

The Promise That Is Never Kept

Our human trouble arises from desire. Not all desires generate problems, however. There are two kinds of desires: demands ("I have to have it") and preferences. Preferences are harmless; we can have as many as we want. Desire that *demand*s to be satisfied is the problem. It's as if we feel constantly thirsty, and to quench our thirst, we try to attach a hose to a faucet in the wall of life. We keep thinking that from this or that faucet, we will get the water we demand. As I listen to my students, everyone seems thirsty for something. We may get a bit of water here and there, but it only tantalizes us. Being really thirsty is not fun.

What are some of the faucets we try to attach ourselves to, in order to quench our thirst? One might be a job we feel that we must have. Another might be "the right partner," or "a child who behaves as he or she should." Fixing a personal relationship may seem to be the way to get that drink. Many of us also believe that we will finally quench our thirst if we can only fix ourselves. It makes no sense for the self to fix the self, but we persist in trying to do it. What we regard as ourselves is never quite acceptable to us. "I don't get enough done." "I'm not sufficiently successful." "I'm always angry, so I'm worthless." "I'm a poor student." We demand countless things of ourselves and the world; almost anything can be seen as desirable, a socket we can attach ourselves to, so that we can finally get the drink we believe we need. Bookstores are full of self-help books, proclaiming various remedies for our thirst: *How to Make Your Husband Love You*, or *How to Build Self-Esteem*, and so on. Whether or not we seem to be self-assured, underneath it all we feel that there is something lacking. We feel we have to

be pleasant and fun, a nice time of year. Then when the season doesn't meet our expectations, we're depressed and upset. In fact, Christmas will be what it will be, whether our expectations are met or not. Likewise, when we discover Zen practice, we may hold out a hope that it is going to solve our problems and make our life perfect. But Zen practice simply returns us to life as it is. Being our lives more and more is what Zen practice is about. Our lives are simply what they are, and Zen helps us to recognize that fact. The thought "If I do this practice patiently enough, everything will be different" is simply another belief system, another version of the promise that is never kept. What are some other belief systems?

STUDENT: If I work hard, I'll make it.

JOKO: Yes, that's a good American belief system.

STUDENT: If I'm nice to people, they won't hurt my feelings.

JOKO: Yes, that one often disappoints us. People will be as they will be, that's all. No guarantees.

STUDENT: I have a belief that we're all doing the best we can.

JOKO: That's a belief system I share.

STUDENT: If I exercise daily, I'll be healthy.

JOKO: I just heard of a fellow who exercises regularly who tripped and shattered his hip.

STUDENT: If I lived elsewhere, I would enjoy life more.

STUDENT: If I help other people, I'm a good person.

JOKO: That's a real pitfall, a seductive belief system that will get us in trouble. Of course, we should do what's appropriate and necessary; in a deeper sense, however, we can't help another person.

STUDENT: I've been sitting for so long, I shouldn't be angry anymore.

JOKO: If you're angry, you're angry.

STUDENT: If my car starts right away, my day will go smoothly.

STUDENT: If I work for a worthy cause, the world will be a better place.

STUDENT: The pain that I experience should make me a better person.

JOKO: You're already fine as you are.

49

It's useful to review our belief systems in this way, because there's always one that we don't see. In each belief system we hide a promise. As for Zen practice: the only promise we can count upon is that when we wake up to our lives, we'll be freer persons. If we wake up to the way we see life and deal with it, we will slowly be freer—not necessarily happier or better, but freer.

Every unhappy person I've ever seen has been caught in a belief system that holds out some promise, a promise that has not been kept. Persons who have practiced well for some time are different only in the fact that they recognize this mechanism that generates unhappiness and are learning to maintain awareness of it—which is very different from trying to change it or fix it. In itself, the process is as simple as it can be; yet we human beings find it extremely difficult. We have absolutely no interest in maintaining our awareness. We want to be thinking about something else, anything else. And so our lives give us endless discouragement, the perfect gift.

When people hear this, they want to get up and leave. Yet life pursues them; their belief systems keep making them miserable. We want to hold onto our belief systems; but if we do, we suffer. In a sense, everything works perfectly. I never care whether anyone leaves practice or enters practice, it doesn't make any difference; inevitably, the process goes on. It's true that some people in their entire lifetime never seem to learn

anything about this process. We all know some people like this. Still, the process goes on, even when they ignore it. Practice lessens our ability to ignore it; after a certain amount of practice, even if we say, "Well, I'm not going to do this practice, it's too hard," we can't avoid it. After a while we just practice. Once the awareness is awakened, we can't stuff it back in the box.

The basic concepts of practice are really quite simple. But to do the practice and to gain a genuine understanding of it takes time. Many suppose within the first two years that they clearly understand it. In fact, if we get practice straight in ten or fifteen years, we're doing pretty well. For most, twenty years is what it takes. That's when a practice is reasonably clear and we're doing it as much as we can from the time we wake up in the morning to the time we go to bed at night. Then, practice even goes on all night in one's sleep. So there's no "quick fix." As we continue to practice, however, it becomes more enjoyable, even fun. Our knees may ache, we may face all sorts of problems in our lives, but practice can be fun, even while it is difficult, painful, frustrating.

STUDENT: At times, it's exhilarating. Whenever I become pain-free in practice, I start to laugh.

JOKO: Because you see something you haven't seen before?

STUDENT: Yes, of course.

STUDENT: You suggested that in a sense, there's no such thing as Zen practice. Could you explain?

JOKO: There's a practice of maintaining awareness; in that sense, Zen practice exists. But so long as we're alive, there's the question of awareness. We can't avoid it. In that sense, there's no way to avoid practice, or even to do it. It's just being alive. Though there are certain formal activities that assist us in waking up (which we can call Zen practice if we want), real "Zen practice" is just being here right now and not adding anything to this.

STUDENT: Back to the analogy of the wall with little faucets on it: when we find a faucet and attach ourselves to it, we do get some water out, don't we?

JOKO: Yes, for a while we quench our thirst slightly. For example, suppose for six months you have wanted to take a girl out on a date, and finally you get up the courage to ask her and she says yes. For a brief moment there's tremendous elation. We could call that getting water, though whether you are truly satisfied is another question. Sooner or later, the elation subsides, and life again seems to present us with new problems. I'm talking about a way of living in which life itself is no problem. We *have* problems, but there's no problem in dealing with them. Everyone probably has a glimpse of that now and then.

