

Embracing Change II
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In our work together after we say “Hello, Everyone,” sometimes instead of saying, “How are you?” we ask, “How is it now?” That little shift makes a big difference, because within the question “How is it now?” there’s another question : How do you define the ‘it’? How big is it? Is it the space that’s bounded by your skull and your skin? Is it you and the people you came up for the weekend with? Is it this room? Is it bigger than that? How big does *it* go? And that question, “How is it now?” also carries within it the implication of constant change. If you ask it now and you ask it later today and you ask it in six months, the answer is going to be different. It keeps us aware that change, whether we’re conscious of it or not, is going on all the time.

So let me ask you, how is it now? If you want to, call out a word or two, an adjective or a quality about how *it* is now, however you define that *it*.

JIS : [After a stretch of silence] It is very quiet.

Q1 : It is trusting.

JIS : Beautiful.

Q2 : Exciting

JIS : (as people throw out comments) Great. Trusting. Exciting. Calming. Emptying. Informative, Curious. Spacious. Any dissenting voices? Provocative — great. Also, hot, also afternoon and maybe a bit tired. That’s all right, too.

Last night when we asked you all to speak to what had brought you here, what your intentions are and what you’re looking for, I was really moved by your responses. I was moved by the sincerity of your searching, and your willingness to be so honest about it in a space in which you may not know many people at all. I heard that sincerity and willingness as a kind of call. What it evoked in me is a deep desire to respond to that call.

That's the second thing after "How is it now?" that I want to say about change. We can hold change as something that comes in through the gate, something that happens to us, something that comes in from somewhere else and affects us, and that we have to do something about or that we feel overwhelmed by. We can hold it like that, *or* we can bring in this other idea : that it's all call and response, that the world is always calling us.

The birds here are wonderful. This morning's light streamed from before the beginning of time and it was never *not* here. There are birds that come out, say hello, and hop around on the trees. That's a nice way that the world calls. It might also call through the grumbling of your stomach if you're hungry. It might call in the death of someone you love. But it is always calling, and one way to think about our human task is to discover the best ways to respond to that call. What are the elements of discovering the most beautiful ways, the riskiest ways, the most possibly helpful ways that we can respond to the calls that we're constantly receiving?

As I was listening to you last night, my impression is, my story about you is, that you are a group of people with a lot of intelligence and deep-heartedness, and, relatively speaking, a lot of resources in your life, and I don't just mean financial; I mean cultural, spiritual, social, etc. So, if learning to embrace change, which some of you expressed as quite a difficult task, isn't something that you've figured out yet, with your deep intelligence and your deep heart and your resources, chances are that it's not a matter of doing more of what you're already doing. Chances are, it's not a matter of tweaking what you're already doing, because if it were simply that, you would have gotten there already.

We who toil in the fields of the Dharma feel that what it offers is a fundamental and radical reorientation to life. It's not a matter of doing more of the same, refining the same, tweaking the same, or even of adding new skills to your existing set. It's a matter of reorienting how we are and how we hold our human lives. And then, from that place, we look at a question like embracing change.

The astronomer Carl Sagan used to say that if you want to make a true recipe for how to bake an apple pie, you have to start with the Big Bang. I feel a little bit like that, and I would guess perhaps my colleagues feel a little bit like that, too. I'm not going to take us back to the Big Bang, but I am going to take us back to the formation of the galaxies, to a question there that relates so directly to how we relate to change. And here is that question : do you trust your life?

First of all, notice what happens when I ask that. We're going to sit with this in meditation in a minute, but here's a little bit of framing about the nature of the question. The question isn't about whether I trust my life to give me what I think I want, or even what I think I need. I don't trust my life to turn out the way I think it ought to. I don't even trust my life to keep me alive; I will trust my life as I'm leaving this life as well. It's not that kind of exchange; it's not about trusting my life *because* it gives me what I want or need or what I think my story is about. It's not even that I always understand my life; I trust it even though a lot of times I don't know what's going on, don't understand what's happening. I can't see it or hold it yet. And yet I trust it. And that, in a way, makes all the difference.

If you don't fundamentally and unconditionally trust your life, what are you running on? What is the engine that creates the energy that keeps you going? For a lot of people, that might be willpower, because you don't trust that if you put your foot down, not only will the ground be there, but the ground will come up to meet your foot. So you've got to push through, will it, make it happen. Think about how this relates to what you hold about change. *It's on me. I've got to make it happen. I've got to figure this out. I've got to fix this. I've got to understand this.* Then imagine the shift when you feel instead that *Here's the situation, and what I'm going to do is listen, pay attention, and see if I can discern what the situation wants. What is arising in the world of which I am a part? What is the best way I can participate?* That's what trusting your life is like.

