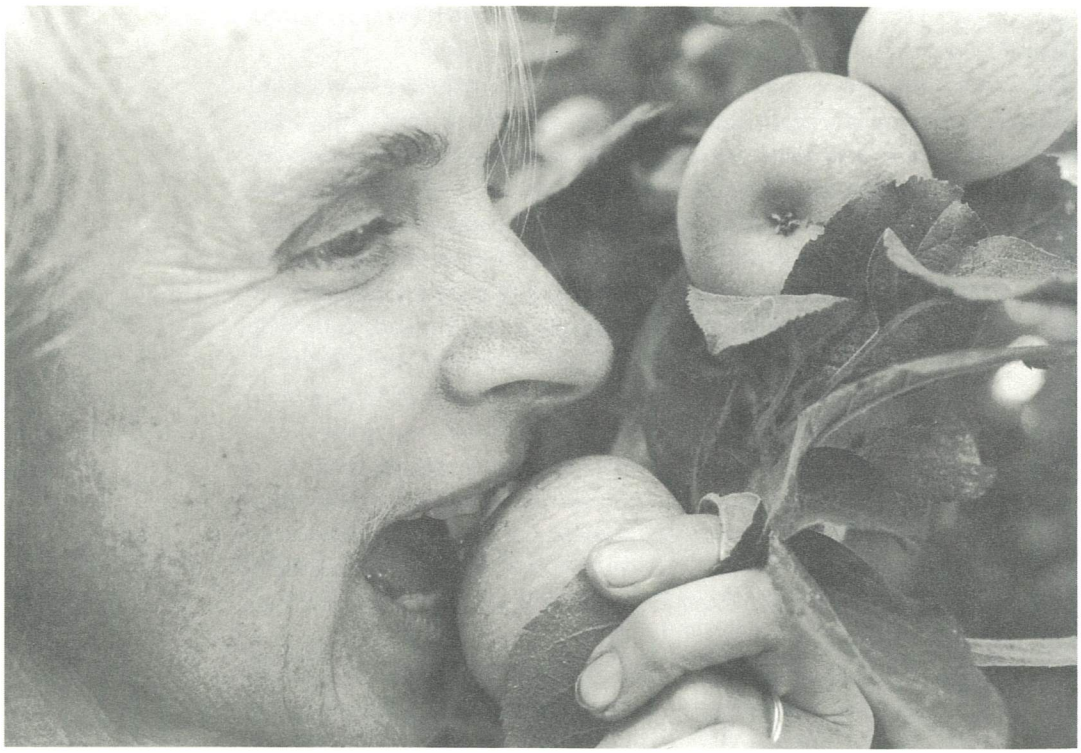

FOR THE TASTE OF AN APPLE

Why I Practice Zen

Ellen Webb

Fig. U1. Ellen Webb, 2001. (© Sandy Walker.)

I started to practice Zen Buddhism after my dad died eight years ago. At that time I was performing frequently, directing a dance company, and raising two small children. As I sat in my father's room on his last day, listening to him breathe, I understood clearly that one day I was going to die too. Maybe not for many years, but I could see my turn coming. Meanwhile, my life seemed to be going by in a blur. Right then I thought that if I was going to die, whether in one year or forty, I wanted to experience more of my life, not more blur. I decided to learn to meditate.

Zen practice has been a way for me to step outside the pattern of thoughts and emotions, actions and reactions that dominate my everyday life. It has given me the feeling, at times, that I have landed on another planet, one where my idea of life as linear has given way to the horizontal, an experience of the present so full I hardly recognize it. Meditation has allowed me to stop planning my life so definitively, to risk more, and to respond more spontaneously to events as they occur. My post-Zen life has become a little less predictable, which can provoke anxiety, but I like noticing the white flesh against the red skin of the apple I am eating.

When I started looking for a place to meditate in the early 1990s there were probably one hundred meditation centers within a fifty-mile radius of my home in Oakland, California. I guess I was not alone. Because I was uncomfortable with the idea of religion and was generally nervous about being asked to believe in anything, it took some searching to find a place that felt right to me. I ended up at a small Zen center in Oakland, with a teacher named Joko Beck. She didn't talk about religion, and she assured me that I didn't have to believe in anything. (Many Zen teachers welcome students to maintain their prior religious practices, such as Christianity and Judaism, while adding Zen as a meditative tool.) Her instructions seemed simple: find a quiet place away from the swirl of your daily life, sit still, and observe. Pay attention to whatever comes up: the busy thoughts

in your head, the feelings in your body, the sounds you are hearing. Just quiet down and witness what transpires. Even five minutes is enough to start.

