What Practice Is

*From Everyday Zen by Charlotte Joko Beck*

When we make a personal investment in our thoughts we create the "I" and then our life begins not to work. That's why we label thoughts, to take the investment out again. When we've been sitting long enough we can see our thoughts as just pure sensory input. And we can see ourselves moving through the stages preliminary to that: at first we feel our thoughts are real, and out of that we create the self-centred emotions, and out of that we create the barrier to seeing life as it is; because if we are caught in self-centred emotions we can't see people or situations clearly. A thought in itself is just pure sensory input, an energy fragment. But we fear to see thoughts as they are.

When we label a thought we step back from it, we remove our identification. There's a world of difference between saying, "She's impossible" and "Having a thought that she's impossible." If we persistently label any thought the emotional overlay begins to drop out and we are left with an impersonal energy fragment to which we need not attach. But if we think our thoughts are real we act out of them. And if we act from such thoughts our life is muddled. Again, practice is to work with this until we know it in our bones. Practice is not about achieving a realization in our heads. It has to be our flesh, our bones, ourself. Of
course, we have to have life-centred thoughts: how to follow a recipe, how to put on a roof, how to plan our vacation. But we don't need the emotionally self-centred activity that we call thinking. It really isn't thinking, it's an aberration of thinking.

Zen is about an active life, an involved life. When we know our minds well and the emotions that our thinking creates, we tend to see better what our lives are about and what needs to be done, which is generally just the next task under our nose. Zen is about a life of action, not a life of passively doing nothing. But our actions must be based on reality. When our actions are based on our false thought systems (which are based on our conditioning), they are poorly based. When we have seen through the thought systems we can see what needs to be done.