop known as solid reality (mere “analogue”), replacing evidence with ungrounded opinion and interconnectedness with physically isolating “connectivity.”

Both the long-term pull of modernity away from what is “natural” and the sudden sharp turn toward on-screen attention pulling us away from what is physically happening to life on earth are the very antithesis to deep human intimacy with life-and-death reality here on earth.

Against this, the red thread of our actual human reality, richly tangled with boundless emptiness, is all that humanity is hanging by now, and all that we have ever been hanging by—which may leave our situation looking dangerously vulnerable. Yet this is the tenacious reality, of life and death and productive vulnerability itself, inseparable from the whole of an infinitely interconnected reality. The tenacity of the red thread is the power of human wisdom and compassion grounded in the reality of human *being*. It connects the one who is awake to it with the naturalness of direct action in response.

We do hang as a species by the red thread; we would have to destroy ourselves completely to destroy the red thread; but the red thread remains forever, by its very nature, our deepest and most enduring human source of creativity, renewability, and rich unfolding. Mind congruent with reality: that is our sole and also open and unbounded means “to save the many beings.”

The Actual Body

The teisho of the actual body is one lifelong human bow to the fullness of reality. In a sense, although the tradition of a practice like Zen points the Way, we all make the Way our own in making our bow to life and earth. And it follows as one continuous matter that in bowing to life, we bow to mortality.

The creative power of response at any moment in a life comes from knowing we're not here long and not alone. The actual body is where acknowledgment of this limited life exactly meets (like two arrows meeting in midair, point to point) the radiant fact of unlimited, undivided reality, in which every detail, each particle of matter, expresses and participates entirely in the whole. This self-enclosed human mind extends to Mind, awakens and participates in it. Expressing Mind in the way you live every "ordinary" moment on this unlikely planet—there's the joy of it, becoming *like this*.

Actualizing this participation—drawing it deeper into life and up into keener understanding—all the fun lies here. An old Hasid called it walking the sharpest blade, adding, "On either side, a netherworld."

It has always been a startling time to be alive on earth. But this one seems qualitatively different. We're rightly terrified and mortified but also fortunate to be here at such a critical time, when earth lies bleeding—the central fact that now underpins everything else. Can we rely on the fact that attending well and seeing clearly we will know what to do as decisive moments arise for each of us? There are thousands of such moments large and small, and the choices we make ripple into the entire world in this great, distributed field in which human beings are making the human world, that is now beginning to impact the unfolding geophysics of the earth herself. No one knows how far we can rely upon ourselves. But we do begin to know this crisis of the whole earth will be the making or unmaking of us as a species and as an earthly experiment in sentience.

What might response to the call of the moment upon a human being look like? When Shakyamuni Buddha was walking one time with his disciple Sakadevendra he pointed to the place ahead and said, "This would be a good place for the temple to be erected."

Sakadevendra bent down, plucked a blade of grass, planted it in the earth in front of the Buddha and said, “The temple is erected!”

There’s much to see here. The immediacy and spontaneity of practiced attention. The creativity that springs from frugal means (abundantly on offer). That practice is right where you are, not vested in some special place and moment. That a single blade of grass planted into the earth creates a temple. And that the playful act of recognizing and bending down, plucking, planting, speaking those words—of *consecrating* the fact with complete human attention and expressiveness—there it is, at every point, the temple erected. One body, actualized in human terms. This very body (Ananda, you, me, and the whole of reality) is articulated in such complete and spontaneous response.

The deeply mysterious words of Dogen that comment upon the tenth Grave Precept of Zen, sometimes translated as “Not defaming the three treasures (of awakening, the teaching, and each other)” begins, “The teisho of the actual body is the harbor and the weir, where human eyes gather.”

Dogen’s words are comment on the final and summative tenth Grave Precept: to take up the way of not defaming the three treasures. “Not defaming” means not failing to hold yourself toward “the three treasures” of “Buddha” (your own unimpeachable awake and original nature), “dharma” (the deep way of the universe, the teaching, and each thing in itself, all finding themselves revealed in each other), and “sangha” (all of us, deeply interwoven, here on earth). Does this begin to sketch the nature of what Dogen calls “the actual body”?

