



## Taking Refuge in the Family of Things: Exploring the Nature of Attachment

by KENT HOFFMAN

### *Wild Geese*

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

Mary Oliver<sup>1</sup>

*To practice Buddhism, we have to take refuge. This means that we have to base our practice on some ground that helps us be stable. It is like building a house – you have to build it on solid ground. If we look around and inside ourselves, we can find out what is stable for us, and we can take refuge in it. We should be careful*

*not to take refuge in what is unstable. This morning I was touching the ground, and I felt that there is some stability in the Earth. Why don't we take refuge in the Earth? There is also some stability in the air, the sunshine, and the trees. We can count on the sun because we know it will rise tomorrow. We have to look around to see things that we can count on. In order to practice, we need to take refuge in stable things.*

Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>2</sup>

*[I]n the case of Buddhism... one single-pointedly entrusts one's spiritual well-being to the three objects of refuge, the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—as a foundation for practice. In order to have such single-pointed confidence and a sense of entrusting your spiritual well-being, one needs to develop a feeling of closeness and connectedness with those objects of faith.*

H. H. the Dalai Lama<sup>3</sup>

*Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.  
"Pooh!" he whispered.  
"Yes, Piglet?"  
"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw.  
"I just wanted to be sure of you."*

A. A. Milne<sup>4</sup>

## Being With

**A**T THE MOMENT of my son's birth, as his body separated for the first time from that of his mother, a wailing cry filled the room. Its suddenness was matched only by its intensity. For a full thirty seconds that tiny, determined lament echoed about us as I looked into his eyes for the first time and then turned him to face his mother's waiting arms. As quickly as it had begun, in the moment he returned to her embrace, his great cry began to subside. The message was unmistakable: He knew the feel and the form of the one who now held him. He had been rudely separated and again had returned home.

To take refuge is to return home. Children come into this world needing to take refuge. All children. To be born onto this plane of existence is to experience the vulnerability of being a stranger in a strange land. Hence, during the first years of a child's life, the primary context

in which he or she can take refuge will be that of the child's primary caregivers. It will be these caregivers who will, for better or for worse, introduce this child to the possibility of confidence and trust, because these caregiving "treasures" will be the first experience of closeness and connection for the child. It will be the conclusions about the nature of life, based upon these early relationships, that will accompany and influence each child throughout his or her lifetime. As Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says, "In order to practice, we must take refuge in stable things."<sup>5</sup> But what if our caregivers are experienced as less than stable?

Imagine, if you will, a trapeze platform high at the top of a circus tent. Now imagine that you are standing on that slim board about to grab hold of the bar that is swinging toward you. As you take a firm grip and then fall forward, you realize that there will need to be another bar sent your way, with the timing just right, so that you can transfer from this trapeze to the next, midway through your journey. But just as the moment arrives for you to make your transfer, you notice that the bar coming toward you is ill-timed, and as you reach out you miss it (and it misses you). Now you are falling. Free falling. Most certainly you begin to experience terror as you look down and see no net beneath you. Then, quite unexpectedly, another bar is available for you to grab. Do you take hold of it? Of course. Does it save you from falling? It appears to. "But," someone says, "That is the wrong bar. You are swinging at the wrong angle and it will take you in the wrong direction." Having just experienced the terror of falling, what are the chances of your letting go of this bar? Knowing what it is like to hang in midair and fear that there is no way to survive without its presence, how tightly will you cling to this source of support? And given the opportunity to exchange this trapeze grip for another, how likely do you think your chances are of doing so? Having known the fright of free fall and the panic of potential annihilation, each of us would tend to cling tightly and remain attached to that with which we are familiar.

*Illustration by  
Alicia Brown*



One might say that in your desperate grasping you are attached. And yet attachment is a word with many levels of meaning. To Buddhists it tends to signify clinging,

the very essence of the self-centered ego, as it seeks to control the inevitable flow of change—an attempt to minimize pain while maximizing pleasure. To the developmental psychologist it implies the healthy requirement that accompanies each child’s entrance into this world, a wondrous need to “*be with*” a caregiver who will provide protection, comfort, and necessary interaction. These meanings may at first appear to be very different. And yet, it is a sacred need to “*be with*” that is at the root of this desperate clinging when needed closeness and connection are not made available.

All babies “know without knowing” that they must have adequate protection and tender care. It is in the nature of things (*Dharma*) that a child will respond with trust and delight to a caregiver who provides sensitive and careful attention. And a child will respond with protest, despair and eventual detachment when such attention is not available. This is because there is a highly accurate intuition (a precognitive knowing) on the part of all infants and young children that they are the human manifestation of a relational universe, and thus that they must remain in relationship at all costs. They somehow understand that they are individual expressions of the *Nirmānakāya*—the unique and mysterious presentation of the Buddha in this personal body. And they intuit that the nature of this uniqueness and mystery is vulnerability, the “soft animal” of need now incarnate in human form. And what is this need? It is nothing more and nothing less than the sacred need to be in relationship, to take refuge, to belong to and find our true identity in “the family of things.”

We are inherently relational beings. Mutual interdependence (*Sambhogakāya*) is the truth of our nature. (“*Meanwhile the world goes on. Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.*”) Everything in existence is dependent upon everything else. Community-as-*Sangha* (with roots in the Sanskrit words for “connection” and “with”) becomes a dance of mutual need. And because our first experience of need and of sangha is in our contact with our first caregivers, the quality of this connection will affect our every future perception of relationship, as well as our perception of the world as good or bad, safe or threatening. If enlightenment is indeed a capacity to experience the inherent intimacy of all things, then it becomes useful to discover how our earliest relationships either enhance or block this intimacy.

## Blocking Off What Hurts Us

*In blocking off what hurts us, we think we are walling ourselves off from pain. But in the long run, the wall, which prevents growth, hurts us more than the pain, which, if we will only bear it, soon passes over us. Washes over us and is gone. Long will we remember pain, but the pain itself, as it was at the point of intensity that made us feel as if we must die of it, eventually vanishes. Our memory of it becomes its only trace. Walls remain. They grow moss. They are difficult barriers to cross, to get to others, to get to closed-down parts of ourselves.*

Alice Walker<sup>6</sup>

Attachment as clinging seems to define the human condition. We all cling. That is, we all reflexively seek to block pain and then hold fast to whatever it is that promises to keep that pain at a distance. This self-protective face of attachment appears to be a given. And it is a given within the first years of every life. Early on it is somehow inevitable that each of us will find it necessary to take charge and to some degree defend ourselves from what we consider to be a painful lack of responsiveness to our inherent vulnerability. Every child defends. Each of us learns to take charge in a different way, but each way is a strategy that is designed to protect us from what we consider to be an unbearable pain.

