

A Light in the Mind

*Living Your Life
Just as It Is*

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For All Those Practicing in the Tradition
of Kobun Chino Otogawa Roshi

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Introduction

A Basic Perspective

Recently, I had the most wonderful good fortune: my first grandchild was born. Now, of course, children are born all the time; it's an absolutely ordinary, everyday event. And, also, every time a birth occurs, it's truly a miracle. It's so amazing to be what we call "embodied." This word expresses not only what we are—we inhabit our animal bodies—but also what happens for us: we discover ourselves through being in our bodies. And this experience of being alive, of being embodied, is both exquisitely wonderful and, also, at times, profoundly painful. It's complex. It's exciting. It's frustrating and confusing, and it's also fabulous, to discover that we are anchored in this human form. We can see that we have birth and we have death—and our being embodied is that which lies between these two fundamental events.

I've been thinking about what it is to experience this living between birth and death as embodied beings. And I began to wonder what I could say to my wonderful new grandson that might be helpful as he, too, experiences this embodied life. I asked myself: what do I wish my Grandma had told me? What would have been useful? Is there anything essential, absolutely basic, to consider as we enter into these bodies and these lives?

It occurred to me that one of the most foundational teachings of the Buddha—called **The Three Marks of Existence**—is exactly what I would like to share with him, because, as much as I can understand these concepts, as frequently as I can remember them, and as often as I can internalize them, they help me with living my life. Sometimes we may hear grand-and-glorious, abstract explanations of these Buddhist teachings, but I'm thinking of an everyday teaching, something that even a child can understand.

So, what is this basic perspective? What can we usefully say about being in a body? What are the core “Facts of Life” the Buddha taught, in the most fundamental terms? I would put it this way: **there is one thing to *know* in our life; there is one thing to *learn*; and there is one thing to *do*.**

What is the one thing to *know*? It’s very simple. Sometimes we’re hungry. Sometimes we’re tired. Sometimes we need help to stay dry and warm. Life can feel painful. Often we want things to be different than they are. Sometimes we need to cry—to get help, to express what we feel, or simply to soothe ourselves.

At other times, life is perfect. We’re fed and rested and warm. We feel energetic and happy and interested in life. Someone who loves us is holding us. We hear the familiar voice of someone who cares for us. The world is a friendly, welcoming place. Sometimes life is this way, too.

So here is the one thing to *know*: life can be wonderful, and life can also be painful. Being in these bodies that are born and grow and age and die—being embodied—includes *all* these different feelings. And it’s not right or wrong to have these experiences—to have an *embodied* experience—it just is. We’re not making a mistake when life feels difficult. It’s not our fault. It’s not about our deserving to feel pain. And it’s helpful not to believe that when things are going well it’s because we’re so special we made it happen! It’s useful not to take blame *or* credit. Life is what it is. To be in a body—to be embodied—is both pain and pleasure. It is sorrow and joy. It is loss and gain. This is the first fundamental fact of life. This is how it is. This is what we can *know*.

What is the second vital fact? What is the one thing to *learn* that may help us in living our lives? It is that whatever we’re experiencing—a wet diaper, a hungry stomach, tiredness, fear, or the satisfaction of a big burp, a full tummy, a hand rubbing our back, a soothing sound in our ears—whatever it is, life keeps changing all the time. When life feels unbearable, something shifts; and when it all seems perfect, something shifts also. When we notice our experience, this is what we see: everything born into a body has the nature to change. As long as we are embodied, nothing will last forever—not pain, not pleasure, not sorrow, not joy, not ignorance, not wisdom. And when we say to ourselves, “I want only waking up, I don’t want sleep,” or “I want only warmth, not cold,” it’s like saying, “I want only the in-breath, and not the out-breath.” When we try to hold on to one part only, life can be very painful. So this is the thing to *learn*: everything keeps changing, as long as we are in these bodies.

The third core teaching from the Buddha is usually explained in this way: “We are all interconnected,” or, “We are not solid, separate selves.” But a friend of mine has a slightly different explanation that I like very much: “Don’t take it personally.” This is the thing we can *do*. Let’s don’t take *life* personally. Let’s not automatically assume that if we feel hurt or afraid or lonely or frightened, it’s because we are bad people. If someone strikes out at us, it doesn’t have to be about whom we imagine ourselves to be. Let’s not take all the painful knocks of life personally. And I would suggest that, if we are flaming successes, it’s good not to take that personally either. We don’t have to blame ourselves, and we don’t have to praise ourselves. Life is not our fault. And it’s also not our credit. It is what it is. It’s good not to believe that life is something we can or even should control. Life just happens—to all of us. When we do this, when we don’t take it so personally, life can be much more peaceful. It can be both more satisfying and less frustrating. If we don’t take it personally, this embodied life, we will find we come much closer to being happy.