Here are the words in full: *The Teisho of the actual body is the harbor and the weir, where human eyes gather. This is the most important thing in the world. Its virtue finds its home in the ocean of essential nature. It is beyond explanation. We just accept it with respect and gratitude.*

What then is the “teisho”—song or shout or deep echo in a human being—of the actual body? The “actual body” is highly particular in every instance, yet found in everything; and is nothing at all until it is actualized by us, brought to life. Any vivid expression of this *actual body* affords shelter and sustaining power . . . a safe

harbor, a steadily brimming weir. “Where human eyes gather” (a phrase sometimes not brought across from the original) suggests the timeless gathering of wakeful beings. Why is it that “human eyes”—suggesting not just the brilliant eye of realization but also the simple effort to pay attention and offer care—gather at such a point, creating safe harbor, a state brimming and yielding as at the spillway of a weir?

When we restore the phrase *where human eyes gather*, our embodied, human, red thread entanglement with emptiness is restored to Dogen’s powerful words. Restored, the temple is erected. The red thread that cannot be cut makes our very humanity the live connection to all that is and brings us sharply to awareness; when we admit our vast connectedness, we enter all the joy and grief that comes with that. We come to realization *just as we are*—messy, failing, laughing, loving, and torn. And since we cannot cut free or carve out this self from the powerful mix of passionate feeling and natural obligation revealed as the red thread, we learn to let that self go, instead, complete, into what cannot be cut.

The mixed and hazy nature of being human includes the sharp inevitability of knowing we’ll part with everything we love; this conscious fact may be the final and keenest making of us *fully* human. But it is perfect for purpose. A leaf meets its stem precisely in the mysterious place that’s perfect for the letting go and dropping away; likewise, the notch of death, and of giving ourselves away, in all of us.

Dogen goes on to say, of this teisho of the actual body, which forms a harbor and weir where human eyes gather: “Its virtue finds its home in the ocean of essential nature.” Which is to say that this expression of the actual body finds its source and natural home in undivided emptiness—or “ocean of essential nature.” “This is the most important thing in the world,” he tells us. “It is beyond explanation. We just accept it with respect and gratitude.”

Its sole “explanation” is the way it lives us and finds us out, as we feel our way home to ourselves in the dark along the guiding wall of “I don’t know.” Or as Samuel Beckett put it, “Dear Incomprehension—thanks to you I’ll be myself in the end.” This self is beyond

“comprehension,” but you can confirm it entirely for yourself, in that open state of “not-knowing.”

Properly Looking After It

Dongshan was unwell. A monk came and asked him, “Your Reverence is sick—after all is there someone who is *not* sick?”

Dongshan said, “There is.” And he was not being asked, nor was he replying, about someone other than himself.

The monk then asked, “Does the one who is not sick look after Your Reverence?”

Dongshan said, “This old monk is properly looking after that one.”

“How is it when Your Reverence is looking after that one?” asked the monk.

And Dongshan replied, “Then I do not see that there is any sickness at all.”

No sickness at all. His words anticipate Yunmen’s great offer: *Medicine and sickness heal each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is this self?* What sickness is Yunmen talking about? He’s pointing us to something infinitely deeper than the way in which the existence of medicine implies sickness, or that sickness discloses healing and what wholeness may be. All the way to the undivided, where nothing is opposed or can bump into anything else. At that level, the singular power of the wholeness of the earth, the fact of the *wholeness* of reality, to heal the wound of existence, begins to dawn. And in sensing that and bringing it to life, we see ourselves at last—not as a one-off event but as an ongoing mystery, rippling into being, moment by moment, together with everything else . . . For if the whole earth is one state of ever-transforming potency, Yunmen demands, then “What is this self?”

In the case of Dongshan, unwell, is “this self” (in the light of Yunmen’s question) the one who is so clearly lying there, sick? Is it the one who he tells the monk is *not* sick? Or is it the one who he insists is properly looking after that one? Can there be even a jot of difference between these “three”? When Mazu was lying, deeply unwell, in Case 3 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, it’s the accountant monk who comes along to check on this very mystery, asking Mazu, “How

is Your Reverence feeling these days?” “Sun Face Buddha, Moon Face Buddha” is the master’s reply.

Sun Face Buddha is the one said to live for eight hundred golden years; such time cannot “run out” but stretches lazily to meet the eternity of a dragon-fly delicately poised in the air to sip from the flowing stream. Moon Face Buddha is the one born in the morning who dies by evening, like the brevity of dew, butterfly, breath; thus every breath counts, every grimace of pain is piercing to the one who loves you, mortality quickens your heartbeat and rouses you to meet today.

