Notes on: Nothing Special: Living Zen

by Charlotte Joko Beck

Struggle:

- 1. Self-centered thinking arises from living in fear and drains us of life energy thereby resulting in stagnation.
- 2. Pursuit of comfort and security blinds us to the true nature of reality.
- 3. Finding fault with ourselves or others helps no one, especially oneself.
- 4. It is not what we do that makes us unhappy but the judgments we make about it. (Note: Judgments are grounded in our beliefs)
- 5. Positive thinking like negative thinking is a burden that requires constant lifting (effort) that eventually wears us down.
- 6. We all experience pressure or stress. Our chief feature or coping strategy is how we handle it, e.g., anger or blaming.
- 7. The little mind or the observer is the ego. When the observer is silenced and no longer produces a swarm of self-centered thoughts, there is only awareness and acceptance of things as they are.
- 8. Our baseboard or interpretive mind is the source of all of our distress, not the events that we experience.
- 9. Any time one feels upset about something, we have evidence that the interpretive mind is engaged.
- 10. The task is not to avoid reacting to events but rather how long we stay with the reaction and what we do with the energy.
- 11. Meditation is a method to aid us in dissolving self-centered thoughts arising out of the interpretive mind and thereby quieting the interpretive mind.

Sacrifice:

- 1. Feeling guilty about victimizing (treating as objects) others in the past is a way of sacrificing (victimizing) ourselves in a misguided attempt at atonement.
- 2. Practice leads to self-knowledge, which increases our choices, including becoming aware of impulses to treat others as objects and choosing not to act on the impulse and break the cycle of suffering.
- 3. Desires demand satisfaction and lead to disappointment. Realization that nothing will ever permanently satisfy us is the first step toward serious practice.
- 4. Desires arise from beliefs about how things should be. Practice helps us recognize these beliefs for what they are egocentric (dualistic) thinking.
- 5. Disappointed desires lead to anger, which serves to separate us and sustain dualistic thinking.
- 6. The opposite of injustice is not justice but compassion. Fighting to gain a just result is grounded in anger, which is the mother of resentment, jealousy and depression.
- 7. The failure to know joy is a reflection of one's inability to forgive, which in turn is rooted in our egocentrism (subject/object dualism). In practice we observe this egotistic thinking and learn to release it making room for forgiveness.
- 8. We enter into practice with the expectation that it will solve our problems. This makes practice about what ego wants. Practice must be about being focused on life and learning from it rather than being focused on ourselves and what we desire.

- 9. The more intent we are on controlling our circumstances the more stress we feel. The more stress we feel the more miserable we become and the more willing we are to victimize (sacrifice) others to our ends.
- 10. Life is not a safe space and all protective mechanisms eventually fail. We must simply live life without expectations (beliefs) about how it should be.

Separation and Connection:

- 1. Dualistic thinking leads to a feeling of separation, which is the source of ego-centric thinking and contention.
- 2. Ego-centric thinking produces attachments, which are not possessions but our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about possessive objects.
- 3. Attachments imply a fear of losing possessive objects. Thus, to let go of an attachment requires facing and letting the fear pass.
- 4. Subject/object thinking divides the world into self and other about which we form many beliefs and feelings that govern our interactions.
- 5. Unity with All That Is flows from awareness (Be Here Now) unimpeded by beliefs, judgments and emotional reactions to them.
- 6. Pain and discomfort are a natural part of life and part of the experience of being human and being alive.
- 7. We must make peace with ourselves before we can become one with the world.
- 8. Separateness requires fear of annihilation or death, which leads to anger and from this comes conflict that destroys relationship and strengthens separateness.
- 9. The urge to action, to do "something," arises from self-centered thinking and seldom makes much difference. We just like to think it does.
- 10. Awareness (Be Here Now) gives one patience, which allows right action to arise spontaneously.
- 11. Focus on our own thoughts, feelings, sensations and actions instead of judging others will lead to self-knowledge and release us from attachments.

Change:

- 1. The reality of our live includes pain as well as joy in the flow of events.
- 2. Dealing with this reality is preparation of the ground from which transformation of the mind and body and grow.
- 3. Events come and go and letting them pass through your life without grasping at or complaining about them allows room for enjoying life.
- 4. Practice will reveal the simple meaning to be found in life -- enjoying the opportunities that flow the flow of life presents to us.
- 5. We perceive life as a series of experiences and to each we bring associations and memories from our past. This turns the experience into an object, which promotes subject/object or dualistic thinking and separateness.
- 6. Enlightenment is found in experiencing life free of associations, memories and thoughts. Letting go of the cognitive structures that we impose on experience is the most difficult and threatening task we face in our practice.
- 7. We experience life as a series of dualistic relationships. We need a strategy for dealing with *not-self*. The most common strategies are: conforming, attacking or withdrawing.
- 8. The ego is grounded in the strategy we choose and elaborate. We live our life seeking confirmation of our strategy through our choices in work, friends, organizations, etc.
- 9. No matter how well developed our strategy there are always uncertainties, which opens us up to fear and since the body reflects the mind, we develop physical effect or "emotional contractions" that can become illnesses.

