

*Whirlpools and Stagnant Waters*¹

Charlotte Joko Beck

I. Dharma Talk

We are rather like whirlpools in the river of life. In flowing forward, a river or stream may hit rocks, branches, or irregularities in the ground, causing whirlpools to spring up spontaneously here and there. Water entering one whirlpool quickly passes through and rejoins the river, eventually joining another whirlpool and moving on. Though for short periods it seems to be distinguishable as a separate event, the water in the whirlpools is just the river itself. The stability of a whirlpool is only temporary. The energy of the river of life forms living things—a human being, a cat or dog, trees and plants—then what held the whirlpool in place is itself altered, and the whirlpool is swept away, reentering the larger flow. The energy that was a particular whirlpool fades out and the water passes on, perhaps to be caught again and turned for a moment into another whirlpool.

We'd rather not think of our lives in this way, however. We don't want to see ourselves as simply a temporary formation, a whirlpool in the river of life. The fact is, we take form for a while; then when conditions are appropriate, we fade out. There's nothing wrong with fading out; it's a natural part of the process. However, we want to think that this little whirlpool that we are isn't part of the stream. We want to see ourselves as permanent and stable. Our whole energy goes into trying to protect our supposed separateness. To protect the separateness, we set up artificial, fixed boundaries; as a consequence, we accumulate excess baggage, stuff that slips into our whirlpool and can't flow out again. So things clog up our whirlpool and the process gets messy. The stream needs to flow naturally and freely. If our particular whirlpool is all bogged down, we also impair the energy of the stream itself. It can't go anywhere. Neighboring whirlpools may get less water because of our frantic holding on. What we can best do for ourselves and for life is to keep the water in our whirlpool rushing and clear so that it is just flowing in and flowing out. When it gets all clogged up, we create troubles—mental, physical, spiritual.

We serve other whirlpools best if the water that enters ours is free to rush through and move on easily and quickly to whatever else needs to be stirred. The energy of life seeks rapid transformation. If we can see life this way and not cling to anything, life simply comes and goes. When debris flows into our little whirlpool, if the flow is even and strong, the debris rushes around for a while and then goes on its way. Yet that's not how we live our lives. Not seeing that we are simply a whirlpool in the river of the universe, we view ourselves as separate entities, needing to protect our boundaries. The very judgment "I feel hurt" establishes a boundary, by naming an "I" that demands to be protected. Whenever trash floats into our whirlpool, we make great efforts to avoid it, to expel it, or to somehow control it.

Ninety percent of a typical human life is spent trying to put boundaries around the whirlpool. We're constantly on guard: "He might hurt me." "This might go wrong." "I don't like him anyway." This is a complete misuse of our life function; yet we all do it to some degree.

Financial worries reflect our struggle to maintain fixed boundaries. "What if my investment doesn't work out? I might lose all of my money." We don't want anything to threaten our money supply. We all

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think that would be a terrible thing. By being protective and anxious, clinging to our assets, we clog up our lives. Water that should be rushing in and out, so it can serve, becomes stagnant. A whirlpool that puts up a dam around itself and shuts itself off from the river becomes stagnant and loses its vitality. Practice is about no longer being caught in the particular, and instead seeing it for what it is—a part of the whole. Yet we spend most of our energies creating stagnant water. That's what living in fear will do. The fear exists because the whirlpool doesn't understand what it is—none other than the stream itself. Until we get an inkling of that truth, all of our energies go in the wrong direction. We create many stagnant pools, which breed contamination and disease. Pools seeking to dam themselves for protection begin to contend with one another. "You're smelly. I don't like you." Stagnant pools cause a lot of trouble. The freshness of life is gone.

Zen practice helps us to see how we have created stagnation in our lives. "Have I always been so angry, and just never noticed it?" So our first discovery in practice is to recognize our own stagnation, created by our self-centered thoughts. The biggest problems are created by attitudes we cannot see in ourselves. Unacknowledged depression, fear, and anger create rigidity. When we recognize the rigidity and stagnation, the water begins to flow again, bit by bit. So the most vital part of practice is to be willing to be life itself—which is simply the incoming sensations—that which creates our whirlpool.

