

ENDING
THE PURSUIT
OF HAPPINESS

A ZEN GUIDE



B A R R Y M A G I D

AUTHOR OF *ORDINARY MIND*

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BARRY MAGID



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F IT
AIN'T
BROKE
DON'T
Fix IT



IF IT AIN'T BROKE, DON'T FIX IT.

The title of this introduction—and one of the main themes of this book—isn't taken from some thousand-year-old Zen text, although we can find echoes of it in such Chinese classics as the *Tao Te Ching* or *Hsin Hsin Ming*. But just as the old masters spoke in the colloquial language of their time, so we need to find our own contemporary American way of talking about what they transmitted to us. The saying “If it ain't broke, don't fix it” is one of those bits of folk wisdom that everyone thinks they've heard before but whose original source no one can ever quite pin down. I remember hearing it back in 1977 when it was made famous by Bert Lance, a close friend and advisor to President Jimmy Carter. But it was probably an old saying even then. Maybe it really does go all the way back to China. In any case, in its very folksy American way, maybe it conveys a truth deeper than Lance intended. Not only does it caution us not to meddle with things that are already running perfectly smoothly without our help, it challenges us to take a closer look at what we assume is broken and at what we assume needs fixing in our

lives. The surprising answer may just turn out to be that nothing whatsoever is broken and that we don't need fixing after all.

Since I am also a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst as well as a Zen teacher, my professional life is all about working with people who say they have problems and who indeed are suffering, often quite visibly and terribly. How can I tell them that there is really nothing wrong with them? And if I were to tell them that, how would I be fulfilling my Buddhist vow to save all beings?

Everyone who comes to therapy or meditation practice feels something is wrong and wants something fixed. That's to be expected. We come seeking a relief of suffering, however we may conceive of that "suffering" and that "relief." Yet Zen (and maybe Bert Lance) is telling us that our search itself may embody the very imbalance we are trying to correct, and that only by leaving everything just as it is can we escape a false dichotomy of problems and solutions that perpetuates the very thing it proposes to fix.

But before we too glibly arrive at that conclusion we will have to investigate thoroughly all the ways we feel that we are broken and be honest about just what kind of fixing, treatment, or salvation we think we need. Each of us is trying to cure ourselves in one way or another, but often our hopes go underground and we are never quite clear just what we are seeking or how we imagine we're going to get there. We may say a lot of different things about what we hope to get from meditation, but in the back of our minds there usually lurks the fantasy that something will fix us once and for all. That fix goes by many names, one of which, "enlightenment," can become a way of imagining a life once and for all free of problems. Enlightenment is real, more real than we can imagine, but we will never know

what it means as long as we entangle it with all our fantasies and dreams.

In the first chapter of this book, I will explore the ways we can become aware of and more honest about that “secret practice” that we all engage in behind the scenes, so to speak, in our imagination, the practice that we hope will be our fix or our cure.

Knowing how to look for all the subtle ways in which we unconsciously put meditation practice in the service of our personal psychological agenda is where my psychoanalytic training comes in handy. Psychoanalysis is an open-ended inquiry that basically asks us to look at what our mind is doing moment after moment—in a way that really isn't so different from watching our thoughts come and go in meditation. The main difference is that psychoanalysis also asks, “Just where did you get *that* idea?” In an ongoing dialogue with the analyst we look at our personal history of hope and dread, how when we were growing up we learned what to expect, for better or worse, from our loved ones and from life in general. We remember together what it was like to look to our parents for love and what as children we imagined we had to do—or not do—to earn or keep that love. As the analytic relationship develops over time, we look at that relationship itself to see the ways it, like all of our relationships, is continually being shaped by those old longings and expectations. Are we finally getting the attention we always wanted but never could get from our parents? Or is the analyst just the latest in a long string of people who never “get it” and leave us feeling chronically misunderstood?

The permutations of hope and dread are literally endless and will play themselves out in a variety of different scenarios over the course of many years. What gradually emerges is a clearer picture of who we think we are and how we feel about being

that person, how comfortable we are in our own skin: with our emotions, our bodies, our sexuality, and with other people.