Current infant and child development research consistently points to a particular form of pain that the developing mind of a child cannot sustain for more than a few seconds. It is the terror associated with abandonment, the mirror opposite of our primal need to “*be with.*” Above all else, children cannot endure a prolonged experience of “*being without*”—of being disconnected from their source of belonging. British pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott said that all children require a “*holding environment.*”<sup>7</sup> A holding environment is any caregiving relationship that engenders a genuine and safe experience of belonging. In Thich Nhat Hanh’s words, such an environment is a relationship that we can count on “ground that helps us be stable.”<sup>8</sup>

Winnicott also described a category of experience that all children find unbearable. He called this level of difficulty the “primitive agonies.” For Winnicott, there are six preverbal themes within these primitive agonies: “not going on being,” “having no orientation,” “having no relation to the body,” “complete isolation because of there being no means of communication,” “going to pieces,” and “falling forever.”<sup>9</sup>

These are the internal anxieties that result when the relational needs of a child go unmet. Agonies associated with the lack of parental attunement to the highly sensitive and specific needs of young children are inevitable. All parents fail. It is never a matter of *if* caregiver failures will happen. It is more an issue of *how often* and *to what degree of intensity* these moments of actual and perceived abandonment occur.

Interestingly, the finding of recent research concerning infants is that when children are provided with a secure and consistent holding environment, they are less likely to cling and require attention later in life.<sup>10</sup> Children whose needs are met and responded to adequately in their early years relax and build a sense of confidence that life is safe and that relationships can be trusted.<sup>11</sup> This might be considered a kind of *confidence-at-the-core*. Developmental theorists conclude that when a child can trust in the availability and sensitivity of his/her primary caregivers, this trust is gradually incorporated into the growing sense of self. At the core of that self is an experience of a safe and predictable relationship, a holding environment.<sup>12</sup>

Central to a holding environment is an experience of an “other” that is available to understand and empathically regulate the often difficult and confusing experiences of the child’s emerging sense of self. In the countless experiences of being soothed, comforted, sensitively stimulated, and calmed, it is as if the child repeatedly drops a pebble into a well and consistently gets to hear it land. There is an experience of *being-with-as-being-known*. This is a paradoxical context where the child seems to be saying: “I am me, but I am not only me” and “You are you, but you are not only you.” Thus, the center of gravity for the developing self of the child is at first within the parent and then gradually moves toward the self. But the sense of a completely separate self is never fully necessary, because it is experienced within this *paradoxical wholeness* of individuality and connection. The “I” that is being formed is really an experience of *autonomy-within-relatedness*, a uniqueness-within-belonging. The regulation of the self by a sensitive and caring other (*witness*) is gradually internalized within a growing capacity toward healthy self-reliance, an ability to become one’s own witness and to regulate the needs of the self. The self moves toward full differentiation, but never complete separation. The center of gravity is experienced to be simultaneously within the self and within the whole of relationship.

Along the continuum between security and insecurity, children raised within such a holding environment are the most secure, show-

ing a capacity to be relaxed and at ease with themselves and others. Because their security needs were so well attended to in their earliest months and years of development, that confidence and sense of safe connection is deeply internalized and thus available in much of what they experience.

With this said, even these children exhibit signs of insecurity and clinging within the Buddhist understanding of attachment. Even within a utopia, every child would find a need to self-protect in such a way that their resistance to life would cause them and others genuine suffering. Primitive agonies seem to be a given for everyone of us. Themes of “falling forever,” “not going on being,” “complete isolation,” “going to pieces,” etc. are the stuff of the nightmares, nursery rhymes, fears and fairy tales to which all children (and adults) can relate. Within this discussion of establishing internalized trust and relatedness, we are always considering a matter of degree.

## Being Without

*He lays quietly, the warm crease of the sheet beneath him feeling damp and familiar. The time since his last cry for help seems to expand into an unreachable distance far beyond his ability to watch it. The feeling increases: dark, darker, then tumbling into blackness. Finally a sound rushes toward his almost rigid mouth and he lets the full force of his need begin to release. Just as quickly the blackness he swims in stops the expression and he quickly backs away from this spasm of urgency. All that remains is a whimper, a sober whispering of sound that says little of what he would really want.*

*When she is suddenly there at the door, their eyes meet for but a brief glance, then each looks away. Yet even in that momentary touching of eyes, her exasperation reaches him and scolds his need of her. She does not want to be reminded of lack and yearning, not his and most certainly not her own. And once again the decision developing in his tiny mind loosens its grip on this thing of togetherness: “Stop the wanting, at all costs stash it away. Banish it to the farthest reaches of experience. Whenever it returns, hate it with the same intensity you now see in her eyes. There is no place for longing. Swallow it now and swallow it always.”*

Author confidential

*Underneath all of his [her] preoccupations with sex, society, religion, etc. (all the staple abstractions which allow the forebrain to chatter) there is, quite simply, a [person] tortured beyond endurance by the lack of tenderness in the world.*

Lawrence Durrell<sup>13</sup>

Abandonment is abandonment is abandonment. Some of us experience a little, some of us experience a lot. Yet a primitive agony experienced at any level constitutes a pain too formidable for the mind of a very young child to endure. Suffering, said the Buddha, is built into the human condition. Not surprisingly, built into the lives of all children are events that were not adequately processed and feelings that were not adequately “held,” understood, and regulated by their primary caregivers.

Early experiences of abandonment tend to center around our expressions of need. We each have the need to “*be with*” and the need to be our most unique selves. Problems arise when our caregivers meet these needs with either too little or too much attention. Our experience of self-in-relationship is then colored with the experience of being inadequately or inappropriately met. Thus, it is not uncommon for children to have the following perception: “My parents are either neglectful or impinging, focused more on their agenda for me than on who I really am and what I am really asking for.”

Children require sensitivity to these expressions of need for both closeness and autonomy. An open declaration of need for the regulating presence of the caregiver as the child moves in the direction of either attachment or individuation is a positive sign, because such a child knows that it is safe to ask for parental resources when necessary. To a child who chronically goes without this supportive resource of availability and sensitivity, an experience of need becomes equated with isolation and desperation. When, for example, a child cries or gets angry, the parent may find a way to diminish or deny the child’s experience. Or when a child is confused or frightened, the parent may over-emphasize the child’s dependency upon parental attentiveness. Such a child doesn’t find in the caregiver a source of security to explore either closeness or positive self-reliance. And thus an internalized witness, a container of sensitive support and self-regulation, is never allowed to build.