Over the years, we have trained ourselves to do the opposite: to create stagnant pools. This is our false accomplishment. Out of this ongoing effort come all of our troubles and our separation from life. We don't know how to be intimate, to be the stream of life. A stagnant whirlpool with defended boundaries isn't close to anything. Caught in a self-centered dream, we suffer, as one of our daily Zen Center vows states. Practice is the slow reversal of that. With most students, this reversal is the work of a lifetime. The change is often painful, especially at first. When we are used to the rigidity and controlled stiffness of a defended life, we don't want to allow fresh currents into awareness, however refreshing they may truly be.

The truth is, we don't like fresh air very much. We don't like fresh water very much. It takes a long time before we can see our defensiveness and manipulation of life in our daily activities. Practice helps us to see these maneuvers more clearly, and such recognition is always unpleasant. Still, it's essential that we see what we are doing. The longer we practice, the more readily we can recognize our defensive patterns. The process is never easy or painless, however, and those who are hoping to find a quick and easy place of rest should not undertake it. . . .

What we do get out of practice is being more awake. Being more alive. Knowing our own mischievous tendencies so well that we don't need to visit them on others. We learn that it's never okay to yell at somebody just because we feel upset. Practice helps us to realize where our life is stagnant. Unlike rushing mountain streams, with wonderful water flowing in and flowing out, we may be brought to a dead halt by "I don't like it...He really hurt my feelings," or "I have such a hard life." In truth, there is only the ongoing rush of the water. What we call our life is nothing but a little detour, a whirlpool that springs up, then fades away. Sometimes the detours are tiny and very brief: life swirls for a year or two in one place, then is wiped away. People wonder why some babies die when they are young. Who knows? We don't know why. It is part of this endless rushing of energy. When we can join this, we're at peace. When all of our efforts go in the opposite direction, we are not at peace.

II. Question and Answer

STUDENT: In our individual lives, is it a good idea to choose some specific direction and set our sights on that, or is it better just to take things as they come? Setting up specific goals can block the flow of life, right?

JOKO: The problem lies not in having goals, but in how we relate to them. We need to have some goals. For example, parents typically set certain goals for themselves, such as planning ahead to provide for their children's education. People with natural talents may have the goal of developing them. Nothing wrong with that. Having goals is part of being human. It's the way we do it that creates the trouble.

STUDENT: The best way is to have goals but not cling to the end result?

JOKO: That's right. One simply does what is required to reach the goal. Anyone who seeks an educational degree needs to register in an educational program and take the courses, for example. The point is to promote the goal by accomplishing it in the present: doing this, doing that, doing this, as it becomes necessary, right here, right now. At some point, we get the degree or whatever. On the other hand, if we only dream of the goal and neglect to pay attention to the present, we will probably fail to get on with our lives—and become stagnant. Whatever choice we make, the outcome will provide us with a lesson. If we are attentive and aware, we will learn what we need to do next. In this sense, there is no wrong decision. The minute we make a decision, we are confronted with our next teacher. We may make decisions that make us very uncomfortable. We may be sorry that we did what we did—and we learn from that. There is, for example, no ideal person to marry or ideal way to live one's life. The minute we marry somebody, we have a fresh set of opportunities for learning, fuel for practice. That's true not only of marriage, but of any relationship. Insofar as we practice with what comes up, the outcome will nearly always be rewarding and worthwhile.

STUDENT : When I set a goal for myself I tend to go into a "fast forward" mode and ignore the flow of the river.

JOKO: When the whirlpool tries to become independent of the river, like a tornado spinning out of control, it can cause a lot of damage. Even though we think of the goal as some future state to achieve, the real goal is always the life of this moment, this moment, this moment. There's no way to push the river aside. Even if we have created a dam around ourselves and become a stagnant pool, something will turn up that we have not anticipated. Perhaps a friend invites herself and her four children to visit for a week. Or someone dies; or our work suddenly changes. Life seems to present us with whatever it takes to stir up the pool.