In a sense, Zen is a religious practice. *Religion* really means to rejoin that which seems to be separate. Zen practice helps us to do that. But it's not a religion in the sense that there's something outside of ourselves that's going to take care of us. A lot of people who practice Zen have no formal religious affiliation. I have nothing against formal religion; in all religions there are some remarkable people who truly practice and know what they're doing. But there are also people who have no connection with formal religion whatsoever, yet who practice just as well. In the end there is no practice except what we're doing each second.

Because true practice and religion help us to rejoin what seems to be separate, all practice has to be about anger. Anger is the emotion that separates us. It cuts everything right in two.

STUDENT: Is not this practice very difficult to do entirely by oneself? When one of my belief systems breaks down, I feel betrayed and need some support from others.

JOKO: "I feel betrayed" is, of course, just another thought. It is more difficult to practice alone, but it's not impossible. It's useful to come to a Zen center to get a foundation, then maintain some contact long distance and come to sit with others when one can. When one practices alone, it's like swimming against

the current. In a community of persons practicing together, we have a mutual language and common understanding of what practice is. Still, I have some excellent students who live far from Zen centers and who talk with me on the phone. Some of them are doing very well. And for some, the struggle of a practice done with such minimal support may be the most useful thing.

The Talk Nobody Wants to Hear

If we're honest, we have to admit that what we really want from practice—especially at the beginning, but always to some degree—is greater comfort in our lives. We hope that with sufficient practice, what bothers us now will not bother us anymore. There are really two viewpoints from which we can approach practice, which need to be spelled out. The first viewpoint is what most of us *think* practice is (whether we admit it or not), and the second is what practice actually is. As we practice over time, we gradually shift from one viewpoint toward the other, though we never completely abandon the first. We're all somewhere on this continuum.

57

Operating from the first viewpoint, our basic attitude is that we will undertake this demanding and difficult practice because we hope to get certain personal benefits from it. We may not expect them all at once. We may have some limited patience, but after a few months of practice, we may begin to feel cheated if our life has not improved. We enter practice with an expectation or demand that it will somehow take care of our problems. Our basic demands are that we be comfortable and happy, that we be more peaceful and serene. We expect that we won't have those awful feelings of upset, and we will get what we want. We expect that instead of being unfulfilling, our life will become more rewarding. We hope to be healthier, more at ease. We hope to be more in control of our life. We imagine that we will be able to be nice to others without it being inconvenient.

From practice we demand that we become secure and increasingly achieve what we want: if not money and fame, at least something close. Though we might not want to admit it, we demand that someone take care of us and that the people

close to us function for our benefit. We expect to be able to create life conditions that are pleasing to us, such as the right relationship, the right job, or the best course of study. For those with whom we identify, we want to be able to fix up their lives.

There is nothing wrong with wanting any of these things, but if we think that achieving them is what practice is about, then we still don't understand practice. The demands are all about what *we* want: we want to be enlightened, we want peace, we want serenity, we want help, we want control over things, we want everything to be wonderful.

The second viewpoint is quite different: more and more, we want to be able to create harmony and growth for everyone. We are included in this growth, but we are not the center of it; we're just part of the picture. As the second viewpoint strengthens in us, we begin to enjoy serving others and are less interested in whether serving others interferes with our own personal welfare. We begin to search for life conditions—such as a job, health, a partner—that are most fruitful for such service. They may not always be pleasing for us; what is more important to us is that they teach us to serve life well. A difficult relationship can be extremely fruitful, for example.

As we increasingly adopt the second viewpoint, we learn to serve everyone, not just people we like. Increasingly, we have an interest in being responsible for life, and we're not so concerned whether others feel responsible for us. In fact we even become willing to be responsible for people who mistreat us. Though we may not prefer it, we become more willing to experience trying situations in order to learn.

As we move toward the second viewpoint, we will probably retain the preferences that defined the first viewpoint. We will continue to prefer to be happy, to be comfortable, to be peaceful, to get what we want, to be healthy, to have some control of things. Practice does not cause us to lose our preferences. But when a preference is in conflict with what is most fruitful, then we are willing to give up the preference. In other words, the center of our life is shifting from a preoccupation with our-

selves to life itself. Life includes us, of course; we haven't been eliminated in the second viewpoint. But we're no longer the center.

Practice is about moving from the first to the second viewpoint. There is a pitfall inherent in practice, however: if we practice well, many of the demands of the first viewpoint may be satisfied. We are likely to feel better, to be more comfortable. We may feel more at ease with ourselves. Because we're not punishing our bodies with as much tension, we tend to be healthier. These changes can confirm in us the misconception that the first viewpoint is correct: that practice is about making life better for ourselves. In fact, the benefits to ourselves are incidental. The real point of practice is to serve life as fully and fruitfully as we can. And that's very hard for us to understand, especially at first. "You mean that I should take care of someone who has just been cruel to me? That's crazy!" "You mean that I have to give up my own convenience to serve someone who doesn't even like me?"

Our ego-centered attitudes are deep-rooted, and it takes years and years of hard practice to loosen these roots a bit. And we're convinced that practice is about the first viewpoint, that we are going to get something from it that's wonderful for ourselves.

True practice, however, is much more about seeing how we hurt ourselves and others with deluded thinking and actions. It is seeing how we hurt people, perhaps simply because we are so lost in our own concerns that we can't see them. I don't think we really want to hurt others; it's just that we don't quite see what we are doing. I can tell how well someone's practice is going by whether he or she is developing greater concern for others, concern that extends beyond merely what *I* want, what's hurting *me*, how bad life is, and so on. This is the mark of a practice that's moving along. Practice is always a battle between what we want and what life wants.

It's natural to be selfish, to want what we want, and we are inevitably selfish until we see an alternative. The function of

teaching in a center like this is to help us see the alternative and to disturb us in our selfishness. So long as we are caught in the first viewpoint, governed by wanting to feel good or blissful or enlightened, we *need* to be disturbed. We *need* to be upset. A good center and a good teacher assist that. Enlightenment is, after all, simply an absence of any concern for self. Don't come to this center to feel better; that's not what this place is about. What I want are lives that get bigger so that they can take care of more things, more people.

