



Nothing Special:  
Living Zen

**Charlotte Joko Beck**

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# NOTHING SPECIAL

Living  
Zen

CHARLOTTE JOKO BECK

EDITED BY STEVE SMITH

 HarperCollins e-books

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Zen is not some fancy, special art of living. Our teaching  
is just to live, always in reality, in its exact sense.

Shunryu Suzuki,  
*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

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## Preface

Living Zen is nothing special: life as it is. Zen is life itself, nothing added. “Put no head above your own,” declared Master Rinzai. When we seek from Zen (or from any spiritual path) the fulfillment of our fantasies, we separate from the earth and sky, from our loved ones, from our aching backs and hearts, from the very soles of our feet. Such fantasies insulate us for a time; yet in ten thousand ways reality intrudes, and our lives become anxious scurrying, quiet desperation, confusing melodrama. Distracted and obsessed, striving for something special, we seek another place and time: *not here, not now, not this*. Anything but this ordinary life, this...nothing special.

Living Zen means reversing our flight from nothingness, opening to the emptiness of here and now. Slowly, painfully, we reconcile to life. The heart sinks; hope dies. “Things are always just as they are,” observes Joko. This empty tautology is no counsel of despair, however, but an invitation to joy. Dying to ego-dreams, no longer straining for effect, we return to a simple mind. In the garden of everyday experience, we uncover unexpected treasures. Ingenuous, living from what we are, we move from a self-centered toward a reality-centered life—and open to wonder. Abandoning magical thought, awakening to the magic of this moment, we realize in dynamic emptiness the grace of nothing special...living Zen.

In her life and teaching, in her very presence, Joko Beck manifests the remarkable absence that is living Zen. As Lenore Friedman observes, “In her absolute plainness, Joko embodies the Zen quality of ‘Nothing Special.’ She is simply there, in each bare moment.”\* Joko’s blunt clarity carries far. Her

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\*Sources for quotations are listed at the end of the book.



thought has touched a resonant chord in countless readers around the world. *Everyday Zen: Love and Work* brought the insights of Zen to ordinary life in a form that is attuned to the rhythms of contemporary Western experience. *Nothing Special: Living Zen* extends and enlarges Joko's teaching. Its heightened maturity and closer attention to actual practice make this book useful not only for those who wish better understanding of Zen in the West, but also for those who are determined to transform their lives.

Like its predecessor, this book is the fruit not only of Joko's thought, but also of generous support from many of her devoted students and friends. Some will find talks here that they first transcribed or suggested for inclusion. Without their help, the book might not have come into being. John Loudon, senior editor at HarperSanFrancisco, guided the project with encouragement and wisdom. I am grateful for his stewardship and good judgment. Few authors and editors can be more fortunate than I in their secretarial support: with unflagging good humor, Pat Padilla has worked quickly and accurately with my often messy revisions. Once again, collaborating with Joko has been the greatest joy of all. Through compassion seasoned by wisdom, she continues to serve every life she touches.

Steve Smith  
Claremont, California  
February 1993

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**I**

**STRUGGLE**



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## Whirlpools and Stagnant Waters

We are rather like whirlpools in the river of life. In flowing forward, a river or stream may hit rocks, branches, or irregularities in the ground, causing whirlpools to spring up spontaneously here and there. Water entering one whirlpool quickly passes through and re-joins the river, eventually joining another whirlpool and moving on. Though for short periods it seems to be distinguishable as a separate event, the water in the whirlpools is just the river itself. The stability of a whirlpool is only temporary. The energy of the river of life forms living things—a human being, a cat or dog, trees and plants—then what held the whirlpool in place is itself altered, and the whirlpool is swept away, reentering the larger flow. The energy that was a particular whirlpool fades out and the water passes on, perhaps to be caught again and turned for a moment into another whirlpool.

