

Being Accompanied
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When we began last night I said that I wanted to talk this sesshin — as we gather together to sit, walk, eat, sleep, and dream together — from inside that coming together, about what it's like to practice alone, which a lot of us spend a lot of time doing. The place I'd like to start again tonight is with the poem "Caminante" by Antonio Machado. I suggested it as a place to start last night. It goes like this :

Traveler, it is your footsteps,
the road — nothing more;
traveler, there is
no road, you make the road by walking ...

I love this image because it feels so much like life to me. It has a quality of grandeur, the grandeur of being alive, that sense of the road unfurling through emptiness in front of us. It also has great humility and simplicity : one foot in front of the other.

When you begin looking you see that image of walking everywhere in the zen tradition. There are those times when we walk and we don't know where we're going. When we're deeply in 'don't know.' There's a koan about fording the stream at night : I know I have found the next stone when my foot doesn't get wet. There is the department of silly walks. Someone I'm working with told me recently that he realized that the road he was walking on was quite wide. He had been walking down the middle of it as though he was on a balance beam, teetering and trying to balance with one foot right in front of the other. Suddenly he saw it was wide.

We do that. We make our lives and we make our practices one step after another. It's simple and it's beautiful and it's awesome in a way. In our meal service we try to capture a little bit of the flavor of that humility and that grandeur in the verse we say, the verse the cantor says.

Out of the mysterious source
we and the things that sustain us come.
Waking and eating, embracing and sleeping
we walk on the empty sky.

I like to think of Machado and his donkey walking across the empty sky.

One of the things I notice about this image, as much as I love it and as deeply as it touches me, is that it doesn't include the sense of being accompanied that I feel about life. Images practically beg to be changed. They want to come into relationship with you and have you mess with them, move them around, and they'll move you around. The image doesn't mind if we then add this sense of being accompanied as we walk, as we unfurl this road step by step through emptiness.

If I glance around I can see all of these roads in progress everywhere around me, intertwining and intersecting. Some I can touch. Some are on the horizon and barely visible. Some are underneath the horizon, and so completely unimaginable. It seems that the universe is made up of all of these roads in progress, moving in all directions. Even when we're practicing alone we're never alone. We know that. We fundamentally know that.

What I'd like to talk about tonight are the things that accompany us that aren't necessarily human : things like the images in the Machado poem, koans, art — the experience of making art or looking at art — literature, sometimes psychotherapy, relationships — all those things that accompany us as we walk on our journey.

Maybe we have an idea that the practice is one thing, and it's the same thing for everybody all the time. *This is pretty much it. A little walk. A little chant. Pretty much it.* That idea comes out of a different circumstance than our own. It comes out of a monastic tradition in which everybody lived pretty much the same life. That was part of the deal. You were choosing to live the same life with all these other people living the same life you were living. In Muso Soseki's image it's like a snake choosing to crawl into a bamboo tube and stay in the darkness, stay stretched out, all the curves pulled out while it's in the tube.

But we're not monastic. We don't crawl into *that* tube though we may crawl into others. There are probably just as many different kinds of lives in this room as there are people in this room. It's interesting to wonder about the one-size-fits-all practice. It's interesting to wonder about when we're doing it and when we're not doing it.

People will say to me, *Well, I've really kind of moved away from my practice.* Translation : *I'm not sitting.* But then when you begin to talk you find out that there are other things going on. They're walking around holding a koan like *What is this?* all the time, everywhere bringing up

the koan. They're working with a practice like *metta* where they're offering a lovingkindness to other people. They're listening to tapes as they drive around in their car, they're reading books. Sometimes people move into a more devotional practice, in which they shamefacedly tell me, *I've got this Guanyin and I light a candle*. There's something so beautiful about that. I'd like to challenge the idea that any of that is a matter of stepping away from or abandoning the practice.

Your job is not to sit twenty-five minutes a day twice a day and come tell me about it twice a year during retreat. That's not a practice. In one of the koans I handed out last night was one from Zhaozhou.

When someone said, "What is meditation?"

He said, "It's not meditation."

"Well, why isn't it meditation?"

"It's alive. It's alive."