A child without the capacity for self-regulation will become chronically focused upon others, always looking for a supporting and regu-

lating presence outside of the self. This chronic focus upon the “other” tends to go in one of two directions: either becoming adept at manipulating others into providing needed witnessing and support (via compliance, perfect behavior, performance, compulsive caretaking, melodrama, rebellion, etc.) or continually seeing the other as potentially dangerous and then withdrawing into a protective shell of self-sufficiency and detachment.

Manipulation, compliance, withdrawal and detachment become the self-protective postures that a child naturally clings to in order to keep the pain of “free fall” at a distance. Having experienced the primitive agony of abandonment, we all ingeniously protect ourselves against feelings and memories that would remind us of that aloneness. And yet, this pain invariably becomes the tail that will wag the dog of our unconscious attention. Because the pain of abandonment is so all consuming, once it is known we tend to spend our lives obsessed with avoiding the anguish involved in revisiting it, while simultaneously trying to find a way to maintain some degree of connection.

But is it possible that the pain of abandonment is being overstated? Writer Judith Viorst reports the following account, based upon a true story. It poignantly describes the universal terror associated with this primal pain:

A young boy lies in a hospital bed. He is frightened and in pain. Burns cover 40 percent of his small body. Someone has doused him with alcohol and then, unimaginably, has set him on fire.

He cries for his mother.

His mother has set him on fire.

It doesn't seem to matter what kind of mother a child has lost, or how perilous it may be to dwell in her presence. It doesn't matter whether she hurts or hugs. Separation from mother is worse than being in her arms when the bombs are exploding. Separation from mother is sometimes worse than being with her when she is the bomb.<sup>14</sup>

A young child will hold tenaciously to the caregiver even when that person is harsh and abusive, because to give up such an attachment is to fall into intolerable chaos. For the still developing self of a child, traumatic and unchosen separation from the primary source of emotional refuge is the greatest pain possible.

This is where the trapeze bar comes in. Because once a child has experienced the primitive agony of free fall, reaching out for the nearest bar, any bar, will be the reflexive response. Even if that bar is destructive. It's as if the little boy we just read about were saying: "At least here I know some connection, even if it is negative. She may be horrible, but at least she is predictable and in that way I feel safe. To give up this predictability and connection is to sustain a level of abandonment I dare not feel. So I will cling to this pain and negativity in my present and future relationships. I will find a way to make certain this distorted safety, this negative attachment, returns again and again. If I don't, I will be reminded of what it is like to be with no one. I can't choose that."

Of course, this is a dramatic example that will be hard for many to identify with. Yet experiences of abandonment have happened to all of us at some level. The poem that follows gives voice to a more subtle form of primitive agony. The results are quieter, but no less poignant:

*Ordinary Heartbreak*

*She climbs easily onto the box  
that seats her above the swivel chair  
at adult height  
and crosses her young legs,  
left ankle over right,  
smoothes the plastic apron  
over her lap  
while the beautician lifts her ponytail and mocks  
"Coarse as a horse's tail."  
Then, as if that is all there is to say,  
the woman at once whacks off  
and tosses  
its foot and a half  
into the trash.  
And the little girl  
who didn't want her hair cut,  
but long ago learned successfully  
how not to say  
what it is she wants,  
who even at this minute  
cannot quite grasp her shock and grief,*

is getting her hair cut  
"For convenience,"  
as her mother puts it.  
The long waves gone,  
that had been evidence  
at night,  
when loosened from their clasp,  
she might secretly be a princess.  
Rather than cry out,  
she grips her own wrist  
and looks to her mother in the mirror.  
But her mother is too polite  
or too reserved  
or too indifferent  
to defend the girl.  
So the girl herself  
takes up the indifference,  
while pain follows a hidden channel  
to a place almost unknown in her,  
convinced as she is  
that her own emotions are not the ones  
her life depends on.  
She shifts her gaze from the mother's face  
back to the haircut now,  
so steadily,  
as if this short haired child  
she sees  
were someone else.

David Levine<sup>15</sup>

Both the boy who was burned and this little girl getting her hair cut are caught in the vortex of clinging, of defensive strategies, of what Buddhism looks upon as attachment. But developmental psychology would see this as pseudo-attachment. Because it is here, at the place where a young child feels compelled to cling to abuse ("*He cries for his mother. His mother has set him on fire.*") or comply with the inattention of the caregiver ("*...So the girl herself takes up the indifference*"), that the false or protective self is born. In contrast to the spontaneous expression of self that emerges fresh in each moment, the protective self is the "made-to-order" self, established to join with the limited capacities of

the caregiver. (*“She shifts her gaze from the mother’s face back to the haircut now, so steadily, as if this short haired child she sees were someone else.”*) In the absolute need to not be abandoned we split ourselves in two; we take charge by clinging to what seems available and abandoning what seems to be unacceptable.

In the most prominent field of developmental research, based upon the original observations of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, researchers have been able to systematize just how this capacity to comply in the service of remaining attached is worked out by children. This school of research, coincidentally known as attachment theory, has replicated findings in laboratories around the world that establish a most significant conclusion: By the time a child is a year old, he/she has already come to an internal conclusion about the availability and non-availability of primary attachment figures. (“When I do this, she comes closer. When I do this, she backs away.”) Gradually, over the next several years, every child forms a reified, almost rigid template of what this “other” will accept, reject, attack, delight in, withdraw from, support, etc. This template is referred to as the child’s “working model” of attachment. In their first months and years of life children are seeking the information necessary to provide a system of behavior designed to keep their primary source of attachment as close, yet as safe, as possible.

