

Joy

By Charlotte Joko Beck

I'm often accused of emphasizing the difficulties in practice. The accusation is true. Believe me, the difficulties are there. If we don't recognize them and why they arise, we tend to fool ourselves. Still, the ultimate reality—not only in our sitting, but also in our lives—is joy. By joy I don't mean happiness; they're not the same. Happiness has an opposite; joy does not. As long as we seek happiness, we're going to have unhappiness, because we always swing from one pole to the other.

From time to time, we do experience joy. It can arise accidentally or in the course of our sitting or elsewhere in our lives. For a while after sesshin, we may experience joy. Over years of practice, our experience of joy deepens—if, that is, we understand practice and are willing to do it. Most people are not.

Joy isn't something we have to find. Joy is who we are if we're not preoccupied with something else. When we try to find joy, we are simply adding a thought—and an unhelpful one, at that—onto the basic fact of what we are. We don't need to go looking for joy. But we do need to do something. The question is, what? Our lives don't feel joyful, and we keep trying to find a remedy.

Our lives are basically about perception. By perception I mean whatever the senses bring in. We see, we hear, we touch, we smell, and so on. That's what life really is. Most of the time, however, we substitute another activity for perception; we cover it over with something else, which I'll call evaluation. By evaluation, I don't mean an objective, dispassionate analysis—as for example when we look over a messy room and consider or evaluate how to clean it up. The evaluation I have in mind is ego centered: “Is this next episode in my life going to bring me something I like, or not? Is it going to hurt, or isn't it? Is it pleasant or unpleasant? Does it make me important or unimportant? Does it give me something material?” It's our nature to evaluate in this way. To the extent that we give ourselves over to evaluation of this kind, joy will be missing from our lives.

It's amazing how quickly we can switch into evaluation. Perhaps we're functioning pretty well—and then suddenly somebody criticizes what we're doing. In a fraction of a second, we jump into our thoughts. We're quite willing to get into that interesting space of judging others or ourselves. There's a lot of drama in all of this, and we like it, more than we realize. Unless the drama becomes lengthy and punishing, we enter willingly into it, because as human beings we have a basic orientation toward drama. From an ordinary point of view, to be in a world of pure perception is pretty dull.

Suppose we've been away on vacation for a week, and we come back. Perhaps we've enjoyed ourselves, or we think we have. When we return to work, the “In” box is loaded with things to do, and scattered all over the desk are little messages, “While You Were Out.” When people call us at work, it usually means that they want something. Perhaps the job we left for someone else to take care of has been neglected. Immediately, we're evaluating the situation. “Who fouled up?” “Who slacked off?” “Why is she calling? I bet it's the same old problem.” “It's their responsibility anyway. Why are they calling me?” Likewise, at the end of sesshin we may experience the flow of a joyful life; then we wonder where it goes. Though it doesn't go anywhere, something has happened: a cloud covers the clarity.

Until we know that joy is exactly what's happening, minus our opinion of it, we're going to have only a small amount of joy. When we stay with perception rather than getting

lost in evaluation, however, joy can be the person who didn't do the job while we were gone. It can be the interesting encounter on the phone with all of the people we have to call, no matter what they want. Joy can be having a sore throat; it can be getting laid off; it can be unexpectedly having to work overtime. It can be having to take a math exam or dealing with one's former spouse who wants more money. Usually we don't think that these things are joy.

Practice is about dealing with suffering. It's not that the suffering is important or valuable in itself, but that suffering is our teacher. It's the other side of life, and until we can see all of life, there's not going to be any joy. To be honest, sesshin is controlled suffering. We get a chance to face our suffering in a practice situation. As we sit, all the traditional attributes of a good Zen student come under fire: endurance, humility, patience, compassion. These things sound great in books, but they're not so attractive when we're hurting. That's why sesshin ought not to be easy: we need to learn to be with our suffering and still act appropriately. When we learn to be with our experience, whatever it is, we are more aware of the joy that is our life. Sesshin is a good chance to learn this lesson. When we're prepared to practice, suffering can be a fortunate thing. None of us wants to recognize this fact. I certainly try to avoid suffering; there are lots of things I don't want happening in my life. Still, if we can't learn to be our experience even when it hurts, we'll never know joy. Joy is being the circumstances of our life just as they are. If someone's been unfair to us, that's it. If someone's telling lies about us, that's it also.

The material wealth of this country in some ways makes it more difficult for us to experience the basic joy that we are. Travelers to India sometimes report that along with the enormous poverty, there is an extraordinary joy. Faced with life and death all the time, the people have learned something that is hard for most of us: they have learned to appreciate each moment. We don't do very well with that. Our very prosperity—all of the things we take for granted and all of the things we want more of—is in a way a barrier. There are other barriers, more basic ones. But our wealth is certainly part of the problem.

In practice, we return over and over again to perception, to just sitting. Practice is just hearing, just seeing, just feeling. This is what Christians call the face of God: simply taking in this world as it manifests. We feel our body; we hear the cars and birds. That's all there is. But we are unwilling to stay in that space for more than a few seconds. We go shooting off, remembering what happened to us last week or thinking about what's going to happen next week. We obsess about persons that we're having trouble with or about our work or whatever. There's nothing wrong with these ideas popping up, but if we get stuck in them, we're into the world of evaluation from our self-centered viewpoint. Most of us spend most of our lives in this viewpoint.