I did not take to Zen practice easily. I had a million good reasons not to sit still, even for those five minutes. During my first, excruciating four-day sitting retreat I remember thinking that everyone in the room with me was completely crazy. I vehemently told Joko exactly what I thought. Unfazed, she encouraged me to keep sitting.

I did keep sitting and gradually I learned to pay closer attention to what was going on in- and outside of me. And, as I had hoped, I really did begin to experience more of my life: more sound, more color, more sensation. Slowly, slowly I learned to notice the feeling of my breath whether it was quiet or rampaging in my chest. I felt discomfort, uneasiness, tensions that in all my years as a dancer I'd barely ever noticed. I began to open myself up to clenched feelings—anger, fear, envy—that I'd felt before but resisted to the best of my ability. I noticed my constant nagging judgments aimed at myself and everyone else. And I began to see my thoughts as slightly separate from myself. Rather than being linked together in the endless river that fills the mind during waking hours, thoughts and self began to seem distinct from one another, a distinction that arrived as a momentous, if quiet, revelation.

This aspect of Zen practice—being fully awake to the present moment—relates very directly to my years as a dance improviser. In both, the focus is on paying attention, to noticing what is going on. Poetry, painting, music, dance—all these art forms represent, at their most basic level, an effort to capture the moment and a plea to wake up. See all the colors of the forest, stop and hear this tune, share this moment of contact I am having with another dancer. Framing the moment as it slips by, dance improvisation in particular says: Notice! Notice! Wake up to the arch of my spine.

I am driving down a busy city street. Out of the corner of my eye I see an old man maneuvering the sidewalk. Just as I pass by he trips and falls prone, his body partly in the street. My blinker is on and before I know it I am changing lanes, making one U-turn, then a second, changing some more lanes. I pull up at an angle, using my car to shield the body of the old man from oncoming traffic. In an instant I find myself out of my car, talking to him. Other people have gathered and two of us help him as he struggles to get up.

This encounter, though it took place a couple of years ago, has stayed unusually clear in my memory. The man fell as I drove past and I must have gotten back to him in less than a minute, yet I felt I was doing everything slowly. For those few seconds my actions were entirely a response to the situation at hand. While I saw the man fall in my peripheral vision, I started to turn before I started to think. In fact, I can't remember thinking at all until I got back to him. In those moments of pure response, uncertainty vanished. Intuition, awareness, and action were aligned.

I have heard other people—mothers, athletes, LSD-users, Everest-climbers,

astronauts, artists—describe such instances. In times of risk, crisis, or extreme exertion, we find ourselves unexpectedly shaken out of our fixed reactions and responding in a new way. Described as "a moment of disappearing when the ego is absent," "being completely open," "knowing without question what to do next," such an experience may seem unpredictable, even inscrutable. In my own life, I've treasured such experiences and have secretly wanted more, yet I haven't intentionally sought out risk, crisis, or extreme exertion in order to replicate the clarity of the adrenaline rush. In fact, years ago I discovered that I could at least taste this experience without climbing Mount Everest, running a marathon, or having a baby. I could taste it in improvisation.

Even for someone who has practiced improvisation for a long time, improvisational performance is a risky endeavor. Whether working with a score, a structure, or no plan at all, the outcome is by design unpredictable. For the performer, this can be heart-stopping. Like a skydiver who doesn't know whether or not her parachute will open, you don't know whether you will ever really connect to the other performers or to your own best resources. More to the point, how can you be sure what movement comes next?

That's where the thrill of improvisation comes in. Not that I am against choreography. I've choreographed many dances in my life. For periods of time choreography has seemed like a safer bet, with an outcome that is not only more certain but more crafted and thought out. So why take the risk to improvise? For me the answer is simple: movement that is crafted and thought out in advance is by its very nature predictable and designed; it can lose its subtlety and spontaneity. Choreography, on account of its predesigned specificity, goes on regardless of what is really happening in the room. If a dancer falls down, or makes a mistake, she gets up and continues as if nothing happened. By choosing to perform without a set plan, however, we allow something unexpected to intrude: a movement, an interaction, a random choice about space or speed that occurs in response to the present moment. This element of unpredictability changes everything. For the better.

In improvisation, as in Zen practice, I can be aware and changed by what goes on at each moment. A response is called forth from me when I pay enough attention to the situation at hand (other dancers, space, sound, light). What's especially interesting to me is that, regardless of whether that response is judged brilliant, pedestrian, inspired, or funny, it doesn't feel like mine. It is simply the response needed for that moment. In fact, when I choose to improvise, I find that one of the greatest challenges is to give up my drive to strategize, and instead to stay in the open-ended situation in which I have placed myself. I counter the urge to reproduce what is safe and familiar. It is not that I plan nothing, but that I am willing to surrender my plans to the exigencies of the situation at hand.