That's your job. *It's alive. It's alive.*

What's your life? If you're sitting or not sitting or raising a small child or chanting or dancing naked in the sprinklers with your neighbor at three o'clock in the morning to folk music, the question is not *Are you following some recipe?* The questions are : How is your life? What is your life like? How is your heart? How is your mind? How are the people in your immediate vicinity? Is there an openness? Is there a clarity sometimes? Is there a generosity? Is stuff happening?

Those are the questions that seem important to me. Not only will how you get there be different for every person in this room, but through the course of your life it's not going to look the same either. It will be different things at different times.

Again, it's not about following a recipe, but something a little more difficult, granted. This is where sitting does come in and this is why we say it's good to include sitting in the mix. Because one of the things that meditation can do is help you develop an attitude towards things, an attitude that we have called one of warmth and curiosity. That's not a bad place to start. That's not a bad place to stop. If you can go with warmth and curiosity through most of your life that will get you through most situations — although we'll talk in a minute about the times it might not.

The longer we practice in whatever ways we practice, it's possible that a field of awareness begins to open up, and we begin to experience ourselves not as the center of the universe, but as a part of a field. In that field rise and fall other people, circumstances, everything around us and also the things inside us. Our own thoughts and feelings rise and fall in this field of awareness. It's not exactly that we're observing it, because awareness is a little bit different from observation. It's not like us looking at everything else, or one part of ourselves looking at another part of ourselves as an observation, but more taking place in that field with everything else and coming to see the dreamlike quality of everything — including ourselves and including what rises and falls inside of us.

When we see the dreamlike quality of things we see simultaneously that they are provisionally real and entirely unreal. And what a beautiful thing that is, because we too are provisionally real and entirely unreal. What a relief that is.

The idea is developing that kind of awareness, feeling more and more the field around. Experiencing it with warmth and curiosity will go quite far and will look different for different people. And that's all right.

An old Chinese teacher was talking about when we encounter other people. She said, "Each being has an eternal radiance. Each being is an eight-thousand-foot precipice." I love the way she captures the simultaneous *wow* and *yikes* quality of every genuine encounter : Everything shines, and there are a hundred thousand ways to fall off the cliff.

Warmth and curiosity, a field of awareness, a kind of warm intelligence about things will take you pretty far, and most woodland creatures will respond well to that.

Sometimes though you might encounter a mountain lion who is not in the least bit interested in your field of warm intelligence. [Laughter] And that's part of it, too. At such times it's also good to have a little bit of method, to have something to do. There's a point in the story of the myth of Psyche which we've spoken of a number of times where she has to do a kind of penance to her mother-in-law, Aphrodite. She's put in a room that's filled with all of these seeds and grains in a big jumble. Her job is to sort them into separate piles. That's what she does; she sits down and she starts sorting. There's a sense that sometimes when you're having to do penance, when there's some particular aspect of your fate that has caught up with you, it's good to have something to do. It's good to have grains to sort.

Sometimes when things are really difficult it's great to have advice. When Psyche goes into the underworld, she's despairing because she wonders how she can possibly survive a journey through the underworld. A friendly tower gives her a bunch of advice about what not to do when she's in the underworld. Having that little bit of a shift from *My job is to survive the underworld* to *My job is to follow this advice* is a huge thing. That's doable, maybe. That's something we can grasp, get ahold of, and manage in some way, or at least try, while surviving the underworld can feel overwhelming.

Here too, the same advice isn't going to apply to everybody. If someone comes to me who has spent most of their life not really getting that other people are real and is suddenly overwhelmed by the experience of the reality of other people, is filled with strong feelings of empathy, and is having a lot of difficulty with that, my advice is to please continue to be overwhelmed. Good. Keep going. Let it wash over you. Let it flood you. Let's see what happens.

If someone is being overwhelmed by painful or self-destructive images and can't find a way through, it's going to be different advice. It's not going to be *Please be overwhelmed*. It's *Maybe there's something we can do to work with this. Maybe there's something else you can do. Maybe there is a life raft that can be thrown here.*

Even encounters with mountain lions don't always look the same. Even they are dependent on the life that's unfurling in front of us. The step we place. We put a stone down, we take a step on it, we put the next stone down, we take a step on it, we put a stone down and it falls, it doesn't stick. Someone comes and helps us put stones down for a while. Someone comes and throws all the stones up in the air. All of that is part of it.