In Mazu’s labor of mortal illness, which is which? When these “two” are not two, does *being* have any time, indeed any sickness, at all?

These two “faces”—both boundless and momentary at once—of our peculiarly human consciousness are constantly being encountered and fully or partly resolved in sensations, feelings, thoughts, insights, imagination, stories, conversations, dreams—in meeting every action arising in mind. They are both present when under the sharp pressure of sickness, too, as Mazu makes clear, as well as in those balmy years, days, moments of nothing yet especially going wrong. At every point, which is which? Realized “Buddha” facing imminent mortality; dying human being who is radiantly unborn. They heal completely into each other, in just this fully aware cough, splutter, collapse of strength, wave of grief, guttural breathing, and underneath it all, this shock of unaccountable joy . . .

So even in the throes of demanding illness—or debilitating rage, bout of terror—there is someone, closer even than yourself, who is not sick, not enraged, not lost in fear. Each time we actively touch what heals the gap between medicine and sickness, and realize the whole earth, wholeness of reality, as that no-gap, then we live a little more deeply into becoming the full response to Yunmen’s question, “What is this self?” Right here is the beginning of seeing into Dongshan’s humble statement: “This old monk is properly looking after that one.”

Does practice and realization “help”? That’s the monk’s unspoken question. Dongshan says, instead, “I help *it* by practicing.” *There’s*

the teisho of the actual body. Something gets past us and touches what's been free and whole from the very beginning. We recognize ourselves a little, at last, and start to bring that forward to meet the day. Human eyes gather in the wake of such healing touch. Practice becomes extending this mind to all beings, the whole world, and to this ailing, clouded, yet transparent self that embraces all beings.

So practice—"properly looking after that one"—is our human harbor within the "ocean of essential nature." Its virtue—strength, worth—lies in recognizing our true home in the place that is empty of "me." Properly looking after that true self means life lived consciously as the vow to find the open response in even the most pressed of circumstances.

"What's it like *then*?" the monk is asking. What's that like in the midst of suffering, sickness, loss? "Then I do not see that there is any sickness at all."

This is a genuine finding, a practical matter, not solace, nor an invocation of something that may be ardently desired yet held in secret fear at arm's length. Sun Face Buddha and Moon Face Buddha are always healing into each other and closing the wound of existence. What echoes in me when I write this is the call of an unnamed East Timorese poet who was listed among the dead or missing, after the Indonesian military assault upon the population in the wake of the referendum that chose independence from Indonesia in 1999. His last message was read out to us all at a protest rally in Sydney:

Be here

Be immortal

John Tarrant's translation of the fifth mode (arriving in concurrence within the relative and absolute) in Dongshan's magisterial series of verses known as the *Five Ranks*, sets out the nature of possessing no rank at all this way:

Not deciding "it is" or "it isn't,"

Do you have the courage to be at peace with it?

*Everyone wants to leave the endless changes.
But when we finish bending and fitting our lives,
We come and sit by the fire.*

“Bending and fitting our lives”—that’s the endless contriving of escape attempts—moving off from circumstances, making ourselves up a little “better,” warding off or contorting ourselves to disown what hurts, doing what we usually describe as coping with things, bumpily adjusting to what *never* will stand still as required.

“Sitting by the fire” is very different. Sometimes it’s translated as “the charcoal fire”; we’re all smudged with it. Sitting by such a fire is certainly not sitting on your hands but is the work and play of forbearance, close attention to what actually is, curiosity and inquiry, discovery and response, and making a home in the unknown—which means facing directly toward the inexhaustible fire. “Then I do not know that there is any sickness at all.” There it is, the fire.

The sense of ease and “doing nothing” in this profound process touches Mazu’s challenge: “Benefit what cannot be benefitted; do what cannot be done.” When the evening washup is done and one last warm plate placed to dry in the rack, in the nameless satisfaction of completion, who actually did that? Who strokes the brow of the child you love even more than your own life, when he is feverish? Who feels the beautiful shock of your lover’s skin touching yours, *who* does that? We rejoin the ongoing benefit going on in the place where we are—just in becoming it, and shrinking from no part of it. Dongshan’s remark, “It is only for your benefit!” cuts dangerously deep. There’s no end to benefitting the benefit, relinquishing the crowded sense of self, and breathing a little more completely, doing what cannot be “done.” A little like never being able to single out (though you search to the end of time) Zhaozhou’s one fact for which you are responsible.

