

The Promise of Meditation II
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We're talking about a fundamentally optimistic way of being. We're talking about a sense that awakening is always going on; that our whole lives are processes of awakening; that it's not a matter of working hard so that you can have breakthrough moments and then everything will be okay, but that everything that happens in your life is part of your awakening.

It's important not to throw anything away, make it bad, or think that you were on a detour. There aren't any detours in the Way. The Way is broad and includes everything. It's punctuated by these moments when things get radiant, clear, and apparent. As someone was saying about the experience they had as a child, if you don't have anything to hold it, it leaks away, it disappears. Practice is about making a bucket strong enough to hold it when it comes and not have it leak away immediately.

I'd said earlier today that I don't use the word enlightenment much because it's a squishy word and can mean anything anybody wants it to mean. That's not to say that all of it is subjective and vague and doesn't have meaning. In the koan way, the ways we see things and the words we use are very specific and quite technical, actually, for the kinds of experiences that it's possible to have. If you have a broad stroke of awakening throughout your whole life, if that's a process that's always going on, then there are moments of punctuation where things open up. They run on a scale from tastes of emptiness to small openings, to openings, to big openings, to *kenshos*, to thorough-going *kenshos* — all along that spectrum, and each of those has its own qualities and results.

That's not the end of the process, either. It's not like, *Okay, I got the kensho, that's what I came for and now I'm set*. Because if you stay with it, fairly shortly after, usually something terrible will happen. It's as if life is saying, *That's all well and good, but match it up against this. Does the light shine here too? Does the light shine when there's disaster, or suffering, or something really horrible?* And you have to come to terms with that. In the Middle Ages they used to make paintings of Jesus where it would just be his feet leaving the frame at the top, ascending to heaven ... so it's not a

matter of just ascending to heaven in that way. There's a fundamental integration that has to happen between those experiences of opening, those experiences of the true nature of things, and the ordinary joys and difficulties of life.

Those opening experiences don't reveal something truer than our ordinary lives. What they do is show us an aspect of everything that's already here that we tend to forget or overlook. It's the same world it was five minutes ago, it's just that we can see this other aspect of it, this radiant aspect. Not true or more important, but *there* as well.

So now we have the ordinary experience of things and the radiant experience of things, and there's even a third thing, which is a place where those mix and things are half material and half energy, and there's a lot of possibility. That's the room of creativity and dreams.

All we've done is we've seen — to go back to Trungpa's formulation — more realistically. We're seeing things more realistically because we're seeing the radiant aspect as well, but not *instead of*. So how do we do that work of integrating the form world and the radiant world into one whole thing? That's really the process of awakening — not the moments of thunderbolts and lightning — but that slow process of integration over time where it becomes natural to see everything like that all the time.

Q1 : Can you define *kensho*?

JIS : In the koan tradition, *kensho* is the word that's used to describe the experience of seeing your true nature, seeing things as they really are. It's a time when the obstructions and obscurations that get in the way of seeing fall away and we're in direct relationship — we're in intimacy — with the way things actually are, and we know that right down to the core of our being. Once having had a *kensho*, you know that thing. You know that you've seen something true. Even though you may go on with life looking very much the same, something's fundamentally different because a door has opened that won't close again. There can be degrees of that — there can be degrees of how much you see, how thoroughly you see it. And the nature of what you see, in addition to the way things rise and fall, changes all the time. There is also something that is eternal, doesn't change at all, and co-exists with everything rising and falling. Everything is always simultaneously changing and completely eternal and just as it is — not even an adjective, like 'perfect as it is,' but just *as* it is. Complete.

Q2 : How do we forget?

JIS : That's a good question. I think it's because we don't yet have a container strong enough to hold it. We don't have a place to put it or something to do with it. It feels too far outside our ordinary experience to have a hook to hang it on.

Q3 : Could it be fear?

JIS : Yeah, it can be fearful because it's very subversive of our small happinesses and our little negotiations with life.

Q4 : I don't get it. How do we forget it if it's part of us? Do we know it when we're kids?