Here's a story about a Japanese mother of a daughter who became a photojournalist during the last Afghan war, the one with the Soviet Union. The daughter went to Afghanistan and was working on the front lines so close to combat that she ended up being killed in a battle there. She was buried hurriedly in the mountains of Afghanistan by the troops she was with. Word got back to her mother, who lived a very traditional life in a small Japanese village; she'd hardly ever left the village, let alone Japan. She had done what was customary at the time : when her baby daughter was born, she began to sew a wedding kimono for her, a wedding kimono that her daughter never wore, because she chose a very different kind of life. That mother who had rarely left her village packed up the kimono and flew to Afghanistan, to find her daughter's hasty grave in the mountains, saying, "I will find her. I will wrap her in her wedding kimono and I will take her home and bury her right." What I hear that mother saying is, "When I was sewing this kimono for you, this is not what I imagined for your life.

This is not what I would have wanted for your life. But it was the life that you chose, it was the life that happened to you, and I *bless* it. I bless this life that I don't understand."

The companion question to "Do I trust my life?" is "Can I *bless* my life?" No matter what happens. Even when terrible things, incomprehensible things, happen. Do I bless my life for the simple fact that it is my life, given to me to live?

Let's take that question into meditation as we do with koans. Begin by finding just enough stability and quiet so that you can welcome in the koan as a noble guest. The koan in this case is, "Do I trust my life?" The attitude we want to take is : please come in; let me make some tea; what do you have to tell me after your long journey from 1,500 years and another continent ago? We don't do that because koans are especially precious, and so we treat them as noble guests. We do that as training so that we can welcome everything that happens to us as a noble guest. That's what the practice is about.

Get a little bit quiet. Get stable enough that you can make a cup of tea for your noble guest. I'll ask the question. Repeat it to yourself a few times, and then let it go. Think about it is as though the koan is a stone, a stone that you're dropping into a still pool, and you're going to just watch the ripples.

In koan meditation, we're interested in what happens. But not in the sense of trying to figure things out, trying to discover the meaning. None of that is going to be helpful. What *is* going to be helpful is to maintain, as much as you can, a state of listening and attention to what arises. Is it an emotion? Is it a physical sensation? Is it a thought? A memory? An image? Whatever it is, let it rise. Notice it; you don't have to do anything about it. You don't even have to figure out what it means; in fact, it's good if you don't try to figure out what it means. Let it rise and let it fall.

If you feel that you've bought a ticket for the thought train and you're off, come back to that practice that allows you to be quiet and stable. Then drop the koan in again.

You'll notice the difference between when I ask the question while we're just sitting here staring at each other, and when you bring it into a meditation. What happens? Then I'm going to ask you a couple more questions while you're in that stable place, and we'll see what happens. So...calm and stable enough to welcome the noble guest.

Do I trust my life?

If you can answer, “Yes. Maybe I hadn’t thought about it quite like that, but yes, I do trust my life,” what responsibilities, worries, and ways of seeing things can you put down, because it’s already being taken care of? What is the backpack you can set down forever? If you answer, “No, I don’t yet trust my life,” what is that like? What are you doing instead?

Can you begin to imagine what it would be like to live as though, when you took a step, not only were you certain that the ground would be there under your foot, but you would feel as though the ground were coming up to meet your foot?

Would anyone like to speak to this question about trusting your life, or any of the other things around it?

Q1 : My answer was ‘yes,’ and that is because it feels like my life has proven over and over to me that in some way it knows better than I do. There has been an aspect perhaps of ‘fortune’ that I feel has been part of my experience. But then when you talked about letting go of things, that was hard, because even though I know that it is true that I have all this fortune, there are a number of things that I’m not willing to let go of. One of them is anxiety. There’s a certain amount of anxiety that I’m clinging to. I almost feel like it’s necessary for me to have it, for whatever reason. The other one was guilt, a feeling that I really couldn’t let myself completely get my eye off the ball here. That’s where I went.

JIS : Thank you.

Q4 : My answer was ‘yes,’ because in the last six years I have visited with the prospect of death very closely with an incurable form of leukemia and a stem cell transplant that was very risky, and then breast cancer. And here I am. The take-away from that — and from all the relationships and the love in my life — is to live my life more purposefully. By that I don’t mean to make more money, I mean to live in a way that contributes to society at large. So, that was really what came through to me in this meditation.

JIS : Thank you. If I could make a suggestion for people like you, there's another question you might want to ask. At a certain point in my life around a medical diagnosis I realized, *Oh, my death just started walking towards me. I don't know how long it's going to take to get here – it could be five minutes and it could be forty years – but it's coming.* Of course, my death was always walking towards me, and what changed was that I noticed it. This happened right around the time I first started working with “Do I trust my life?”, and I thought, *Ah, do I trust my death?* So if you can respond to “Do I trust my life?” with “yes,” consider taking up, “Do I trust my death?”