The deep lament that rejoins us to the pain of the world begins to realize the benefit of ceasing to stand apart. But it cuts deeper: The *whole* of this must be realized as benefit, not excluding the pain and cries of all sentient beings. The *whole* world is medicine: realizing that wholeness is the ongoing healing process. Just try taking “benefit” out of that!

So the benefit, the ongoing provenance, is embracing what is, shorn of the distorting fuzz of opinions about it, and the fear they so carefully mask. In the undertaking “I am always looking after that one,” can you hear the sacrifice of self that brings the walls in the mind tumbling down, leaving little or nothing to fear? With nothing to fear, there is just one great “equals” sign: “Then I do not see that there is any sickness—or fault or failing or finality—at all.” Being here, and undivided, touches being immortal.

A hundred-year-old and very deaf but loving Korean nun made the undivided offer to an Australian Zen nun, Chi Kwang, when, unable to hear anything much of what Chi Kwang was trying to say to her, just brushed all such bother aside and said, “Let’s get enlightened together!”

I find that a fine presentation of the human *teisho* of the actual body of reality. The trees don’t seem to need *teisho*: They just offer it as themselves. Pebbles, likewise, and they do so completely. Potatoes, too, even cracked coffee mugs and the silvery ting of the teaspoon sounding the china. But humans seem to need to repeatedly stumble on it all over again in order to tumble more fully to ourselves. That beautiful daily struggle that seems particular or peculiar to the *human* shape that emptiness takes. We cannot “achieve” or “attain” what is already our true nature; we practice to achieve and refine taking part in the earth and all of life more consciously, more *here*. No one is enlightened alone, even if there is no one else about.

And as Flora Courtois put it, we don’t get enlightened at all, we simply enlighten each moment with true attention. True attention, she said, is “rare, and totally sacrificial.” The open response requires throwing away “everything that we have been or hope to be, to face each moment naked of identity, open to whatever comes, and bereft of guideposts.” Guideposts would simply reinstate a self setting out on the track of getting something good, good for the self. But “It’s better to have nothing than something good,” as Linji kindly assures us.

Yet don’t mistake this fiercely playful embrace of full reality for austerity. Consider Keizan’s confirming verse to the case in which

the master Tongan Daopi said, when asked what it is that he *loves*, “I have already become like this”:

*The moon of mind, the flower of eyes,
Are bright and beautiful.
Opening since time beyond kalpas—
Who will play with them?*

Listen to the inviting song of the actual body! Emptiness plays in “Moon of mind,” eternity plays in “Opening since time beyond kalpas.” Actualizing turns up in “Flower of eyes,” and even more in the joy of the wide-open offer, “Who will play with them?” Intimacy is most simply the whole of life and actual body, wherein there are no parts any longer to be found. Who is this self then?

This *who*—is not a thing. It’s just intimacy, most natural, the mystery that will never be cleared up, will always lie open—the source called *I don’t know*—and so is ever open to coming more clear. Where do you see it? There’s nowhere you cannot. Just take a few scattered crumbs, sparrows hopping, their shadows never missing a single beat—and include the many years it takes to truly see such a thing. That’s where the plenitude of “I don’t know” comes to light.

“Who” is so clear we can see right through it to all beings and the great wide earth—and to our unspeakable desecration and ransack of the earth. But now we have the means to approach the unspeakable with something other than fear. No walls in the mind—there’s the access to the open response that is so close to love. As Gary Snyder said, “Doom scenarios, even though they may be true, are not politically or psychologically effective. The first step . . . is to make us love the world rather than to make us fear for the end of the world.”

Kathleen Dean Moore, nature writer and lifelong activist, sets her level of hope for the earth at one, or “very little hope” (where ten would mean “no worries”). Neither hope nor despair is acceptable, she insists, since both vacate the ground of agency and action. “Between hope and despair is the broad territory of moral integrity,”

she explains, “a *match* between what you believe and what you do. You act lovingly toward your children because you love them. You live simply because you believe in taking only your fair share. You do what’s right because it’s right, not because you will gain from it.” She finds freedom in that, and joy, and insists that genuinely healing social change can happen only in that place between hope and despair, where moral integrity rediscovers itself.