Because being connected is an absolute requirement, all children will place themselves within this central relationship in such a way that an acceptable degree of closeness can be maintained. However, we are not talking about a level or kind of closeness that is necessarily the first choice of the child. The focus is upon what the parent will and will not tolerate. Ideally the closeness allowed would be neither too much (which is experienced as intrusion) nor too little (which is experienced as rejection). In less than ideal circumstances a child will take what he or she can get. Therefore, each child ingeniously gauges the parent’s “strategy of attachment,” i.e., how much closeness and distance the parent is comfortable with. Then the child does what it can to match that strategy so that it won’t ask for too much proximity if the parent rejects such requests; so that it will whine and complain if the parent requires over-involvement in order to be available, etc. Thus, even if it must be distorted, some approximation of a “holding environment” appears to be inevitable. If the parent doesn’t provide the needed connection, the child will. This mirroring of attachment strategy is recognizable both within the laboratory and within longitudinal studies. As will be ex-

plained later, in each case it is repeated from generation to generation, in a discernible pattern, approximately 75-80% of the time.<sup>16</sup>

A closer look at the research findings from attachment theory can bring more clarity to how this sensitivity manifests itself in surprisingly predictable ways. Those of us involved in attachment research and treatment utilize the “Strange Situation,” a “test” of young children (minimum age of eleven months) that places them in a mildly stressful setting. This stress includes having the parent leave the child for three minutes in an unfamiliar room (with a safe and supportive stranger present). The focus of our attention is upon the emotional response of the child to the parent, especially upon their reunion. With this seemingly simple exercise, attachment theory has, over the past 45 years, been able to build an impressive body of research that tells us much about how the child psyche functions concerning relationships.<sup>17</sup>

Children tend to fall within four major strategies of attachment: secure, insecure/avoidant, insecure/ambivalent and disorganized/disturbed. Until the late 1980s it was believed that securely attached children made up approximately 65% of the population. More recent studies, however, suggest that this number may be closer to 50% in certain populations.<sup>18</sup> What this percentage might mean for society remains unclear, but it is worth contemplating the question: If so many of our children are unable to take refuge in the stable ground of a caregiver, how will they provide refuge for the suffering of others? What does rising insecurity in individuals mean for our culture?

The hallmark of the parent of a securely attached child is a relative degree of comfort with closeness *and* autonomy. For the parent of a securely attached child, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. That is, the path of direct communication on the part of both parent and child is well respected. If the child has a need for either *being with* or *being separate* from the caregiver, that need is allowed to be expressed openly. Hurts can be hurts, wants can be wants, angers and joys and requests can be just what they are, nothing more and nothing less. Whether the child needs support or time alone, he/she knows that the caregiver will be available and responsive to the full continuum of requests in the direction of either closeness or autonomy. This parent is at-ease with the sense that she/he is, in Winnicott’s terms, “good enough.” Attentive, but not obsessive or anxious, the secure parent trusts that the inevitable mistakes she makes in caregiving will be workable for the child because of the overriding experience of security they have come to share.

Hence there is a sense of ease, an atmosphere of spontaneity, delight and honesty between parent and child. There is also a wealth of face-to-face contact and physical holding. A key trait of these parents is their capacity to feel free in the expression of both deep pleasure and genuine, yet contained anger with their children. This directness and clarity of emotion becomes a cornerstone for all communication, and an antidote to treating a child as “too precious” or incapable of direct emotional interaction.

When the child reaches an age for locomotion, these parents support and encourage the need for exploration. In the laboratory, these children explore the environment while periodically checking back in with their caregiver. Upon separation and return, they are comfortable in turning to the caregiver at the point of reunion. This trust in a responsive and accepting caregiver at the moment of reunion is, by no means, a given for all children. However, in the case of a securely attached child, this ease upon return is the norm. Such a child mirrors the parent’s comfort with proximity and differentiation, with the genuine expression of need for and independence from the caregiver.

The caregiver of an insecure/avoidant child (approximately 15-25% of the population) encourages independence at the cost of close physical and emotional contact. These caregivers are uncomfortable with direct communication and uneasy with the expression of need. The child of such a parent finds a way to deny any direct expression of want or need for the caregiver. (*“When she is suddenly there at the door, their eyes meet for but a brief glance, then each looks away. Yet even in that momentary touching of eyes, her exasperation reaches him and scolds his need of her. She does not want to be reminded of lack and yearning, not his and most certainly not her own. And once again the decision developing in his tiny mind loosens its grip on this thing of togetherness: ‘Stop the wanting, at all costs stash it away. Swallow it now and swallow it always.’”*)

Hence it is not surprising that in the Strange Situation such a child shows little distress when the parent is absent and tends to rebuff the parent upon reunion. It is the understanding of attachment theorists that such a child expects that his/her attachment needs will be dismissed. To avoid the pain of not being invited into closeness, this child begins to build a pattern of creating distance and prioritizing exploration and achievement. Not coincidentally, it is exploration and achievement that a parent of an avoidant child tends to emphasize as important. These parents are often efficient at the tasks of *caretaking*, while being dismissing of *caregiving* opportunities. They are more in-

interested in their perceived performance as parents and/or the performance of their child, than they are in intimacy.

What we are now finding is that when these children become adults, they are either overly focused upon achievement/perfection or upon detachment/safety.<sup>19</sup> These patterns in individuals become the roots of larger cultural patterns of competition and workaholism or apathy and withdrawal. The former category of child learned to comply with the caregiver's request for achievement and perfection in order to maintain connection. The detached child at some point gave up on the possibility of safe connection and chose to withdraw and pull away from relationship as a way to protect the emerging self. And in trans-generational studies children raised by parents dismissing of closeness and vulnerability tend to grow up to be either equally dismissing of attachment behavior in their children or reactively overidentified with their child's needs.<sup>20</sup> The child in the latter category is seen by the parent to be "exquisitely fragile" and/or "uniquely perfect." As clinicians, we see the child as being held within the unreal context of being "too precious."

A parent ambivalent about the nature of caregiving engenders an anxious experience of relationship in the child. The category of insecure/ambivalently attached children makes up approximately 10-15% of the population. These children are truly unsure of how to deal with attachment. They alternate between clinging and resistance to closeness. Not coincidentally, their primary caregivers provide something of a moving target when it comes to attachment behavior. Rather than communicate directly, these parents send mixed signals, offering a distorted closeness that is either intrusive or tending toward fusion ("being of one mind"). The child is expected to either continually look to the parent for resource without building an internal capacity for self-support, or the child is required to be and think exactly like the caregiver. In the latter experience, the parent is so overly identified with the child that any independence in thought or action on the part of the child is experienced as intolerable separation for the parent.