We'd rather not think of our lives in this way, however. We don't want to see ourselves as simply a temporary formation, a whirlpool in the river of life. The fact is, we take form for a while; then when conditions are appropriate, we fade out. There's nothing wrong with fading out; it's a natural part of the process. However, we want to think that this little whirlpool that we are isn't part of the stream. We want to see ourselves as permanent and stable. Our whole energy goes into trying to protect our supposed separateness. To protect the separateness, we set up artificial, fixed boundaries; as a consequence, we accumulate excess baggage, stuff that slips into our whirlpool and can't flow out again. So things clog up our whirlpool and the process gets messy. The stream needs to flow naturally and freely. If our particular whirlpool is all

bogged down, we also impair the energy of the stream itself. It can't go anywhere. Neighboring whirlpools may get less water because of our frantic holding on. What we can best do for ourselves and for life is to keep the water in our whirlpool rushing and clear so that it is just flowing in and flowing out. When it gets all clogged up, we create troubles—mental, physical, spiritual.

We serve other whirlpools best if the water that enters ours is free to rush through and move on easily and quickly to whatever else needs to be stirred. The energy of life seeks rapid transformation. If we can see life this way and not cling to anything, life simply comes and goes. When debris flows into our little whirlpool, if the flow is even and strong, the debris rushes around for a while and then goes on its way. Yet that's not how we live our lives. Not seeing that we are simply a whirlpool in the river of the universe, we view ourselves as separate entities, needing to protect our boundaries. The very judgment "I feel hurt" establishes a boundary, by naming an "I" that demands to be protected. Whenever trash floats into our whirlpool, we make great efforts to avoid it, to expel it, or to somehow control it.

Ninety percent of a typical human life is spent trying to put boundaries around the whirlpool. We're constantly on guard: "He might hurt me." "This might go wrong." "I don't like him anyway." This is a complete misuse of our life function; yet we all do it to some degree.

Financial worries reflect our struggle to maintain fixed boundaries. "What if my investment doesn't work out? I might lose all of my money." We don't want anything to threaten our money supply. We all think that would be a terrible thing. By being protective and anxious, clinging to our assets, we clog up our lives. Water that should be rushing in and out, so it can serve, becomes stagnant. A whirlpool that puts up a dam around itself and shuts itself off from the river becomes stagnant and loses its vitality. Practice is about no longer being caught in the particular, and instead seeing it for what it is—a

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part of the whole. Yet we spend most of our energies creating stagnant water. That's what living in fear will do. The fear exists because the whirlpool doesn't understand what it is—none other than the stream itself. Until we get an inkling of that truth, all of our energies go in the wrong direction. We create many stagnant pools, which breed contamination and disease. Pools seeking to dam themselves for protection begin to contend with one another. "You're smelly. I don't like you." Stagnant pools cause a lot of trouble. The freshness of life is gone.

Zen practice helps us to see how we have created stagnation in our lives. "Have I always been so angry, and just never noticed it?" So our first discovery in practice is to recognize our own stagnation, created by our self-centered thoughts. The biggest problems are created by attitudes we cannot see in ourselves. Unacknowledged depression, fear, and anger create rigidity. When we recognize the rigidity and stagnation, the water begins to flow again, bit by bit. So the most vital part of practice is to be willing to be life itself—which is simply the incoming sensations—that which creates our whirlpool.

Over the years, we have trained ourselves to do the opposite: to create stagnant pools. This is our false accomplishment. Out of this ongoing effort come all of our troubles and our separation from life. We don't know how to be intimate, to be the stream of life. A stagnant whirlpool with defended boundaries isn't close to anything. Caught in a self-centered dream, we suffer, as one of our daily Zen Center vows states. Practice is the slow reversal of that. With most students, this reversal is the work of a lifetime. The change is often painful, especially at first. When we are used to the rigidity and controlled stiffness of a defended life, we don't want to allow fresh currents into awareness, however refreshing they may truly be.

