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You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself
Week Three: "Ordinary Mind and Relational Practice"
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We have been in the realm of ideas and haven't really touched base with this body and my practice, what I'm doing and what I'm not doing when I'm sitting on the cushion, and how that relates to the rest of my life. Ordinary Mind's Joko Beck redefined the relationship of lay practice and monastic practice through an incredibly, elegantly simple stroke by taking our resistance to our life as it is in each moment as the basis of our practice. Rather than practice being about something else, trying to attain some other mental state, it's just about awareness of what's happening in this mental state, my ordinary mind, right here, right now—what's happening in this body, taking body in the widest sense, in my mind, my feelings, my emotions, my thoughts, but also the tension in the way I'm holding this body and how it feels in this ordinary moment.

Practicing like this, there's suddenly no difference. I can be sitting on a three-month retreat in the monastery. I can be sitting at the kitchen table with my wife, my children, the dog, the cat. That's still me sitting. It's just my ordinary life, whatever is happening, right now, wherever I am. No difference. With that insight, suddenly, where you practice and the context you're practicing in become entirely irrelevant, and practice really becomes 24/7. It becomes every second of every hour of every day, potentially.

So what are we actually doing? We're practicing with our resistance to life, that simple and inevitable and pretty much permanent desire to turn away from this moment. What's wrong in this moment? Maybe I'm worried about something; maybe I've got pain in my shoulder. It doesn't really matter. Whatever it is, that's the material of my practice in this moment: my desire to escape this moment, my life as it is. It's always there, always present, always with me. It's simply this, whatever is going on right here, right now. And my practice is simply to be with that and notice my resistance to it. I can feel that in tightening muscles, in averting my gaze, in thinking about something else, in a million ways of avoiding the reality of this moment and my experience of being just this, right here, right now.

So that was the effect of Joko's insight, but I think it actually took my own teacher, Barry Magid, to really bring our attention to the importance of this. Joko came out of a monastic tradition. She spent a lot of time in robes with a shaved head. She gave all that up. But I don't think it was ever her intention to definitively reject that. With Barry Magid, my own teacher, lay practice acquires its own authenticity, its own sense that *this is it*. This is what we do.

There's another thing that Barry has pointed to that I think is his major contribution to our understanding of Zen and what Zen practice can be, which is in our relation to the self and what we think a self is. I mentioned in the first talk that traditionally, Buddhism has seen the self as this kind of paradoxical enemy: I must discipline the self, I must erase the self, I must see through the self and realize it never existed in the first place. I can identify the self with my ego, and that's really unfortunate because ego is always negative. (It's also a term in psychology where it's not always negative.) There are all kinds of little conspiracies of language that makes self "bad, bad, bad, me, me, me."

Miraculously, Ordinary Mind stands that on its head because if I'm just observing this me as I am in this moment, however I'm showing up, angry, happy, bored out of my skull, in pain, doesn't matter, it's all just me in this moment. Then my ordinary mind, what I think of as myself, suddenly ceases to be a problem. It's just part of this experience, part of the rich play of me. Suddenly my self isn't my enemy. It's just that this is the way that I am in this moment.

One idea that Barry has developed is the idea of curative fantasy in our meditation practice. Why did I begin to meditate? Was it to save all beings or achieve some kind of loftiness? Or actually, what was I trying to get away from? What was I worried about? What was the problem in my life that I thought practice was going to solve? To that extent, because practice doesn't solve problems in that way and it's not about fixing problems, we all come to meditation for the wrong

reason. But that doesn't matter because that's just our material. Again, we experience our own resistance, our own desire to turn away, to turn everything into a problem, and that is just simply a part of our practice. Beginning to understand that, beginning to become aware of that in ourselves, we begin to see patterns emerging in the way we think about things, the way we feel about things, the way that a thought relates to an emotion relates to a feeling in my body. When I think about that, I tense up. Infinitely, these levels of awareness go down from the absolute physicality of this body to whatever it is that I'm thinking about at that moment. And we learn that we are kind and loving and gentle and cruel and mean and callous. It's just what human beings are moment by moment. But by becoming aware of that, things can begin to change. I can begin to understand.

Joko always advised to keep practice very close, very intimate, very personal. She realized very early on that relationships—my partner, my parents, my children, how I'm reacting to them in each moment—were fantastic subjects for practice. Nobody gets us as dreamily excited, as angry, as hurt, as disconnected as these intimate relationships. And we can really experience ourselves being kind and cruel, loving, callous, moment by moment. The more we're prepared to allow ourselves to observe ourselves like this and really get down to this awareness, the more it changes us. But even in these most personal relationships, there's still a really significant aspect of the social. If I have an argument with my wife, there's always an element of what I think a wife should be in relationship to a husband. There's always an element of what she thinks a husband should be in relationship to a wife. Those are not necessarily our conscious understandings, not how we'd like to appear to the world, but deep-down socialization that makes us respond and react in certain ways.

