

# How the Universe Thinks

WE MAY HAVE SOME IDEA of what we would like to have happen during sitting, but our mind and body unfold according to their own inner necessity. That is the marvelous, unfabricated, inconceivable power of Zen.

Practice is often messy—the effort is beyond anything we can imagine. Sitting is often difficult, requiring much attention and discipline. The mind rebels and fatigues. Many of us find it easier to be attentive to some object “outside” the self than to pull in this scattered mind and bring its attention to itself. This effort to turn inward simultaneously brings our awareness to this restless body.

We often don't find our breath or our body interesting enough to bring our wholehearted attention to them—but wait until we are breathing our last breath! See how wholehearted we become on that last breath. When we can do it in our life, we find there is no stronger, more powerful force in the universe than our undivided body and mind.

We can actually be wholehearted about practice without

recognizing it. We might notice we continue to return to it even when our mind and body complain. Something else draws us back to the cushion. We may find that returning to the cushion is the only thing we are not ambivalent about in a roundabout, ambivalent way.

A monk asked his teacher, "What are you thinking of in that immobile sitting position?" "I think of not-thinking," replied the teacher. The monk asked again, "How do you think of not-thinking?" "Beyond thinking," replied the teacher.

"I think of not-thinking" is a key teaching of our practice. Thoughts come. We do not try to exclude them. Our effort is to leave them alone as much as possible and let them go on their way. Not-thinking, or zazen, is how the universe thinks. We are this undivided, unfabricated movement of energy in the universe. You can call this "beyond thinking."

This dialogue was a conundrum for me until I understood that the energy arising when my mind moves is the way mind is. We can say, there is thinking, but I don't think. Author and psychotherapist Mark Epstein calls this "thoughts without a thinker." In the midst of all of our mental stuff, we can step outside the stream of consciousness and simply witness the arising of thoughts, feelings, and impulses. There is no one attached to this consciousness or no one who has to be attached. When we have an experience of the impersonal nature of this flow of consciousness, we can observe it without regret or desire to control; we can watch our irritations and desires come up without judging or reacting to them. This is taking refuge in dharma, in things as they are.

When I was younger in practice, this felt like a passive submission to the winds of fate instead of my understanding that

## THE TRUTH OF THIS LIFE

I was cultivating the capability to be engaged with the reality of my life. This is practicing with no gaining idea. It took me some time to realize I wasn't experiencing my experience. Transmission of the dharma\* does not happen from the outside or through words, books, or some teacher. Actual transmission is intimate; you transmit to yourself. The transmission that comes from outside is not intimate. It took me years to understand and accept this. It was only when I exhausted the effort to find something outside that I was finally able to turn my awareness inward, toward just this mind and body.

In *The Wholehearted Way*, Dogen says, "Buddha is actualized only when ordinary human beings are lost." Buddha is actualized when our human striving, desires, ambitions don't work anymore. The times when I have borne witness to such parts of myself as hopelessness and loss were the moments of deepest self-acceptance. These are the parts of ourselves we do not wish to have anything to do with. We may try to outrun them in our lives, but finally we find we can't. Working with whatever comes up, not viewing anything as an interruption or hindrance in our lives, we come to see whatever arises as our life.

Without expectation or judgment we can be present for our karmic body—our fear, anger, delusion, greed, shame, embarrassment, hesitation—until our awareness begins to release the knots of our consciousness. These two currents, our karmic life and our life free of constructs, are happening simultaneously. All we need to do is step back from this entangled realm and watch it all go by. We can get the hang of "just seeing" when we really want to.