It's natural to think, "If I didn't have such a difficult partner (or difficult roommate or difficult something else), then I know my life would be much calmer. I would be much better able to appreciate my life." That might be true for a short time. Life would feel better for a time, of course. But such comfort is not as valuable as facing what upsets us, because it's this very upset (our tendency to get attached to our dramas, to get involved in them and get our mind racing and our emotions fired up) that is the barrier. There is no real joy in such a life, no joy at all. So we run from difficulties; we try to eliminate something—our partner, our roommate, our whatever—so that we can find a perfect place where nothing can upset us. Does anybody have a place like that? Where could it be? What could even approximate it? Years ago I used to allow myself ten minutes a day to daydream about a tropical island, and every day I would furnish my little hut. My fantasy life got better and better. Finally, I had all of the conveniences. Wonderful food just showed up, and there was the gentle ocean and a lagoon, just right for swimming, next to

the hut. It's fine to daydream consciously if there is a time limit. But my dream couldn't exist, except in my mind. There is no place on earth where we can be free of ourselves. If we were sitting in a cave meditating, we'd still be thinking about something: "How noble of me it is to sit in this cave!" And after a while: "What excuse can I invent to get out of here and not look bad?" If we stop ourselves and find out what we're really feeling or thinking, we'll notice—even if we're working hard—a thin veil of self-concern over our activity. Enlightenment is simply not doing this.

Enlightenment is simply doing what we're doing totally, responding to things as they come up. The modern term is "being in the flow." Joy is just this: something comes up; I perceive it. Something is needed, and I do it, and then the next thing, and the next. I take some time out for a walk or to talk to my friends. There is no problem in a life lived in this way. The joy would never stop, unless I interrupt it with evaluation: reacting to events as problems, blaming, rejecting, straining. "I don't want to do that." When what comes up doesn't fit my idea of what I want to do, I have a problem. If the activity is one I enjoy, I may also drain it of joy. Can you think of examples?

STUDENT: I try to be perfect at it.

STUDENT: I think that doing it makes me important.

STUDENT: I stop paying attention to it and just think about getting it done. STUDENT: I start to compare myself with others and get competitive. STUDENT: I worry about whether I'm doing it right.

STUDENT: I start to worry that it will come to an end.

JOKO : Good. And below the conscious level, there is our deep-seated conditioning, the unconscious motives that drive us to do what we do. All that stuff floats up in time. Even when we have an activity that we like in life, even if we have a partner whom we basically like, the nature of being human is to keep trying to fix things, which takes away the joy. Any self-centered evaluation of a situation will obscure the pure perception which is joy itself. When such thoughts arise, we just see the thoughts and let them go, see the thoughts and let them go, see the thoughts and let them go. We return to the experience of whatever's going on. That is what brings joy into view.

Good sitting doesn't mean that we suddenly have some clear space in which nothing's happening. That may happen occasionally, but it's not important. What is necessary for good sitting is that more and more we are willing to be aware of whatever is happening. We're willing to be aware that, "Yes, I do nothing but think about Tahiti. Isn't that interesting." Or "I broke up with my boyfriend six months ago and what am I doing? All of my thoughts are stuck there. How interesting!" Emotions build out of this kind of thinking—depression, worry, anxiety—and we're stuck in our obsessions. Where's the joy?

For most of us, to stay in the present moment and to keep reminding ourselves that that's what we're here to do, is suffering. We have to be willing to do this practice not just when we're sitting, but for the rest of our lives. If we do, then we increase the percentage of our lives in which we experience joy. In order to do this, we have to pay a price, however. Some people will pay it; some people won't. People sometimes imagine that I can produce joy for them; they think I have some magic. But I can't do anything for others except to tell them what to do. I can't do it for anybody except myself. That's why, if practice is made too easy and there's no price to be paid, we don't ever turn the key in the lock to that door. If we keep running in our life from everything that displeases us, the key never turns.

We should not push ourselves excessively. Depending on our capacity, we may need to back off, to withdraw. But if we withdraw, we can be sure that our problems stay right with us. When we “run away” from our problems, the problems stay right with us. They like us, and they’ll stay right with us until we pay some real attention to them. We say we want to be one with the world, when what we really want is for the world to please us. If we are to be “one with the world,” we must go through years of meticulous practice, of hacking away. There is no shortcut, no way to a life of relative ease and joy, without paying a price. We must see that we get embroiled in our personal stuff, just notice it, and return to this world of pure perception, which doesn’t interest us at all, for the most part. Suzuki Roshi once said, “From the ordinary point of view, to be enlightened would seem pretty dull.” There’s no drama in it whatsoever; there’s just simply being here.

We differ in our ability to be with our perception. But we all have the capacity. It may manifest at a slightly different rate, but we all have the capacity. Since we’re human, we can be awake, and we can always increase the amount of time we are awake. When we’re awake, the moment transforms: it begins to feel good; it gives us power to do the next thing. This capacity can always increase. We must be aware of what we are this second. If we’re angry, we have to know this. We have to feel it. We have to see what thoughts are involved. If we’re bored, this is definitely something to investigate. If we’re discouraged, we need to notice this. If we’re caught up in judgment or self-righteousness, we need to notice this. If we don’t see these things, they rule the roost.

To sum up: as we sit, two activities are occurring: One is pure perception, just sitting here. The content of that perception can be anything. The other activity is evaluation: jumping out of pure perception into our self-centered judgments about everything. In sitting, we deal with this tension, this strain, and this repetitive thinking. We have to deal with our residual conditioning; it’s the only way to joy. We deal with what’s happening right here, right now.

Discussion Questions