Tonight I want to just touch on the idea that there are things that accompany us other than people. There is a something to do. It's all right to experiment. It's all right to notice what works and what doesn't work, and to keep trying different things. It's all right to make the path yourself. What I would love to begin to do tonight is to have a conversation about how we do that, and to raise questions about how we do that. Tomorrow night we'll be working with some koans that have to do with different kinds of relationships to practice, like the Zhaozhou koan I quoted, "It's alive. It's alive," and then pick up the conversation again in a couple of days.

Let me leave it there for now and open it up for any comments you have, any questions you have about this when we're accompanied and when we're alone.

Q1 : The sense of being alone sometimes seems like delusion itself. That's the problem with the sense of being alone, that I'm missing all the other ... The guy who brings me my breakfast in the morning, all the support that I get from people I wouldn't consider companions of the Way. It's almost like a warning : *You're off the highway a little bit and feeling isolated.*

JIS : What do you do about that when you notice it?

Q1 : It seems like typically there's something I'm taking way too seriously, some problem that's gotten blown way out of proportion. What to do about it is give it a little space. Back up a bit. Find a way to laugh at it. Not take it as real. There's a little voice that says *This isn't really the way it is.*

Q2 : I see different people and I see a lot of the same people every day at work. It's funny, I always thought we all should feel more connected than we do — we drop this protective space around us — and not be so afraid of each other. I realized that even with that there you're still connected. Sometimes it feels very good. On the other hand people come in and I'm talking to them and feel that connection, but I can sense that they don't. I want to open that up a little bit. I wish they could feel that connection and give that to everybody, that kind of spirit. It's almost like a small painting of our hearts. So many of us walk through our lives so separate from one another.

Q3 : I really appreciate you saying that practice isn't just sitting on the cushion. I can't sit like I used to and it's only recently that I've found there's much more to Zen than this structure.

JIS : Isn't that wonderful? Something happens that you think is a complete disaster and then it makes something possible that never would have been possible in any other way. Suddenly your practice is so much larger.

Q3 : Yeah, but I'm still constantly fighting it and knowing that it's much bigger.

JIS : Tell me about fighting it.

Q3 : I throw temper tantrums. [Laughter] I've been sitting for thirty years. I was really macho and now I can't.

JIS : And the problem is?

Q3 : I want what I want. I want what I'm comfortable with. I created this way of sitting that anything could happen and you couldn't budge me. It's not a problem, it's just a pain in the ass. It's scary. I thought I had something.

JIS : Do you have something? What's it like to be able to be without structure and not budge?

Q3 : Accepting my life just as it is.

JIS : And how's that going?

Q3 : The last few days it's been going pretty well.

JIS : Good. Good. I'm still curious about you talking about fighting it. I'm wondering if there aren't other relationships to it possible.

Q3 : Instead of fighting it?

JIS : Yeah.

Q3 : Accepting it. I'm not there. I'm much more aware of what it was now than I was then. I'm aware how connected the body is. How much my hip is not my hip, my hip is my shoulder. Something really big that I saw [inaudible].

JIS : What was it?

Q3 : It was a river.

JIS : Okay, and is the river still there?

Q3 : Yeah, but I'm not aware of it.

JIS : Are you sure about that? Maybe it just looks different.

Q3 : I think you're right. There's something there in that stubbornness and that stubbornness is what kept me practicing.

JIS : In the Tibetan tradition there's a bit of advice — since we're in an advice mode tonight — which is "Liberate the antidote." What that means is you have a problem; most of us come to meditation because we're suffering and we don't want to suffer. The antidote to the poison is to sit. You sit and sit and sit and it works incredibly well. Then at some point something happens where even the antidote has to be liberated because it's become its own prison.

Quite often, in my experience, things will do that for us. Our hips will do that for us.

Might it be interesting to think of this as a way of liberating the antidote, and what does that

mean? What's the next thing? Which will then be wonderful and solve a problem, and then become its own prison and you'll have to liberate that, and on and on and on. We get stuck in the idea that it has to be a particular way and if it's not that way it's no good, where in fact it's a series of things that are beautiful until they're not. Then the next thing and the next thing and the next thing. Does that make sense?

Q4 : Like a flower that blooms and then wilts.