The truth is, we don't like fresh air very much. We don't like fresh water very much. It takes a long time before we can see our defensiveness and manipulation of life in our daily activities. Practice helps us to see these maneuvers more clearly, and such recognition is always unpleasant. Still, it's essential that

we see what we are doing. The longer we practice, the more readily we can recognize our defensive patterns. The process is never easy or painless, however, and those who are hoping to find a quick and easy place of rest should not undertake it.

That's why I am uneasy with the growth of the Zen Center of San Diego. Too many seekers are looking for easy, painless solutions to their difficulties. I prefer a smaller center, limited to those who are ready and willing to do the work. Of course, I don't expect from beginners the same thing I expect from experienced students. We all learn as we go. Still, the bigger the center, the more difficult it is to keep the teaching clean and rigorous. It's not important how many students we attract to the center; what is important is maintaining strong practice. So increasingly I am tightening up the teaching. This is not a place to be if one is seeking an artificial peace or bliss or some other special state.

What we do get out of practice is being more awake. Being more alive. Knowing our own mischievous tendencies so well that we don't need to visit them on others. We learn that it's never okay to yell at somebody just because we feel upset. Practice helps us to realize where our life is stagnant. Unlike rushing mountain streams, with wonderful water flowing in and flowing out, we may be brought to a dead halt by "I don't like it.... He really hurt my feelings," or "I have such a hard life." In truth, there is only the ongoing rush of the water. What we call our life is nothing but a little detour, a whirlpool that springs up, then fades away. Sometimes the detours are tiny and very brief: life swirls for a year or two in one place, then is wiped away. People wonder why some babies die when they are young. Who knows? We don't know why. It is part of this endless rushing of energy. When we can join this, we're at peace. When all of our efforts go in the opposite direction, we are not at peace.

STUDENT: In our individual lives, is it a good idea to choose some specific direction and set our sights on that, or is it better

just to take things as they come? Setting up specific goals can block the flow of life, right?

JOKO: The problem lies not in having goals, but in how we relate to them. We need to have some goals. For example, parents typically set certain goals for themselves, such as planning ahead to provide for their children's education. People with natural talents may have the goal of developing them. Nothing wrong with that. Having goals is part of being human. It's the way we do it that creates the trouble.

STUDENT: The best way is to have goals but not cling to the end result?

JOKO: That's right. One simply does what is required to reach the goal. Anyone who seeks an educational degree needs to register in an educational program and take the courses, for example. The point is to promote the goal by accomplishing it in the present: doing this, doing that, doing this, as it becomes necessary, right here, right now. At some point, we get the degree or whatever. On the other hand, if we only dream of the goal and neglect to pay attention to the present, we will probably fail to get on with our lives—and become stagnant.

Whatever choice we make, the outcome will provide us with a lesson. If we are attentive and aware, we will learn what we need to do next. In this sense, there is no wrong decision. The minute we make a decision, we are confronted with our next teacher. We may make decisions that make us very uncomfortable. We may be sorry that we did what we did—and we learn from that. There is, for example, no ideal person to marry or ideal way to live one's life. The minute we marry somebody, we have a fresh set of opportunities for learning, fuel for practice. That's true not only of marriage, but of any relationship. Insofar as we practice with what comes up, the outcome will nearly always be rewarding and worthwhile.

STUDENT: When I set a goal for myself I tend to go into a "fast forward" mode and ignore the flow of the river.



JOKO: When the whirlpool tries to become independent of the river, like a tornado spinning out of control, it can cause a lot of damage. Even though we think of the goal as some future state to achieve, the real goal is always the life of this moment, this moment, this moment. There's no way to push the river aside. Even if we have created a dam around ourselves and become a stagnant pool, something will turn up that we have not anticipated. Perhaps a friend invites herself and her four children to visit for a week. Or someone dies; or our work suddenly changes. Life seems to present us with whatever it takes to stir up the pool.

STUDENT: In terms of the analogy of the whirlpools and the river, what is the difference between life and death?