Inevitably, there is much about ourselves we don't like and want to change. There are also broad areas of our mental and emotional life we don't want to examine at all and whose existence we would prefer to deny entirely. These are the areas where we feel most vulnerable, most fragile—perhaps most damaged—or those things we are most ashamed of. But the longer we practice paying attention and being honest with ourselves and with the analyst, the harder it becomes to ignore these warded-off aspects of ourselves. The question then becomes this: What is supposed to happen to those parts of ourselves that we don't like, the ones that seem to be the cause of our pain? Will therapy make them go away once and for all? What about spiritual practice? Can meditation turn us into another kind of person altogether, a kinder, more compassionate, more spiritual person?

Both psychoanalysis and meditation can bring about profound changes in our lives but they each do it in ways that we don't expect. The changes that we notice after years of analysis or practice may not be anything like what we anticipated when we first started out. In a deep sense, they both change us by teaching us to leave everything just as it is—but leaving everything alone isn't what we usually want or expect. There are many kinds of therapy and spiritual practices out there that promise to fulfill all our fantasies of self-improvement, if not perfection. I like to say that the difference between psychoanalysis and that kind of psychotherapy is that psychoanalysis doesn't *help* anybody. All those helpers, and those they purport to help, are all too sure what's wrong and what's going to make it right. Psychoanalysis and Zen, each in its own way, both call that kind of certainty into doubt.

If at some fundamental level we don't need fixing, then the life we're already leading, this ordinary day-to-day life of ours, is not the problem but, somehow, already the solution we're looking for. In that case, our everyday definitions of "problems" and "solutions" will have to undergo drastic revision. A venerable Zen verse, the *Sandokai* ("The Identity of Relative and Absolute"), indeed tells us that "ordinary life fits the absolute like a box and its lid." The absolute stands for what we usually take to be the opposite of our ordinary life: something that is eternal, perfect, and indivisible into our usual dichotomies of good and bad, perfect and imperfect. The problem is we are deeply conditioned to see the ordinary and the spiritual as polar opposites. And yet, rather than the ordinary and the absolute canceling each other out, we are told they are a perfect fit.

So this book also will be about being ordinary, and how it fits together with what we call the spiritual. Much of what follows will explore what that fit looks like in our everyday life of work, relationships, desire, and difficulty.

Unfortunately, we think we already know all about what it means to be ordinary, and we don't like it one bit. The psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan once remarked that in the end "we are all more human than otherwise." Sounds obvious, but somehow most of us end up preoccupied with being "otherwise." Usually people come to therapy dreading that they are somehow less than simply human; that they were somehow damaged by their life or are in some basic way inadequate. They are plagued by anxieties and often stuck in unhappy relationships that keep them from living the lives they want, tying them up in webs of conflict and inhibition.

Historically, psychotherapy developed along the lines of an analogy with medicine, and emotional problems were thought of

like illnesses that the psychotherapist, though only occasionally actually a medical doctor, would undertake to cure. We have grown accustomed to thinking in terms of mental “illnesses,” and treating unhappiness as a disease from which we are suffering and of which we need to be cured. While there are undeniably serious conditions like schizophrenia or bipolar illness that may be shown to have some biological or neurochemical basis that we may need to treat with medication like other physical illnesses, it’s not so obvious that we can draw a straight line from schizophrenia down through every form of unhappiness, confusion, or interpersonal difficulty with which we struggle.

Are they all really illnesses? Is the whole human race basically ill and in need of treatment? Or are there forms of suffering that we all have to face even after we have somehow gotten a clean bill of mental health? Buddha declared that life, birth, death, and everything in between is suffering. We will explore how that suffering is rooted in the reality of change, particularly the changes that happen to our bodies. How does what we think of as spiritual practice relate to our embodied existence? Can practice help us somehow transcend our bodies and find us a higher realm free of suffering or does practice always keep bringing us down to earth? What do all those sages mean by “enlightenment” and what kind of difference will practice make in our lives?

In my previous book, *Ordinary Mind: Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychoanalysis*, I examined how it’s possible to integrate the way psychoanalysis talks about the self, both a person’s healthy development and his or her pathological difficulties, with Zen Buddhism’s way of talking about *no-self*, the self’s essential emptiness, and its interdependent

connectedness with all existence. In this book, I will not make any further attempt to define or justify an integrated approach to Zen and psychoanalysis—I will simply illustrate it as I go. The style of this book will therefore be less explicitly psychoanalytic. I hope my experience and expertise as a psychoanalyst, though it necessarily informs everything I write, will, for the most part, remain unobtrusively in the background.