STUDENT: In terms of the analogy of the whirlpools and the river, what is the difference between life and death?

JOKO : A whirlpool is a vortex, with a center around which the water spins. As one's life goes on, that center gradually gets weaker and weaker. When it weakens enough, it flattens out and the water simply becomes part of the river again.

STUDENT: From that point of view, wouldn't it be better to always be just part of the river?

JOKO: We are always part of the river, whether or not we are a whirlpool. We can't avoid being part of the river. We don't know that, however, because we have a distinct form and do not see beyond it.

STUDENT: So it's a delusion that life is different from death?

JOKO : That's true in an absolute sense, though from our human point of view they are distinct. On different levels, each is true: there is no life and death and there is life and death. When we know only the latter, we cling to life and fear death. When we see both, the sting of death is largely mitigated. If we wait long enough, every whirlpool will eventually flatten out. Change is inevitable. Having lived in San Diego for a long time, I have watched the cliffs of La Jolla for many years. They're changing. The shoreline that now exists is not the same shoreline that I saw thirty years ago. Likewise with whirlpools; they also change and eventually just weaken. Something gives way and the water rushes on— and that's fine.

STUDENT: When we do die, do we retain anything of what we were or is it all gone?

JOKO: I'm not going to answer that. Your practice will give you some insight into that question.

STUDENT: You have sometimes described the energy of life as a native intelligence that we are. Does that intelligence have any boundaries?

JOKO : No. Intelligence is not a thing; it is not a person. It doesn't have boundaries. The minute we give something boundaries, we've put it back into the phenomenal sphere of things, like a whirlpool that sees itself as separate from the river.

STUDENT : Another of our regular Zen Center vows speaks of a "boundless field of benefaction." Is that the same as the river, the native intelligence that we are?

JOKO: Yes. Human life is simply a temporary form taken by this energy.

STUDENT: Yet in our lives there do need to be boundaries. I have a lot of difficulty reconciling this with what you're saying.

JOKO : Some boundaries are simply inherent in what we are; for example, each of us has a limited amount of energy and time. We need to recognize our limitations in this sense. This doesn't mean that we have to establish artificial, defensive boundaries that block our life. Even as small whirlpools, we can recognize that we are part of the river—and not become stagnant.

Dharma Discussion Questions 1-4

Question 1:

In response to a student's question about how the whirlpools describe life and death. Joko responds: "A whirlpool is a vortex, with a center around which the water spins. As one's life goes on, that center gradually gets weaker and weaker. When it weakens enough, it flattens out and the water simply becomes part of the river again."

How accurate is Joko's description of our lives as "whirlpools" in the river of life?

Question 2:

In another exchange, a student wonders whether setting up specific goals can block the natural flow of our lives. Joko responds: "The problem lies not in having goals, but in how we relate to them. We need to have some goals. For example, parents typically set certain goals for themselves, such as planning ahead to provide for their children's education. People with natural talents may have the goal of developing them. Nothing wrong with that. Having goals is part of being human. It's the way we do it that creates the trouble."

If having goals is "part of being human," how can we relate differently to the "trouble" Joko describes? What kinds of "troubles" might she be referring to?

Question 3:

Joko States in the talk: "Ninety percent of a typical human life is spent trying to put boundaries around the whirlpool. We're constantly on guard: "He might hurt me." "This might go wrong." "I don't like him anyway." This is a complete misuse of our life function; yet we all do it to some degree."

Does meditation practice help us to dissolve the boundaries of our own fear, anxiety, anger, etc.? Is this process in our lives as natural as the flowing water Joko describes?

Question 4:

Joko States: "What we do get out of practice is being more awake. Being more alive. Knowing our own mischievous tendencies so well that we don't need to visit them on others."

Is our practice only about "being more awake" and knowing our own "mischievous tendencies"?