This morning I had a call from a former student who has lung cancer. In an earlier operation, three-quarters of his lungs were removed, and he's devoting himself to sitting and practice. Some time after the operation, he began to have troubles with his vision and with severe headaches. Tests revealed two brain tumors: the cancer had spread. He's back in the hospital for treatment. We talked about the treatment and how he's doing. I told him, "I'm really very sorry this has happened for you. I just want you to be comfortable. I hope things will go well." He replied, "That's not what I want from you. I want you to rejoice. This is it for me—and it's wonderful. I see what my life is." He went on to say, "It doesn't mean I don't get angry and frightened and climb the walls. All those things are going on, *and* now I know what my life is. I don't want anything from you except that you share in my rejoicing. I wish everyone could feel the way I do."

He is living from the second viewpoint, the one in which we embrace those life conditions—our job, our health, our partner—that will be most fruitful to all. He's got it. Whether he lives two months, two years, or a long time, in a sense it does not matter. I'm not suggesting that he's a saint. He will have days of extreme difficulty: pain, anger, rebellion. These things are going on now for him; yet that wasn't what he wanted to talk about. If he were to recover, he would still have all the struggles and difficulties that everyone else does, the demands and dreams of the ego. These things never really go away, but how we hold them can change.

The shift from the first to the second viewpoint is hard for us to comprehend, especially at first. I have noticed in talking with people who are new to practice that often my words simply don't register. Like a cat on a hot tin roof or drops of water in a hot frying pan, the words touch momentarily and then jump off and vanish. Over time, however, the words don't bounce off so quickly. Something begins to sink in. We can hold the truth longer about how life is as opposed to how we think it might be or should be. Over time the ability simply to sit with what life really is increases.

The shift does not happen overnight; we are much too stubborn for that. It may be accelerated by a major illness or disappointment, by a profound loss or other problem. Though I don't wish such crises on anyone, they often bring about needed learning. Zen practice is difficult largely because it creates discomfort and brings us face-to-face with problems in our lives. We don't want to do this, though it helps us to learn, and prods us toward the second viewpoint. To sit quietly when we're upset and would really like to be doing something else is a lesson that sinks in little by little. As we recognize the value of practice, our motivation to practice increases. We begin to sense something. We gain strength to sit day after day, to participate in an all-day sitting, to do a sesshin. The desire to do this hard practice increases. We slowly begin to comprehend what my former student meant when he said, "Now I know what my life is." We're mistaken if we feel sorry for him; perhaps he is one of the lucky ones.

STUDENT: You say that from the second viewpoint, we demand that our lives be more fruitful. Do you mean fruitful to one's practice, or what?

JOKO: Fruitful for life. Fruitful for life overall, including as much of life as possible. That sounds very general, but when it happens in our life, we understand it. For example, perhaps we might go and help a friend to move, even when we're really tired and don't want to do it. We put ourselves out, we

inconvenience ourselves, not to be noble but just because it's needed.

STUDENT: When I hear stories like that, I immediately want to start making plans to do fruitful things.

JOKO: Yes, we can make anything into an ideal to pursue. If we do this, however, we quickly encounter our own resistance—which gives us something to work with. It's all grist for the mill.

62

We don't have to push ourselves to the point where we fall apart. We shouldn't set ourselves up as a martyr; that's just another ideal, an image of how we should be as opposed to how we really are.

STUDENT: When I plan how I can make my life more secure and comfortable, I imagine that it will make me happy at last. But then a question arises: "Will I really be happy?" I notice in myself an anxious grabbing after security and happiness, and behind that ideal is a feeling of dissatisfaction, because somehow I know that's not going to be it, either.

JOKO: There's some value for us in chasing after such dreams, because when we've achieved what we thought we wanted, we can see more clearly that this doesn't give us the satisfaction we craved. That's how we learn. Practice is not about changing what we do so much as being very observant and experiencing what's going on with us.

STUDENT: That process of chasing dreams seems endless. Does it ever fade?

JOKO: It does fade, but only after years and years of practice. For years, I began every sesshin with a sense of resistance: "I don't want to do this because I know how tired I'll be at the end." Who wants to be tired? That resistance has faded for me, now. When sesshin starts, it starts. If we're practicing, ego agendas slowly fade. We shouldn't make that fading yet an-

other agenda item, however. We shouldn't think of practice as a way to get somewhere else. There's nowhere to get to.

STUDENT: In my life right now, I'm making a lot of new friends and contacts. It's exciting. I don't know who's helping whom—whether I'm giving to them, or they to me. Is that related to practice?

JOKO: Practice changes patterns of friendship away from calculating costs and benefits for oneself toward simply being more genuine. In a sense, we can't help others; we can't know what's best for them. Practicing with our own lives is the only way we can help others; we naturally serve others by becoming more who we are.

STUDENT: If we want to operate from the second viewpoint and do what is most fruitful for life, how do we know what to do? How can we tell whether this job or that relationship is the right one?

JOKO: Living from the second viewpoint, we don't bring in ideals or agendas; it's more a matter of seeing clearly what is before us. We act without turning the question over and over in our mind.

Sitting with the issue helps; as we pay attention to our thoughts and the tension in our body, we begin to see more clearly how to act. The actual practice of sitting is always somewhat murky. If we keep sitting long enough, however, slowly over time things get clearer. There's a continuum, and to sit is to move along that continuum. It's not that we get somewhere; more and more we just get ourselves. I don't mean only sitting on a cushion. If we're practicing well, we're doing zazen all the time.

STUDENT: We dream that we're going to know the right thing to do, when in fact at some point we just take a course of action and then, whatever it is, we learn from it. If we make mistakes

and hurt people, we apologize. When I watch my mind and stay with my body, out of that comes some course of action. It may be a very confused course of action. If I'm staying with my practice, however, in some way I will learn from it, and that's the best I can do. I can't hope always to know what's best for life. I can only do what I can do.

64

JOKO: Yes. The thought that there should come a time when we absolutely know what to do is part of the first viewpoint. On the way to the second viewpoint, we say, "I'll practice, I'll do my best, and I'll learn from the results."