Nonetheless, when we turn to what Zen practice means for our relationships and what it tells us—and doesn't tell us—about sexual passion and spiritual compassion, I will draw more explicitly on my clinical experience.

Ordinary Mind also included formal commentaries on various *koans*. Koan commentary is one of the most traditional forms of Zen teaching, and I wanted to show how such commentaries could be made relevant to a modern psychologically-minded audience. In this book, I will talk about koans more informally and use them simply as the old case examples that they are (*koan* means “public case” in Japanese) in order to illustrate a particular topic. Although the old cases can be used to illuminate a variety of issues, in their most basic form they pose a question whose very form exemplifies or actually heightens the problem it poses. Thus, in the first case students traditionally encounter, a young monk asks his teacher, “Does a dog have buddha-nature or not?” The question reflects our own preoccupation with what we have or don't have, with what's basic about ourselves and what we imagine is spiritual. It reveals the basic gap most of us experience between who we think we are and what we want to attain. That way of experiencing life as either/or, and ourselves in terms of *have* or *have not*, is the shape of our most basic conflicts. The koan challenges us not to

answer the question, but to radically escape from its (and our own) arbitrary dichotomies.

As an analyst, I know that therapy can help solve problems, but it can also have the unintended consequence of perpetuating a person's idea that there is something basically wrong with him or her, some sort of fundamental, inner psychological damage that will require a lifetime of work to correct—if that is even possible. It doesn't matter whether that "damage" is conceptualized as biologically based or laid down in childhood traumas that are forever and irreducibly etched into who we are "deep down." Too often so-called insights into the nature of our illness or a reconstruction of childhood trauma may simply be a crutch that confirm a belief in our intrinsic infirmity rather than give rise to the strength to trust our own resiliency in the face of our life as it is. Zen offers us a counterbalancing insight into our essential wholeness, a wholeness to which nothing need be added or subtracted—or indeed even could be. We are like water which can't—and doesn't need to—get any wetter.

What then becomes of the "helping professions" or "saving all beings" from suffering? We are surrounded by therapies and diets and self-improvement programs, all of which promise to fix us. What we don't realize is the way all of them tacitly reinforce our assumption that we are broken and need fixing. What if, instead of searching for the latest fix, we really deeply challenged that assumption once and for all? We will need to look where that challenge leads us and explore how it has been differently addressed in different traditions, psychological, philosophical and religious, lay and monastic, Western and Eastern.

By the end, I hope you will see how a new psychologically-minded Zen practice can be relevant to your daily life in twenty-first-century America.

OUR SECRET PRACTICE

I. WHAT IS MEDITATION?

A great variety of different techniques from many different cultures and traditions all go by the name “meditation.” Some call for us to concentrate all our attention on one thing, a single word or mantra, like Mu, for instance. Some advise that we count our breaths from one to ten, over and over. Others suggest that instead of focusing our attention on one thing, we allow our attention to be wide open and simply observe whatever occurs moment after moment. My own teacher, Joko Beck, who herself was trained by a Japanese Zen teacher in America, recommended that students begin with the practice of labeling their thoughts.

As we sit, thoughts inevitably occur; when one arises we simply repeat it silently to ourselves. For example, when we notice ourselves thinking about something from our job, we might say, “thinking: I must get the report in by noon.” Whenever a thought arises we simply repeat it, and as we do

this over and over, we start to experience thinking as an ongoing process that has its own pace and rhythm. When we notice certain patterns recurring over and over, we might pick a simple one-word label like “work” or “planning” to cover all the little variations on the recurrent theme. As we settle into doing this kind of practice, we don’t try to make the thoughts go away or cultivate any particular state, we simply notice and label our thoughts and let our mind settle down—or not—all on its own.

Although the word “meditation” has many spiritual connotations, all we’re really doing is sitting there. As we sit, we feel ourselves breathe. There’s no need to worry about thoughts, we just sit there and feel ourselves breathe. Nowadays, the literal, physical act of sitting is sometimes taken for granted and the emphasis is placed on what’s going on in our minds. But meditation is a physical activity, not just a mental one. We *sit* in a particular posture, traditionally cross-legged, so that our knees are firmly on the ground and our back is straight. We might think of meditation as a form of yoga with a single posture that we stay with for a lifetime. Being able to hold a physical posture is an important correlate to being able to remain mentally focused and concentrated. Staying attuned to our body is our most fundamental discipline of awareness.