JOKO: A whirlpool is a vortex, with a center around which the water spins. As one's life goes on, that center gradually gets weaker and weaker. When it weakens enough, it flattens out and the water simply becomes part of the river again.

STUDENT: From that point of view, wouldn't it be better to always be just part of the river?

JOKO: We are always part of the river, whether or not we are a whirlpool. We can't avoid being part of the river. We don't know that, however, because we have a distinct form and do not see beyond it.

STUDENT: So it's a delusion that life is different from death?

JOKO: That's true in an absolute sense, though from our human point of view they are distinct. On different levels, each is true: there is no life and death *and* there is life and death. When we know only the latter, we cling to life and fear death. When we see both, the sting of death is largely mitigated.

If we wait long enough, every whirlpool will eventually flatten out. Change is inevitable. Having lived in San Diego for a long time, I have watched the cliffs of La Jolla for many years. They're changing. The shoreline that now exists is not the same

shoreline that I saw thirty years ago. Likewise with whirlpools; they also change and eventually just weaken. Something gives way and the water rushes on—and that's fine.

STUDENT: When we do die, do we retain anything of what we were or is it all gone?

JOKO: I'm not going to answer that. Your practice will give you some insight into that question.

STUDENT: You have sometimes described the energy of life as a native intelligence that we are. Does that intelligence have any boundaries?

JOKO: No. Intelligence is not a thing; it is not a person. It doesn't have boundaries. The minute we give something boundaries, we've put it back into the phenomenal sphere of things, like a whirlpool that sees itself as separate from the river.

STUDENT: Another of our regular Zen Center vows speaks of a "boundless field of benefaction." Is that the same as the river, the native intelligence that we are?

JOKO: Yes. Human life is simply a temporary form taken by this energy.

STUDENT: Yet in our lives there do need to be boundaries. I have a lot of difficulty reconciling this with what you're saying.

JOKO: Some boundaries are simply inherent in what we are; for example, each of us has a limited amount of energy and time. We need to recognize our limitations in this sense. This doesn't mean that we have to establish artificial, defensive boundaries that block our life. Even as small whirlpools, we can recognize that we are part of the river—and not become stagnant.

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## The Cocoon of Pain

When we bow in the zendo, what are we honoring? One way to answer this question is to ask what we actually honor in our lives, as shown by what we think and do. And the truth of the matter is that in our lives we do not honor buddha nature, nor the God that encompasses everything, including life and death, good and evil, all the opposites. The truth is, we're not interested in that. We certainly don't want to honor death, or pain, or loss. What we do is erect a false god. The Bible says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." But we do just that.

What is the god that we erect? What do we actually honor and pay attention to moment by moment? We might call it the god of comfort and pleasantness and security. In worshiping that god, we destroy our lives. In worshiping the god of comfort and pleasantness, people literally kill themselves—with drugs, alcohol, high speeds, recklessness, anger. Nations worship this god on a much larger, more destructive scale. Until we honestly see that this is what our lives are about, we will be unable to discover who we really are.

We have many ways to cope with life, many ways to worship comfort and pleasantness. All are based on the same thing: the fear of encountering any kind of unpleasantness. If we must have absolute order and control, it's because we're trying to avoid any unpleasantness. If we can have things our way, and get angry if they're not, then we think we can survive and shut out our anxiety about death. If we can please everyone, then we imagine no unpleasantness will enter our life. We hope that if we can be the star of the show, shining and wonderful and efficient, we can have such an admiring audience that we won't have to feel anything. If we can withdraw from the world and just entertain ourselves with our own dreams and fantasies and emotional upheavals, we think we can es-

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cape unpleasantness. If we can figure everything out, if we can be so smart that we can fit everything into some sort of a plan or order, a complete intellectual understanding, then perhaps we won't be threatened. If we can submit to an authority, have it tell us what to do, then we can give someone else the responsibility for our lives and we don't have to carry it anymore. We don't have to feel the anxiety of making a decision. If we pursue life madly, going after any pleasant sensation, any excitement, any entertainment, perhaps we won't have to feel any pain. If we can tell others what to do, keep them well under control, under our foot, maybe they can't hurt us. If we can "bliss out," if we can be a mindless "buddha" just relaxing in the sun, we don't have to assume any responsibility for the world's unpleasantness. We can just be happy.