Q5 : My answer was ‘no,’ and the answer to the second question about what you’ve done instead is, I think I’ve over-achieved and tried to prove myself. I’m always pushing myself to do better, do more. I guess I compare myself to others — and I always have to come out on top. So, my answer was no.

JIS : So that’s a kind of will; you’ve willed your way, through achievement, to make up for that.

Q5 : Yes, so how do I turn that around?

JIS : It’s exhausting, isn’t it? Yes, that’s what we’ll be talking about soon. Thank you.

Q6 : I thought my answer was going to be ‘no,’ going into the meditation, and it turns out that it ended up being ‘yes,’ because I’ve willed my way through much of my life. To have it brought as a possibility during this workshop that I don’t have to do that was a wonderful paradigm shift for myself. I found that very interesting.

JIS : Great.

Q7 : My answer was also ‘no,’ and what I’ve been doing instead is contending with my life. I feel like I do a fair amount of battle. What was interesting for me was imagining what it would be like if it were different. It occurred to me that, rather than the dialogue I usually have about my worry and anxiety – which is that I *shouldn't* worry because there’s nothing I can do anyway – I had the sensation that I didn’t *have* to worry, that I wouldn’t need to worry. That’s what it would be like.

Q8 : I think I'm a little wishy-washy, because I got both a 'yes' and a 'no.' Sometimes I do, and sometimes I really don't trust. I think the answer for me was : when I don't, what do I do? And I realize it's that I try to control those things that are important to me, and I create a certain amount of anxiety and fatigue, actually. And the times that I do trust it, it's simply surrender. I realize I'm not the same all the time. It does go back and forth. It's still practice.

Q9 : Well, I'm among the wishy-washy. My first response to myself was 'yes,' but I realized that — and I think perhaps it goes back to my mom dying when I was a kid — I try to control situations. I think if I could just have done things differently, the outcome would have been different. And that still creeps in, even though I've really worked on letting it go. So, 'yes and no' for me.

Q10 : It became clear that I do trust my life, which means I can let go to all the willfulness that has been my insurance to make sure it stayed in the level that I trusted. And the question about what would happen if the ground came up to meet me, wow! That means I could do anything! I saw myself approaching anything that I wanted to do without fear, worry, or concern, and that's such a freeing concept.

Q11 : I was very moved by your story about the Japanese mother. I just couldn't quite leave the mood of that, that she was able to bless the life of her daughter who she did not understand at all; who inhabited a world that she knew nothing about. So that's sort of what I brought to this question : can I live with not knowing and not understanding?

JIS : Yes. We'll spend some time with that.

Q12 : My answer was unequivocally 'yes,' because I have had experiences where the ground is constantly coming up to meet me., and I feel very supported. So, I say 'yes' from my mind, but I notice that one of the things that follows me around, which I am conscious of all the time, is doubt. So, even though my mind is saying, *Oh, yes, I trust my life! It's all so wonderful,* my day-to-day experience in my gut is the feeling of doubt. So, I trust my life. But not when I'm alone.

Q13 : My answer was “yes, I do trust my life,” and what kept coming up for me was trusting that I will be adaptable and not fall back into old patterns. So, I’m thinking about slowly building good experiences to build upon to make my adaptability stronger.

JIS : Our aspiration, when we’re working with a question like this, was expressed by one of the great koan geniuses over 1,200 years ago named Zhaozhou. Zhaozhou said, “It’s as though you find a word you’ve never seen before. You don’t know what it means yet, but you recognize the handwriting.” That is one of the most beautiful descriptions of living a human life : every new situation, every change, every encounter, everything that happens. I might not know what this word means yet, what this event means, what this person means, what this feeling I’m having means, but I recognize the handwriting ... because I trust my life. It’s the handwriting of life. And if I recognize and trust the handwriting, I can stay in relationship to discover what the meaning of the word is.

What we’re really saying is that this is a practice about saying to everything that comes, “You belong. You are the noble guest.” And saying to ourselves, “I belong.” That’s what trusting your life means : “I belong.” Everything that comes through the gate belongs. We start there, and we don’t have to make that case every time. From there, we can so much more clearly hear the call of each noble guest and so much more clearly respond, without having to wade through thickets of stuff about whether we belong or whether it’s right or how we feel about it.

It’s entirely conceivable that all of this could come blindingly, perfectly, and completely clear to you this weekend. Things could turn on a dime and you could walk away completely different from how you came. It’s also possible that that won’t happen ... which is why we have practice, which is why, as a number of you said, we do this over and over again.