STUDENT: On the question of helping others, I think that as we see increasingly well our feelings and our tendencies to manipulate a situation, to that extent we're going to be acting more in harmony, or at least creating less havoc. So we don't have to go far to help people. Simply seeing what we're doing as we interact tends to help people naturally without our even really trying.

JOKO: Yes. In contrast, if we view someone outside ourselves as being someone to help, we can be sure we've got a problem. As we just sit over time with our own confusions and limitations, without trying to do anything we do something.

STUDENT: Sometimes what's valuable is not what we do for other people, but what we don't do to them.

JOKO: Right. Often the right course of action is just to let people be. For example, it would be a mistake for me to try to do something for my former student who has cancer. I can only listen to him and be myself. He is living through his situation; that's his learning. I can't do anything about that.

STUDENT: In myself lately I have discovered a greater availability. I seem to be less self-conscious, and more open-ended and available to others. Part of it is simply being more relaxed. People come to me with their concerns. It's not that they're asking for help; usually they just want someone to listen. All I

have to do is just be myself and be available, say, to someone at the other end of the telephone line who says, "I want to share something with you. . . ."

JOKO: Yes.

STUDENT: Joko, you seem to be available all of the time in that way.

JOKO: Not always; I turn off the phone sometimes.

STUDENT: I think you don't do it enough for your own good. There are some people who really take advantage of you.

JOKO: But that's my job. And, remember, no one can "take advantage" of me.

STUDENT: Are you saying that whenever somebody cries out to you, "I need help, I need help, I need help!" you must always respond? What do you do with people who call up and complain the whole time?

JOKO: I say something like "I hear what you're saying. Maybe you could practice with this. How would you practice with this?"

I don't mind if somebody complains; we're all complaining, though we may not admit it. We all like to complain. I do mind, however, if people just want to tell their story endlessly, without any space for reflection on what they might do to deal with their life. I have no place in that. They may have to suffer until they are willing to wake up a little.

STUDENT: I was very touched by your story of your former student with cancer. I have tremendous resistance to acknowledging that amount of suffering as okay.

JOKO: It's not for us to say that the suffering is okay. I don't want him to suffer either. But it's what he says that matters.

Life presents us with lessons all the time. It's better if we can learn each one, including the small ones. But we don't want to

learn them. We want to blame a problem on somebody else, just brush it aside, or block it out. When we refuse to learn from the smaller problems, we're forced to confront bigger ones. Practice is about learning from each thing as it comes up, so that when bigger issues confront us, we're more able to handle them.

66

STUDENT: I recently got reacquainted with the fact that when I start moving away from the rut I've been traveling in and moving more in the direction that I need to be going, it will occasion all kinds of chaos. It's not going to feel good.

JOKO: Right. As we begin serious practice, and for some time thereafter, life often feels worse, not better. That's another part of the talk nobody wants to hear.

Can Anything Hurt Us?

A Zen student called me recently to complain about my emphasis on the difficulty of practice. She said, "I think you make a mistake in urging your students to take their practice so seriously. Life should be about enjoying ourselves and having a good time." I asked her, "Has that approach ever worked for you?" She said, "Well, not really . . . yet. But I have hope."

75

I understand her attitude, and I sympathize with anyone who feels that practice is really hard work. It is. But I also feel sad for those who are not yet willing to do this kind of serious work, because they will suffer most. Still, people have to make their own choices, and some are just not ready for serious practice. I said to the Zen student, "Just do your practice or not according to your own lights, and I'll support you in doing that." Whatever people are doing, I want to support them—because that's where they are, and that's fine.

The fact is that for most of us, our lives are *not* working well. Until we engage in a serious practice, our basic view of life usually remains pretty much untouched. In fact, life continues to aggravate us, and even gets worse. Serious practice is needed if we are to see into the fallacy that is at the bottom of almost all human action, thinking, and emotion.

As human beings we see life by means of a certain sensory apparatus and because people and objects seem external to us, we experience much misery. Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. Certainly it *looks* as though I am separate from other people and from all else in the phenomenal world. This misconception that we're separate creates all the difficulties of human life.

As long as we think we're separate, we're going to suffer. If we feel separate we're going to feel that we have to defend ourselves, that we have to try to be happy, that we have to find

something in the world around us that's going to make us happy.

Now the truth of the matter is that we're not separate. We are all expressions or emanations of a central point—call it multidimensional energy. We can't picture this; the central point or energy has no size, no space, no time. I'm speaking metaphorically about what can't really be spoken of in ordinary terms.

76

Following this metaphor, it's as though this central point radiates out in billions of rays, each thinking that it's separate from all others. In truth, each of us is always that center, and that center is us. Because everything is connected in that center, we're all just one thing.

We don't see that unity, however. Perhaps if we know enough contemporary theoretical physics, we can see the point intellectually. As we practice over the years, however, some inkling of this truth begins to creep into our experience here and there: we don't feel so separate from others. As we begin to feel less separate, life as it happens around us isn't as upsetting. Situations, people, and difficulties begin to land on us a little more lightly. A subtle shift is taking place. Over a lifetime of sitting this process slowly strengthens. There may be brief moments when we flash into who we really are, though by themselves, such moments are not terribly important. More important is the slowly growing realization that we're not separate. In ordinary terms, we still appear to exist separately, but we don't feel as separate. Consequently, we don't struggle with life as much: we don't have to fight it, we don't have to please it, we don't have to worry about it. This is the path of practice.

If we don't struggle with life, does this mean that life can't hurt us? Is there anything outside of ourselves that can hurt us? Being Zen students, we may have learned to say—intellectually at least—that the answer is no. But what do we really think? Is there any person or situation that can hurt us?

Of course, we all think there is. In working with my students, I hear countless stories of being hurt or upset. They are all versions of "This happened to me." Our partners, our par-

ents, our children, our pets—"This happened, and it upset me." We all do this, without exception. That's what our life is. Perhaps things go fairly smoothly for a time, and then suddenly something happens to upset us. In other words, we're a victim. Now that's our usual human view of living. It's ingrained, almost inborn.

