John Tarrant, “The Great Way Is Not Difficult”

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They're cryptic, often strange, and can't be penetrated by the rational mind, but the koans of Zen are meant to be applied to our lives. When he went home to care for his dying mother, Zen teacher John Tarrant discovered what it meant — for himself and everyone around him — to give up picking and choosing.

The goal of the Zen koan is enlightenment, which is a profound change of heart. This change of heart makes the world seem like a different place; with it comes a freedom of mind and an awareness of the joy and kindness underlying daily life.

Koans are not intended to prescribe a particular kind of happiness or right way to live. They don't teach you to assemble or make something that didn't exist before. Many psychological and spiritual approaches rely on an engineering metaphor and hope to make your mind more predictable and controllable. Koans go the other way. They encourage you to make an ally of the unpredictability of the mind and to approach your life more as a work of art. The surprise they offer is the one that art offers: inside unpredictability you will find not chaos, but beauty. Koans light up a life that may have been dormant in you; they hold out the possibility of transformation even if you are trying to address unclear or apparently insoluble problems.

A koan shows you two conditions for your mind: a with and a without condition. This is a natural way to understand things — life as a botox advertisement in which you are shown a haggard, careworn face, with wrinkles, and then the improved version, smooth as a baby's backside, without wrinkles. A koan uses this natural eagerness to compare things in an interesting way: when you work with the koan, what you are either with or without is your map, your cherished beliefs, your story about how your life should be at the moment in which you find yourself.

The with condition is what, in an unexamined way, you believe to be true. Beliefs have consequences; they build their own fictional world. When you believe something, you usually want the world to agree with you, to back up your story. Of course it rarely does, so your story will come with conflict built into its plotline. In the without condition, you see the world without wanting it to be different from the way it is. The without condition is an act of imagination. You ask yourself, "What might the world look like if I loved it as it is, just as it is?"

Here is a koan that shows the power of imagining life when you are not depending on the stories you usually tell yourself. It also can show you what life is like in the with condition, when your maps of the world vary from the actual territory of the world.

**The Koan**
Zhaozhou often quoted this saying by Sengcan:

The great way is not difficult
if you just don’t pick and choose.

**Working with the Koan**

Everyone knows that some events are just bad and make you sad or angry, and some are good and make you glad. Yet what everyone knows might not be true. For example, there might be a
certain coercion to the attitude that weddings must be happy and funerals have to be sad. It could prevent you from meeting the moment you are in. What if events don't have to be anything other than what they are? Children laugh at funerals; some tears shed by brides are from disappointment rather than joy. Being fired or losing someone dearly beloved could open an unexpectedly beautiful new life. You might be armored against an unpleasant event that turns out not to be. Instead of wrestling toward what you are convinced ought to be going on, it might be refreshing to approach events without armor, meeting their nakedness with your own nakedness. That might also be a kind approach, since it sets up no conflict in your own heart.

There is a legend in which the Buddha comes upon the mind of not picking and choosing. On the edge of his own profound change of heart, the Buddha meditates all night under a fig tree, and an image comes to mind. He remembers that, as a child, while his father plowed a field in an annual ceremony, he was left in the shade of a rose apple tree. At this moment the boy has no minders around to distract him; he is under no one's gaze. His father is absorbed in plowing. The air is pleasant, the leaflight green, the shade cool. With nothing on his mind, the child does not want or fear anything. The sun seems to stand still. It is delicious to be alive. He feels a happiness not born of desire. The boy moves his eyes over the whole field. He can find no resistance, no tension, no inner conflict; everything is sufficient. There is nothing to add, nothing to subtract. And it occurred to him that exploring this approach, which he discovered in childhood, might be the direction in which enlightenment lies.

Here, not picking and choosing is something a boy wanders into; it is the natural state of an undisturbed mind. Then the boy notices that thoughts and feelings are always rising and that they are not themselves disturbing: thoughts and feelings are things in the world as much as flowers and parasols, and he doesn't have to either agree with them or quarrel with them. It's easy not to pick and choose about his own reactions, about his picking and choosing.