So here is the basic perspective: *one thing to know*—life is made up of all our experiences, both good and bad, and it simply is what it is; *one thing to learn*—it will all keep changing; *and one thing to do*—don’t take everything so very personally or get too upset about life. This is really very clear and not abstract. A child can understand it. We all can understand it.

And, yet, I find it can be easy to lose sight of this fundamental view. I sometimes long for things to be different than they are. I feel myself pull away from life now and then. Do you experience this too? I have to keep making a conscious effort to remember. I have to keep practicing all the time. I suspect that this, too, is what it means to be human, to be embodied in this world. We have to continue practicing our whole lives. We try. And, then, we try again. And it helps me to share this undertaking with others. We speak of this often at Everyday Dharma Zen Center—the power, for each of us, in practicing together. So, please join me here in exploring what it means to be embodied in this life, and to remember again what the Buddha taught: one basic thing we can know, one basic thing we can learn, and one basic thing we can do.

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Creating the Self

A few days ago, I went downtown to do some errands, after our noon meditation. It was a lovely Santa Cruz day. I walked to the local bookstore, and, as I was browsing along the aisles, a former acupuncture client came up to me. It was wonderful to see her. We exchanged news, and when I told her about the Zen Center her immediate reaction was, “I don’t know how you do that meditation thing! I would absolutely go bonkers if I had to sit still that long. It sounds like torture to me!” We laughed together and parted after a few more minutes. Her reaction is fairly common—“How can you stand to sit still and be quiet for so long?”

Walking down the street a few minutes later, I ran into a rather shy computer friend of mine. We greeted each other and caught up on our news. When I described our Zen Center and the community to him, he responded, “I don’t know how you can do all that community-involvement stuff. I would hate to have to see the same people and talk with them about my life. Ugh—no way!” We laughed together too, and each went on our way.

Here were two opposite reactions to the same description—one said she couldn’t stand to be silent, and the other said he couldn’t stand to talk. Both of them were quite emphatic about what would be uncomfortable to them, and they were at opposite ends of the spectrum in their experiences. I thought afterward about how this experience of discomfort with living happens for each of us, now and then, no matter what our perspective. We create our selves, we construct our selves, and then, having made this great effort, we frequently feel dissatisfaction in being the selves we’ve worked so hard to construct. We say, “I couldn’t stand to do this,” or, “I couldn’t bear to do that.” It’s not that someone else is making us feel this way. It’s we ourselves who feel uncomfortable, whatever these “selves” are.

This brings up an interesting issue—what is this “self,” anyway? It can be confusing when we begin to examine a bit more closely this experience of being embodied. What exactly do we mean when we say, “myself”? How do we recognize ourselves? How do we, in fact, construct this self—this thing that we call “I”? We often say words of introduction such as, “I am Mark” or “I am Mary” or “I am Chris,” and it can seem as if we know who we are. We’re this living being walking around who’s been given a name as an identifying tag: “Ken” or “Victoria” or “Fred.” That seems to be fairly clear.

But we change our orientation slightly when we say, “I am tall,” or, “I am female.” This is more a recognition of ourselves based on an attribute; we’re marking how we are recognized in relation to other people, often by physically recognizable

qualities. We might say next, “I have blue eyes,” and, all of a sudden, the self is an owner of the blue eyes—there is an “I” that owns a part of this self that “has” blue eyes. We may go on to say, “I am an architect,” and all of a sudden this “I” that we recognize is identified by our actions, by our work, not simply by what we look like. If we say, “I am in love with so-and-so,” our definition is based upon feeling. Or we may describe an event, saying, “I was beside myself with fear,” and suddenly there’s a split that’s happened and we have two selves—one beside the other. And so on and on it goes. When we listen to our language about ourselves we can recognize how very confused we are about who we “really” are.

Now, part of the confusion is that the word “I” has different meanings. In one sense, we’re talking about what we might call the psychological “I.” This is the self that functions in the world, that makes decisions and carries them out. This “I” goes to work, prepares dinner, attends family reunions and votes in elections. We often arrive at our understanding of who this psychological “I” is by paying attention to our individual experiences, our backgrounds, our habits, our training—all the societal and social aspects that influence us in our interactions with the world. So let’s call this the worldly functional “I,” or the psychological “I.”