- 10. Our ceaseless internal dialogue or chatter Benoit calls "the imaginary film," which is our ceaseless thinking, planning and plotting to avoid the emotional contraction that arises from our efforts to protect ourselves from unpleasantness and pain.
- 11. The path to enlightenment must pass through this imaginary film and we must come to terms with what lies beneath it. Then we can "be here now" and know *non-duality* and peace.
- 12. We labor under the delusion that other people are going to comfort us, save us and give us peace. Until we let go of this delusion that other people exist to do something for us, it will not be possible to deal with our emotional contraction (fear).
- 13. Life is a series of disappointments that prompt us to work ever harder at refining our strategy to make it work better. The disappointments continue and so does our misery until we realize that the disappointments are really opportunities.
- 14. When we're frozen like an ice cube by our emotional contraction, we thin life is going around slamming into other ice cubes or being slammed by them.
- 15. We need to just watch and experience who we really are. We must recognize we can't do much about other "ice cubes" and know it is not our business to do so anyway. When we complain about, analyze or try to fix others, we are playing the futile *ice cube game*.
- 16. What we usually think is our problem is often a pseudo-problem. The real problem is the underlying fear (EC) that we are trying to avoid. The problem is not out there it is in us.
- 17. From our beliefs, opinions and judgments, we build a castle in which we imprison ourselves. Anything that threatens the castle we've built upsets us and is perceived as a problem.

18.	Zen practice isn't about adjusting to the problem. It is seeing that there isn't any problem.

Awareness:

- 1. We try to avoid just being what we are.
- 2. Our thoughts latch onto conditioned beliefs, which give us an illusory view of reality. If we simply maintain awareness of our thoughts, just looking at them will cause them to fade away.
- 3. All doing arises from the thought that things should be different than they are. Our thoughts are always occupied with trying to get somewhere.
- 4. Anxiety lies in the gap between idea and reality. When we let go of our idea about how things ought to be and accept that things are as they are, we become centered.
- 5. Practice is learning to live in reality, seeing it for what it is and enjoying it.
- 6. All of our opinions about life separate us from it. We become numb to the sensations associated with what's happening now and are left feeling unsatisfied with life.
- 7. Life in the present consists of the five senses plus functional thought (abstract and creative thinking and planning), i.e., not ego centered thought.
- 8. When one finds oneself engaged in ego-centered thinking, refocus awareness on one sensory input such as the sounds present and awareness of other sensations will be drawn back into focus.
- 9. Right action in a situation arises naturally from being centered. Emotions that arise when centered are true emotions and are immediate and unique reactions to the present situation and lack ego involvement.

- 10. Problems arise when we subordinate awareness of the moment to selfcentered thoughts such as our personal priorities, i.e., what I want. Thus, when life doesn't go the way we want it to go, we get angry, depressed or upset in some way.
- 11. A narrow practice though at times useful restricts awareness and doesn't transfer well to living our daily lives.
- 12. Awareness practice is open to any present experience and helps us release self-centered emotional reactions and attachments.
- 13. If we think our feeling are more important than what's happening at the moment we're spinning a web in which we'll become entangled.
- 14. Generalizations about life create a fog that obscures our awareness of reality. Conceptual thinking can be useful and necessary for some things but concepts are descriptive abstractions, not reality.
- 15. False generalizations and harmful concepts always have an egocentered emotional association.
- 16. The essence of Zazen practice is to be totally what you're doing. The point is to experience directly and unfiltered what is happening.
- 17. Our psychological self is revealed by labeling our habitual thoughts about ourselves and our lives.
- 18. drama is always in self-centered mental creations that we use to generate excitement as a diversion to avoid being what we are.
- 19. To be ego-centric is to be allergic to being.
- 20. Good practice is uneventful and viewed as boring but over time we experience "boring" as joy and recognize this as the ground state for our life.

Freedom:

1. Pre-practice: One is wholly caught up in emotional reactions to life and the belief life happening to us.

2. Steps in Practice

- a. Becoming aware of our feelings and internal reactions to our thought. Knowing our personal dramas.
- b. Breaking down emotional states into their physical and mental components.
- c. Brief periods of pure experiencing without self-centered thought.
- d. Movement into a more consistent non-dual state of living the is experiential.
- e. Most of one's life is lived from an experiential base.
- f. Pure experiential living -- Buddhahood -- rarely achieved.
- 3. The move from step one to two is the hardest. If we persist in making emotional judgments such as believing another person makes us angry our ego is still hard at work and we're still in step one.
- 4. Practice is nothing but an attitude of curiosity. What's going on right now? What am I thinking and feeling? What is happening right now?
- 5. Zen practice is about functioning from moment-to-moment. Instead we get caught up in thoughts and emotional reactions, which are obsessive loops. We may have an obsessive perfectionism loop, obsessive understanding or knowing loop, an obsessive work loop or whatever. Loops are simply detours, distractions or resistance to truly knowing ourselves rather than who we think we are.