JIS : It knows its time. Mostly we don't know our time. Mostly we have to be prodded and poked. [Laughter]

Q5 : That reminds me of the last time I heard you speak about freedom and freedom being obedient to the moment. That really stayed with me. It's such a paradox to be free and yet be obedient, but god, it's so liberating. You really get it. That's what to be free is, to be obedient to exactly listening to that and having the freedom to choose to recreate every moment. For me, right now, I'm so happy for the divine timing of this retreat. It's really getting that and trying to be comfortable and unafraid of it. That freedom. Every moment we can create a new reality. It's makes me so happy and passionate about living. Just getting that freedom and obedience to now. It's really powerful. The obedience of sitting and yet we're free to choose how we practice.

JIS : Thank you for saying that. That's lovely. I think of something Marcus Aurelius said. He said, "Love only what happens." [Laughter] Isn't that great? It's another way of saying the same thing I think. "Love only what happens."

What about when it's hard to be on your own?

Q6 : Seek solace in company.

Q7 : It's kind of like a treasure chest to look into. Way too many times I run away from it, but really there are a lot of messages in those moments when it's really hard to be alone. Feeling how it feels and seeing what it is that scares me about it and seeing what my usual ways out of it are and not taking those roads. That's what I mean by treasure chest because there is so much information about myself and about my ways to extract from it. It's like that's one of the times when it's hard to be obedient to the moment and I just want to be somewhere else. [Laughter]

Q8 : I think when I'm alone I'm more likely to be plagued by a lot of demons and thoughts that aren't in the now. That's a wonderful thing about being with other people, it's really alive. It keeps you connected to the moment.

JIS : Can you say more about how you feel that the demons aren't from this moment?

Q8 : It seems like they're often stories from the past or ideas and interpretations about what's happening that are based on decisions or rules that I made twenty years ago.

Q9 : There's a sutra that the Buddha wrote called *The Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Practice Alone*. It really goes with that and talks about not thinking of the past, what positions you held in the past, what you looked like in the past, what you had in the past. It goes on to the future too with a list of things not to think about in the future and not getting too caught up in what's happening now. I guess it was in response to a student who was always alone and wouldn't talk to anyone. He thought that that's what the Buddha meant about practicing alone. We're supposed to be an island unto ourselves and not talk to anyone. That's really helped me. When I'm alone I get crazy. *What's going on?* Oftentimes I go off on these Jungian analysis-type theories : *No, maybe I'm just lustng after something I couldn't have in the past.* I've actually found that it's been much more helpful than I would've expected. It's like this huge monster I've fed for years and all I have to do is rattle its cage a little and it will just pop out and consume everything. Really if I just don't rattle the cage I'm okay. [Laughter]

JIS : Such a good servant. So responsive. [Laughter]

Q9 : Yeah, it's right there.

JIS : That's great. Can you talk a little bit about not rattling the cage? That seems tremendously important.

Q9 : It's hugely important. For me it's just to realize that I have. Greed, anger, and ignorance has gotten me so far in the last few months. *Which one is it? Do I want something? Am I avoiding something? Or am I not open-minded?* [Laughter] *Oh, I'm really greedy for this thing that's not here and I have an aversion to myself.* I don't want a solution. For me it's important to sit with that. Usually if I go there all sorts of things open up. A lot of it is having everything be a practice. The practice of being at a party. A lot of my life I find right now I'm catering. It's like I'm always a guest at a party where I don't know many people. Sometimes I get really bitter about that and I'm like *Where are my fucking friends? I don't want to talk to anybody.* [Laughter] And other times I'm like *Okay, just open up and just be available. Don't have a story. Don't try and get*

anything. Just be loving. Just be available. Hi. Practicing ‘hello,’ that gets me pretty far too. When people see ‘hello’ they want to fill that space. That helps too.

Q10 : I’m the opposite. I’ve sort of always treasured independence. I do a lot of things by myself, on my own. It gets you into a place where you want support for something but you don’t have it available at that point because you’ve always done for yourself before.

JIS : So what’s that like?

Q10 : It’s uncomfortable. The problem is I’ve got a nice little cycle going where I say *Well, I don’t have support. I’m going to figure out how to do this myself.* Which reinforces being independent again.

JIS : Liberating your antidote might be going out and begging for help from somebody. [Laughter] Just somebody on the street. [Laughter]

Q11 : Hearing people talking, it sounds like there’s an evaluation like demons are bad or they come and go. [inaudible] We can just sit with them all.