The second self, the second “I,” we might call the metaphysical “I.” This is the self the Buddha was teaching about during his lifetime. Harvey Aronson writes: “Peter Harvey, in his meticulously researched *The Selfless Mind*, states that the picture emerging from the early Theravadin discourses shows the Buddha encouraging his disciples to explore their own experience and see if they can find a self, defined as ‘[A]n unconditioned, permanent, totally happy “I”, which is self-aware, in total control of itself, a truly autonomous agent, with an inherent substantial essence, the true nature of the individual person.’”²⁰ This is the metaphysical “I” that we’re talking about. The Buddha is asking, can you find a part of yourself that is real and solid and permanent, a self that is unchanging and will always be there?

In the early Buddhist discourses, what we hear is that his disciples looked and looked and then they replied, in effect, “No, Your Reverence, it is all transitory. We can not find a permanent self.” What they were looking for, what the Buddha asked them to seek, was this second definition of self, this metaphysical “I.” Their conclusion was that no such solid, permanent and unchanging self could be found. This is the Buddha’s teaching that we translate into English very commonly as “no self.” The Sanskrit word is *anatman*. And it means exactly this: the self is transitory. It is impermanent. It is not solid and fixed. This self is constantly changing; we can’t hold on to it forever.

Why does this matter? The story we hear in the Buddhist tradition is that a young man, Siddhartha Gautama, searched and searched for understanding about his life, and then finally he sat down under a Bo tree and vowed that he would not stand up again until he understood the roots of human suffering. He was asking, “What is the fuel that fires human suffering? Why does it happen?” And the answer he came to was this: it is because we are attached to the belief in an enduring self, in a solid metaphysical self. We keep looking for something permanent, and we can never find it. This, he taught, generates our suffering.

I want to be really clear: the Buddha was not asserting that we are figments of our collective imagination. He wasn't suggesting that the disciples gathered around him did not exist, even as they shared their lives together. And he was not teaching that we should give up functioning in the world. He was saying instead, “Look at the place where we want the self to be permanent, where we want to always be this same, certain self, because exactly *here* is where we will find our place of suffering.”

So, we're talking about two different kinds of selves, two different “I's.” One is the functional, daily-life self, and the second we might name the essence self. In some traditions, this essence self is called “the soul.” In some traditions, it's considered the “inner self.” As far as I can tell, in studying and reading, and in listening to others and in living my life, this idea of an essence self seems to be a repeated, recurrent, consistent human longing. I suspect it's built into the very nature of our beings, as we become conscious. And here's the issue: when we read Buddhist teachings that say, “Give up your attachment to the self,” or perhaps we hear, “The point of practice is to become selfless,” or someone says, “You should give up your attachment to ego,” these teachings are meant to be pointing to this metaphysical “I,” to the concept of *anatman*.

But we can easily hear those directives as being about our daily functional selves. We may believe, for example, that this means we should give up interacting with the world. Sometimes people get involved with Buddhist practice and begin to believe they should give up all self-assertion, or learn to be totally passive and silent. Some people interpret it to mean we should almost give up being conscious. “If you're really enlightened you'll be, like, all zoned out and cool, dude, like, you know, Zen. Far out.” This is a confusion that frequently happens.

And, sometimes with the best of intentions, Buddhist teachers get confused themselves. Certainly psychological problems around behavior can arise in long-term

communities. And it's fairly easy for the holders of authority to insist that these functioning psychological issues are really metaphysical problems. It's not uncommon in Buddhist centers to hear someone say, "If you have a problem with such-and-such, then that's your practice." And this doesn't just happen in Buddhist communities. It can occur in many intentional communities. These issues can be very confusing. What is the functional self and what is the metaphysical self? It's difficult to be clear about this; we blur them together.

Another confusion for us as Westerners can be traced to Freud, who talked about the *id* and the *ego* and the *superego*. In modern American English usage, I think it's common to blur these words together. We use "I" and "self" and "ego" pretty much interchangeably. And it's easy for the word "I" to become "ego" and we know that "ego" can become "egotistical," and that "self" can become "selfish." It may seem that, subtly, and yet suddenly, the self is a negative experience for us. We can easily mix together in our minds these concepts about self and I and ego. And then we may confuse our psychological functioning with a metaphysical longing, and the results frequently lead us to feel badly about ourselves. We're not sure why we feel uncomfortable with ourselves, really, but we do. It all can become very painful.

