

Dhara Kowal
The Courage to Lose
July 1, 2026



Hello, fellow travelers of the way. Thanks for taking a few moments outside of your day—on a day that might feel like you have competing demands placed on your time, whether it's a growing to-do list, the everyday responsibilities of family and relationships, or just the lure of your cell phone. Just setting all that down to tend to the mind. It's so needed in our life and in this world.

My name is Dhara Kowal. I'm a resident teacher and priest at the Rochester Zen Center, which was founded in 1966, 60 years ago. As part of the lineage of Philip Kapleau, I'm a dharma heir of Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede. I oversee a year-round residential Zen training program, and I also lead sesshin a number of times a year at our retreat place called Chapin Mill, which is located between Rochester and Buffalo, New York. I also lead retreats in Mexico, where one of our sister sanghas is located.

The title of this dharma talk is "The Courage to Lose." What does that mean? Why would anyone aspire to lose? And why does it take courage?

Zen is a very simple practice. While there are different methods one can take up—such as breath practice, koan practice, *shikantaza*, or just sitting—no matter the method, the practice comes down to simply experiencing each moment just as it is, not through the filter of our thoughts, not according to our opinions about it, but directly. Just being in this very body-mind right now. Showing up for whatever presents itself, without the complications of dwelling in thoughts.

And so this means experiencing the whole of life—its vibrancy, beauty, joy, but also its hardships and heartaches—all of it, without picking or choosing, without holding on to anything. Anytime we hold on to a thought, a feeling, an experience, what we're doing is cutting ourselves off from life, the flow of life, and cutting ourselves off from the pure intimacy of each moment. We live our life divided. Our body's doing one thing and our mind's doing another. And this is a habit that causes so much suffering. We feel disconnected and in opposition to one another. Life in general feels like it's something that is happening to us, as if it's bearing down on us rather than it being us. And this shapes how we experience every moment of our life, affecting all the people and beings and things that we come in contact with as well.

So, as a way of illustrating this everyday suffering that results from being caught up—snagged in thoughts—I'll share a story about one of my recent trips to Mexico.

I arrived several days before sesshin, so I had a chance to get acclimated, to visit with sangha, and also just to explore. On this particular trip, I visited the beautiful town of Tepoztlán, located south of Mexico City. I was especially looking forward to it because this is the town where Roshi Kapleau lived for two years while he was working on one of his books, and he was joined there by my teacher, Bodhin Roshi.

Anyway, one of the main attractions of Tepoztlán is a pyramid that dates back to the Aztec Empire. It sits on top of a mountain. The pyramid is called Tepozteco, and it overlooks a wide expanse—you see all of the town and the mountains off in the distance. It's a spectacular view. But visiting it involves working your way up a very steep, winding, and rocky trail. And once you get to the top, there's a metal staircase, and at the top of the staircase there's a gate. You have to go through the gate in order to access the pyramid site, which is a cultural treasure. It's protected, and so it's only open certain days and times of the week and the year.

Anyway, one morning as I was working my way up that mountain, up that difficult trail, I came upon another hiker—a British guy who was headed in the opposite direction. He was bounding down the mountain, totally out of breath. He stopped and said to me, exasperated, "For the second time this week, I went to the top of this mountain and the gate was closed." I asked him what the view was like from outside the gate. And he just dismissed it and said, "There's nothing to see there. It's just dense jungle." He was visibly angry and incredulous. He was basically saying to me: don't waste your time and energy heading up that mountain. The gate's closed.

Dharma gates are never shut—they're always open

Well, when I got up there, the gate was open. And forget about that—forget about the view from the top. The way up and the way down was incredible. The lushness of the trees and plants, some of them flowering. All the different stepping stones, different sizes and shapes. The chorus of birds. And people—fellow hikers from all different walks of life, all of us sweaty and out of breath. It was wonderful.

Dharma gates are never shut—they're always open. But this guy was so fixated on getting to a destination, on getting the results that he wanted, that he failed to appreciate what was right in front of him, even the very ground that he was walking on. He also didn't realize that Mexican time is a little different from time in other cultures—it's more approximate, not rigid.

Anyway, from the vantage point of Zen, the journey along the way is the practice. That's the practice. The path. And it's endless. There's no finish line, no arrival point. And it's in this way that Zen is a practice of losing—not in the sense of being defeated, but in the sense of dropping our goal-seeking and our grasping for things to be different than they are.

Zen is a practice of losing—not in the sense of being defeated, but in the sense of dropping our goal-seeking and our grasping for things to be different than they are.

And this is where practice, as simple as it is, becomes challenging. Why would anyone sit still in silence in a meditation posture for extended periods of time if there wasn't something to gain from it? The whole notion of losing runs completely counter to how we humans have been conditioned. For starters, it's built into the hardwiring of our brain. If you look at human evolution going far back in time, our very survival as a species depended on amassing resources, gaining territory, food, allies, shelter. And of course, those who were successful at this were more likely to survive, and their genes were more likely to be passed on. So we modern humans inherited this deep-seated drive to succeed. Our tendency is to view our life as if it's on a trajectory of continuous improvement, constantly advancing ahead, climbing up and up, making our way to the top. And of course, the brain's reward system reinforces this by giving us those jolts of dopamine.