JIS : A lot of people do. Do you feel like you did?

Q4 : I see it in kids a lot.

JIS : Yeah, kids often have a really strong connection with it.

Q4 : So is it like our experiences when we grow up and start conceptualizing everything, saying this is the way I think it's supposed to be, that covers it up?

JIS : Mm hmm. Also, most kids when they have those kinds of experiences don't have a way to understand it or someone to talk to about it, a way to give it a context. It just seems so different.

Q3 : We're living in a culture that doesn't understand it or relate to it. So, as a kid, it diminishes because we're not getting any kind of feedback. I think there are other cultures that understand it and it is something that is valued and can be carried into your life.

JIS : Mm hmm.

Q5 : There's also the importance of becoming yourself in a way, so that you can come back to this — that circular kind of a thing. With my own kids I see them pushing against it. They've hardened to become singular. They work very hard at it and know it's important that they do that. I don't know why, but I see them doing it a lot every day.

Q6 : Have you seen, culturally, an understanding of kensho that's more roundly accessible? Have you experienced an understanding, a cultural glimpse?

JIS : I do think there are groups that are much more open to it. A friend of mine just told me a story that I'm digesting. She's a filmmaker and was with a group of people in the Amazon basin. They sleep in one long hut together on hammocks. She started noticing that every night between midnight and three a.m. there would be all this rustling in the hut, low voices, and people talking for about three hours, and then everybody would go back to sleep.

It took her about four nights to realize that every night, between midnight and three o'clock, they would wake up and talk amongst themselves about dreams, the culture, and carrying on the stories. The kids were taught that way. The culture was passed on. The kids would relate their experiences and be listened to. I love that story. So I think that there are cultures that are much more open to that kind of thing. There's less of a separation.

Q6 : What about cultures where Buddhism is the basis? Do you see that in typically Buddhist cultures?

JIS : Not so much anymore. That's a whole long thing, but in most Asian Buddhist cultures a huge split developed between the monastic and the lay practice. So the kind of stuff we're talking about was relegated to monastic practice. People didn't even realize they were having those type of experiences in their ordinary lives.

You can give someone an experience that seems like kensho just by putting a whole lot of pressure on them. There's the classic story that Suzuki Shunryu used to tell about going to a temple as a young man, and there were six people doing a *rohatsu* retreat, which is the most intense retreat. You stay up all night without sleeping, and you just sit, sit, sit. The roshi said, "Every single one of you will have a kensho before this retreat is over or you will die!" Five of them had kensho and one of them didn't. They went outside and dug a pit in the ground and said, "Throw him in." They were swinging him with, "One, two ..." and he said, "I got it! I got it!" [Laughter] I have a question about how thoroughgoing and longlasting that kind of experience might be. But it degenerated into tricks like that.

Q7 : In the Christian tradition there's the same sort of pressure to understand salvation, to become saved.

JIS : What's the quality, when it's under pressure, of the experience over time?

Q7 : It happened to me when I was a kid at church camp. I remember thinking, *These people are nuts*. I went through the motions to try and get to where it was they wanted me to get to. But I walked away thinking, *They don't get it*. I had an understanding as a child that they didn't have. They were trying to get me to a kensho experience I guess.

Q8 : My church camp kensho dissolved into terror. I thought I had it, that I got it. *I did it! I did it!* And I really believed it. It dissolved into abject terror within just a couple of weeks. It was waking me up at night; my relationship with that experience became a terror of what they

were trying to teach me. Not necessarily the experience, because that was very light and beautiful. But the basis, the base belief of the whole thing, became a nightmare for me. I'd wake up terrified.

Q1 : I recently found a house that I've been looking for for a very long time. Last year I had come to a crisis point where I had a sense that *I can't stay in this house anymore. I cannot live the way I have lived. Something has to change or I'll die.* It was coming to a point of working with all my family stuff, my father issues, all of those things leading up to *I gotta get out of here! It is time to leave this house.* It was a very crisis kind of space. My therapist even questioned if I was considering suicide. But it wasn't that. It was just that this life as I had lived it, must end. It's taken me nine months, and a lot of process, but that moment, even though it was a difficult moment, led me to change. That one moment made all the difference in my life. It's a huge step to leave that house and move into the one I found.