Have I been sufficiently confusing here? If the answer is "yes," then I've succeeded, because I think this "self" is very confusing! In light of this complexity, we well might wonder how we are to understand ourselves in these lives. How can we make any sense out of this at all? I think that, minimally, we can say that, clearly, we are all in this life, together. All of us, every one of us, no matter where we live or what we do or what we believe, we are all born and we come to an emerging consciousness at some point. We become what we call "self-aware"—aware of our self as an entity in the world. I have a memory of this happening for me when I was eight or nine years old. We had hot summer nights in Nebraska, and there was no air conditioning then, so the windows were wide open. I remember lying on my bed, listening to the voices of the family next door—their house was just a few feet away—and I kept wondering why I was me and not Mary Sue Mohler, whose bedroom looked out upon mine. Why was I me? Why was I not her? I'm sure many of you recall those early self-aware thoughts, the times when you began to wonder, "Why am I me, and what is this life, and what is this being alive all about?" Then we grow up, and we keep trying to figure out how to live these lives, and who we are, and how we can make our selves—this "self"—be what we want to be, or perhaps be what we think we should be. We all get to do this, each of us, and it can be painful; it can be confusing.

If we grow up in a more traditional culture, the question may be directed in another way. Someone told me once that her issue of self was communally oriented: what should I do to be a worthy member of my family, so that I will never besmirch the family honor? This woman grew up in a traditional Asian community. In this Western culture, we often ask, “How can I distinguish myself? How can I be uniquely me so that I’m different from everyone else, so that everyone will recognize me?” But, wherever we live, wherever we grow up, we get to create a sense of self. Certainly, we must face the psychological and practical questions of how to live, of how to function in the world. And with consciousness also come the deeper questions: what is this thing of being alive, and who am I, and why am I me?

A number of you have shared stories with me about your ongoing experiences of creating this self, and of being this self. I want to share a few of these delightful tales. One of you described driving to a party recently and how, on the way there, in the car, you were rehearsing in your mind what you would say when you arrived. You suddenly realized that you were planning how to be yourself at the party. Figuring out how to be Chris, perhaps, or Catherine. Deciding how to be Monica. I thought that was a wonderful description. We do have such thoughts—I think one of the most common internal monologues is about what we will say and what we will do, in order to be ourselves.

Another person wrote to me about this question of self, “For the last few days, my mantra’s been, ‘It’s all about me.’ If I am judging myself for this, it’s less than I ever have, and that feels good. I must say, I’m impressed. Even when I’m doing an act of kindness or sharing with others, the focus is almost always on myself. In conversation I wait, usually impatiently, for my turn to speak. When I’m with my partner or our children, I’m half there, with the other half thinking about me. When I’m working, I’d say I’m lost in self-analyzing about 75 percent of the time, and when I’m in my habitual behavior, huge amounts of time, hours and hours a day, are spent in morbid reflection on my particular life’s trials. When I write, it’s to sound good, much of the time, and the same with speaking. I’m self-obsessed. It’s all about me.” That’s a great description, don’t you think? Most of us could have written this. Yes, indeed, it’s all about us.

Perhaps you’ve heard the story about a man at a party who is talking and talking about himself to a woman he’s trying to impress. Finally he pauses for a moment, then says, “But enough about me! What do you think about me?” This is what we do, right?

Someone else mentioned to me that she was frequently silent in our meetings because she was concerned that, if she spoke up, she would blast everyone out of the room. She wasn't talking about coming on strongly or being critical of others. No, it was that she thought to herself, "They will never understand what I'm saying, and, then, what will people think about me when they find out how truly weird my mind is?" Have you ever thought that? We may hesitate to let people know what we think, because then they may discover how strange we really are!

Who among us hasn't worried about what others think, and who hasn't planned ways in which we will be ourselves in the future? Who hasn't felt self-obsessed? It's easy to want to be special. Don't we all want to be cared for and valued and appreciated? I tell a story in my book *Quiet Mind Open Heart* about my friend who took care of his mother in Nebraska. When we talked together and he cleared away all the caretaking and problem solving and could finally look directly at what he wanted, he said, "I just want to be good enough. I just want to be good enough for her."²¹ We *do* want to be good enough. We want to be loved and appreciated and held in high regard. And we want these feelings to last forever. No wonder we suffer.