In the laboratory situation, these children are very upset about the initial separation from the caregiver but upon return give mixed signals concerning reconnection. They cry, demand attention, and when the attention is given they get angry and often throw tantrums. The parents of these children have the trademark behavior of being fundamentally inconsistent: They can be alternately available (usually in the direction of intrusiveness) and ignoring of or embarrassed about

the child's needs and requests. Hence, the ambivalence on the part of the children is an accurate reflection of the context in which they find themselves. These parents seem preoccupied with the drama of relationship at the expense of a genuine and simple relatedness. Often they will emphasize the child's need for them ("I'll bet you really missed me while I was gone") as a way to maintain a lengthy dependence. Indeed, it is this heightened sense of dependency, on the part of both parent and child, that characterizes these relationships. Parents within this category have a hard time being in charge and a difficult time establishing the hierarchy necessary for the child to feel secure within a context of known rules and limitations.

So once again, the child adapts in whatever way possible, molding to the expectations of the caregiver: "If clinging, resistance, drama, worry, or fusion are what you need in order for me to stay connected, then that is what you are going to get." When these children become adults they consistently feel unresolved about primary relationships, often feeling caught up in a perpetual melodrama of helplessness and hopelessness about their constant search for support. They tend to become caretakers, complying with the needs of others in return for the unspoken promise that these others will never leave. Because they were so preoccupied with the tensions concerning attachment as children, they never risked exploration and autonomy. Their caregiver wouldn't allow it. Thus, as adults they are now afraid to make decisions and to venture into the world of competence—of thinking and acting for themselves. The internal pressure is to remain either over-involved or fused ("of one mind") with the significant others in their life.

The final classification is that of the disorganized/disturbed parent-child dyad. This category makes up somewhere between 5% and 10% of the population. It is this classification that is currently appearing to be more prevalent than we had once imagined. The parents of these children are themselves profoundly disturbed—often depressed, neglectful, and/or abusive. In some significant way these caregivers are always experienced as either frightening to or frightened of their children. Parents in this category invariably are found to have had an unresolved loss of a primary caregiver in their history. Such a loss tends to leave something of a black hole where attachment responses might be expected to be. The result for the child is an experience of disorientation and emptiness when in relationship to such a caregiver. Because the caregiver is experienced as both unavailable and unpredictable, the child is continually unsure about the options for attachment. When

the potential source of comfort is as likely to also be a source of danger and disorientation, a child is unable to formulate a consistent strategy for relationship.

Within such a scenario, it is understandable that children classified as disorganized tend to be fearful upon the reunion in the Strange Situation. A child will often pull back, put a hand over his/her face, make quick approach/avoidance movements, cry mournfully, or hide. These children tend to be either exceptionally controlling of their parents and peers or to noticeably take on the role of caregiver. This role-reversal is a result of having become the designated caregiver in the parent/child relationship due to the parent's abdication of that necessary function.

Thus, as we can see within each attachment classification, infants and young children are remarkably sensitive to their need to be in relationship and ingenious in establishing whatever strategy is necessary to stay in relationship. Ironically, it is our sacred need, in the words of the Dalai Lama, to "develop closeness and connectedness" that gives rise to the very distorted attachment that Buddhism has warned us about for thousands of years. We all require connection. One way or another we will each find a means to stay connected. The style of attachment we choose, in most cases, tends to remain relatively constant throughout our lives, guiding our interactions with our romantic partners, our social group, and our community.

This is not to say that the working model of attachment reached in our first years of life is set in cement. Most of us can remain open to new experiences and are capable of forming new conclusions about life and relationships. But it does become more difficult as the years progress. Developmental researcher Daniel Stern puts it rather bluntly when he says, "History builds inertia." That is, the decisions about relationships and life formed in the early years, based upon hundreds of thousands of interactions with primary caregivers, bias our processing of later events. What we expect to experience tends to be what we will continue to experience. Updates become less and less likely. Even though novelty abounds, because it is outside of our pre-established intrapsychic roadmap, it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize.

Given a history that includes moments of free fall, terror, and our present state of clinging, how do we return to our option for a more direct experience of closeness, connectedness, and novelty? And how do we move beyond defensive strategies that feel like the only safe choice in a life that appears to consistently threaten abandonment?

## The Ground We Seek is in our Pain

*If there is an orphan in our lives, it is our pain ...[because] we are all looking for a way out of our pain ...One definition of practice is that we must develop a container strong enough to contain a chaotic moment ... The maturing student welcomes chaos or difficulty (which does not imply liking it). Without struggle and effort in facing difficulty, the container which can hold a chaotic moment without breaking apart will not be forged. Our usual behavior of complaining about the chaotic moment and then withdrawing or repressing or moving into the fray with aggression does not increase our capacity, in fact, it weakens it ... Only when we gently turn to our difficulty and rest in it ... only when we stay with what is beneath [our illusions of what life should be] and rest there, do we begin to have a clue ... That goes against everything we want, everything our culture teaches us. But it is the only real solution, the only gate to peace ...When we rest at peace with our pain, this repose is the "gateless gate."*

Charlotte Joko Beck<sup>21</sup>

In the summer of 1979, after completing my first *sesshin* (a seven day silent Zen meditation retreat), a small gathering of participants sat around talking about the events of the previous week. One of those present, a woman from Europe, related the following dream: "It is the middle of the night and I am suspended over a wide chasm, hanging by my arms as my hands tightly grip the metal bars of a jungle gym. Throughout the night I hung with my hands and arms getting increasingly fatigued until I thought I couldn't stand it for another moment. And yet I knew I didn't dare let go because if I did I would crash to my death on the rocks in the distance below me. Then gradually the sun began to rise and with it the first hint of light. And with that light I could begin to make out the shapes and contours of the scene beneath me. What slowly became clear was that I had spent the entire night suspended only a few inches above the earth. Plain, solid ground lay beneath me and in a moment I could drop with no real danger."

The Buddha told us that life is anguish and that the only way to cease suffering is to cease our self-centered clinging. Yet it is not in our nature to let go of our defenses if such a letting go would seem to result in a guarantee of our destruction. The call to practice Buddhism is not a call to destroy the self; rather it is a request to recognize our

limited understanding of its nature. Enlightenment is, in this sense, not so much a letting go as it is a waking up. And what do we awaken to? We awaken to the ground that has always been safely beneath our feet. Confidence and trust, the Dalai Lama makes clear, follow (rather than precede) an opening to closeness and connectedness. To experience realization is therefore to discover our true and original identity as already connected, as already in relationship, indeed as the very nature of relationship itself.