Everyone knows that Buddhism is about nonattachment, and people might think that not picking and choosing is about having no preferences. Yet nonattachment might lead to warfare with the part of you that enjoys the world. In this case nonattachment would be just another tyrannical belief and itself a source of unhappiness. Not picking and choosing could be the opposite of nonattachment, something more unsettling and demanding. If someone asks you, "Vanilla or chocolate?" and you notice that today you would like vanilla, and say so, that might be not picking and choosing. If you say, "I don't mind, what are you having?" then that could well be picking and choosing. You might be trying to guess what your host wants. You might want vanilla but be unwilling to reveal yourself by saying so.

I discovered something about this koan when my sister called from Australia and told me my mother was dying. I got off the plane in August in Launceston, Tasmania, to gusts of wind and cold rain. Water lay in sheets on the paddocks; the luggage on the carts was glistening. The hills were as green as in dreams, merino sheep had green seeds sprouting in their wool.

My sister took me straight from the airport to my mother's bedside in the hospice. My mother, the doctor thought, was waiting for my arrival and might not last the night. "Dying of what?" I asked him. "Nothing, everything." He was a doctor who considered life and imagined that you might join him in considering it, too. He reflected for a moment. "There isn't a reason. She's just worn out."

My mother was extremely wasted; her hair was baby fine, bone white, and drifted above her skull. Her skin had an uncanny translucence relieved by large dark blotches where nurses had
tried to find a vein and she had bled under the surface.

I held her hand and sat with her. The next morning she was still alive, so I did the same thing. My sister was negotiating with the nurses about the oxygen levels. This was an intense activity. My father was trying to encourage Mum to stay in this world, to eat-for him, for life. "May I tempt you with just a spoonful of this custard, Alison? You might get a taste for it."

She was heedless, impatient, rude: "You don't know what you are talking about, oh you don't care, you have never listened to me, never!"

"Oh, Alison," he said disconsolately.

Everyone had something to do but me. I began to consider love. Immediately I noticed that whenever I wanted anyone to be different, the room filled with sorrow and pain. Under that condition, I began to struggle and feel terrible grief. There was nothing wrong with this really. It was intense and interesting, but my mother didn't seem to need it of me. My father or sister didn't need it either. It also wasn't something I needed. Then for whom did I struggle and feel grief?

I noticed that it was easy to think that my father should accept that my mother was dying and let her go. Acceptance, the last stage, and all that. And it was easy to think that my mother should bless Dad on her way out — why not? Or I could think that I should be able to help, sand off the edges of the conversation, oil the wheels.

With any of these thoughts the room became small and fearful. There was a sense of strain, of needing to change others, of the hopelessness of that task, of picking and choosing. Wanting to change myself also led to this strain. This was the with condition — with wrinkles, with delusions of control. But when I wanted no one to be different, the room was large and at peace. It was obvious in the "Why didn't I think of this before?" way that important things can be. Obvious seemed good. I didn't think my mother should live longer or that it might be better if she died more quickly or more painlessly. What she was doing was good enough. I wanted my mother to have the death that was hers and saw that only she could know what that was. And how my father kept her company was up to him. I could trust him to know what he must do.

In the without condition, it seemed likely that my father spoke out of love, and that my mother pushed him away out of love. In a long marriage, the codes spoken by the couple might make no sense to outsiders, including their own children. My mother's apparent attack on my father could have meant: "I've always felt oppressed and this is my final verdict on marriage." Yet she could just as easily have meant, "I'm so sorry to be leaving you. I'm doing my best, but I think I can't stay. I don't want to give you false hope." And my father's cajoling might also have been saying, "I'll keep you company as long as I can, so that you don't need to be lonely."

In that room, I did whatever came to me without thinking much about it. Mainly, I read aloud the slightly bleak, old-fashioned poets she liked—Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, some Robert Frost. I read from an old grade-10 reader, A Galaxy of Poems Old and New. My name was written inside it in a child's script, and also the name of the boy who had owned it before me. Sometimes, as I read, I held her hand. It was the fag end of winter. Gales set in, and winds off the great Southern Ocean beat against the windows, offering a kind of companionship mixed with awe that seafaring people become familiar with. I was comforted by the wind roaring in the dark and confident that, as I walked, a path would appear. Everyone seemed to be free then, and the hospice room was large and kind, a peaceful place to spend a late winter afternoon, watching
gaps of light appear, robins hop with twigs in their beaks, and then the rain bash against the windows again, the season beginning to turn.