When we feel victimized by the world, we look for something outside of ourselves that will take away our hurt. It could be a person, it could be getting something we want, it could be some change in our job status, some recognition, perhaps. Since we don't know where to look, and we hurt, we seek comfort somewhere.

Until we truly see that we're not separate from anything, we're going to struggle with our lives. When we struggle, we have trouble. We either do foolish things or we feel upset or we feel unfulfilled or we feel as though something's missing. It's as though life presents us with a series of questions that can't be answered. And as a matter of fact, they can't. Why?

Because they're false questions. They're not based on reality. Feeling that something is wrong and seeking ways to fix it—when we begin to see the error in this pattern, serious practice begins. The young woman who called me hasn't reached this point. She still imagines that something external will make her happy. Maybe a million dollars?

With people who practice, on the other hand, there's a little chink in the armor, a little insight. We may not want to recognize this insight. Still, we do begin to comprehend that there's another way to live beyond feeling assaulted by life and then trying to find a remedy.

From the very beginning, there's nothing wrong. There is no separation: it's all one radiant whole. Nobody believes this, and until we have practiced a long time it's hard to get. Even with six months of intelligent practice, however, there begins to be a little shake in the false structure of our beliefs. The structure begins to fall apart here and there. As we practice over the years, the structure weakens. The enlightened state exists when it falls apart completely.

Yes, we do have to be serious about our practice. If you're not ready to be serious, that's fine. Just go live your life. You need to be kicked around for a while. That's okay. People shouldn't be at a Zen center until they feel there's nothing else they can do: that's the time to show up.

Let's return to our question: can something or someone hurt us? Let's take up some real disasters. Suppose I've lost my job and I'm seriously ill. Suppose all my friends have left me. Suppose an earthquake has destroyed my house. Can I be hurt by all that? Of course I think that I can. And it would be terrible for such things to happen. But can we truly be hurt by such events? Practice helps us to see that the answer is no.

It's not that the point of practice is to avoid feeling hurt. What we call "hurt" still happens: I may lose my job; an earthquake may destroy my house. But practice helps me to handle crises, to take them in stride. So long as we are immersed in our hurt, we'll be a bundle of woe that is of little use to anybody. If we're not wrapped up in our melodrama of pain, on the other hand, even during a crisis we can be of use.

So what happens if we truly practice? Why does the feeling that life can hurt us begin to soften over time? What takes place?

Only a self-centered self, a self that is attached to mind and body, can be hurt. That self is really a concept formed of thoughts we believe in; for example, "If I don't get that, I'll be miserable," or "If this doesn't work out for me, it's just terrible," or "If I don't have a house to live in, that's *really* terrible." What we call the self is no more than a series of thoughts that we're attached to. When we're engrossed in our small selves, reality—the basic energy of the universe—is hardly noticed at all.

Suppose I feel I have no friends, and I'm very lonely. What happens if I sit with that? I begin to see that my feelings of loneliness are really just thoughts. As a matter of fact, I'm simply sitting here. Maybe I'm sitting alone in my room, without a date. Nobody has called me, and I feel lonely. In fact, however, I'm simply sitting. The loneliness and the misery are simply my thoughts, my judgments that things should be other than

what they are. I haven't seen through them; I haven't recognized that my misery is manufactured by me. The truth of the matter is, I'm simply sitting in my room. It takes time before we can see that just to sit there is okay, just fine. I cling to the thought that if I don't have pleasant and supportive company, I am miserable.

I'm not recommending a life in which we cut ourselves off in order to be free of attachment. Attachment concerns not what we have, but our opinions about what we have. There's nothing wrong with having a fair amount of money, for example. Attachment is when we can't envision life without it. Likewise, I'm not saying to give up being with people. Being with people is immensely enjoyable. Sometimes, however, we're in situations where we have to be alone. For example, one might have to spend six months doing a research project somewhere in the middle of a desert. For most of us, that would be very hard. But if I'm doing research in the middle of nowhere for six months, the truth of the matter is, that's just the way it is; that's just what I'm doing.

The difficult, slow change of practice grounds our life and makes it genuinely more peaceful. Without striving to be peaceful, we find that more and more, the storms of life hit us lightly. We're beginning to release our attachment to the thoughts we think are ourselves. That self is simply a concept that weakens with practice.

The truth is that nothing can hurt us. But we certainly can *think* we're being hurt, and we certainly can struggle to remedy the thoughts of hurt in ways that can be quite unfruitful. We try to remedy a false problem with a false solution, and of course that creates mayhem. Wars, damage to the environment—all come out of this ignorance.

If we refuse to do this work—and we won't do it until we're ready—to some degree we suffer, and everything around us suffers. Whether one practices is not a matter of good or bad, right or wrong. We have to be ready. But when we don't practice, a sad price is paid.

Of course, the original oneness—that center of multidimensional energy—remains undisturbed. There's no way that we can disturb it. It always just *is*, and that's what we are. From the standpoint of the phenomenal life we live, however, there's a price that is paid.

I'm not trying to create guilty feelings in anyone. Such feelings are themselves merely thoughts. I'm not criticizing the young woman who didn't want to take practice seriously. That's just exactly where she's at, and that's perfect for her. As we practice, however, our resistance to practice diminishes. It does take time.

STUDENT: I can see how we can be one with other people, but it's hard for me to understand what it means to be one with a table or something like that.

JOKO: One with a table? I think the table is a lot easier than people! I haven't had anyone complain to me about conflict with a table. Our troubles nearly always are with people, either individually or in groups.

STUDENT: Maybe I don't understand what you mean by being "one with."

JOKO: "One with" is an absence of anything that divides.

STUDENT: But I just don't feel like a table.

JOKO: You don't have to feel like a table. By "being one with the table," I mean that there's no sense of opposition between you and the table. It's not a question of some special feeling, it's a lack or an absence of feeling separated in an emotional way. Tables usually do not arouse emotion. That's why we don't have any trouble with them.

STUDENT: If someone has, say, arthritis, and is in pain all the time, do you say that that doesn't hurt?

JOKO: No. If we have persistent pain, we should of course do what we can to deal with it. But finally if there's still a residue

of pain, all we can do is experience that residue. It doesn't help to add onto the pain judgments, such as "This is terrible! Poor me; why is it like this?" The pain just *is*. Taken in this way, the pain is a teaching. In my experience, most people who have had a serious illness and who have learned how to use it have found it the best thing that ever happened to them.