So, is that a kensho experience? [Laughter] Or is it something different?

JIS : It's something different. It's an epiphany.

Q1 : Oh! [lots of laughter]

JIS : Because fundamentally it comes from within the territory of your life experience. This is you working out something in your life within the terms of your own life. A kensho by its nature, comes from completely outside your life experience. Because you can't know it ahead of time. Your experience is built of all the hard work you've been doing in your life. Kensho isn't built of anything.

Q9 : Let me try to transfer that into a question, because when you talked about this at the December retreat I did the same thing. I think probably all of your students are doing this because you're talking about the kensho experience in clear terms, but I'm sitting here going, *Have I had one? Have I had one?* It's like we're all doing that. What have I experienced that is like this that might have been kensho? I think there are varieties of experiences of selflessness and oneness and that kind of thing. What comes to mind for me today is the scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studied this phenomenon called flow, which is characterized by a complete loss of a sense of self, a complete loss of the sense of a passage of time, a unification of consciousness and action, and a sense of the radiance of everything and an elation about it

all. He studied high adventure sports people, which is where I picked up on this because I used to teach that. He studied orchestra conductors, ballet dancers, English Channel swimmers, a huge range of people that are in very intense situations. And another characteristic of the flow experience is that the situation seems to absolutely demand action and you're capable of it, and you become the action. There is nothing else. There is no self, there is no passage of time, it's just the action. I've experienced that on long multi-pitch rock climbs. I can remember times when I was 350 feet off the ground, in a very tense situation, where I'm not thinking of anything else except how to make that next move because my life depends on it, and I make it.

But I don't think that's kensho. I remember the December retreat, when I was hearing this for the first time, I thought, *I've had this experience, it was full of radiance! Everything was radiant. I felt like we were all just perfect!* And you said, "It might have been a little opening." [Laughter]

I'm okay with that now, but what I'm leading up to is, tell us more. Because we're all practicing. Kensho is a traditional part of this Zen consciousness. You're teasing us. Tell us more.

I'm also getting from today that we are collaborating with the awakening. It's collaborating with us. So we're making the openings for these kensho experiences, creating them through practice. Is there more to be said? Maybe there isn't.

JIS : It's difficult to talk about. What you just described as a flow experience I would call something like a peak experience, similar to Maslow's theory. But again, there's something coming from completely outside anything you could imagine knowing [with a kensho]. I'm trying to think of whether you could actually complete an action during a kensho, and I have a feeling you might not be able to. I have a feeling that that might be diagnostic. You can't do anything. It's not like an extreme sports moment or a moment of creativity. There's no one there to do anything, in a way.

Q3 : I'd like to relate something that happened in my meditation. It has to do with my experience of stillness. I've had stillness so overpowering that it totally swallowed up all sound, all manifestation. After I came out of it, I could see that the stillness was really the biggest thing that there is. It totally changed my understanding of manifestation.

JIS : That's *samadhi*. That deep meditation experience that you're describing is the engine, like an engine rumbling underneath everything that gives us the focus, the power, and the

concentration we need to do this work. The danger is in thinking that that in and of itself is the end, rather than the engine.

I'm not trying to dodge the question; I'm trying to think if there's anything useful I can say about kensho. What we can do that's tremendously important is be sincere and consistent with our meditation, so that we do develop all of that engine of samadhi.

We were saying at the retreat that there's a fantasy that we can have a powerful transformational experience without having to change; it will just come and transform everything, but we don't need to do anything about it. And we do. One thing is to keep doing the meditation, to develop the concentration and the focus so that you've got this big engine underneath you that's fueling the journey.

