

to go to sleep because I might forget to breathe so many times a minute during the night. I go to sleep entrusting my breathing to the great power of life beyond my control. Again, though this is not a power I control, since it is really working inside of me, it is nothing other than the reality of my life.

Let us go a little further with the concrete realities of our lives.

I was born Japanese, and perhaps you were born American. This is not something we chose by our so-called will, and yet, in fact, I am Japanese, and you are what you are. This is the reality of life that transcends our own measurement and discretion. Also, I am a Buddhist priest living a life of zazen practice in a certain temple in Kyoto, Japan. Is this way of life a way I chose by my own power? Yes, of course, in a certain sense, I did choose it. But where did I get the power to choose it? I cannot help but conclude that this choice, too, has been given life by a great power that transcends my own willpower and thought, whether you call it chance, fate, life itself, or the providence of God.

Using our intellect to come up with some answer to this we can only come up with a one-sided or abstract answer. Ultimately, all we can say is that the reality of life is as it is. The reality of the life of the self is simply to live life just as it is. Self does not exist because I think about it or because I don't think about it. Either this self, universal and personal, is my life. Zazen is a way of truly putting this reality of life into practice.

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of
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Living Out the Reality of Life

I have explained that the reality of life is the very living out of life just as it is, and that zazen is the practice of doing just that. But is there any other way to live besides living life as it is? Of course not.

Whatever our way of life may be, that is the reality of life, so there is no possibility of living outside the reality of life. Nevertheless, it is all too possible to live losing sight of that reality, and because of that, to suffer and agonize about our lives.

One time a woman in her forties came to talk with me. She was distraught as she told me her story. She had always loved to paint and was quite talented. When she was in her twenties, her parents supported her and helped her make a life as an artist in Tokyo. Initially she met with considerable success. Her paintings were exhibited everywhere, often winning prizes, and even the critics gave her generous praise as an accomplished young artist. However, her brilliant beginning met with an obstacle. Just when her reputation was starting to grow, her father lost everything he had. It was still a little too risky for her to live only by her paintings, and she was also worried about her disappointed parents, so she returned to the country and did all she could to look after them. Years went by, and her parents grew quite old, but her unceasing passion for painting would not allow her to stay in the country and wither away, so she moved back to Tokyo, taking her aged parents along. She worked during the day and devoted herself to painting at night. She continued this effort for several years, but she was unable to win recognition the way she had in her twenties. Every painting she exhibited and placed her hopes in lost in competition. As a result, she was unable to sell any paintings and was forced to continue working to support herself and her parents, which sapped all her energy and spirit. Lamenting her unfortunate situation, she wept over being unable to develop her talent because her family had lost all its property.

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While I totally sympathized with her inability to achieve her goal as a painter due to the setback in her circumstances, I rebuked her for her own sake:

"You're thinking about this all wrong. It's a big mistake to think that it is only natural for a person to receive a family inheritance. What is natural is that a person has no property at all. You were able to study painting by means of your family's wealth until you were past twenty. That's unusual, and something for which you should be grateful. Now, even though twenty-some years have passed, you're still lamenting your family's loss and being dragged around by fantasies of the past. You have to open your eyes to your present reality and start off with a totally naked self, possessing no property or anything else.

"Besides, you're still looking back to the time when you were in your twenties and the paintings you exhibited always won prizes for you, and wishing you could taste those days again. Isn't agonizing over things that don't work out just the way you want nothing but being dragged around by more fantasies? You have to begin with your present reality.

"What is most basic is that you paint because you enjoy painting, isn't that so? Can you let yourself be satisfied with that and with having a part-time job to support yourself? If you can make a living like that and enjoy painting the rest of the time, then you can have a rich life. This is something to be happy about whether you receive recognition or not.

"I haven't been doing zazen because I want to make it into something salable. I've been leading a life of zazen for thirty years, but in the first twenty, I was completely ignored by the world and practiced zazen in obscurity with barely enough to eat. But just by

doing zazen, I was able to discover the meaning of my own life even in those circumstances. During the last ten years, people who are sympathetic with my attitude toward zazen have come to join me in sitting, but even now I haven't the slightest intention of making zazen into a salable product. I'm just doing my own zazen. For you, painting your pictures is your life. Shouldn't just that be your greatest joy?" She said she understood completely and went away with fresh vigor in her step.

We are always living out the reality of our own lives, although we very often lose sight of this reality, getting caught up in fantasies of the past or in our relationships with others. We end up being dragged around by those fantasies and by our comparisons of ourselves with others. Living like that, how can we not become filled with feelings of utter isolation and loneliness, overwhelmed by our jealousy and envy of those around us or by some other great suffering?

One time when I went to a place in the country, I could see from a distance a thick forest on the side of the mountain and I was able to make out the roof of a large temple hidden among the trees. I asked a local villager about it, and he told me that this temple used to be much larger, but it burned down and the present building was put up on a much smaller scale. Guided by the villager, I climbed up a long stone stairway. When I finally reached the top and had a look around, the temple, far from being small, was a magnificent structure that didn't seem to have been built at all recently. I began to wonder about what my guide had said, and I asked him just when the temple had burned down. He told me it had happened during the Kamakura period, in the thirteenth century! I burst out laughing, because his aggrieved tone of voice had implied

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that the temple had burned down recently, certainly during his lifetime. These villagers handed down to each successive generation a sense of personal loss about something that had happened hundreds of years before. Living near this handsome, imposing temple, they didn't really enjoy it because they were busy lamenting that it wasn't some other way.

On second thought, a thing that happened seven hundred years ago is undoubtedly a recent event for many people. Most religions encourage believers to "remember" events written in their holy books, events that may have happened thousands of years ago, and to act as if these things had happened to them personally. On the basis of these "memories" they wage wars and kill each other en masse. This is not limited to mythological and sectarian religions, either. It is exactly the same among all the many doctrines and ways of thought. Instead of looking at the fresh and vivid reality of life with their own eyes, people end up stifling that reality in the name of justice, or peace, or some fixed dogma.

All these memories and myths are produced by human life, so we cannot say they are meaningless. However, all these ideas and beliefs have only a conceptual existence that is fixed within our thoughts, they are not raw life-experience that is alive right now. We tend to plunge our heads too far into memories and fantasies, into religious dogma and rigid doctrines. When we admire them and believe in them blindly, becoming frenzied and fanatical, we become imprisoned by this fixed and conceptual existence.

Hand We would be much better off if our past experience and wisdom were made to live within the raw life-experience of the self here and now. Instead we think that kind of conceptual existence is our real life of the present, and we end up being dragged around

by our thoughts. We do things that only stifle raw life. This is happening all the time. When an individual is like this, he can be admitted to a mental institution as a schizophrenic, but when huge masses of people begin to act like that, there is no hospital big enough. Most unfortunately, such groups of fanatics eventually shape the very history of the human race. If we think about it, there is no doubt that everyone is always living out the reality of life. But so often we live blindly, so caught up in our thoughts that we think they alone are what is real and complete. This is a kind of insane reality. The important thing is to find a *zazen* way to live out the reality of life. This is what a true spiritual practice is about: not spirit or mind separated from the body and the world, but a true way of life. This is what *zazen* is—a practice of living out the fresh reality of life.

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Opening
the
Hand
of
Thought

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