However, for Western students of Zen, cross-legged sitting traditionally posed problems of endurance as well as of awareness. Indeed, when I started out, it often seemed that the one thing I was learning to do in the *zendo*, the meditation hall, was to sit absolutely still even though I was in intense pain. The only thing I remember of my first Japanese teacher’s words during my first *sesshin* (as the intensive meditation retreats are called in the Zen tradition) was his growling the word “endurance” in the midst of a painfully long sitting period.

He may have had all sorts of interesting things to say on other subjects, but the only thing I could concentrate on was getting from one painful breath to another while my ankles and knees felt like burning needles had been plunged deep inside my joints. Those early years of zazen were physically very painful ones—and I have chosen not to pass this particular legacy on to my own students. Sitting still amid a certain amount of pain or restlessness is a very valuable form of discipline, but the point of Zen practice is not to train people to hold out under torture. Students can sit still and straight in chairs if sitting cross-legged is unbearable and people need to learn for themselves what amount of difficulty is useful for them to bear and why. Traditional Zen had a very macho side to it, one that thankfully has softened over the years, in no small part due to a new generation of American teachers, especially women teachers, who have found new ways to balance discipline with gentleness.

When we enter the zendo for the first time and look at the stillness of the meditators there, we might imagine that they have all reached a state of complete inner stillness as well. Once we sit down ourselves however, we realize that the two do not automatically go together. Instead, the stillness of our bodies gradually creates a container for our agitated thoughts and feelings. They may gradually settle down or they may seethe and churn for a long while. Whatever is going on inside, we simply sit and breathe.

It's really very simple, but it's hard for us to keep it simple, to let it stay simple. We complicate it by being preoccupied with the content of our thoughts rather than simply letting thoughts float through our mind like clouds through the sky. So much of what's involved in meditation instruction is a matter of finding ways to keep it simple. Everyone knows how to

breathe; anyone can feel the breath as it fills the chest and moves in and out of the nose. It's like climbing stairs. We all know how to take that first step; what is not so easy is taking one step after another after another, especially since in our practice, the staircase is never-ending and we can't be sure where it leads. Yet at each step, all we ever have to do is take the next step, the next breath.

When I give newcomers meditation instruction, I usually tell them to sit down and face the wall as if they were facing a mirror. I tell them that as they sit, their mind will automatically appear and display itself. When we sit in front of a mirror, our face automatically appears. We can't do it right or wrong; the mirror is doing all the work. When we sit in meditation, right there in front of us is our mind. All we have to do is be willing to look and experience what comes up.

What could be easier? The good news is you can't miss it; it's right there all the time; looking into the mirror your face automatically appears. The bad news is that is not at all what we were looking for when we came to practice. We are not at all happy with the version of ourselves we wake up to every morning—that's often why we've come to practice.

Our discomfort with our mind as it is, is displayed to us by the kinds of thoughts I call "meta-thoughts." These are our thoughts about our thoughts. These take the form of judgments or comments on the whole process. These are the "how am I doing?" or "am I doing this right?" thoughts. When we label our ordinary thoughts about lunch or planning or daydreaming, we simply notice them and let them go, but our meta-thoughts require a slightly different kind of attention, because they can encapsulate all sorts of longings, expectations, and judgments about who we are and why we are practicing. Our

meta-thoughts reveal where and how we think we are broken and what are our fantasies of being fixed or cured. These curative fantasies make up the core of what I call our secret practice. Becoming clear about our secret practice is the only path to true practice.

2. WHY ARE WE (REALLY) MEDITATING?

When I ask someone what his or her practice is, I'll usually be told something like "counting my breaths." But what is that person really doing? Whatever method of meditation we adopt, we are inevitably going to try to enlist that practice in the service of one or more of our *curative fantasies*. A curative fantasy is a personal myth that we use to explain what we think is wrong with us and our lives and what we imagine is going to make it all better. Sometimes these fantasies are quite explicit: we're sure we know what's wrong and we're sure we know what we're after. Feeling certain, of course, is no guarantee of being right. As we go along we may have to radically question our definition of what counts as a problem and a solution. Sometimes these fantasies lurk behind the scenes, operating more or less unconsciously, and the teacher and student together must work out a way to bring them out in the open and make their assumptions explicit before they can be challenged. Curative fantasies take many forms, and when you know where to look, they can be seen in all sorts of places.