JIS : Sure, but they’re demons because they come and stay, at least for awhile. We have mind states that are tormenting to us; that’s part of being human. There are lots of cool things about being human, and lots of difficult ones, too. That just seems to be part of it. Sure, yes, of course, the idea is to be able to have the equanimity to include the demons too, but while they’re demons they’re really demons and it’s important to take that seriously — while simultaneously not believing they’re real, which is a good trick : taking them seriously without believing they’re real.

One of the things I’m interested in is that those kinds of disturbances are messages from the body that something’s up. The important discrimination to make is to accept the inquiry from the body. The body is going *Whoa! Hello! There’s something we need to pay attention to here.* The body will also often suggest a response : *Be very afraid.* [Laughter] The discrimination is to accept the inquiry — there’s something going on that needs attending to — without accepting the suggested response, *Be very afraid.* Does that make sense? Do you know what I’m saying?

That’s taking it seriously without agreeing that it’s real. It’s important to pay attention to that stuff. It’s also important not to assume that the form it comes in is the form you need to live with. It can be raising a question that has a very different response to the one it’s suggesting.

Q12 : What starts the demon delusion?

JIS : Um, not a lot. [Laughter]

Q9 : It seems like demons are these living things that are beside us, but they're also these delusions that we just have to capture. Right? There are some delusions that I don't feel like I'm supposed to entertain and give them dinner. Enough, you know. Not that I need to hate them, but I need to go *I see through you. You're smoke.* There's this thing that I've been carrying since I was a kid or this habit that I do. I don't need to take the bait. I'm not a fish. It's like a lure or something.

JIS : Okay, so the delusion arises and you try paying attention to it, you're inviting it to dinner and you notice what happens. You try saying *You're smoke. I reject you.* And you see what happens. That's practice. Practice isn't that there's a recipe that says *That's delusion 496 and what I do about that is this ...* Practice is I try *that* and I notice what happens and I try *this* and notice what happens. Then I try something else and I notice what happens. I take the feedback and then I take the next step. Does that make sense?

Q9 : That's perfect.

Q13 : Isn't it so that sometimes we trick ourselves there in saying that isn't it possible to just sit with them and let them rise and fall, not invite them in for tea, but still? Really it's a kind of self-trickery. It is really inviting them in for tea.

JIS : So you notice that. The practice is in the noticing. The practice is in the paying attention when I ...

Q13 : But then how much is the practice worth when you keep doing it? When you keep having that relationship with the demons.

JIS : Then you notice that you're continuing to have that relationship with the demons. [Laughter] Do you see? You notice whatever. "Love only what happens." You notice whatever happens and you keep noticing and keep noticing. The theory is that if you keep noticing it and you don't either go to sleep to it or try to beat it up or try to change it or make it something else, but notice, eventually something is going to open up in there. Something is going to shift. Implicit in that is a trust in something larger than ourselves going on. Our ego doesn't have to figure this out, thank god, because what a sorry state we'd be in if the only resource we had was our small mind. If we hang out and we notice it, stay with it, get frustrated, and do all the things we do but we stay with the process, that keeps the question open and allows for other things to happen. For time to pass, for someone to give you good

advice, for someone to give you bad advice, for you to see something differently. All of that. Because it's happening in a field, it's not just happening inside your skull. Yeah?

Q13 : But it can be such a long process.

JIS : Yes! [Laughter] Right. And did anyone promise you anything different?

Q13 : I guess not. [Laughter]

JIS : You're going to be alive until the moment you die.

Q13 : I have your word for that?

JIS : You have my word for that. [Laughter]

Q14 : [inaudible]

JIS : I think the operative word there is sometimes. *Sometimes* that's exactly right and that really works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes I think there are demons that you say *You're smoke*. I'll just go back to the same thing. You try both and you see what happens. Also, not the same answer always in your life. Different answer, different times in your life with the same demon. Sometimes it might not be possible to do that, sometimes it might.

I'm really interested in the engagement with the process. Engage with the process, trust that it's happening in a field that's larger than our own internal states. Maybe, if I'm really honest about it, a kind of implicit belief in a movement of opening that is going on and that even when there are disturbances there are the beginnings of some movement towards opening. What we do, how we respond to that disturbance will have a large effect on whether that opening can happen or whether things will close down or stay chaotic.

Q14 : Is this opening genuinely making peace with the constant struggle and realizing that it's going to continue, even if you make peace with it it's still going to be there?