Something else about the hospice. The story in our family was that Mum was often difficult. I had evidence, memories; psychotherapists had agreed with these memories. But after sitting in that room, not wanting anyone to be different, I didn't want anything about my life to have been different either. My sister and I started to tell each other Mum's Famous Outrages—the "Can you believe she did that?"-stories, but our hearts weren't in it. I noticed that, while I remembered the stories, my body didn't. I could no longer be sure what was intended in my mother's actions or my father's, or my own. It was easy to think that what had once been received as harshness could have been a step along one of affection's twisting paths.

In the end, my mother defeated the expectations of the hospice and everyone else's expectations too. She came home and lived to see another Christmas. It turned out to have been an opera singer's farewell concert; a rehearsal for another farewell, at a future, unspecified time.

The night my mother died she was back in the hospice and I called her from California. I had no particular urgency and no sense that this phone call was more at an edge than any other. I heard her say, "Hello?" very sweetly and then ask herself impatiently which end she should talk into. She sounded like the colonel in an English mystery — someone intolerant of innovations such as shirts with collars attached and telephones that didn't need to be wound up. She knew that I was on the other end, but she couldn't converse and manage the phone at the same time. This might just have been the effect of a stroke she had had many years before. Her intelligence was frustrated when her body did not understand what was being asked of it, had no grasp of basic Tasmanian.

It seemed that she was speaking into the ear end of the phone and listening to the speaking end. That is a likely explanation for the gurgles and thumps I was hearing in California. Like many human problems, it was absurd; the problem prevented me from explaining the problem to her. "Oh hell," she said, "bloody thing! I never liked it." By the clatter, it was clear that she had either dropped the handset or hurled it away.

I called back several times, thinking that she might by chance pick the receiver up right way around. But since she hadn't hung up the phone, the line was engaged. The nurse's station didn't answer. Before dawn the next morning I heard my father's voice come through the answering machine. "Mum died, John. That's all I have to say. Bye." I felt a love for him and also felt that my mother had indeed said farewell in a completely satisfactory way.

So those are my examples of the with and without conditions. With and without a belief about how it should be. There is nothing wrong with believing people should die a certain way and, for that matter, feeling the thrill of certainty that comes with any strong emotion, including grief. This too is life. If you don't dislike your own dislike, not picking and choosing is just present. It's not a discipline or a good thing that must be achieved. On the other hand, freedom is always interesting. When I was without what I should do and might do and could do, I just did what was obvious and was given to me. I experienced that as one of the shapes of love.

John Cage has a famous piece of music called 4'33" in which all of the notes are silent. While it has often been performed at the piano, the score calls for any number of people playing any number of instruments. Everything else that happens ends up being the piece. The cough, the siren coming up the avenue, your wondering if anything is going to happen, the air conditioner,
your memory of church in childhood, your sense of waiting for something. What is really happening is always happening now. It's always now. What happens when you think something else is happening is what is happening.

My mother's funeral had another fine John Cage moment. My sister and I found that my parents' sound system was very old, and the funeral chapel system needed tapes or CDs, not vinyl. We searched through rarely opened drawers, finding cassettes of Highland flings and odd arias until we settled on a tape of a Vivaldi piece. I gave this to the funeral director, a pleasant man who had known my mother through other occasions. The idea was that, as we pushed the button to send Mum into the fire, he would start the tape and Vivaldi would fill the chapel. So we stumbled through our loving, difficult readings and tiny speeches; then the button was pushed, and as the coffin advanced solemnly into the furnace, dysfunctional squawks came like a shower of arrows out of the sound system. The tape kept trying to play and its clicks and grindings were amplified very efficiently into the overhead speakers. The coffin was gone. We could hardly back up and try again. So that was her music. No picking and choosing. The director confessed that he had inserted the tape wrongly. I shook his hand and told him that the ceremony was perfect. Everyone has her own death, and realizing this seems to allow everyone to have her own life as well.

After my mother died, I dreamed that she was walking slowly and with some effort along a path in the country. It seemed that she could feel my gaze. Yet, as if she knew that this matter was for her alone, she did not turn to speak, or ask anything. She met what rose up before her as a task, and now it was her task to go on foot into death. I watched her walk along that trail until she passed out of my sight. She seemed to know what she was doing. There wasn't any picking or choosing involved for either of us.

From *Bring Me The Rhinoceros and Other Zen Koans To Bring You Joy*, by John Tarrant
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