Moral integrity seems to depend on affinity, fellow-feeling, love. How does love inhere in emptiness? Where is compassion housed in this actual body of vast emptiness, nothing holy, in which one thing is constantly becoming another?

Non-Thinking

There’s a deceptively small koan drawn from the words of the Diamond Sutra: *Non-thinking*. Non-thinking is not acting unthinkingly. It is the consonance with reality and with the earth discovered in Zazen. *Non-thinking*: Such a small koan to find wrapped around the whole great matter!

Mind in its fullness is equal to the earth, equal to our circumstances here—*empty* of difference to the nature of the earth. The practice of non-thinking is our way of recovering the poise of being humbly “equal to the earth.” If you can follow along with this, you can see that this ultimately most natural state of mind—oddly called “non-thinking”—is the way back into accord with the terms that the earth presents to us, which are the terms of life.

The wind “bloweth as it listeth”—this is the familiar Biblical description of the movement of grace that can be neither ordered nor willed. The wind blows where blowing is. Those leaves, wet with recent rain, glitter in slow motion as some subtle fingers of breeze riffle through the trees over there on the hill; right here, nothing stirs. There is something so deeply intimate in play in every detail of the natural way of things, that analytical mind can never touch.

But practice can catch up with it. Consider the concert pianist’s or ballet dancer’s rigorous command of spirit that for magical instants can offer something that is complete, founded entirely in a practice of “Try again. Fail better.” Difficulty, over and over, makes the way

genuine. Slight success is minor failure. There is a rare adult delight in finding something that finally says to you “Never enough. Let the straw sandals wear out, and then—walk on.” Thus we join (even for a moment) the way everything moves together, and, almost voluptuously, disappear into it.

The pull of gravity, the force of the mass of the earth that holds things together and has shaped human bones, muscles, organs, locomotion; it takes part in what shapes faces, thought, imagination, even dream. Its shaping contributes much of what we call cause and effect. But cause and effect, and gravity itself, has something very strange inside it. A human being might call it love—the earth pulls everything to itself and holds even the moon in thrall. What would the composed weight of a mountain, or the flow of a river call this matter, I wonder? “Gravity”? “Mysterious affinity”? “Non-thinking”? “What it wants”?

This force of attraction is fundamental to a practice of any kind. What calls us into practice is not just the “problem” or nagging resistance of suffering, of difficult things happening and a desire to be released free and at ease within them. For even when pain, loss, fear command us to meet them more directly, that is a kind of love, too. Come! Reality calls us into the wholeness of mind that can meet it.

Practice itself is an act of love, toward that which is better left unnamed. If you name it as the lust for an enlightenment experience, you belittle it and limit yourself to a dream, missing the heart of it. Dedication and persistence is needed, but “success” in meditation is just an idea. That delicately effortful willingness just to really be here is already success at every point in which you offer your heart to it.

Our direct and constant experience of this vast universe is the immediate manifestation we call earth, the body it has shaped, and the awareness of ourselves it has kindled. It is the earth that breaks through that same self-consciousness and wakes us up—some random detail just as it is with no thought attached, finally breaking through the account of reality fabricated by thought.

It was the earth singing “Come!” to an apple that shattered an existing easy “obviousness” when it fell onto Isaac Newton’s head and opened him up to something far more marvelously apparent—

the depth of gravity's mystery. He freely confessed that while he could describe its presence, naming and even measuring gravitational force, that left things more, not less, mysterious. He could begin to identify it as a prime shaper of the universe lying minutely close to the way so many things unfold and inhere—but that clears up nothing about the mutual attraction of things, the strange intimacy inside cause and effect. It only made the mystery clearer.

Robert Aitken once looked into cause and effect to find its innermost seed—a little like taking apart a series of Russian dolls with the mind of un-knowing. You take the head off one to discover another inside, and then another, and another, until there's just one tiny figure, one innermost seed. The first layer of containment was the word *karma*.

Containing Everything

Karma—the realm of falling apples sometimes hitting heads—is a word that can take us down unending rabbit holes of hypothesis about fate and destiny and various ways to improve it. But at the simplest level, karma arrives the moment I wake up to myself and acknowledge that what I do and what happens to me are the same thing. When the pain that our own actions has caused arrives in consciousness, karma has come home. Until then, it's been busy abroad. “But that was in another country,” as Christopher Marlowe put it in *The Jew of Malta*, “and besides the wench is dead”—cruelly nailing our human gift for shifting and ducking blame. But *karma* is the Sanskrit word that means, most simply, the way things happen in the relative world. One thing does lead to another. Apples fall on heads, for example. And so, “*Unpack karma and you get cause and effect*,” said Aitken.