- 6. There is a kind of impersonal quality or God's eye view of things that develops in someone who sits for a long time. This is not unfeeling or callous just impersonal. Franklin Merrill-Wolff's "the high indifference."
- 7. Transformation arises from a willingness to be what life asks of us. We must really be open to life as it is to experience transformation.
- 8. Our life needs to be impeccable -- Carlos Castaneda -- that is being aware as we can be in every moment.
- 9. Zen practice is about growing up, which requires an investigation of our self-centered dream reality.
- 10. In separating ourselves from the world we create duality. We occupy our ego with avoiding what we believe to be threatening, unpleasant or boring.
- 11. There is nothing natural about self-centered emotions. They are simply physical sensations and thought that we've cooked up.
- 12. Compassion comes from openness to what is. Trying to be compassionate is like trying to be spontaneous.

Wonder:

- 1. Worrying about the past or imagining the future is pointless. There is nothing for us to do except live in the moment.
- 2. We spend our lives trying to avoid the unavoidable. Instead of living in the moment, we spend most of our lives in imaginative fantasies and melodramas, which are rooted in memories.
- 3. We view life as a struggle but the struggle arises because of the difference between reality and the thoughts in our mind. The struggle is what practice is about, that is, facing our life directly so that we see what we're really doing. We must understand that thinking won't change anything.
- 4, We have preferences to which we add emotions that transform them into demands. These needs are mental creation that should be dissolved back into simple preferences.
- 5. Happiness implies unhappiness and is an example of the dualistic thinking trap. Joy on the other hand is who we are, if we're not preoccupied with our ego-centered thoughts.
- 6. Our lives are basically about perception or the precepts created from the sensations that we experience. Problems arise through ego-centered analysis and evaluation of our precepts. Doing this we create drama and try to use it to avoid the world of perception and simple being, which we find dull or uncomfortable. Are you allergic to being?
- 7. Practice is about facing our suffering. If we can't learn to be our experience, whatever it may be, we'll never know joy.
- 8. We obsess about troublesome persons, our relationships, our work or whatever. We get caught up in self-centered thoughts about these and become upset. We become absorbed in dramas of our own creation, which keep our minds racing and our emotions fired up. This is the barrier to joy.

- 9. Enlightenment is simply experiencing the joy that flows from total commitment to living in the moment. Being fully immersed in the flow of perceptions without interruption by ego-centered thoughts.
- 10. What is necessary for a good sitting is to become willing to be aware of what is happening in the moment. Be here now!
- 11. If we are angry, we have to know this, we have to feel it, we have to sense what thoughts are creating it. Often it is found to come from thoughts arising from deep-seated conditioning that drives us to do what we do.
- 12. When we fail to see the wonder in what we experience in life then we are in trouble. Wonder isn't to be found only in special things and events but can be found in the most mundane aspects of our lives.
- 13. Practice is about wonder. We gain the ability to see the wonder in life no matter what it is and regardless of whether we like it or don't like it.
- 14. From movement comes change and in change there is chaos. From chaos comes new order, which in turn becomes chaos. That's what life is. Peace is being willing to be with the chaos. That doesn't mean we don't take any action, but even our action is part of the chaos. Yet the chaos is not chaos -- it is wonder.

Nothing Special:

- 1. Diaphragmatic breathing is an important first step when sitting.
- 2. Don't try to quiet the mind rather be conscious of what it's doing. Observe you mind with detachment like a conscientious scientist. Label your thoughts and let them pass on. Mindfulness.
- 3. What we quiet is not our thoughts but our attachment to them. This attachment is the major obstacle to Samadhi or full absorption in the present.
- 4. As the quality of our practice increases so does our ability to distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy, which is how we begin to eliminate our personal dramas.
- 5. Our dramas usually focus on negative events, experiences and beliefs that we think define our lives. We become very attached to these stories and believe they convey great truth. We must be willing to abandon our beliefs in these stories if we are to eliminate their hold on us.
- 6. Perfectionist ideals and guilt over failing to live up to them block clear awareness and the possibility of experiencing who we are, which is the only thing that matters.
- 7. The most important thing about our practice is our intent. We must intend to practice, to be present in the moment and to be aware.
- 8. Experience life as it appears right now and live without drama, which seals us off from a functioning, caring life and the experience of joy.
- 9. Practice is about developing a simple mind or a natural mind (our Buddha nature), which is unassuming and unpretentious. Living through our natural mind eliminates the confusion that arises from the complex external environment.

- 10. The natural mind doesn't need to oppose others even when they're difficult. We observe their foibles without thinking we have to fix them. We enjoy the world as it is and without judgment.
- 11. Through our natural mind we sense our connectedness to everything and that leads us to act differently.
- 12. Just being present now and with the awareness of the natural mind is cleansing and promotes healing in our life.
- 13. Chasing after ideals or enlightenment is grasping at an illusion.
- 14. Trying to achieve enlightenment (Kensho or Satori) will never unlock the door, which is always open. It is our belief that it is locked that keeps it shut.

End