In psychology, there's a term—the "hedonic treadmill"—used to describe how, upon making some improvements to our life, perhaps acquiring some new possessions in the pursuit of happiness, we often quickly return back to our baseline level of happiness. And then we proceed to go after the next latest and greatest thing that we think will make us happy. And the pattern continues. So we return to seeing ourselves as lacking, as needing more, needing better than what we have and who we are. And as a consequence, we feel like we're stuck in place, even as we continuously chase after what we think will address our dissatisfaction.

This habit of mind is also embedded in cultural values. In industrialized societies—so-called advanced societies—there's this core belief that the future can and should be better than the past, and that we need to work toward that. And as long as we work hard and stay focused on pursuing our goals, we'll get there. So it's an orientation to life that is merely linear—as in getting from point A to point B—and of course we want to get there as soon as possible, on our timetable, and we want there to be a payoff for our efforts. We want the gate to be open, not closed.

Now, this idea of making progress and strategizing certainly is relevant to some aspects of our life—like your career or your education—but it does not translate into awakening to our true nature. To come to see who we are fundamentally. Each one of us. Without exception. Not just intellectually. Not just as a belief. But to experience it, to embody it and actualize it in our life. And that is the promise of Zen practice.

And it's not until we abandon the safety and comfort of thoughts and control strategies that we can really begin to open up to the whole of life. Now, it's one thing to tell yourself, "OK, I just need to let go." It's another thing to do it. And what do I mean by doing it? It's not just reading

books or watching videos or listening to talks like this one. It's actually doing the work and making it the foundation of your life. And what is that work?

In Zen, we use the word *zazen* to refer to meditation—sitting still in a stable posture, upright, and turning inward, tending to the breath, to the koan, or whatever practice you're working on. It's a process. And in doing it, the mind does settle and it does become more aware, especially if we do it on a daily basis. But no one can do it for you. No one can open the gate for you. And by the way, there isn't just one gate—there are as many gates as there are moments, and as there are breaths.

And this is where courage comes into play. We tend to think of courage as being this strong and willful act of bravery, like going into battle, subduing one's enemies. But if you treat thoughts as if they're enemies, you're only placing yourself in opposition to them. That's not experiencing life as it is—that's rejecting it. Thoughts are not a problem. They're not an enemy. The brain produces thoughts just as it does beads of sweat. That's what the body is designed to do. We don't need to deny that. What matters instead is where we choose to direct our attention.

And somehow, this involves courage, because it can feel kind of risky. Mindfully noticing and returning our attention to the practice, to what we're experiencing. Now, it's not risky in the conventional sense, like if you were to take up skydiving or some other extreme sport. It's a different kind of risk. It's far more subtle. It's just the gentle effort of directing your attention—and yet it's transformational.

It's the courage to relax into this. Not how you want it to be, but just this. It's the courage to let go of our familiar self-narratives, all the stories we cling to about who we are, what we can and can't do, and what others think about us. And most of all, the courage to let go of our identification with being a discrete self, a fixed self, that we think is separated from all the other selves out there. And the habitual thinking and strategizing that sustain this illusion of a self and other.

So, losing the grip of this notion that you're a static self—that's scary, isn't it? It's scary for a lot of people. It is putting your life on the line, or at least your thoughts about your life and your identity on the line. And heading straight into the unknown. Just experiencing whatever arises is unknown territory. Not trying to manufacture anything. Not trying to make it fit with your preferences. Not holding on to it. And ultimately not knowing what it is.

But with courage, effort, and persistence, we have the capacity to access this other self that has no borders or edges, that is vast and wide and has no limits. And it's who we truly are, without exception.

And it's scary because we've long bought into this illusion of duality. We've developed this persona, and throughout our life we've poured so much time and energy into constructing it, asserting it, defending it, trying to elevate its appearance and its rank. Or the opposite—seeing oneself as broken or damaged goods. Not worthy. Beyond repair. Most people would rather hold on to their story, whatever the content is, because as painful as it is to hold on to that story and to live one's life as separate and divided, as painful as it is, it's familiar.

But with courage, effort, and persistence, we have the capacity to access this other self that has no borders or edges, that is vast and wide and has no limits. And it's who we truly are, without exception.

So how do we muster the courage to let go and to drop this notion of a self and an other? It goes back to simplicity. It is very simple. It doesn't require any force. And it begins with relaxing the body. Relaxing right where you are, as you are. And when we relax the body, often the mind will follow. Trusting that there's nothing about you, there's nothing about your practice and your life that needs to be changed. No special place that you need to get to. That everything you could possibly need is right here.

Just looking. Just showing up for this. Just this. And "just" means just.