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THE POOLS

teisho by Charlotte Joko Beck, Sensei

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues.

Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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THE POOLS

Let's picture if we can two landscapes. The first has a deep clear quiet pool, and the second also has a deep clear quiet pool. The first one is surrounded by garbage. The second one, also surrounded by garbage, has an odd characteristic - everyone who jumps into the pool takes a little pile of garbage in with him -- and there is something in the pool that eats it up, so it remains quiet and clear.

Which kind of practice are you doing ? Most of us long for deep, blissful sitting and, even if our pool of peace is ringed around with garbage, we attempt not notice it; if the garbage can disturb us, we want to ignore it. We don't

like difficulties; we prefer to sit in our peace and not be intruded upon.
That's one type of sitting.

The other kind of pool eats up the garbage; as fast as it appears, it is consumed as the person entering the pool carries it in with him. Still in a short time the pool is clear and undisturbed. It may churn more at first. The major difference is that the first pool ends up with more and more garbage around it; the second has none or very little.

As has been said, most of us long for the first kind of practice (life). But the second, facing life as it is, is more genuine; we keep churning up our drama -- seeing it, experiencing it, swallowing it -- throwing the garbage into ourselves, the deep pool that we are.

A practice exclusively devoted to concentration (shutting out all but the object of concentration) is the first pool. Very peaceful, very seductive. But when you climb out of the pool, the garbage of life remains -- our dualistic dealings with our work and relationships. You haven't handled them. Or you may resort to the well-intentioned but inaccurate devices of positive thinking or affirmations; the gas in the garbage increases and in time explodes.

The second pool (being each moment of life, pleasant or unpleasant) is at times a slow and frustrating practice, but in the long run, fruitful and satisfying.

With all that as a background, let's look at what can be called the turning point in our life and practice. From what are we turning? Let's look at some sentences: "I feel irritated. I feel annoyed. I feel happy." What we omit is: "I feel I am hurt by you. I feel I have been made happy by you."

Actually, the fact is not that you irritate me, it's that I have a desire to be irritated. You may loudly protest, "oh, never, I certainly don't want to feel irritated or hurt..." Well, just for a few years (intelligently, in the second pool). The first and uncomfortable years of sitting make it clearer and clearer that my desire is to be irritated or angry (separate). That's almost all I have known as a means to preserve and protect what I think is my identity. With continued awareness, it dawns that there is only one person who can irritate me or make me feel lonely and depressed, and it is myself -- myself as a false

identity.

We begin to see a strange and lethal truth: contrary to our beliefs, our basic drive and all our life force goes into a struggle to perpetuate our separateness, our touchiness, or self-righteousness.

Lao Tzu said, "He who feels punctured, must be a balloon.", the balloon of irritability, anger, self-centered opinions. If we can be punctured (hurt), we can be sure we are still a balloon. We want to be a balloon; otherwise we could not be punctured. But our greatest desire is to keep the balloon inflated. After all, it's me!

So what would turning be? What is the turning point? It begins when we observe and feel our anger, our manipulation, our anxiety - and know in our hearts a deep determination to be in another mode.

Then the real transformation can begin. Instead of ignoring garbage, pushing it away, or wallowing in it, we take our garbage into ourselves and let it digest. We take ourselves with us into the pool of life. This begins the turning. After it, life is never the same.

The turning is at first feeble and intermittent. Over time, it becomes stronger and more insistent (in Christian terms, the 'hound of heaven' chases us). As it strengthens, more and more we know who our Master is. Of course, the Master is not a thing or a person but our awakening knowledge of Who We Are. The difficult years of practice (and life) come before the turning. The patience and skill of both teacher and student are called on to the utmost. Some but not all will make it through the difficulties.

Gurdjieff said: man is a machine. We know how machines work: when the blender's button is pushed, it goes WHOOSSSH; when we turn our car's ignition key, the motor roars. Man is a machine. Why? As long as a man's primary drive is to keep his balloon unpunctured, to avoid having his buttons pushed, he is an automatic machine which has no choice.

Even moving from passive dependence to an active and angry independence -
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"Don't tell me what to do!" -- is still the activity of a machine with buttons.

I feel ruled and compelled by 'something else'; I have no choice. Like the blender, if pushed, I turn on.

Suppose you do something to me that I view as punishing (it's mean, it's unfair, I don't deserve it). How do I react when this button is pushed? With anger? (And I may not reveal my anger, or I may turn it against myself). Then I am a machine. In this instance, what would the tuning point be?

The turning point is my ability, developed slowly by practice, to be aware of the thoughts and bodily sensations which comprise anger. In the observing of thoughts and sensations, anger will swallow itself and its energy can open life instead of destroying it. Then I (the angry one) can act out of this clarity in a manner that benefits me and you. This is the way of the second pool, the one that takes the garbage, digests it, letting it feed and renew life as compost does a garden.

Let us not have some naive notion that this ability is won overnight. A lifetime is more like it. Nevertheless, faithful and determined practice makes a difference and fairly soon at that.

We come to view the unpleasant aspects of life as learning opportunities. If my balloon is deflated a little -- great!. As an opportunity to be welcomed, not avoided or dramatized. each round of such practice renders us a little less machine-like, gives us more appreciation of ourselves and others.

Let's live in the second pool.

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