I have a certain idea of what being a parent is to my daughter. How she reacts to me may contradict that. How am I going to respond? In fact, one of the big things that hopefully you begin to learn eventually as a parent is that every preconception you had about that relationship

is completely wrong and has to be revisited, unlearned, and relearned. That's what relationship is. That's the creative possibilities of relationship. Coming out of those ideas, we learn to modify and we learn to relate to the actual being in front of us. That's where the possibilities of our actual caring come from, beginning to challenge those fundamental, deep, instinctive socializations, and learning to be with this being. We still need that structure. I'm still father, she's still daughter. I'm still husband, she's still wife. We just learned that we can do it differently.

We can draw the lines in slightly different places. And that changes how we are in relationship to each other. Even with drawing the lines anywhere, there's always an imbalance of power. It's difficult being man and woman in this society because the lines are drawn here and here and here for us, and our actual lived experience isn't necessarily that at all. As individuals, as married partners, as people having a relationship, we tie ourselves in endless knots, part of which is a direct consequence of that. All the time, we're asked to relate in terms of this identity. We're being labeled as part of this nation, this class, this race, this religion. All of these things may occur, whether we're normal or abnormal. And out of this raft, this field of internal contradictions in what is basically a subtle picture of grace, or yugen, as I was talking about in the last talk, we abstract. We define. All of those identities try to limit and channel me between certain lines, and the richness that I am expands and explodes beyond that. Above all, what gets lost is this experience of vulnerability, which is where caring comes from.

In the first talk, I was saying how even when I was in the womb, I required absolute care. When I was a child, I required absolute care. As adults, we want to deny and renounce that vulnerability, which is absolutely central to our existence and absolutely central to our being. The whirlpool is vulnerable. It's fragile, it's momentary, it flickers in and out of existence. The billiard ball is invulnerable, permanent, stable. We see vulnerability as weakness, whereas in actual fact, it is the source of the possibility of care. If we're going to address our suffering and if we're going to

address the suffering of the world, that possibility of care is absolutely essential. We are whirlpools who attempt to be billiard balls, and we fail as billiard balls, endlessly and hopelessly. We turn away and turn away and turn away. That generates a real tension. Everything which contradicts our own version of how we would like to be, how we would like other people to see us generates a huge tension within us, this pain from which I have to turn away now or else I'm going to explode. I'm going to hit somebody. It needs to be expressed, it needs to be let out, it needs somewhere to go.

If there are aspects of myself that I'm not happy with, aspects that I've been taught to despise or loathe or hate, I can *other* those. I can say, "That's not me." I can repress them. I can suppress them. The most comprehensive way of doing that is this process that we call othering. Othering is literally making something separate from myself, so I can other aspects of myself. Let's imagine a gay member of parliament in the early 1960s, when being gay is still illegal. You're this upright person legislating on the law, absolutely a model of moral behavior, and yet your truth of your sexuality is something which you can't express without going outside the law. It's a huge problem. What am I going to do with that? That's a very specific example, but in our own way, we are complex. Because of that, we are not our own fantasy of a billiard ball. And that tension, that pain, that need to push away aspects of ourselves means that we want to offload those onto others. We other, and then there is someone to blame. I can blame gay people, the Commies, people of color, anybody. It depends where I draw the lines. Remember, there are no fixed lines. I will draw those lines to suit myself along the lines that I have been given, along the lines presented to me as part of this paint-by-numbers painting.

So I can watch this process. I can become aware of this moment by moment by moment. Maybe it'll show up in my actual relationships when I meet somebody on the street, somebody at work, but also when I'm watching the news, when I'm reading a book, skimming through a magazine, watching a TV drama. How am I reacting? When am I turning away? When am I going, "Oh,

yes"? Who am I identifying with, saying, "Oh, I'm just like that" or "I would like to be just like that"? Where's the problem?

In this way, we can bring this practice to ourselves 24/7. This, for me, is what the practice of Zen precepts is about. In the way that I want to look at them and the way that I want to talk about them, the Zen precepts are very much investigating the way that we perceive the world and coming to see our own misperceptions, how the lines do conflict and contradict, how in each moment in so many tiny ways, we misrecognize ourselves and our relationships, whether that's with the person in front of me. Who do I instinctively turn towards? Who do I instinctively turn away from? Why? What is this actually about? Coming to understand this is to care: to care for the world, but also to care about ourselves, to become more fully what we can be. Awareness and caring are always intimately connected. And that is the basis of our practice. Sitting here on this cushion, going about my everyday life, in all moments, and all situations, there is my resistance. To the extent that I can see the social construction, the structural selfishness that I manifest, rather than seeing it just in terms of "me, me, me" and the self-hatred that that generates, I can become aware in a much wider sense. And with this awareness, I can care. I can care more widely. I can care more honestly. I can care more openly. And it begins with my practice in this body, these feelings right here, right now.

For the last talk, I want to take this out wide again and ask: if this is the basis of our practice, what does that say about how we might care as individuals and how we might care and address the structural selfishness within society as a whole?