What we’re talking about, the aspiration here, is towards awakening. One way to look at awakening is that we get closer and closer to, more and more intimate with, what is actually happening. In order to get more and more intimate with what is actually happening at every level, from that cosmic level down to the most local level – what it feels like in your body right now, for example – we start by deconstructing what gets in the way. Makes sense. A number of you talked about how you started out thinking one thing and then you discovered

something else. That's the beginning of the deconstruction process. First you have to know what you really think, feel, and believe, and what's going on around you. You have to get some clarity about what's operating. If you discover that what's operating are things that you wish weren't operating, like anxiety or rigidity, you have to figure out why that's happening. The radical question to ask is, "How is this serving me?" Gulp. Look that in the face : How is this serving me? Can I get along without it? Could I do something else?

Half of the process is that deconstruction of our habitual patterns and ways of doing things, and of our default settings, where we go when we can't figure out where else to go. The other half of the process is to begin to experience the space free of those habitual patterns and compulsions. It sounds like a number of you had a taste of that —a sense of that freedom. We need that sense of what we're moving towards, what the process of awakening is leading us towards, as well.

If we keep putting ourselves in situations where we're deconstructing and where we're experiencing awakening, right now, in bursts of an eighth of a nanosecond or ten years, it will happen. But we have to keep putting ourselves in those situations. A lot of the Dharma is about sophisticated, well-thought-out, millennia-old ways of putting yourself in that situation, over and over again. So if you don't get the blinding, turn-on-a-dime, everything-is-different experience this weekend, take the practice approach. You're going to need it even if you have the blinding turn on a dime, because then you're going to have to figure out what to do with it. That's what practice is for as well.

Begin to explore what helps you deconstruct, what helps you see, what helps you put down, without bullying yourself. As someone beautifully said, "The difference between I *shouldn't* worry and I don't *have* to worry is gigantic," and it's the difference between the presence of the bully or not.

How do you put yourself in the way of awakening? My grandfather in the Dharma used to say, "If you want to get struck by lightning, hang out in open fields during rainstorms." Put yourself in the way of it. Enlightenment is an accident, but practice makes you accident-prone.

Q14 : I spent a lot of the meditation just being perplexed at the wording of your question. In other words, if you'd said, "Do you trust yourself?" or "Do you trust other people?" or even if you'd said, "Do you trust the Universe?" that would have made more sense to me. But I was wondering, 'my life,' what is that? I don't even know what that is. I don't know if I trust it or not.

JIS : So that's your question. Your question to bring into meditation, to carry when you're walking around, as you're eating your cornflakes, is, "What is my life?" That's the question that arose. That's the prior thing that you need to understand, and there's something quite alive for you there. If you had a question like that arise, it has come as a noble guest, so take it seriously and work with it, okay?

Just to remind you : when I'm talking about trusting your life, I'm not talking about just when times are good, I'm talking about all the time....

Q15 : You stole my question!

JIS : Go ahead!

Q15 : It sounded to me as though the question was, "Do you trust that good things will happen?" and it seems like a lot of people were saying, "Well, I've gone through so much adversity and so I trust my life because I'm here." I also went through a life-threatening medical condition about six years ago, and what came up for me from your question was that I trust that. I trust that my life will be like this, that a lot of different things will come up, some good, some bad, and so does that mean I trust my life?

JIS : So if that's the experience of your life, that's your life, and if you trust that, you trust your life.

Q15 : Oh, okay. Well, thank you!

JIS : It's tremendously important that this isn't an ego bargain. It's not, "I will love you if you give me what I want." That's not what we are talking about. It's, "I will love you. I will bless you ... no matter what." Love has come up a few times today, and this is the purest form of love, because it's not based on any kind of exchange. I won't love you, Life, if you don't give me what I want versus I will love you, and we'll go from there; we'll see what happens. There's no transaction.

Q16 : I was in the wishy-washy category. I felt mostly “yes,” and one of the things that made sense to me in the mostly “yes, I do” is that bad stuff like death happens, but somehow, even in something like that, there are things that come from that, that might not have happened otherwise, that do feel good. I felt a sort of coming in and out of focus. There were moments when yes, I do trust it, because even when bad stuff happens, you can learn something. So, what you said about reflecting on what helps you deconstruct, helped me think that I can look at those pieces, which gives me some trust in a life that seems to throw random and unfair things. But then it was gone, then it came back, and it was gone again. I think that’s what you were describing — hanging with those little bits.

JIS : Absolutely. Hanging with those little bits. In the case you’re describing, you’re going to want to look at the evidence that convinces you that should trust your life. Then at a certain point you’re going to want to drop that evidence away, because it’s not an evidence-based decision. It’s a leap off a cliff. Part of the trust is the willingness to leap off the cliff without being certain, without being sure. You’re doing it because, *You know what? I can’t figure out what else I’d rather be doing in this life.* I’m doing this because I have an intimation that it’s intimate to the truest thing I’ve ever felt. But not because I’ve convinced myself that it’s a good thing to do. So, all the convincing in the world, all the deconstruction in the world, all that is really important, *and* at a certain point you have to take another step, and just do it *because*.

Thank you.