One classic curative fantasy, one about being cured by love, can be found in Plato. Aristophanes, cast as a character in Plato's *Symposium*, tells a parable about the nature of love in which the ancestors of mankind have been punished by the

gods by being literally cut in half, so that we, their descendants, are destined to be searching forever for our missing half. What we call love, Aristophanes says, is the desire and pursuit of that lost wholeness. It seems mankind has been searching forever for some version of that lost wholeness. Buddhism and Plato however seem to offer very different accounts of the loss of that wholeness and the role of desire in its original disruption and possible repair. For Plato, desire and love are what overcomes our experience of separation; they are what glue us back together when we've been torn apart.

Buddhism offers us a vision of a life in which originally nothing is lacking. Desire, on the other hand, always seems to arise from an experience of something missing. Does fulfilling our desires genuinely restore us to wholeness or does it send us on an endless, frustrating quest for what we can never have?

“Dualism” is a word that Buddhists use to describe the experience of being cut off from what's vital in life. Wherever we are, we feel that what we want or need is somewhere else. We may feel isolated and alienated from life, as if a curtain has come down and has separated us from being fully present and engaged with other people and with the life going on all around us. We imagine, in our curative fantasies, what we're missing and at the same time we assign blame for why we don't have it. We can blame ourselves or blame others or blame fate. Sometimes we imagine someone else really has what we are missing and we try to attach ourselves to that person. We can attach ourselves as a lover, as a student, as a disciple or a patient. But as long as we approach people from a feeling of deficiency and longing, we cannot approach them as equals. And by definition, it is only as an equal that we will have what they have.

No matter how much we look outside of ourselves for what's missing, we always will have to come back to the question of what's missing in the first place, and why we think we don't have it. What has stood in our way? Almost always we conclude that there is something wrong with us as we are. That is why we have been unable to achieve what we want or why we haven't been given the love or attention we need. Our curative fantasies always contain within them a corresponding fantasy of what's wrong with us, a private explanation of the way in which we're damaged, deficient, or unworthy. So in looking to overcome our suffering, we have to look at the ways we have come to blame ourselves for suffering in the first place. If we practice Buddhism, we are tempted to blame our desires or our self-centeredness for our suffering—that's what Buddha said we are doing wrong, isn't it?

We imagine: "If only I could get rid of those bad parts of my self, everything would be OK." Or maybe I have to get rid of my "self" entirely! Then "I" get entangled in the paradox of wanting to get rid of "me." "I"? "Me"? My "self"? How many of us are in there, and which side am I on? How did I end up in so many pieces?

The fundamental dualism we face on the cushion is not some metaphysical abstraction, it is the all too down-to-earth experience of a person divided against herself in the pursuit of a curative fantasy. All too often, or perhaps I should say, inevitably, one side of a person takes up arms against another side and enlists practice itself as the weapon of choice. We do this, of course, in very high-minded terms, telling ourselves we want to be spiritual not materialistic, compassionate not self-centered, self-contained instead of needy, calm instead of anxious, and on and on and on. And while these are seemingly worthy goals,

our so-called aspiration is a mask our self-hate wears for the world, putting a spiritual face on our inner conflict.

Over and over again, I see students whose secret goal in practice is the extirpation of some hated part of themselves. Sometimes it is their anger, sometimes their sexuality, their emotional vulnerability, their bodies, or sometimes their very minds which are blamed as the source of their suffering. “If only I could just once and for all get rid of...” Try filling in the blank yourself. This attitude toward practice, if unchallenged, turns students into spiritual (and sometimes literal) anorectics: practice becomes a high-minded way of purging ourselves of aspects of ourselves that we hate. Our hatred for our own physical mortality and imperfection fuels a war against our own bodies, a war in which we strive to turn our bodies into invulnerable machines that can endure anything, or discard them as irrelevant husks that merely clothe some true, inner, idealized self. We go to war against our own minds, trying to cut off emotion or thought altogether as if we could rest once and for all in an untroubled blankness. We want practice to be a kind of mental lobotomy, cutting out everything that scares or shames us, perhaps even cutting out thinking itself.