In a way he's saying don't try to contrive your fate, just remain as awake as humanly possible to the outcome of your actions—and even earlier and more forensically, try to glimpse your motivations. All the harm and hurt ever caused by any one of us, through our actions, speech, and thoughts, from beginning-less time, belong only to us. This is not as simple as saying either “Do bad and bad will happen to you,” or “Do good or bad things happen to you.” That's

roughly true, though from the point of view of no-separation, accounts are not kept; rather, all ripples finally touch everything. At the deepest level it does not come down to final “bad” or “good” but the fundamental working of one circumstance continually evolving or emptying itself into another, the current of change, empty of fixed entities.

This cause and effect is impermanence itself, an unfolding mystery that yields us into being alone with all that is and is never finished with us. It leaves each thing—including this “self”—as fluid as ground mist. The ground mist rises, yes, and you could somewhat adduce the cause and effect that draws the mist from the ground at this or that moment. But how could you ever finally conclude the why of how it shapes and lifts and entwines itself, quite where it appears and when, or what determines the way it wants to rise and then spread and simply disappear? I once walked to the dojo to give evening teisho and found the ground mist waiting in a brief column on the verandah, a momentary being, standing right by the door! What can we finally determine or claim to know about the ceaseless unfolding of cause and effect apart from “It bloweth as it listeth”?

In a sense we must blame cause and effect for the universe, the earth, and, of course, ourselves! Cause and effect is the great chain of happenings that by some miracle arrives at us, now, breathing by the grace of miraculous organs in our body that have been and continue to be intricately shaped by cause and effect.

And when we look at such things as a feather, an eye, a spine, a skull—how delicate this cause and effect is, how brilliant its intelligent patterns of chaos, the infinite, subtle designs that arise from it! An old Chinese maxim reminds us “Heaven is ruthless.” I stand amazed before such exquisitely particular “productions of time” *and* the ruthlessly impartial nature of the unfolding we call impermanence, which conforms with our wishes only rarely and by chance. This ruthlessness—the tiger’s kindness—endows us with everything, in the course of which it quite naturally asks that we pass all we have on to others and in the end keep nothing for ourselves.

And yet cause and effect is also what joins everything up, forms every holding pattern of relationship that collaborates in creating us.

So it's worth studying "Unpack karma and you get cause and effect" for some time. A lifetime, for example.

Next, "*Unpack cause and effect, and you get affinity.*" A poet said, "The beautiful earth, as we know, belongs to those who are like it." Well, we cannot help being like it, can we? Remember Daopi the elder being asked, "What is it that you love?" and saying, "I have already become like this." "Like this"—the shine on the leaves, drone of incoming plane, the sorrow you express, the tortured faces of asylum seekers, the burning forests of Alberta, the seeping of methane from melting permafrost . . . "Like this" means simply our most intimate identity and belonging—realizing that we can't be told apart from all *this*. That we are not carved out from it, that our perceived insularity is merely the prevailing act of self-alienation.

The force of the teisho of the actual body is to see this clearly with immediate gut recognition: That while we say "cause and effect" as though there are two bits of business here, there is just one bit of business anywhere, one continual moment that swallows up every division our minds can put upon it. Call it causation, impermanence, change, the tiger's kindness, the great chance, affinity pervading the whole universe, or whatever you wish, *it* is not two; and we "players" in the drama of existence are wholly that, too. The great gift of the affinity inside "cause and effect" is that there is *no other*.

Affinity is what draws us to "become like this" and describes the waking realization that we've never actually been anything else. Affinity dawns in the state of consciousness called non-thinking, the curiosity, openness, and acceptance that is Zazen. Affinity is the way one thing is actually falling and folding into another because of the complete equality of *no-thing* seated at the heart of all things. There's affinity between the baby you once were and the old person you will one day become should you live so long. Affinity is the intimate communion event constantly at play inside "cause and effect." To call it the Dao is simply to admit we finally can't clear up the mystery of the evident, natural way of all things.