JIS: Yeah.

Q14 : And that's okay. That's just life. That's it. So why don't we give up? [Laughter] I don't mean give up, but why don't we give up struggling against it?

JIS : Why don't we? Yeah. Why don't we?

Q14 : For me, I don't know what that is yet. It's an unknown. There's a fear with that *What if I give up?* And I won't know. Not that I know now, but I think I know. At least I've created something that I think I know.

JIS : Okay. A simple question to ask is *How's it going? How's it going struggling?*

Q14 : It's going.

JIS : And why are you here?

Q14 : To watch it.

JIS : Is it to learn to struggle better? Or is it maybe to open up the possibility of another kind of relationship with it?

Q14 : Yeah, like struggling softer.

Q15 : Snuggling. [Laughter]

JIS : What would that be like to struggle softer?

Q14 : Be okay with the struggling.

JIS : You're talking about the problem when you're doing something and then you're having a big opinion about what you're doing. You're struggling, and you're struggling because you're struggling, and you're struggling with how you're judging that you're struggling that you're struggling.

Q14 : Yeah and then maybe a couple more eddies of struggle attached to that, that hang around just waiting to open up.

JIS : Yeah. That would be a time, as much as you can, to try to cut through to primary experience. What's at the center of all of that? What's really going on there? It might be different than you think. It sounds like you're hanging out a lot in secondary and tertiary experience.

Q14 : I had an experience at work where I was just watching myself do what needed to be done. I didn't think *Move the ladder over here, climb up, and nail it on*, I was just watching my body take care of what needed to be done. It was without struggle. Things that I thought were going to be heavy weren't heavy because it wasn't *Go do that*. It was just being done without really anything extra. It was just happening.

JIS : You were in the field and it wasn't just you doing it. It was something happening in the field rather than *You are doing something*. It's a completely different experience.

Q14 : Yeah, I wasn't doing anything.

Q16 : Splat. [Laughter]

Q17 : I'd like to talk about something related to that, which is living creature overload. I think I'm very solitary. I've put myself in this wonderful household with lots of children, a wife, and more animals than you can see at one time. In a way I feel like I'm responsible for very simple stuff like getting everybody out the door in the morning and making stuff happen.

I don't feel like I can quite watch it, but I get into a thing a lot where everything is going too fast and the rhythms are not right. I'm completely out of sync with everything but I feel like I have to manage it a lot. I feel like I spend a lot of my time not dealing with that very well, getting angry or just getting a little frazzled. It's very hard to dismount from that. Short of getting rid of the rabbit and stuff ...

JIS : You find yourself in a life you wouldn't have expected?

Q17 : Oh yeah. [Laughter]

JIS : How did that happen?

Q17 : It's a gift. I don't mean I have a gift. It's a gift that that happened.

JIS : Is it? Because?

Q17 : Because if I had everything under control and it was just me it wouldn't be as full.

JIS : What would it be like not to have an opinion about the chaos in the morning, getting everybody out the door? What if you were just being chaotic wholeheartedly?

Wholeheartedly chaotic without a thought?

Q17 : It'd be fine actually because the kids go to this flaky school where nobody cares if they come late. [Laughter] So it's just me.

JIS : Is it?

Q17 : Well, you know within practical limits it's just me. If they got there three hours late it would be an issue. Maybe I could just not do it. I guess I'd have to watch everything. Little nudges are necessary for the six-year-old to get his shoes on. It's very hard for me to not have that racing. I get more and more frazzled. The field has got a lot of things popping up in it. It's like prairie dogs. *Now the dog is barking.* It's great. When I talk about it I love it. I don't think I always handle it very nicely. I don't think I'm very nice to people in my household.

JIS : That's your part in the field, right? [Laughter] Be grumpy dad. Just for a second take away any evaluation you have of it. What's happening? Is it okay?

Q17 : Probably usually it's fine.

JIS : Probably usually it's fine. It's the beauty you've made, yeah? Do you think those kids are lucky? Yeah. You think those animals are lucky? Yeah. So just be a big prairie dog, it's cool.

Q9 : Sometimes I get the sense that I know I'm going to have to rattle the cage. I know it's there. I know it's expecting more of that. Usually though I let my body tell me when it's time.