I studied for a number of years with a Zen teacher at the Zen Center of San Diego. Her name was Joko Beck, and before she passed away in 2011, she wrote two important books on meditation practice within the context of our everyday lives: *Everyday Zen* and *Nothing Special*. Joko had a rather unique way of approaching this process of waking up to the holding environment that needs to be experienced prior to a release of our protective strategies. In her typically direct and no-nonsense way, she said: “If there is an orphan in our lives, it is our pain.” Here, in a single sentence, Joko was telling us that it is in returning to our pain that we will find the resolution to our clinging. Because hidden in this pain is the orphaned vulnerability and the neglected holding environment that will, to use Thich Nhat Hanh’s words, “make us stable.” But how can we discover within our rejected pain the very ground that each of us seeks in order to feel at home?

One of the gifts of psychology is the understanding it gives of the unconscious. Out of sight does not necessarily mean out of mind. The mind has a capacity to split off and maintain, outside of conscious awareness, experiences it considers too painful to remember. Even though we may not be conscious of the pain, it remains active and alive—in the mind and in the body. Thus, any difficulty we seek to avoid remains continually present. But this continual presence doesn’t have to be a dramatic memory that is shoved underground. Rather, like the experiences we have just been observing in the development of a child’s worldview, the unconscious *is* the belief system about self, others, and life that becomes the template for our beliefs and expectations. (“When I want to be close, she backs away and begins talking. I must not be worthy of affection.” “If I try to do something on my own he gets worried and upset. I must not be capable of surviving without his constant attention.” “Unless I do things perfectly she won’t pay attention to me. When I am myself nobody wants to stay.”) This lens, acquired and accepted without question, *is* the unconscious. It is always present, manifesting in the chronic beliefs and experiences that we have

come to accept as “the way life is”: numbness, boredom, hopelessness, mistrust, fear, a subtle certainty that life will never be truly fulfilling or that the answer to life is always around the next corner, etc. This steady-state projection—hidden in plain sight—is always active and continuously believed in each moment.

One of the gifts of Buddhism is its teaching that the only place anything actually ever exists is in the present: “Only this!” Everything else is a mental construct about the past or the future. For anything to have reality, it must be happening now. If we are to come into contact with our lives, the only place it can be done is within direct experience, the grounding of the present moment.

Thus we have a dilemma. If the only place we can find stability is within the present moment, and if the present is where our denied pain and unconscious beliefs reside, then our options are rather limited: either come to know this pain and the beliefs that keep it in place or set ourselves apart from the resource we most need.

Joko went on to say: “We are all looking for a way out of our pain.” Of course we are. But why? Why is our pain something that we will do almost anything to stay away from? Within the context of our earliest experiences the answer becomes clear. We avoid our pain because it is the remnant of our original experience of abandonment. In our pain we are brought to that place where “*being with*” has never been an option. In an attempt to protect ourselves from that sense of unbearable isolation, we ceaselessly re-orphan the very vulnerability and truth within us that was originally left alone. Instead, we split ourselves in two: on one side is our denied pain and on the other are our protective strategies. In so doing we create a dualism that guarantees a life of further pain. This happens precisely because the early agony remains untouched (and continuously calling out for connection) and the protective self frantically spends its energy trying to avoid the very hurt that gave it existence in the first place.

## The Dissolving of Dualism

*Each particle of matter, each moment, is indeed no other than the Tathāgata’s inexpressible radiance.*

Torei Zenji, Bodhisattva’s Vow

*As our practice matures, we more and more pause to feel in our body, as pure physical sensation, what is true at the moment. No*

*division. Just being the pure physical sensation ... When we can do that we have slipped out of the duality that says there is me and there is a way I should be, and we return to ourselves as we are ... Then, if we surrender to being the sensation, comes the shift of transformation ... The truth of any moment is always being just as we are. And that means to experience our unkindness when we are unkind. We don't like to do that. We like to think of ourselves as kind people. But often we're not.*

Charlotte Joko Beck<sup>22</sup>

*To pick and choose is a sickness of the mind.*

Zen teaching

Taking refuge is not a technique for stopping pain. It is rather a willingness to come home to the present moment. It is a return to direct experience and an acceptance of what is, exactly as it is. As we have just seen, it is dualism that blocks this from happening. It is our innate capacity to split experience into good and bad, safe and dangerous—a splitting that is well established by the age of one—that creates the problem. Because, from that age onward, our unconscious requirement is to always stay in control so that negative experiences are either kept at bay or at least repeated in such a way that we know what to expect. Healing this split is thus the hallmark of any genuine transformation. If this dualism-at-the-core does not shift, then change cannot occur.

Taking refuge in our pain is that fundamental shift. Within any moment in which we are genuinely willing to “*be with*” our pain, the dualism has already dissolved, because the fear that supports it has momentarily vanished. “You can’t fall out of bed,” the saying goes, “if you are sleeping on the floor.”

Thus, the only way to transform pain is to return to it and patiently reside within it. “Only when we gently turn to our difficulty and rest in it,” Joko said, “listening with respect and gratitude to our body’s suffering, can the transformation occur.” (And returning to our pain as a “plan” to get rid of it becomes yet another form of trying to be separate from that pain.) In a true return and a genuine resting in our pain, the agony is allowed to cease being an orphan because for the first time “*being with*” is available.

We protect ourselves from pain because our belief, based upon actual experience, is that we are alone in it. (As we have just seen, much of what young children require is the presence of a holding and regu-

lating environment precisely at moments of pain: of need and hurt, of anger, disappointment, sadness, grief, and confusion. When this is not available, the tender witness to this pain is not there to be internalized, and the experience of pain is then equated with unbearable aloneness.) Thus, we protect ourselves from pain because it is in suffering that we are thrown back into our original experience of abandonment. Not wanting to return to the scene of the crime, whenever pain emerges we are conditioned to immediately run in whatever direction we learned would keep us “safe.” That direction is, of course, so obvious as to go unnoticed. Protective strategies work that way. They are “just the way we do things,” like living beyond reproach, complimenting profusely, being cheerful, being depressed, being withdrawn, making ourselves indispensable, being perfect, being aloof, on and on.

