

The Joy of Not Choosing

IN RAM DASS'S BOOK *Still Here*, he describes a trip in India on a very slow train. He became impatient, thinking: "This trip is going to go on forever. . . . This present moment will never end. I've been on this train my entire life and I will never ever get off. Now what?"

As he meditated on these thoughts, he began to surrender into the rhythms of the train, slowly dropping his anger. He noticed the part of himself that yearned to slow down, to move to the rhythms of earth and sky, the coming and going of generations. And he also noticed the part of himself raised in the West, accustomed to material life and great stimulation. He wrote, "I saw these two aspects in stark relief, and wondered which of these parts was actually me."

During my early sesshins at Tassajara I had an experience like that. Our sitting periods were forty minutes long, and you learned to sense by how your body felt just when it was time for the bell to end the period. And when the pain was really strong, you would find yourself anticipating the bell, barely

holding on until the period was over. Many periods I couldn't imagine going a minute past forty.

And then one day, the bell did not sound. I kept thinking, *Anytime now*, but minutes went by, and I gradually realized that the bell wasn't going to sound. At first there was panic and then, very unexpectedly, release came, release into just sitting there. The holding on, the wanting to be out of that experience, was creating more tension.

Accepting and releasing into just what is, is the homeopathy of Zen. Being willing to settle into just this experience—this is the teaching of saying yes to our life, not giving in to thoughts of another life. We learn that our resistance strengthens whatever we want to avoid.

Trying on the attitude of yes is the not-knowing mind, whereas the conditioned mind creates conditions: *This is too much (or not enough). No way am I going to stay in this situation.* The not-knowing mind is willing to know and feel whatever is happening.

Recently I was thinking about a difficult situation in my life, trying to find a way to make it acceptable. For days I would think about it, invite my mind to reimagine it in a less painful way. After weeks of trying, I realized, *I'm helpless. I can't solve this by myself: I just have to be it.* That realization was an enormous relief. Like Ram Dass saying, *I'm going to be on this train forever*, I settled into my own circumstances: *There isn't anything I can do about this situation. There is no way to escape it. I must live with it and let it become digested and transformed internally on its own.* Thinking I had to solve the problem had become the problem.

When we are experiencing strong pain in sesshin, being willing to know the pain and release into it is more helpful than trying to escape, move, wiggle. Every movement to escape the

pain eventually results in a return of the pain. Being willing to know and experience the pain is the letting go.

In Kazuaki Tanahashi's translation of *The True Dharma Eye*, the great master Dongshan was asked by a monk, "When cold or heat come, how can we avoid it?"

Dongshan: Why don't you go to the place where there is no cold or heat?

Monk: What is the place where there is no cold or heat?

Dongshan: When it is cold, let the cold kill you; when it is hot, let the heat kill you. (Case 225)

This koan tells us to take the situation as a meditation, not as a problem.

The composer John Cage made a spiritual practice of creating sound compositions. He knew that he could only compose as a practice if he did it nonintentionally, that if he tried to do something it would just be another expression of ego. Cage had heard D. T. Suzuki lecture at Columbia University in the 1940s, and during those talks Cage gained insight into what had already become his method.

Suzuki drew a circle on the blackboard and sectioned off a bit of it with two parallel lines. The full circle stood for the full range of the unconditioned mind. The smaller part between the parallel lines stood for ego. Cage remembers that Suzuki said, "The ego can cut itself off from the big mind."*

It is by our likes and dislikes that we cut ourselves off from the unconditioned mind. Lewis Hyde, in his book *Trickster Makes This World*, said, "Likes and dislikes are the lapdogs and guard

dogs of the ego, busy all the time, panting and barking at the gates of attachment and aversion and thereby narrowing perception and experience.”

In our five-day sesshin practice we let go of the lapdogs by not picking and choosing, by eating what's offered, by not pointing to something in the salad that we'd rather have, because such choices reinforce the ego. We can learn that it doesn't really matter what we eat, what work we do, who our assigned roommate is, or what time we get up. Simply going with conditions allows our mind to remain calm and ready for whatever may happen next.

John Cage tried to create music without choosing sounds, without having preferences. He wanted everything to be the chance operation of the universe, so he would flip a coin. He took four years to compose a five-minute piece because everything had to be decided by chance rather than by intention. There are times when I have done a similar practice, turning toward whatever comes along. It has always been more interesting than when I follow my own preferences.

“If I have the opportunity to continue working,” Cage says in *Conversing with Cage*, “I think the work will resemble more and more, not the work of a person, but something that might have happened, even if the person weren't there.” He would spend months tossing coins and working with the *I Ching* to create a score. He believed “the highest discipline is the discipline of chance operations, because chance operations have absolutely nothing to do with one's likes or dislikes. The *person* is being disciplined, not the work.” The person is being disciplined away from the ego's habitual attitudes toward a fundamental change of consciousness.

THE TRUTH OF THIS LIFE

There was once a Naropa poetry reading where many big-name poets read. Competition was in the air. Only one poet seemed noncompetitive. Peter Orlovsky went through his notebook and read some notes. It was not especially interesting, someone recalled, just a piece of his mind. But after the event that was the one poet this person remembered.

Lewis Hyde writes of attending a lecture by John Cage, which was a collage of text fragments drawn from Thoreau, Emerson, the *Wall Street Journal*, older lectures of his own, assembled and ordered through a series of chance operations.

Finding it rather uninteresting, Hyde left early, but as he walked away he found himself unable to forget the experience. He heard more clearly the sounds of a city: honking of horns, passing traffic, fragments of conversation by passersby and from car radios. His attention was attuned by the randomness and chance selection and the not trying to impress. He noticed that had made a big impression.

When you are listening for something, there is effort involved, the strain of blocking out. But when you stop trying to listen, there can be a deep release and an increase in hearing. Try this yourselves. "I felt like this increased ability to hear was the joy of letting the world in," wrote Hyde.