The other thing is to do the deconstructive work we spent all morning talking about. How do you deconstruct the obscurations and the obstacles that stand between you and reality? How do you develop a more direct relationship with reality? If you walk out that distance, if you do that with great sincerity, it's hard work and it takes a long time, but if you consistently do those two things, then, as one of our ancestors said, "Enlightenment is an accident, but meditation makes you accident-prone." There is a non-personal or transpersonal quality about it. But if you want to get struck by lightning, hang out in open fields during rainstorms. Keep doing the things that seem to help and make a difference. They'll be good for you anyway.

[Laughter]

I'm wary of saying it like that because it sounds like we only do that so that we can have this big experience. That's not it at all. You were talking about a collaboration; well, that's our part in the collaboration. That's the part we can do something about. Then there's this other part that we *fortunately* can't control or do anything about.

Q9 : Even the kensho experience, or a series of them, is not the full package of awakening. What you said just a few minutes ago was that then the real work is to take that kensho experience and settle it, seed it into the world, so that it itself collaborates with what we experience in the world. So awakening is this slow process, really, over a long period of time, of integrating kenshos and these powerful experiences with the dharma of what is happening.

JIS : Yeah. A kensho is the world calling you home. And to not take the invitation to go home is to be stingy and selfish.

Q10 : I don't want to talk about this. As it started coming up I started feeling a resistance. And the more we talked, this thing has become more and more resistant to this conversation. It's interesting that you say it's like refusing to be called home. It doesn't make any sense that I don't want to think about this. But crap! I don't want to think about this. That's really interesting to me.

JIS : What's the fear?

Q10 : I don't know! Calling for something that won't respond. Why do that? I'm not saying that I don't see the purpose in the practice. Calling for this experience seems somehow to diminish my practice in a way. It feels like the massive, herculean effort that has to go into just getting out of bed some days, if what we're looking for is something that insubstantial, something so outside of ourselves that we can't even really discuss it, then why discuss it? I don't know how to talk about the way I feel but I feel really resistant for some reason. I'm kind of surprised.

JIS : I heard you say, Why call for something that might not come? That sounds like a big fear. Right? I'll put it all on the line, do all this work, be really sincere, and it will never happen. And that would be worse than not trying.

Q10 : So maybe I don't want my practice to be somehow ... I don't want to put it up there as something I should do. Because it might not come. If that becomes the point of it, then it seems like all of this is dead. It seems to put a stake in the heart of it.

JIS : Why?

Q10 : They seem separate somehow. Because it's so far outside of myself I can't contextualize it within my life. So maybe I go to the other end of the emptiness perspective and I tend to hang out in the 'you and me' perspective. So maybe it's just not a big enough container.

JIS : I wonder if you're limiting what's already happening by having that view.

Q1 : Is that supposed to be the goal?

JIS : No. No. No.

Q11 : I see it as, if that's what you want, it's like you're desiring something and you're never gonna get it if you want it. If you see it as goal or the end of something, it's worthless.

JIS : Yeah, it's a terrible pathology to think that that's what you're going for. And that it's all there is and the only important thing. One of the things that that kind of attitude does is

make the world nothing more than a staging ground for that kind of experience. So the world loses its inherent value and becomes a place where this thing might happen that we care about. That's a terrible distortion. *And*, we've gone so far in the other direction, where we don't talk about this at all, we don't discuss it honestly. So people don't even know what experiences they're having. They don't know what's actually going on. They don't know that it can happen slowly over years rather than in a thunderclap. And that seems wrong in the other direction. That seems disempowering in some other way, to not even have it in the mix as part of our aspirations.

Q1 : Yes. Thank you for saying that.

Q12 : I have a feeling not exactly like that, but it's more that as you talk about this, we'll misunderstand it and go off in the wrong direction, wanting this as a goal. But now, it doesn't feel like that. It makes a lot more sense. Because all the koans and the Zen stories about people being instantly awakened, I never understood. Why are there all these Zen stories of people being instantly awakened when what you're describing isn't like that at all?

JIS : Well, it can be like that. The breakthrough moments can be instant like that. In fact, they tend to turn on a dime like that. But they happen in a context. And we just get the few little sentences. You read the whole life story and you find that there's a giant context for that moment occurring. And, there are also spontaneous things that just happen. It's completely random. You've got someone collecting firewood to protect his mother, and he hears a song in the street and wakes up from hearing the song.