A clarification might be helpful at this point. The word “pain” does not necessarily mean a dramatic memory of anguish concerning being left or unmet when we were very young. We are, as we have just seen, talking about returning to the scene of the crime. But the crime has now become a template and the template has become a hologram. Enter it at any point and you approach the full truth of the original pain. The pain we seek to avoid *is* any normal moment of cynicism, defensiveness, shame, boredom, numbness, perfectionism, obsession, withdrawal, etc. Take, for example, the little girl in the poem who had her hair cut. Her pain, as an adult, would probably be manifest within the indifference she might hold toward genuine hopes and dreams. It will only be by patiently listening to her now pervasive apathy and coolness toward life that she will begin to “*be with*” what has felt abandoned for all of these years. In even a moment’s “*being with*,” she will begin to dissolve the dualism that keeps her hidden suffering alive. It is precisely here, in her indifference, that she will be able to touch the loneliness that feels there is no option for closeness and connection. If we are honest, each of us has moments such as these, many times each day. An experience of self-attack, obsessive worry, or cynicism may last no more than a second before we quickly usher it back out of awareness. But these moments do exist. And in almost every case, these are times in which we feel alone and believe that there is no possibility for relationship.

But what if we were to discover that this aloneness is an illusion? What if we were to realize that at no time in our lives—not now, and not even when we were very young—did we exist without the holding environment of the universe? What if the nature of existence were

revealed to be a *spacious grounding*, available to hold and regulate our every experience? We are all looking for a way out of our pain because we believe nothing can be *with* us in it. And yet each of us, in each new moment, is an expression of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “*interbeing*”—mutual interdependence. Everything is in relationship to everything else, all is within all, and nothing is truly separate. As physicist David Bohm puts it, “Everything is enfolded into everything.” The mystery of the whole is always at work regulating each of the parts within it. While classically defined as emptiness, our true identity can also accurately be described as relatedness or relationship itself: the dance in which every spontaneously emerging form belongs to, holds, and regulates every other form. In the words of the poet Mary Oliver, this world really does “*over and over announce your place in the family of things.*”

## Awareness as Compassion

*If you let it, it supports itself. You don't have to. Each something is a celebration of the nothing that supports it. When we remove the world from our shoulders we notice it doesn't drop.*

John Cage<sup>23</sup>

*The whole world lives within a safeguarding, fish inside waves, birds held in the sky, the elephant, the wolf, the lion as he hunts, . . . the ant, the waiting snake, even the ground, the air, the water, every spark floating up from the fire, all subsist, exist, are held in the divine. Nothing is ever alone for a single moment.*

Rumi<sup>24</sup>

*Vast is the robe of liberation,  
A formless field of benefaction;  
Wearing the universal teaching,  
I realize the one true nature,  
Thus harmonizing all being.*

Verse of the Robe (Zen)

My first Zen teacher, Robert Aitken, wrote very movingly about the death of his wife Anne. Near the end of his writing, he said the following: “I am resolved to learn from my bereavement and exercise loving patience more carefully with my other family members, sangha mem-

bers, and friends—with the clerk at the post office, the cat, the dog, the hibiscus. These, too, I now know much more clearly, are also the *Nirmānakāya*.<sup>25</sup> Each being is the *Tathāgata*, as the Buddha Shakyamuni said—the living Buddha who comes purely forth, a sister or a brother to protect and nourish. His words ring with a quality similar to those of Zen master Torei Zenji, who wrote centuries before: “With this realization, and with compassionate minds and hearts, our virtuous ancestors gave tender care to beasts and birds.”<sup>26</sup> The enlightened mind is clearly a compassionate mind. It holds each being with tender care, with loving patience, and sees each as a brother or sister to protect and nourish.

The great gift of meditation practice is that it becomes an opportunity to realize that the nature of awareness *is* compassion. To be aware is to hold all that is with tender care—to allow, to let be, to *be with*. (“*Nothing is ever alone for a single moment.*”) Once brought within the realization that “the formless field of benefaction” *is* consciousness itself and that consciousness is compassion, we can begin to allow each experience to be as it actually is. We are able to do this because we realize that at no moment is anything separate from its “one true nature.” From the perspective of the awakened mind, abandonment is an illusion. Each moment is, indeed, nothing other than a *holding environment*.<sup>27</sup>

## Being in the Family of Things

*To study the Awakened Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe.*

Dogen Zenji<sup>28</sup>

*Through consistent practice we develop the skill of mindfulness... The self then becomes clarified in the sense that it is no longer experienced as an opaque, rigid, ever-present entity, but rather as a transparent, elastic, vibratory activity. It loses “thingness.” We realize that it is a verb, not a noun: a wave, not a particle.*

Shinzen Young<sup>29</sup>

*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,*

*the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

Mary Oliver<sup>30</sup>

When my son, the newborn mentioned at the beginning of this essay, was about to turn four years old, I read him a story about a frog that always wanted to be someone else. Mostly, he wanted to be a bird. All day long, he would complain to the other frogs about how horrible it was to be stuck in the mud and unable to fly. As you might guess, he didn't have many friends. Finally one night he was granted a wish, and with that wish he quickly chose to have wings so that he might fly. And fly he did. Except flying still didn't bring happiness. It soon became boring and now *no* one seemed to want to be around him. The birds wouldn't slow down enough to fly with him because he really wasn't one of them. And the frogs wouldn't swim and hop with him because that was no longer what he could do. So, once again, he wished. Except this time he wished that he might return to being a frog. Just a plain frog, without wings. And that very night his wish was granted. The next morning he was overjoyed: "I'm a frog again!" His excitement was equaled only by his sense of relief. Soon his fellow frogs welcomed his return. And he lived with a deepening appreciation for being a frog and for the friends that he had previously refused to accept.

As I completed reading the story, I asked Kai what he thought the story meant. He paused for a moment, and then replied: "I think it means be what you am."

Be what you am. Be exactly what you am. Meditation teacher and author Jack Kornfield suggests that no matter what is happening within our lives, it needs to be approached with a simple mantra: "This too. This too."<sup>31</sup> Everything can be experienced within the compassionate awareness that is unconditional in its acceptance of what is. "This too. This too." Even this moment of terror; even this moment of back pain. "This too. This too." Even this moment of rage; even this moment of worry or depression or longing or cruelty. Not that we are giving ourselves permission to act on these feelings, but we can witness them and increasingly contain them and accept them as a momentary expression of the universe within our particular human form. Be what you am. Be exactly what you am.<sup>32</sup>

Joko Beck used to ask her students these simple questions: “How is this moment supposed to be? How is it really? How is he/she supposed to be? How is he/she really? How am I supposed to be? How am I really?” Her message is direct and clear: The only place we can take refuge, the only genuine home available to any of us is in the “really.” “When you’re in Chicago,” as the saying goes, “the only place you can call from is Chicago.” Because in Chicago or in our current experience of anxiety or grief or grasping is our only opportunity for non-duality—for direct contact with the ground of all being. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “When we have a feeling of instability, we only need to breathe in and out consciously and recognize the feeling of instability, knowing that our consciousness is much more than that feeling. . . . We know that we can take refuge in our consciousness. We can let it do its work. . . . After cleaning out a wound in our finger, we just let it heal. If we have a wound in our mind or heart, we just clean our wound and then we trust our consciousness to heal it.”<sup>33</sup> And so, hidden within this very moment, in the often dreaded or denied “really” of what actually is, there is direct access to the wholeness that organizes and brings everything into balance. Our deeper nature is nothing other than the holding and regulating matrix of the universe.