What's said to be "known" about the Dao is very slight: that *it moves, and is said to be older than God*—meaning its origin lies beyond or before knowing. Thinking can't know it; but in the grace of non-thinking, it can know us. It is plain that cause and effect is

actually continuous movement—the unfolding-ness of things rests entirely in never ceasing. And it is plain that it is not subject to our wishes, and that at the deepest level, in the things that count, there's no final resting place of better or worse within an infinite unfolding.

“Unpack affinity, and you get the tendency to coalesce.” There's the next Russian doll. Which is to say affinity opens the way of endlessly becoming everything around us. When we look at the moon we become something that is both moon and us at once. We coalesce: Human eye and moon lumens mutually “actualize” the moon three million miles away exactly here where we stand, head tipped back, mouth slightly open to the stars.

Can you finally tell yourself apart from the sounds of the birds and breeze, the ever-changing light? The moment we relax back into ourselves, coalescence is the most fitting description of what we find happening. And that's one aspect of why Dogen says, “The green mountains are always walking.” Exactly like you, and with you, they are evolving, *coalescing* with water and wind and fire—and you—in endless free exchange of self. Seeing the green mountains as you walk, non-thinking, green mountains are walking, too. Shakyamuni Buddha looked up and saw the morning star and realized his true nature. At that moment you cannot say Shakyamuni Buddha or star low in the eastern sky.

Not one poignant, infinitely varied form of this living world can be separated from the moon of Mind, as it is sometimes called. One of the most beautiful of the Miscellaneous Koans asks, “What is the blown-hair sword?” Traditionally you would test a sharpened sword blade by blowing a human hair onto it. If the blade sliced the hair in two, it was known as a blown-hair sword, sharper than sharp. So what is the keenest blade that cuts through everything without moving an inch? The koan just gets deeper in the response it offers to its own question: *Each branch of the coral holds up the light of the moon.* You, me, tears, laughter, unicorns, wombats, and bacilli . . . All moonlight!

The next step: *“Unpack the tendency to coalesce and you get intimacy.”* True intimacy goes beyond nearness or even direct touching; it's *complete* coalescence with mind. It's one thing to discover yourself to be vivid in all things, and all things revealed in

each thing. Intimacy is the experience and enjoyment of this—*this*. Gerard Manley Hopkins called it the “dearest freshness deep down thing,” acknowledging how it continually stirs the heart-mind into life. Yunmen called it “One treasure hidden in the body.” That’s the patter of rain on a tin roof and scuttle of little skink for cover under leaves, the warmth of your own two hands clasped, the delicate sorrow of a gray day, winter coming on. One treasure hidden in the body of all things, impossible to separate from “the tendency to coalesce.”

Next, “*Unpack intimacy, and you will find that you contain all beings.*” When intimacy is clear and impossible to dislodge, then what can we say about this powerful sense of “containment” except “Yes, of course”? And then “What can I do to help?” You can’t take “you” out of all things, nor all things out of “you.” How wondrous. This no-barrier is evident just in breathing, walking, seeing, touching, being touched, hearing, tasting, and forming thought. Long before some big experience befell you, or not, this matter was completely settled.

We sense it, too, in any unforced encounter with another creature, stopping thought in its tracks. A tiny marsupial mouse, genus *Antechinus*, sometimes comes right up to where I’m writing and even dares perch on my shoulder for an instant, examining the contents of my screen. In such a moment, being human, “I” shifts a little into “*Antechinus*”; sentience coalesces. This delightful tiny long-nosed, playful creature. Compelled by it, I have part share in its impossible speed and agility as I cannot help but commit it to heart. Human beings have the peculiar gift of being able to lean into the open presence of another creature and be grabbed, letting them in “unawares.” And there’s one more of the many ways we can see into “containing all beings.”

It may be what we’re here for. Alice Walker commented that her stories, which tend to be set in the deep south of America among poor black people, are seen in China as being extremely Chinese. People there have said to her, “When I read your books you might as well be talking about me.” And she has said, “If you are prepared to go right down completely through yourself, you come up inside all people.”

So containment morphs into power to face circumstances front-on just as they are, and just as we are, neither advancing nor retreating but engaging directly with what is, rather than what “should be.” It’s a lifelong practice and endows us with a long life however long or short life is.

Whenever you get down to what must surely be the final Russian doll, you can anticipate something dramatically tiny—little more than a seed, with tiny skilled paint splashes suggesting a figure like all the others. So what is the minute seed at the very core of everything? “*Unpack containment and there is the Goddess of Mercy herself.*” That’s Guanyin, compassion herself. So *that’s* where she is, right at the heart of all karma!