When I was a young boy going to elementary school, my mother, along with some of the other mothers in the neighborhood, would take turns driving us to school. Four or five rambunctious kids would be squeezed into the car for the ride to school in the morning and home in the afternoon. I was a shy, skinny, bookish kid—what would later be called a nerd—and I often felt bullied by the other, tougher kids. When they teased me or got too wild in the car and wouldn’t listen to the mom doing the driving shouting to them to be quiet, I remember simply closing my eyes and making them all disappear. I just

blanked them out. That worked well, up to a point—but sometimes if they noticed what I was doing, it just provoked them to try to get a rise out of me, which they inevitably could if they tried hard enough. That memory came back to me the other day when I was trying to sit zazen at home with my son shouting and playing in another room while I tried to meditate. As I sat, I realized I simply wanted to shut everything out, just as I did all those years ago in the back seat of that carpool. My secret practice, at that moment, was a fantasy of imperturbable calm. Now, as then, I knew it wouldn't work for long. My teacher Joko used to hate it when anybody called our long intensive practice periods a “retreat.” “What are you retreating from?” she'd ask. Sometimes, the answer is painfully obvious.

It takes a long time to give up on our secret practice, and to accept that we're not sitting here to get away from anything, but that we're here precisely to face all the things we want to avoid. A regular sitting practice makes all those aspects of life, of our body and mind, all the things that we keep ordinarily at arm's length, increasingly unavoidable. It's not what we might have had in mind when we first signed up, but it's what we get.

We may have had the ideal that practice will make us compassionate, and so we end up trying to do away with our self-centeredness or even do away with our desires—but in doing so we set up one part of the self in opposition to another part. We may say we want to dissolve the dualism of subject and object, but it's the dualism of self-hate that we really have to struggle with: one part of ourselves constantly judging another part, one part endlessly needing and trying to destroy another part—and all in the name of compassion and oneness! The real nitty-gritty of practice involves learning to recognize all these subtle forms of self-hate.

How often are we preoccupied in our sitting with judging thoughts? How often does one part of us say to another: “Be Quiet!” How often are we preoccupied with some version or another of the question, “How am I doing?” or “Why is my mind not becoming calm or quiet; why am I still feeling anger or anxiety?” We watch these same preoccupations recycling themselves through our minds, over and over and over. The same handful of thoughts—once we see their repetitive nature, it can get quite boring. Actually, being bored is a big part of practice; we have to get bored with our own preoccupations. We get tired of them, and when that happens, we can start to simply leave them alone. That’s what happens to all those judging thoughts: we don’t banish them once and for all, we just don’t make getting rid of our judgmental side our new project. We see that judging thoughts are just more thoughts and we leave them alone too and eventually we get bored with them and let our attention to move on to other things.

In a way, we allow our life to become much more superficial. We are no longer so preoccupied with our important thoughts and deep feelings that we don’t see what’s right in front of us. Practice allows us to actually pay attention to all these nice trivial things that are happening around us. We don’t have to make our preoccupations go away either, they become just one of many things happening—no longer the only things that count. They are just things hanging around in the corners of our minds; they don’t stand in the center of our universe any more.

After all our futile efforts to transform our ordinary minds into idealized, spiritual minds, we discover the fundamental paradox of practice is that leaving everything alone is itself what is ultimately transformative. We’re not here to fix or improve ourselves—I like to say practice actually puts an end to self-

improvement. But it's very hard to stay with that sense of not needing to do anything, not to turn the zendo into a spiritual gymnasium where we get ourselves mentally in shape. It's hard to really do nothing at all. Over and over, we watch our mind trying to avoid or fix, fix or avoid; to either not look at it or change it. Leaving that mind just as it is the hardest thing to do.

3. THREE STAGES OF PRACTICE

After we've been sitting for some time, we may see that our practice naturally flows through a number of different stages. In the first stage, we are primarily concerned with our private experience of sitting. We might focus on the physical difficulties we have sitting with pain or with the psychological difficulties associated with thoughts that seem to wander and proliferate out of control. Or as we settle into our practice, sitting may become the source of various sorts of pleasure. We might use our sitting to calm or relax our minds, to create a daily oasis of quiet and peace within our hectic lives. Perhaps we may even experience moments of intense joy. There's nothing wrong with any of these feelings, of course. However, when we are starting out, we're experiencing them in the context of an essentially self-centered practice—a practice pre-occupied with the quality or feel of our own moment-to-moment experience. At this stage, we may feel that our secret practice is actually working and that we're beginning to get from practice all the things we came to it to find.