STUDENT: If someone can't hurt us, and we can't hurt someone else, that doesn't necessarily give us license to speak our mind because we can't hurt anybody.

81

JOKO: That's right. If we misinterpret the point and say, "I can tell you off because I can't hurt you," already that's a separation. We don't attack others unless we feel separate from them. All serious practice presumes a devotion to basic moral precepts, moral grounds.

STUDENT: What about the historical samurai ethic in Japan? For example, a samurai warrior might say, "Since I'm one with everything, when I slice off the head of an innocent person, there's no killing: that person is me."

JOKO: In an absolute sense, there isn't any killing, since we're all—"alive" or "dead"—just manifestations of that central energy that is everything. But in practical terms, I don't agree with the samurai ethic. If we see that we're not separated from other people, we simply won't attack. The samurai warriors were confusing the absolute and the relative. Absolutely, of course, there is no one who kills and no one to be killed. But in the life that we live, yes, there is. And so we don't do it.

STUDENT: In other words, if we confuse the absolute and the relative, we might use the absolute to justify what we do in the relative?

JOKO: Yes, but only if we live in our heads. If we take practice to be about a philosophical position, we can get really confused. If we know the truth of practice in our very bones—without even thinking about it—we won't make that mistake.

STUDENT: Before I started sitting I didn't think things could hurt me either, because I didn't feel them.

JOKO: That's quite different. You're talking about a psychological numbness. When we're numb, we're not one with the pain; we're pretending it's not there.

82

STUDENT: When I finally tune in and feel how much I'm hurting myself in different ways, it becomes much easier to stop the counterproductive behavior. Until that time, as you said, we're going to do what we're going to do. If we're going to screw things up, that's what we're going to do.

JOKO: That's right. And I don't mean never to object to others' behavior. If someone has done something to me—perhaps stolen all my money for groceries—I may need to object and take some action. If others mistreat us or cause us pain, they may need to know about it. But if we speak to them with anger, they'll never learn what they need to learn. They won't even hear us.

The underlying attitude or knowledge that we're not separate creates a fundamental shift in our emotional life. That knowledge means that whatever happens, we're not especially disturbed by it. Having the knowledge doesn't mean we don't take care of problems as they arise; however, we no longer inwardly say, "Oh, this is awful; nobody else has the troubles I have." It's as if our understanding cancels out such reactions.

STUDENT: So feeling hurt is just our thoughts about the situation?

JOKO: Yes. When we no longer identify with such thoughts, we simply handle the situation and do not get caught emotionally by it.

STUDENT: But one can *feel* hurt.

JOKO: Yes. And I don't mean to deny that feeling. In practice, we work with the complex of physical sensation and thought

that is "I feel hurt." If we totally experience the sensations and thought, then the "feeling hurt" evaporates. I never would say that we shouldn't feel what we feel.

STUDENT: You're saying to give up the attachment to the hurt?

JOKO: No. We can't force ourselves to give up an attachment. Attachment is thought, but we can't just say, "I'm going to give it up." That doesn't work. We have to understand what attachment is. We have to experience the fear—the bodily sensation—that underlies the attachment. Then the attachment will just wither away. A common error in Zen teaching is that we have to "let go." We can't force ourselves to "let go." We have to experience the underlying fear.

Experiencing the attachment or feeling also does not mean dramatizing it. When we dramatize our emotions, we just cover them up.

STUDENT: Are you saying that if we really experience our sadness, for example, we wouldn't need to cry?

JOKO: We might cry. Still, there's a difference between just crying and dramatizing our sadness, or our fear or anger. The dramatizing is quite often a cover. For instance, people who get in fights and throw things and yell and scream are not yet in touch with their anger.

STUDENT: Back to the young woman who thought practice should be less serious and who didn't want to come here to sit: are you equating serious practice with sitting regularly in a Zen center?

JOKO: No, though such regular sitting is immensely useful. I have some students living at a distance who have very strong practices; still, they find some way to get here once in a while. The young woman just isn't ready yet to be doing that. And she's the one who suffers, which is the sad part.

The Icy Couch

122

In experiencing we lose our seemingly dual relationship to other people and things, which is, "I see you, I comment on you, I have thoughts about you or myself," or whatever. Dual relationship is not hard to talk about; but nondual relationship—experiencing—is harder to describe. I want to consider how we get away from living a life that's experiential, how we fall out of the Garden of Eden.

Every human being while growing up decides that he or she needs a strategy, because we cannot grow up without meeting opposition from what we might call the "not-self," that which is seemingly external to us. Often we meet apparent opposition from our parents, friends and relatives, and others. Sometimes the apparent opposition is severe; sometimes it's fairly mild. But no one grows up without developing a strategy to deal with it.

We may decide that our best option for pleasant survival is to be a conforming, "nice" person. If that doesn't seem to work, we may learn to attack others before they can get at us, or we may withdraw. So there are three major strategies for coping: conforming to please, attacking, or withdrawing. Everyone in some way employs one or another of those strategies.

In order to maintain our strategy, we have to think. So the growing child relies more and more on thinking to elaborate that strategy. Any situation or person encountered begins to be evaluated from the standpoint of the chosen strategy. Eventually we approach the whole world as if it were on trial, asking, "Will that individual or event hurt me or not?" Even though we may do it with a social, smiling face, we ask that question of everything we meet.

Eventually we perfect our strategy so that we no longer know it consciously; it's now in the body. For example, suppose we develop a strategy of withdrawing. When we meet anything or anybody, we tighten the body; the response is habitual. We may tighten our shoulders, our face, our stomach, or some other part of the body. The particular style is unique to each person. And we don't even know we're doing it because once the contraction is established, it is in every cell of our body. We don't have to know about it; it's just there. Although the response is unconscious, it makes our life unpleasant because it is a withdrawal from life and a separation from it. The contraction is painful.

Yet everybody has it. Even when we think we're relatively happy, we may be able to detect a mild tension throughout the body. It's nothing spectacular and may be very mild. When everything is going our way, we don't feel bad; yet the mild contraction never ceases. It's always there, with every person on earth.