There is a story of a student who approached a revered sage and asked to be given the key to the universe. Upon hearing the student’s request, the Wise One paused for a moment and then smiled. “Well,” said the teacher, “I have some good news and I have some bad news. The bad news is that there is no key to the universe. The good news is that it was never locked.”

The “open secret” of practice, then, is to have no expectation of arriving anywhere other than wherever we happen to be at any given moment. Joko went on to describe the awakened life very simply: “We never really get anywhere, except to be with ourselves, to be life itself one more time, one more minute, one more second. Each moment in life is absolute in itself. That is all there is.”<sup>34</sup> Life thus becomes an opportunity for simultaneously “*being with*” and fully inhabiting each moment exactly as it is. Giving up the fantasy of one day finding the one who will completely provide the holding we have craved since childhood, we finally allow ourselves full participation in the holding that is already available in each moment. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke confronts us with these words: “There is no place at all that is not looking at you. You must change your life.”<sup>35</sup> There is no experience, no event that is outside of relationship.

We all belong.

We must change our lives.

Of course, as we increasingly live within this larger awareness, there remains the ongoing process of updating the chronically held strategies that continue to perpetuate the illusion that we are alone and in danger. Our lives will always include the patient holding and gradual release of constrictions and distortions concerning abandonment. But we can do so within the confidence of having entrusted our well-being to a “celebration of the nothing that supports” us. This is the privilege of a lifelong practice.

We all come to spiritual practice within a context of trapeze bars and free falls. Every one of us. It’s not in our nature to voluntarily let go of the trapeze bar unless we can trust in the net of belonging that already holds us. We can give up our protective clinging. But this happens gradually, as we recognize and entrust our experience to the harmonizing nature of life as it is. Exactly as it is, pain and all. Dōgen was right: We can forget the self. But only as we come to directly experience its deeper nature. And in so doing we are joined with and enlightened by all beings. In recognizing our relational nature, we plant the seeds of a compassionate society.

Be “*what*” you am. Be “*with*” what you am. “*Be*” what you am. Within the full circle of trust and belonging, of confidence and connection, a hidden wholeness is finally revealed, and “*being with*” becomes the completeness of “*being*” itself. The focus shifts from protecting the illusion of a separate self to a union with all that is. The part recognizes its original identity within the whole. Shame or boredom or hurt or laughter is each joined with the wind, the emerging leaf, the raisin in the cereal bowl, and the call—harsh and exciting—of the wild geese. And thus, in the moment of our willingness to take refuge in life as it is, we awaken to the awareness that we have always been at home. In that moment we manifest our place *in* the family of things, *with* the family of things, *as* the family of things.



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## NOTES

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27. This might become challenging when we think of a holding environment in a broader social context. How do we apply this teaching to society, particularly in the case of grave social injustices, where society seems to have intentionally stripped the holding environment from certain groups in the population (e.g., cutting welfare programs)? Personalized compassion is, indeed, a problem if it is seen as "personalized." It is merely one more self-help technique that does nothing to transform or awaken us to the "vast and fathomless" nature of the true self-as-the-10,000 things. If, in my practice, I maintain the walls of an isolated self and disregard the plight of those who struggle daily without access to the necessities of life that offer both physical support and dignity then I'm meditating within the ongoing delusion of shared isolation. If, however, my gradual awakening into compassion is genuine, my every action becomes a choice to honor all beings in any way I possibly can, moment to moment.

This gets dicey precisely because, we are always living within a limited sense of compassion and therefore always acting out of a limited understanding of how to honor the genuine nature of all that is (so called "self" and "other"). Sadly, most of the time, we tend

to over-emphasize compassion for others—usually at expense to our healthiest selves. (My choices to get arrested at the Catholic Worker lead to severe circumstances that have resulted in chronic pain that I suffer to this day. I pushed myself too far, under the guise of “doing it for others.”) All of which is to say that we are almost always making decisions about how to be of support to others and how to transform the systems that oppress them from a highly limited point of view. So much “change” on behalf of others is often unintentionally “more of the same.”

Hence, my growing conclusion that impacting a person’s state of mind (the core of the Circle of Security work) is the best plan for lasting change. Interestingly, the very practice mentioned in these pages is at the heart of how I believe our state of mind is best allowed to deepen/shift. Thus, rather than being a means by which we avoid accessing the changes most needed in the “outside” world, it just may be that the serious work of a daily meditation practice is precisely the “means” to an eventual “end” that includes justice for all. I no longer trust the “changers” in our culture who have a game plan that is robust and remarkable, but that lacks the underlying self and other tenderness/compassion that seems essential for a deeper transformation.

28. Dōgen Zenji, “Genjokoan,” cited in Hee-jin Kim, *Eihee Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Somerville, Wisdom Publications, 2004), 125.
29. Shinzen Young, “What Does Being a Buddhist Mean to You?” *Tricycle* (Fall 1993).
30. Oliver, “Wild Geese,” *New and Selected Poems*, 110.
31. Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).
32. One might argue that this outlook is helpful in certain contexts, but perhaps inappropriate for members of groups who have endured centuries of systemic oppression. Simply said, I would never say any of this to someone living in the face of oppression. It would be both callous and cruel. The only options that I believe to be workable: Utilize this fundamental understanding of the universe to inform my moment-to-moment response to the person in front of me (and the circumstances of their oppression). Which basically means “shut the fuck up” and use skillful means to be of actual service in the face of their plight. Meaning: Say little and stay practical. Do what I can, when I can, to alter the societal underpinnings of their oppression, all the while staying kind to myself and to those I am seeking to impact.
33. Nhat Hanh, “Relationships,” 1.
34. Charlotte Joko Beck, *Nothing Special: Living Zen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
35. Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” in *Ahead of All Parting: Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 1995).