But when I say that's random, that should be encouraging, because it can happen anywhere at any time with anything if we're open to it.

Q10 : I think that's the other part of this. There's this sense that there's something outside of us. If this experience is random and we're meditating and preparing for that consciousness, who's the other part of that? What's the other part that's random? Who's the co-collaborator?

JIS : The world. Life.

Q3 : I call it the unmanifest. Is that wrong? [Laughter]

JIS : I don't think it's wrong. The image that often gets used is that you look in a mirror and you see your true face. So there isn't anything outside yourself, but you see it clearly for the first time. It's tricky because an important part of the experience is a loss of the focus on the individual self and a sense of participating in something enormously vast. That's the 'other'

in a way. The world does come and get us, and call us home in some way to itself. I don't want to deny that sense of the other, it's just that you discover that you're continuous with it. You're not separate from it; you're part of it.

Q3 : What hit home in what you just said was that it's not like we're here on the earth doing our thing, it's like the earth and us conspiring together to do our thing.

Q13 : When I get new students and I get questions about creativity, very often I hear, "I have no creativity." And I think, *then you would be dead*. It's just not possible. It's our baseline. It's what we do. To get people to start seeing what they do is creative, we think about what we saw today, just today. What did you think today? Just today? What were your experiences just before you got here? Take all of that together, and this moment is your collaboration with all of what came before. Now you're making something new with me and the other people here that pulls from all of those bits, and from all of these bits, and from everything that's around us. We get to stir it together and build something with it. That's how we talk about it in terms of coming up with an image to make art.

JIS : If there isn't much we can do about that other part — the Other and what it does — there's a great deal we can do on our side of things. It might be more useful to talk about : Are you willing to let go of your habits, conditioned ways of doing things, beliefs, certainties, assumptions? If it's necessary, are you willing to do that? Are you willing to come right up to a process in which you feel fear that you're going to lose yourself? Because in a way you are. That's the truth. There's a lot of *Yeab, yeab. I really want this, except that last step. I don't want to take that step off the cliff*. There's a lot of work to be done in that area. Are you willing?

Q14 : But then that raises the question : can you just say that? And just drop everything you believe and think? I take it that's the whole process, isn't it? You're training yourself over time to let go of things. Although I guess it could happen all at once.

Q15 : I imagine if you move somewhere or change your life it could. The only thing I can liken it to is moving from the city to a farm. My life is completely different than it ever was before in a way that I would never have imagined. It's like what you're saying. I was sort of willing to throw those things away, and still hesitant because I was losing that former part of myself that was a city person. Now I'm a worker of the land and carer of animals and things like that. It's frightening, I think, but also very good.

JIS : That's a great analogy.

Q10 : Do you think that people who go through constant change, more than normal, who are always having to do big lifetime changes, do they either go one way or the other way? They're either able to let go of everything a lot easier, or they're completely closed down to life?

JIS : I think you could go either direction. Are you thinking about something in particular?

Q10 : No. I'm just thinking about people that have to go through a lot of changes and their lives are not just kind of normal. A lot of life changes, losses, and different things that happen. I can see that as making it a little bit easier sometimes to expect the unexpected. To be okay with change. But at the same time it can make you more resistant to change because you've lost so much you want to keep what you have.

JIS : Yeah. For sure. I would think so.

Q1 : I can see, in my life, that experience of loss can be really useful in breaking down those barriers. But there's still this other habitual stuff, and that seems the hardest to me. It's the everyday little things that I don't seem to be able to change, no matter how much I want to. I'll even see myself saying the same things, acting in the same way. I've gotten to the point where I almost have to laugh at myself. I sit on my cushion, I've made huge changes in a lot of big ways, and in these little ways I haven't changed at all. Is it necessary to change those little things?

JIS : We start cutting deals.

Q1 : I know, you can't really do that.

Q9 : But do you think the practice overall is slowly dissolving resistance to the change?