Children learn how to elaborate their strategies, incorporating everything that happens to them into the framework of their personal systems. Our perceptions become selective, incorporating those events that fit our system and screening out events that don't fit. Because the system is supposed to keep us safe and secure, we're not interested in having it weakened by contradictory information. By the time we reach adulthood the system is ourselves. It's what we call the *ego*. We live our life from it, trying to find people, situations, jobs, that will confirm our strategy and avoiding those that threaten it.

But such maneuvers are never completely satisfactory, because as long as we live, we can never quite know what will happen next. Even if we get most of life under control we never know how to achieve this totally, and we know that we don't know. So there's always an element of fear. It has to be there. Not knowing what to do, the average person seeks everywhere for an answer. We have a problem, and we don't

really know what it is. Life becomes for us the promise that is never kept because the answer eludes us. That's when we may start to practice. Only a few lucky people on the planet begin to see what needs to be done to recover the Garden of Eden, our genuine functioning self.

Perhaps we get a new partner who's just wonderful. (Particularly in relationships, delusion reigns supreme.) Then we marry or live with him or her, and . . . whoops! If we're practicing, this "whoops" can be immensely interesting and instructive. If we're not practicing, we may trade that partner in and look around for a new one. It seems as if the promise has not been kept. Or we start a new job or a new endeavor. At first it's fine, but then we begin to see some harsh realities, and the disillusion begins to set in. If we're living out of our strategy, nothing seems to work, because phenomenal life by definition is a promise that is never kept. If we fulfill a desire, we're happy for a brief moment, but the nature of fulfilling one desire is immediately to find another one, and another one, and another one. There's no way of being free from that pressure or stress. We can't settle. We find no peace.

As we sit, the endless spinning in our heads reveals to us our strategy. If we label our thoughts long enough, we're going to recognize our strategy. It's the strategy itself that generates the buzzing thoughts. Only one thing in our life is not caught by this strategy, and that's the physical, organic life of the body.

Of course, the body is taking punishment because it reflects our self-centeredness. The body has to obey the mind, so if the mind is saying that the world is a terrible place, the body says, "Oh, I'm so depressed!" The minute the images appear—thinking, fantasizing, hoping—the body has to respond. It has a chronic response, and at times that response exacerbates into depression or illness.

The main teacher I've had all my life has been a book. It may be the best book on Zen ever written. However, it's a translation from French, and the writing is unwieldy, with sentences

that are whole paragraphs. After reading one of those sentences, you may ask yourself in puzzlement, "What did he say?" So it's a difficult book; still, it's the best explanation of the human problem that I've ever found. I studied it at one time for ten or fifteen years. I have a copy that looks like it's been through the washing machine. The book is *The Supreme Doctrine* by Hubert Benoit, a French psychiatrist who was in a severe accident that left him almost completely helpless for years. All he could do was just lie there. The human problem was his all-consuming interest, so he used those years of recovery to thoroughly delve into it.

Benoit's term for the emotional contraction arising from our efforts to protect ourselves is "spasm." He calls the ceaseless chatter of our internal dialogue "the imaginary film." The turning point for him comes when he realizes "that this spasm, which I have called abnormal is on the road that leads to satori [enlightenment]. . . . One can indeed say that what should be perceived, under the imaginary film, is a certain profound sensation of cramp, of a paralyzing grip, of immobilizing cold . . . and that it is on this hard couch, immobile and cold, that our attention should remain fixed; as though we tranquilly stretched out our body on a hard but friendly rock that was exactly molded to our form."

What Benoit is saying is that when we rest at peace with our pain, this repose is the "gateless gate." And it's the last place we want to be; it's not pleasant, and our whole strategic drive is for pleasantness. No, we want somebody to comfort us, save us, give us peace. Our ceaseless thinking, planning, and plotting are always about this. Only when we stay with what is beneath the imaginary film and rest there, do we begin to have a clue. The way I usually explain it is: instead of remaining with our thoughts, we label them until they settle down a little and then we do our best to stay with that which really is, the nonduality that is the sensation of our life at this very moment. That goes against everything we want, everything our culture teaches us. But it's the only real solution, the only gate to peace.

As we settle into our sensation of pain, we find it so appalling that we skitter off again. The minute we land in the sensation of discomfort, we spin back again into the imaginary film. We simply don't want to be in the reality of what we are. That's human, neither good nor bad, and it takes years of patient practice to begin to touch this reality more and more, becoming comfortable in resting there—until finally, as Benoit says, it's just a hard and friendly rock that is molded to us, and where we can finally rest and be at peace.

Sometimes we can rest for a short time, but because we are so habituated, we soon go back into the same old mental stuff. And so we go through the process again and again. Over time, it's that ceaseless process that brings us to peace. If it's complete, it can be called satori, or enlightenment.

The imaginary film generates the spasm, and the spasm generates the imaginary film. It's a ceaseless cycle, and it's only broken when we have become willing to rest in our pain. The ability to do this means we have become somewhat disillusioned, no longer hoping that our thoughts and feelings will be a solution to anything. As long as we hold out hope that the promise will be kept, we're not going to rest in the painful body sensations.

So there are two parts of practice. One is endless disappointment. Everything in our life that disappoints us is a kind friend. And we're all being disappointed in some way or other. If we're not disappointed, we never wear out our desire to think and reestablish ourself at the top of the heap with victory. Nobody wins in the end; nobody's going to survive. But that's still our drive, our system. It can only be worn out by years of sitting and by life; that's why our practice and our life have to be the same thing.

We have the illusion that other people are going to make us happy, that they're going to make our lives work. Until we wear out that illusion, there will be no real solution. Other people are for enjoyment, not for any other purpose. They are part of the wonder that life is; they're not here to do something for us. Until this illusion begins to wear out, we're not going to be

content to stay with the spasm, the emotional contraction. We'll spin right off and go right back into our thoughts: "Yes, but if I do this, things will be better. . . ."

Life is a series of endless disappointments, and it's wonderful just because it doesn't give us what we want. To go down this path takes courage, and many people in this lifetime will not do it. We're all at different places on the path, which is fine. Only a very few who are enormously persistent and who take everything in life as an opportunity, and not as an insult, will finally understand. So if we spend all of our effort in trying to make our strategy work better, then we're just spinning our wheels. Our misery goes on till the day we die.