Sometimes, recently, circumstances decided for me. It may be a koan you chose or a theme for a sesshin. A couple weeks ago I wanted to watch a movie one night. I put the movie in and it broke. *Well, I've got a bunch of other movies I don't want to watch, or I could watch American Beauty.* What was bothering me was an old relationship that was very long and dysfunctional, and it's taken a lot time to regain a sense of meaning from it. That's the whole thing in the movie between the husband and wife, how dysfunctional their relationship is. *Wow. I could be him.* *That was our relationship.* All of a sudden that cage was rattled. I had no idea that was going to happen that night, but I knew coming up to it that it was coming closer to the surface. In the ensuing days I sat with the feeling and saw what it brought up. It's still there and sometime down the road I might rattle the cage a little more.

Q18 : What if sometimes you're inside the cage that someone else is rattling?

JIS : Can you give an example of that?

Q18 : People talk about how they have these buttons. *Oh, you're pressing my buttons. You're making me angry.* What if someone is doing that to you? What is a healthy way to respond to that? It's not holding it in or that sadness or that frustration, but it's something else.

JIS : It's a really important question and it's a little bit difficult to talk about in the abstract. Could you give a specific example of a situation like that?

Q18 : Sure. Actually, I don't know.

JIS : So you're talking about if you have a strong reaction to somebody else?

Q18 : Yeah, like in general. Little things happen and I don't know what those things are. They're nothing really complete. Maybe that's why it's difficult to come up with some sort of example of it.

JIS : You notice a reaction within yourself?

Q18 : Yeah, that's what I notice. This feeling sometimes of *I just want to punch this person in the forehead. Hold me back.* I don't know how healthy that is.

JIS : Let's go back a second between that discrimination between the inquiry the body is making and what the body is suggesting you do about it. The inquiry is *What's up here? Something's up. Something doesn't feel right.* The suggestion *I should punch this person* is the place where we might want to step back and consider whether we really need to take that advice.

Q18 : Yeah, that makes the snowball that much bigger and all of a sudden that person who maybe wasn't upset before becomes upset. [Laughter]

JIS : Can you step back and inquire into the initial feeling? *What is this?* Start simple. *What does it feel like in my body? What happened in my body to let me know something was wrong?* Then put your breath there and let your breath carry your awareness into that feeling. Say your stomach clenched; breathe into your stomach. Let your awareness follow your breath. Inquire *What is this?* What images arise when you do that? Do you get other kinds of bodily sensations? Do thoughts come up? It doesn't have to make sense. Keep noticing. Usually something will open up, something will float by that you go *Oh, that's it. My big brother used to do that to me when we were kids*, or whatever it is that lets you know that this is where the velcro is in me that this attaches to. Once you get to that stage it becomes a lot simpler to take it as an opportunity for self-exploration rather than something you need to engage with the other person about necessarily. Does that make sense?

Q18 : Yeah.

JIS : That's what I would suggest. Take a step back. Take some breaths. Let your awareness follow your breath, notice what happens when you put your inquiry *What is this?* into that feeling that you're having. If someone's about to slug you, also leave. You know what I'm saying. Be sensible.

We should close pretty soon. Anything that you'd like to say before we do?

Q19 : I'm getting the idea that you're asking us to engage in this playful exchange with the field. There's no set solution, the field is always shifting. Something comes up, and *I'll try this. Oh, well this is what happened here.* Watch in myself and outside myself what happens. Then you said something else comes up. Maybe I've tried this in the past. *What if I do this?* And just try a different approach, a playful exchange. How does the field shift if this happens? Or if I make this choice? Or that happens over there; how does that affect me?

JIS : Yeah, just so. That's a living practice. You're engaged. Not only with yourself and your own life but with the life around you. You're there. You're showing up. I don't know what else practice might be for except to live your life in that kind of way.

When I say to live your life in that kind of way, I'm saying be aware that the field stretches in all directions from one edge of the universe to the other edge of the universe, and goes back in time and forward in time forever. Everything that happens, happens in that field. It's interesting to hold that awareness when we're pushing each other's buttons or getting the kids off for school. Whatever it is we're doing, if we can remember that all of it is taking place in

this moment that extends for eternity in this place that extends from one edge of the universe to the other, what's that like? What's it like to bring that in, to say *Yeah* and be in that universe, in that samadhi of dharma nature, as Great Master Ma called it?