All these are versions of the god we actually worship. It is the god of no discomfort and no unpleasantness. Without exception, every being on earth pursues it to some degree. As we pursue it, we lose touch with what really is. As we lose touch, our life spirals downward. And the very unpleasantness that we sought to avoid can overwhelm us.

This has been the problem of human life since the beginning of time. All philosophies and all religions are varying attempts to deal with this basic fear. Only when such attempts fail us are we ready to begin serious practice. And they do fail. Because the systems we adopt are not based upon reality; they can't work, despite all of our feverish efforts. Sooner or later, we come to realize that something is amiss.

Unfortunately, we often merely compound our error by trying harder, or by plastering over our old faulty system with a new faulty system. It's seductive, for example, to give ourselves over to some false authority or guru who will run our lives for us as we attempt to find something or someone outside of ourselves to take care of our fear.

Yesterday a butterfly flew through my open door and fluttered about in my room. Someone caught it and released it outside. It made me think about the life of a butterfly. A butterfly begins as a worm, which moves slowly and can't see very far.

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Eventually the worm builds itself a cocoon, and in that dark, quiet space it stays for a long time. Finally, after what must seem like an eternity of darkness, it emerges as a butterfly.

The life history of a butterfly is similar to our practice. We have some misconceptions about both, however. We may imagine, for example, that because butterflies are pretty, their life in the cocoon before they emerge is also pretty. We don't realize all that the worm must go through in order to become a butterfly. Similarly, when we begin to practice, we don't realize the long and difficult transformation required of us. We have to see through our pursuit of outward things, the false gods of pleasure and security. We have to stop gobbling this and pursuing that in our shortsighted way, and simply relax into the cocoon, into the darkness of the pain that is our life.

Such practice requires years of our lives. Unlike the butterfly, we don't emerge once and for all. As we spin within the cocoon of pain, we may have momentary glimpses of life as a butterfly, fluttering in the sun. At such times we sense the absolute wonder of what our life is—something we never know as a busy little worm, preoccupied with itself. We begin to know the world of the butterfly only by contacting our own pain, which means no longer worshiping the god of comfort and pleasantness. We have to give up our slavish obedience to whatever system of pain avoidance we have devised and realize that we can't escape discomfort simply by running faster and trying harder. The faster we run from our pain, the more our pain overtakes us. When what we depended on to give our life meaning doesn't work any more, what are we going to do?

Some people never give up this false pursuit. Eventually they may die of an overdose, literally or figuratively. In the struggle to gain control we go faster, we strain, we try harder, we squeeze people tighter, we squeeze ourselves tighter. Yet life can never really be brought under control. As we flee from reality, the pain increases. This pain is our teacher.

Sitting is not about finding a happy, blissful state. The states may occur in sitting, when we've really experienced our pain

over and over, so that finally there's just letting go. That surrender and opening into something fresh and new is the consequence of experiencing pain, not a consequence of finding a place where we can shut the pain out.

Sitting sesshin\* and everyday practice are a matter of wrapping ourselves in that cocoon of pain. We don't do this unwillingly. First, we may be willing to have only one little strand wrapped around us, and then we'll break away. Again we'll wrap it around us and again break away. Eventually we become willing to sit with that portion of our pain for a while. Then perhaps we become willing to tolerate two or three strands. As our vision gets clearer, we can just sit within our cocoon and find it's the only peaceful space we've ever been in. And when we're perfectly willing to be there—in other words, when we're willing for life to be as it is, embracing both life and death, pleasure and pain, good and bad, comfortable in being both—then the cocoon begins to dissolve.

