

The Talk Nobody Wants to Hear¹

I. Dharma Talk

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.

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.

¹ From the book *Nothing Special: Living Zen* by Charlotte Joko Beck and edited by Steve Smith (published by HarperCollins, 1994)

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 ourselves 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.

II. Question and Answer

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. 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 as 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 another 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.

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.

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.

Dharma Discussion Questions

1. Joko: “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, and the second is what practice actually is . . . The [first viewpoint] is 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.”

Does this conception of practice as the “second viewpoint” resonate with your own experience? Why/why not?

2. 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.

In the above exchange, Joko corrects her student by pointing out that “It’s not for us to say that the suffering is okay. Life presents us with lessons all the time. It’s better if we can learn each one, including the small ones.” How does this passage and any other part of the exchange clarify/obscure why we practice?

3. Joko: “As we just sit over time with our own confusions and limitations, without trying to do anything we do something.”

What does Joko means by “without trying to do anything we do something”?

4. Joko: “As we begin serious practice, and for some time thereafter, life often feels worse, not better.”

Why would life feel worse after we begin serious practice?