Q1 : Absolutely.

Q9 : That's what I think. I have hope for myself with even the more intractable of my addictions and tendencies. I do see that the whole thing is dissolving slowly, the whole self. But karma is like a freight train. It just keeps barreling along. To try to look at it, see it for what it is, see that it's possible to change it, envision the change, take the first step, all that stuff takes a lot of energy and time and effort. I think it's going to be my life. But I'm okay with that.

The other thing about the kensho experience — and this is a really helpful workshop for me — I'm getting to the point where I'm okay with all this too, because I know I have those

opening experiences. I don't think I'm going to concern myself about whether it's really a kensho. There are times when I really don't feel like there's much more self in here [group practice] than I do out there [the world]. And I know there are times when there's a radiance, and time seems to stop, and everything seems perfect. I love those experiences and they happen more frequently now than they used to. I think maybe this dissolving of the habits and the constructs is part of being able to have those. I don't really care how fast it happens. I think it's just fine the way it is. I'm just really grateful I have this practice. It's all good. There are certainly a lot of difficult, intractable habits that I still have, but as long as they seem to dissolve more than they seem to get stuck ...

Q10 : Would that be part of the teaching, that it's important to deal with these intractable habits?

JIS : Oh, absolutely. They need to be laughed at. [Laughter] They need to be dissolved or made more spacious because otherwise they're in control. They're delusions that are substituting for what's actually happening.

Q15 : Don't you think that meditation just does that? I don't know if it does for everybody, but for me it's inevitable. I'm not trying to do that, it just happens.

Q13 : Back to will and the jobs that will has. And then the grace of practice. I'm talking about push and pull — being pulled and pushing along. I can see moments when I've overmastered my desire to get ahold of some of these issues, some of these intractable, personal things, things that I know are poisonous. Then I've also seen examples of some of those very same things, given enough space, becoming easier. And I'm not sure where that balance is. Maybe it's different for everyone and maybe practice reveals it, but I'm wondering if you have some insight on the balance between push and pull.

When I began practicing yoga there were some issues that were really important for me to get ahold of — personal issues. I could see I was really hurting myself and hurting others by continuing to engage in those things. When I first started [practice] I started on my own with books and some of them actually talked about some of these things like, don't worry too much about losing weight or doing this or doing that, just start practicing and these things will resolve on their own. And I thought, *Yeah, right*. Yet, eight years later, not only through yoga

and meditation, most of those things aren't issues anymore. How much of that was my will to get over it and how much of it was the grace of the practice? Does this question even matter?

JIS : I would make a distinction between will and aspiration. Will comes out of the forehead and it thinks it knows — and it's almost always wrong. Whereas aspiration comes up from a deeper place and is more likely to listen to the situation in order to figure out where to go and how to do it. *I have an aspiration to love better* is really different than *I'm gonna figure out how to make this family work!*

Q13 : That's perfect. That's very helpful.

JIS : If you find yourself in a will situation, see if you can discover an actual aspiration under the will. The will can take over and thinks it knows how to do this. But go back to the aspiration and listen to what the aspiration wants. When you put that aspiration out, what do you hear in the world?

Q13 : That makes me deliriously happy. That's fantastic! I love it.

Q3 : I was going to say that to me push and pull are the same thing. But then there's something else that draws me. I guess it's like aspiration. Say I'm walking along looking at flowers, there's something there that draws me for a moment and I have a connection, and it wasn't a will thing at all. It's just something that happens.

JIS : Yeah. And sometimes grace falls on you like a piano. I mean, it's not always a flower beckoning. Sometimes it's just flattening.

Q13 : Having West Nile Virus was grace, pure grace. And it *flattened* me.

Q3 : I think sometimes there's a misconception that if you meditate you're going to have fun. And that's not it at all. It is a lot like a piano falling.

Q1 : Can't it be fun?

Q3 : It can be, but that's not what it is.

JIS : It seems much more important to not have any opinions about what it is, or might be, or should be, but just to notice what's actually happening. Whatever is actually happening, that's your meditation.