So there's nothing in life but opportunity, nothing. And that includes anything we can think of. Until we are disillusioned about the imaginary film that we spin endlessly (we hardly open our eyes in the morning before it begins), we won't stay with the cramp. We'll spin some more. I suppose that is what is meant by the wheel of karma.

Now, I'm not asking anyone to adopt this description as some sort of belief system. The only way we know the reality of such practice is by doing it. Eventually for a few people (sometimes intermittently but finally most of the time), there is what Christians call "the peace which passeth all understanding."

It has often helped me in difficult times to think of that cold, immobile couch and instead of fighting and struggling, just to be willing to rest on it. Over time we find the couch is the only place that is peaceful, the source of clear action.

As a dharma talk, this all sounds forbidding. Yet the people who endlessly practice are the ones who are enjoying life. This is the gateless gate to joy. People who understand and have the courage to do this are the ones who eventually know what joy is. I'm not talking about endless happiness (there's no such thing), but joy.

STUDENT: Do you often find that people choose one of the strategies, but as time goes by they may move to another one of these strategies? People who may have chosen to, say, withdraw

and not participate may, as they become stronger, decide, "Well, maybe I'm up to conforming and pleasing a little bit." Do people sometimes move away from the wall and out into the crowd?

JOKO: I've often noticed that people who've been dependent and conforming begin to move to a false independence. That's natural, a stage before we can really just be ourselves. The more we practice with the cramp, the more the transformation accelerates. From the standpoint of the phenomenal world, we make progress, though in an absolute sense we're always fine, just as we are.

STUDENT: Resting with our discomfort, we find that it's not so scary and we can venture forth a little bit?

JOKO: Right. For example, we may learn that we can be depressed and still function. We just go ahead and do it. We don't have to feel good to function. The more we can go against our rigid system, the better.

STUDENT: When you talk about the cramp, it sounds like it's part of the rigid system.

JOKO: No, it is produced by the rigid system, but it's the only part of that system that is open to giving you a solution. For example, if we have angry thoughts, the body has to tighten up. We can't have an angry thought about somebody and not tighten up. And if we habitually have a strategy that is angry and attacking, the body will be contracted most of the time. But it's the only part of that system that gives us a gate to go through; because we can experience that cramp and leave it alone, it is free to open up. It might take five years, but it will happen.

STUDENT: I read the other day that whatever our chief feature is, it is good to exaggerate it. For me, however, that would mean to be very angry and to attack others.

JOKO: You may do it in private.

STUDENT: But if I really exaggerate anger and attack to make it more conscious, won't I hurt someone?

JOKO: No. Please remember that the only way to exaggerate is to exaggerate the *sensation* that the cramp is. We shouldn't exaggerate angry behavior. The system is totally unconscious, so as we consciously experience the cramp, it can dissolve itself.

STUDENT: I find from my experience that I'm in this terrible cramp, and then all of a sudden it will change. Something will open up, and I'll be in a space where I feel open and free, and then for no apparent reason I go back into my upset.

JOKO: Evidently you return into your habitual self-centered thinking.

STUDENT: Sometimes it seems like a muscle that was tight and is now relaxing.

JOKO: Yes, but the real cause is not a matter of muscles. Our basic desire to survive lies behind all of our troubles. If there was some way of managing muscles, then all body workers would produce enlightened subjects.

STUDENT: I find that the unpleasant sensation is not a static state. It's constantly in flux, changing all the time. So I'm in and out, all over the place, because it's pure energy, not static.

JOKO: The only thing that interferes with the flow is the fact that we believe our thoughts again. And that's almost habitual with us. We have to sit for many, many years before we don't believe our thoughts. We really do.

STUDENT: Until we wear out the project of trying to protect ourselves against life or fighting the way things are being presented to us at this moment, we will consistently return to the state of contraction, which is, "I don't like this!" It happens all the time.

STUDENT: Where is the cramp located?

JOKO: Wherever you feel it. It could be the face, the shoulders, anywhere. Frequently it's in the lower back.

STUDENT: I'm becoming more aware that some of my thoughts seem simply givens, pictures I have of myself that don't seem like thoughts, or that sound so good that I don't label them. Then there are thoughts that don't get labeled because they sound like good Zen practice.

JOKO: Yes; it's the thought we don't catch that will be running the show.

STUDENT: A lot of my conditioning seems unconscious or subconscious. So I may consciously feel very clear and light, and yet the conditioning is still there, and it does return me to the cramp or the hard bed, the spasm, even though I don't see anything happening in my conscious mind.

JOKO: Right. Remember that in a way there is no such thing as the unconscious, but what is revealed may be very subtle. A lot of what we're talking about isn't a major cramp like what is called a "charley horse."

STUDENT: You said that in good practice the companion to labeling thoughts is experiencing. Does that mean that the thought you're not catching might reveal itself if you are truly experiencing the cramp?

JOKO: Yes. The more we practice and make things conscious, the more the thought we're not conscious of will begin to float up to the surface. All of a sudden it hits us, "Oh, I never realized that before." It just floats up.

STUDENT: What's the repetitive spasm or bodily shaking that tends to come at times in this kind of practice?

JOKO: If we stay with the spasm, quite often the body will shake, or tears may come, because if we really put our attention on the body and give it freedom to be itself, it will begin to

open up and the energy that was blocked will begin to surface. It may take the form of crying, shaking, or other involuntary movements.

STUDENT: Could you talk more about feelings?

JOKO: Feelings are simply thoughts plus bodily sensations.

STUDENT: And if a feeling comes up?

JOKO: Break it down. Either see what the thoughts are, or go into the body.

131

STUDENT: As we are experiencing, does the experiencing actually trigger memories or insights?

JOKO: Yes, sometimes. If we keep experiencing, the cramp sometimes will crack open. We'll see certain pictures from the past, but I wouldn't worry about them. Just let them come and go. Practice is not about analyzing ourselves, because there is no self. However, in a practice based on experiencing, our life will more and more spring from no-self as a life of direct and effective functioning and—yes!—clear and valuable thinking. Experiencing is the key.