And notice that by this stage, verbal constructions involving *you* have ceased. Or to put it differently, no-self comes forth with this one, and comes forth in the *action* of nonthinking—which is our human approach to unconditioned, unconditional awareness, our very best effort to sustain that. Compassion itself. It is “unconditioned” because it does not split itself off from anything and cannot find anything to split, and “unconditional” because it accepts and moves in sympathy with every condition in which it finds itself.

It’s curious, interested, alert, and poised, this non-thinking that links karma with its core of compassion, and if you persist with it, you find nothing to oppose, nothing to defend. *Because* it does not oppose “this” with “that,” it is compassion; and because it is compassion, it moves in accord with the nature of what is. Renunciation cannot make it more pure, explanation will never penetrate it. Even the finest meditation cannot make it more so—in other words, “Benefit what cannot be benefited”! It is reality itself, and no kind of attainment.

Non-thinking, the mind of practice, is simply a disposition toward greater intimacy with this. Non-thinking is already so close to that *to which* it responds that you cannot separate cause from effect anymore. And so non-thinking is the secret antidote to boredom or unease. When you neither object to nor are confronted by your circumstances but meet them directly, there’s nothing confronting or objectionable to be found in them. Just the endless koan of reality that jumps-starts the heart: *What is this? Who is this self?*

Flowing Outward

Finally, there's another insignificant-looking Miscellaneous Koan that looks into this endlessly unfolding play of "just responding," the way the dance of the ground mist just responds to subtle and capricious currents of air that no one can track. It's this: *When the wind blows, the downy willow seed floats away.* Have you ever seen floating clouds of willow seed? So ready to float that before the wind can even fully arrive, the downy seed is off, gone. When my children were babies I would find myself responding in the dead of night almost before the smallest murmur could reach my ears—not yet fully awake, yet one foot already on the floor.

There is a degree of effortlessness in Zen practice that might not be the first thing to meet the eye. It is a kind of poised readiness that, like compassion, responds earlier than thought. It takes real effort to arrive at the effortlessness of the downy willow seed, poised to respond, relying exactly on what is happening. When the barely perceptible breeze of change arrives, the poised readiness and attunement of non-thinking moves with it.

It's a little like those "people of ancient times" who could not see "things," could barely see boundaries between them, let alone carve out right and wrong as distinct. The "actual body" is this congruency of mind with reality, gathered in, standing apart from nothing.

So here we are, stumbling in the dark, seeing a little, clarifying it a little more, becoming a little more "like this," extending that outward in service to the other. Becoming more genuine through the whole wear and tear and mixed quality of it all—providing the beautiful daily struggle, to be *congruent*. There's the teisho of the actual body! Call and response arriving together.

Paulo Freire's call to become congruent reminds me of the great sycamore tree standing in a Wendell Berry poem. Very old trees, scarred survivor trees that outlive the odds and become a whole ecology of bacteria, mites, worms, borers, beetles, birds, reptiles, mammals, and eventually rich humus for new seeds—have always won my heart. Human beings can sometimes come to closely resemble this. I think of the late Daniel Berrigan, for example, activist, mystic, fighter, as I read:

*In the place that is my own place,
whose earth I am shaped in and must bear,
there is an old tree growing—
a great Sycamore that is
a wondrous healer of itself.
Fences have been tied to it,
nails driven into it,
hacks and whittles cut in it,
the lightning has burned it.
There is no year it has flourished in
that has not harmed it.
There is a hollow in it that is its death,
though its living brims whitely
at the lip of the darkness and flows outward.*

Life is the gift you give away. Its finitude bestows all that we manage to bring to flower and care and love in this life. Life-and-death is the ground note of this shared lifelong teisho of the actual body, to which we all add our singular, distinctive note. It brims and flows steadily outward from the lip of ultimate darkness to whitely cover heaven and earth for—well, for each other, which is only for our benefit. It prompts the teisho of the actual body—the expressive response of just this person in embodying the miraculous tenacity of the red thread that cannot, will not, must not be cut.

It is undivided, pushes nothing away, can find nothing that is not like it, has nothing it dislikes, actively seeks ever to be more congruent (for its own joy), flowing out to cover heaven and earth for each other, healing earth and its resounding consciousness, in humanly becoming *like this*.

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