Even when so-called enlightenment experiences give us a moment of light, at this stage, instead of using that light to illuminate our life, we become infatuated with our own brightness;

or perhaps we become like Zen moths, dazzled by and circling around what we imagine to be our own brilliance. Often practice never goes beyond this stage. Even people who have meditated for years and years can settle into a preoccupation with their own meditative accomplishments or secretly continue to use practice in the service of cultivating one inner state or another. Again, there's nothing wrong with that; it's just not the whole story.

We move out of this phase when we start to be less preoccupied with our own condition and into an awareness of how our actions and reactions affect those around us. We begin to allow practice to go against the grain of our secret practice rather than always to collude with it. We learn to focus not so much on how life is treating us, but on how we respond to life. We are attentive to the world around us and take responsibility for it. We start to feel what it means to let ourselves be open to the world rather than always trying to impose our desires onto the world. We realize practice is not simply something that takes place on our cushions, but is manifested in every moment of our lives. How the zendo is run, how newcomers are treated, how we interact with each other outside the zendo, all those mundane things that, in the first stage, we tended to ignore or treat as a means to an end, now become central to our conception of practice. We may even begin to speculate that any "progress" we think we've made is better measured by what our spouse thinks of our behavior at home than whatever special effects we've managed to generate sitting on our cushion.

Whereas in the first stage we are in danger of becoming "Zen moths," circling around the light of our precious inner experience, in this second stage, the danger lies in becoming attached to making everything run—or *appear* to run—

smoothly and properly on the outside. We can become obsessive or precious in the guise of mindfulness. We can become self-consciously aware of our “compassion” or some other attribute of being a “good” Zen student. As soon as we do that, of course, we’re back to the first stage, honing our self-image, our self-experience in line with our own particular secret practice. To simultaneously stay attentive to our environment and to those around us, without any trace of self-consciousness about our own condition is the beginning of what ancient Zen Master Dogen called “forgetting the self.” Forgetting the self means letting practice open us up to a world of experience outside our secret practice, outside our self-centered gaining ideas. But before we forget the self, we must, as Dogen said, study the self, and become fully aware of all the ins and outs of our habitual self-centeredness.

Finally, we may reach a stage where we are taken far beyond any self-centered notion of what we want, any notion of what’s good for us or even what’s rational. I say “are taken” rather than “take ourselves” or “go” because I believe we are carried into the true depths of practice only involuntarily. Now, practice is characterized by a deep acceptance or surrender to life as it is. Sometimes this takes the form of coming to terms with sudden tragedy, loss, or illness. Life suddenly demands we give up what we cherish the most. This is the stage where our curative fantasies and secret practices are abandoned as utterly hopeless in the face of reality.

Søren Kierkegaard claimed this is what it meant to be truly religious, as illustrated by Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. It may feel like we have been forced to surrender our most fundamental notions of who we are and what we imagine is crucial to our psychological survival. We face life as it is, and

bow to it as our true teacher. True compassion, a life spontaneously and wholeheartedly lived in the service of others, may be forged in this crucible. Yet no transformation is ever total. We would call someone a buddha who lived that way all the time and perhaps the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was such an individual—but I know I don't and I know I'm not. For most of us, our self-protective, habitual ways of being in the world inevitably reassert themselves.

Yet even in this stage there is a danger that we can become attached to our own sense of heroic renunciation. This involves the ego making a show of its own sacrifice, and laying the foundation for a new brand of self-centeredness. Extremes of asceticism, or an impulsive desire to become, or become known as, saintly or selfless may be self-centered parodies of the truly religious life.

What does it mean to totally trust in life, to trust our practice? Simply a willingness to let it carry us through all these stages, which it will inevitably do, if only by finally making us face our own death. But it is all too easy to become caught up in the various dead-ends and eddies that accompany each stage. That is where an individual teacher comes in—someone who knows us, and knows the pitfalls of practice, and who can help keep us on our path.