I began improvising in my creative dance class when I was nine years old, and I fell in love. It was a high. I felt powerful and possessed. In contrast to the rest of my life, I seemed always to know what to do next. I was absorbed by the image

or structure of the dance. And when we were encouraged to think of ourselves as snakes or birds, I felt freed of myself, able to be completely new—squirmy, slimy, feathery—in ways I didn't know as me.

As I grew older and experimented with many kinds of dances, I came back to improvisation again and again to experience this flow of creativity and connection. Having an audience helped. People could share the discovery. They paid attention and heightened my attention. They upped the ante by witnessing this alchemy of attention and response. I felt as though complete strangers could share in what was flowing through me. The channels between human beings seemed clear and unobstructed.

Now, as a mature dancer, I realize that the channels may not always be so open. My friend Christina Svane ascribes the faltering improvisation to what she calls the "Chihuahuas of the mind." These are the nagging judgments that dog our choices at the instant we make them. Some days the barking makes one doubt every step one takes. Midstream in a movement along comes a thought—"this is clumsy" or "you can't dance this long with your back to the audience" or "this must be getting boring"—and the next thing you know you feel lost. It can seem almost impossible not to be thrown off course by such yapping. Christina suggests teaching these little beasts to Sit! and Stay! For myself, I prefer to attend to the Chihuahuas as I would to a cough in the audience, respectfully taking note of their noisy voices and simply continuing to dance.

There is much talk in Zen about the need to practice and, given the fact that not every improvised dance flows like water, practice is essential to dance improvisation as well. Some students of mine with very little technique or experience nonetheless move remarkably. I love to watch them. But their palette is limited. Their range of available choices is narrow. When I am improvising, and I sense what should happen next, I want to be able to do it, to have access to a wide array of choices. It helps to know my instrument well and to be in tune with my body. Practice lets me know what I can count on. To rehearse the process of improvising might seem a conundrum, but practice opens up a wider range of possibilities when the moment of performance arrives. As Mark Salzman writes in his novel *The Soloist,* "you cannot make great music happen; you can only *prepare* yourself for it to happen."[1]

Eight years into my practice, I am finding that Zen offers me the one simple thing I said I wanted: to be present for more of my life. But as it turns out, that is only part of the package. As I become more attentive (again slowly, slowly) my thoughts become simply thoughts rather than the truth. I observe them but am not so attached, possessive, and identified with them. At times my feelings are just feelings, pain instead of *my* pain, anger rather than *my* anger. My old sense of self—a complex matrix of thoughts and feelings—becomes less solid. Sometimes I experience my breath, tension, and anger as who I am, but sometimes I experience those feelings as simply free-floating sensations, nothing more.

I begin to observe the feelings in my body and the thoughts in my mind as I might observe the color of the trees and the sounds in a room. These experiences

don't always come to me as self and other or as internal and external. As my experience of self becomes less fixed, I become less attached to what I create. I don't feel such a strong need to protect it or myself. The outcome of every situation isn't so urgent; I don't always have to win, look good, or gain acknowledgement. I don't have to strategize all the time to make things work out for myself or to shore up my self-image. I can tolerate a little more failure, discomfort, and embarrassment, which opens up a huge arena of possibility. I can play around, try new things and ways of being. As when I came upon the old man who fell in the street, I am free to respond to the situation at hand rather than stick to a strategy that will look after my own well-being.

To me this realm in which I am not so identified with what I create, or as protective of it, gives me freedom. I notice it in my improvisation and in my daily life. I can be more open to what is going on around me and responsive in new ways not bound by my usual self-definition. I surprise myself. Improvising, I can dance the hollow in my bones, or a leaf blowing in the wind, or the feeling of my partner's weight resting on my body. I can become all of these things. I feel more fluid and undefined, and part of my surroundings. At the very best of times I feel that I don't create the dance: the dance dances me.

I fall onto my partner's back and she shifts to assist my rolling and to slightly increase its momentum. I tumble diagonally across the stage and she runs in a circle, sliding to within an inch of my knees as I unfurl to sit up. I feel her breath on my cheek and someone in the audience laughs. We stand up facing each other. I turn away from her, then fall backward, caught in a perfect "spoon" of her body. We walk forward, knees bent, two left feet, two right feet. We stop midstep and start backward. I think, "How are we going to get out of this?" We hesitate, then walk forward again. Midway she falls to the floor backward. I stand center stage, frozen, alone, off balance. My back is cold. The music is louder.

NOTE

1. (New York: Random House, 1994), 274.