Unlike the butterfly, we alternate between the cocoon and the butterfly many times. This process continues through our life. Each time we uncover unresolved areas of our life we have to build another cocoon and rest quietly in it until the learning period completes itself. Each time our cocoon bursts and we take a little step, we are freer.

The first, essential step in becoming a butterfly is to recognize that we can't make it as a worm. We have to see through our pursuit of the false god of comfort and pleasure. We have to get a clear picture of that god. We have to relinquish our sense of entitlement—our sense that life owes us this and that. For example, we have to abandon the notion that we can compel others to love us by doing things for them. We have to recognize that we cannot manipulate life to satisfy ourselves, and that finding fault with ourselves or others is not an effective way of helping anyone. We slowly abandon our basic arrogance.

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\* An intensive Zen meditation retreat.

The truth is, life inside the cocoon is frustrating and heart-breaking, and it's never totally behind us. I don't mean that from morning to night we feel, "I am wrapped in pain." I mean that we're waking up constantly to what we're about, what we're really doing in our lives. And the fact is, that's painful. But there's no possibility of freedom without this pain.

I recently heard a quotation from a professional athlete: "Love is not shared pleasure. It is shared pain." That's a good insight. We can certainly enjoy going out with our partner, for example, and having dinner together. I'm not questioning the value of shared enjoyment. But if we want a relationship to be closer and more genuine, we need to share with our partner that which is most scary for us to share with anybody. When we do that, then the other person has freedom to do the same thing. Instead, we want to keep our image, particularly with somebody we're trying to impress.

Sharing our pain does not mean telling our partners how they irritate us. That's a way of saying, "I'm angry with you." It does not help us break down our false idol and open us to life as a butterfly. What does open us is sharing our vulnerabilities. Sometimes we see a couple who has done this difficult work over a lifetime. In the process, they have grown old together. We can sense the enormous comfort, the shared quality of ease between these people. It's beautiful, and very rare. Without this quality of openness and vulnerability, partners don't really know each other; they are one image living with another image.

We may seek to avoid the cocoon of pain by drifting into a hazy, unfocused state, a vaguely pleasant drifting that can last for hours. When we realize that's what's happening, what is a good question to ask?

STUDENT: "What am I avoiding?"

STUDENT: I might ask, "What am I experiencing right now?"

JOKO: Those are both good questions to ask. The curious thing is, we say that we want to know reality and see our life

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as it is; yet when we begin to practice, or attend sesshin, we immediately find ways to avoid reality by retreating into this hazy, dreamy state. That's just another form of worshiping the false god of comfort and pleasure.

STUDENT: Isn't there a flaw in seeking out suffering and focusing on it?

JOKO: We don't have to seek it; it's already there in our lives. Every five minutes, we're in trouble in some way. All of our "seeking" is to escape it. There are countless ways people try to escape, or to put a safe shell around themselves. Despite our efforts, the shell does get broken. Then we get more frantic and try harder. We go to work and find that the boss has had a bad night, or our child calls about getting in trouble at school. The shell is constantly under assault. There's no way we can be sure of keeping it in place. Our lives break down because we can't stand any opposition to the way we want things to be.

Pain is constantly in our lives. We feel not only our own pain, but the pain of people around us. We try to build our wall thicker, or we avoid people in distress; yet it's always present, nonetheless.

STUDENT: Supposing I'm sitting, and I'm not in pain. I'm actually rather comfortable. Is it useful to remember painful times in my life, to go back to unresolved situations and try to deal with them?

JOKO: That's not necessary. If we're alert to what's going on in our thoughts and our body in this moment, we'll have plenty to work with.

When we are fully awake in this moment, sitting can be pleasurable, too. But we shouldn't seek that out and try to escape the pain; then we bring into practice the false god and refuse to be awake to what is.

STUDENT: Over time, I find that what begins to come up in sitting is not so much pleasure or pain or something in between,



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