Here's one more tender story: recently, I went to hear Pico Iyer read at the Capitola Book Café. He was sharing his new book called *The Open Road*²² about the Dalai Lama, and Iyer's wonderful to hear. I really enjoy what he writes. My favorite book of his is *Video Nights in Kathmandu*.²³ So there we were—many local Santa Cruz people—gathered together at the Book Café, and I invite you to imagine yourself a member of this crowd. It's a large group of people who've arrived, and they're very appreciative. As I look around, I see many people whom I recognize—old faces, familiar faces, what I would call "Buddhist faces"—people I've met in one way or another over the years. There's lots of gray hair in the crowd now, we're all aging a bit, it seems. There's an eagerness in the audience as we wait. Friendly nods pass around the room as people recognize each other. Hands reach out. Hugs are exchanged.

And now, here come the moderator and Pico Iyer up to the front. He's introduced, and begins to speak to us about his craft. He's a journalist. He's traveled to be here with us tonight. He talks about how important independent bookstores are for those like him who are writers trying to make a living. He speaks warmly about Capitola Book Café, and most of us nod our heads in appreciation. He's very engaging and entertaining, and he makes several personal comments about the Santa Cruz area, which we love. We feel a connection, a very strong connection, with him and with each other. He makes a quip about losing his hair, and we laugh. The

audience laughs with him and he laughs with us. He tells us stories about the Dalai Lama, engaging and touching stories. We are moved as we listen. There are occasional sighs as he speaks, and frequent nods. We feel connected to him. And, when he answers questions, he does it so well, giving us lots of information and sharing his compassion and outlook on the world.

Finally, he finishes, and we all applaud and stand up to honor him. We're crowded together and we lean toward each other and begin talking. I turn around to greet a dear old friend who arrived a bit late—we couldn't connect beforehand. Some people move quickly into line to buy a book, and then to speak with him. Others turn to the door and step outside. I'm one of those. I move into the darkness, one of the early-departing ones. I turn around and look back from the darkness into the brightly lighted Book Café, and I see energy and talking and movement and lights and life. Then I turn again into the darkness. Here's the darkness, I think to myself. Each of us will be going home to our houses in the darkness, maybe going with someone else or maybe going home alone. And Pico Iyer too—perhaps he'll go to a hotel for the night, traveling from one venue to another. We just shared time together, all of us—an hour and twenty minutes of a very creative and appealing self-presentation by our author. He was charming and we loved him. We sat admiringly and looked at a “self” that we could all appreciate. People had listened intently to his words, heads had nodded around the room.

It's really so poignant, all of us gathering here, being ourselves, wanting to feel connected, to be seen, to be recognized, to be understood. Perhaps many of us tonight were rehearsing how to be our selves, how to do better, maybe how to be a little bit more like Pico Iyer. Then we turn and we go into the darkness. We go home, we go to bed; and the self that we have constellated, whether audience or author or all of us together, this self shimmers for awhile and then it gradually melts down a bit. I would imagine it even melts down for Pico Iyer. “There,” he might think, “that went well tonight.” And then he feels the out-breath. Then there's the exhalation, and the self stands still. And, then, the self drops down a bit, the self gradually dissolves again. You see what I mean? The self that we create over and over—no matter who we are—the self shines for a time, and, then, after the shimmering, there's this drifting down into silence.

My friend in Nebraska only wants to be good enough. We all really only want to be good enough, and “good enough,” meaning loved and recognized, does happen for a time now and then. But good enough so much feels as if it needs to be solid and forever, and we can never quite get there—to that permanent, essential and

unchanging “I.” So this gathering together of self, this creation of self, rises up, and then it drifts back down. And this isn’t bad. And this isn’t good. This is simply the human condition. Within these bodies and these lives, we cannot hold ourselves together in a solid and permanent essence. It doesn’t last. It cannot last.

Notice when you walk out of here tonight, into the darkness, into the silence, notice when you go home and lie down to sleep, notice the feeling of the self drifting down. I think of all of our stories, all of our efforts to be ourselves, and I feel such a huge tenderness for how difficult it is to be alive. Here we are, all of us humans. We try so hard. We create what we hope is good, and sometimes we feel the self shimmer up and we know—this time, this time it’s really good. This time, we are loved. And, then, we eventually all go out into the darkness. We must exhale. And this self, this shining self we’ve created, drifts slowly back down. There is nothing we can hold on to. Nothing lasts. And this is the tenderness of membership in the human family. This is the way it is. Not bad. Not good. Just the way it is. We are all on this journey together.