GOLDEN WIND: PART 1

Welcome everybody. It's wonderful to be here. It's wonderful to be teaching together again with Sarah and Megan, and it's wonderful to be with all the retreat leaders and the terrific retreat planning team, and the tribes gathering from all over. So it's a great joy to be here.

It looks like this year is our Yunmen retreat. For those of us in Desert Rain, that's something of a switch. We've been spending a lot of time lately with Zhaozhou, both the koans that feature him in the major collections and the myriad short interactions in the *Recorded Sayings*. And Zhaozhou is a different kettle of fish. He's very down to earth, minimalist and very witty, pithy. It's kind of like zen jujutsu: he can turn things around for someone, throw them off balance in just the right way at just the right time, with the smallest of moves and with apparently minimal exertion or flexing. And Yunmen could hardly be more different, at least in one respect: he's characteristically grand, expansive and dramatic, and incredibly intense. It's zen writ large, in a really breathtaking way. And both these teachers are really a pleasure and a great help to spend time with, and they complement each other perfectly. So here we go.

There's a gigantic amount of material featuring Yunmen in the three major koan collections. Plus, as with Zhaozhou, there's a big collection of his recorded sayings, this one with a terrific introduction by Urs Arp. So if you want to become a Yunmen junkie, it's really easy. And it's well worth it. There's not only great power to his teaching but also tremendous range; among other things, there's his repeated, exuberant presentation of what Megan called the fullness of emptiness, but also a characteristically fierce evocation of what 's sometimes called "empty emptiness"—the emptiness of emptiness. The koan tradition warns us away from the temptation to stay there, in "empty emptiness," but it doesn't tell us not to become intimate with this terrain. "The whole universe was sheer darkness," Hakuin said. And earlier Linji reported "it was like an ice cave a million miles thick." Maybe we'll meet both these—the emptiness of emptiness, and the fullness of emptiness—in our retreat.

The koan that gives our retreat its title, "Golden Wind," might actually offer us both these experiences; it's *Blue Cliff Record* case twenty seven. I want to start, as I did at last fall's retreat, by offering a few different translations of the koan. I think they differ significantly, and I'd like to recommend that you feel free to let yourself drift among them as you spend time with the koan during our retreat, both on and off the cushion. Maybe you'll find that you're drawn to one translation. And then another one, with a very different feel maybe, starts calling to you, who knows why. And it doesn't really matter whether the place it's carrying you feels peaceful or scary, or whether you think you'd rather go there or not. Maybe you can cast yourself adrift, allow yourself to let go and be carried there. Anyway, see if you can give that a try, and then pull back if you really need to.

Here's Joan Sutherland's translation, the Cloud Dragon version, where the koan is titled "Yunmen Reveals the Golden Wind":

> A student asked Yunmen, "When the tree withers and the leaves fall, what's that?"
> Yunmen said, "The Golden Wind reveals itself."

Joan's note on the case says "Golden Wind is the name of the deity of autumn." I don't think that's the only implication of calling the wind "golden," but it's certainly part of the picture, and probably the classical way to take it.

Here are some other translations. This one is from the Open Source koan notes:

> A monk asked Yunmen, 'When the tree withers and the leaves fall, what's happening?' Yunmen replied, "It's revealing the golden wind."

That feels a little different—the withered tree is doing the revealing rather than the wind revealing itself.

For these next versions, I won't always read the phrasing of the student's question, focusing instead on the way Yunmen's response is translated. The massive online Terebess archive has this, which again is just a little bit different: "The body reveals the golden wind." And then these next translations shift what I might call the mood of the koan, pretty starkly. Thomas Cleary's translation has: "A monk asked Yunmen, 'How is it when the tree withers and the leaves fall?' Yunmen said, 'Body exposed in the golden wind.'" And then this one, from a transcribed talk from the San Francisco Zen Center, takes this shift of mood further, just by switching the preposition from "in" to "to": "Body exposed to the golden wind."

If we juxtapose the first of these translations, by Joan on Cloud Dragon, to this last one, the difference feels pretty stark: "the golden wind reveals itself" versus "body exposed to the golden wind." They almost feel like two different koans. But all of these versions are surely plausible ways to translate the classical Chinese characters, whose presentation is compressed, elliptical, and enigmatic. So if we want to ask which one is the "right" translation, or what Yunmen "really" said, the question is probably pretty unanswerable. And that's a good thing, I think. As we spend time with the koan, this not knowing really is most intimate. It beckons us into the koan, and invites us to let our meditation drift among the various versions, as they arise, and allow ourselves to be with the feelings and associations each one surfaces in us; and I think all those feelings are appropriate, maybe inevitable, as we respond to the autumn scenario where the tree withers and the leaves fall.

For tonight I'll just touch on how one of these translations tends to affect me when I sit with it. If "body exposed to the golden wind" comes to fetch me, what arises doesn't feel altogether easy to keep company with. When I imagine my way into this "body exposed to the golden wind" scenario, I don't usually find myself identifying with the wind, though that would be possible. I'm nearly always the tree, and that's not, to put it mildly, entirely comfortable. I feel really vulnerable and at risk, as if I'm starting to undergo some really dire or drastic process of profound and maybe difficult, harsh change, a falling apart or a coming undone, stripped to the bone. On the other hand, even in this harsh version, the phrase "golden wind" feels like it brings in something else. The "golden" makes it feel really rich. There's a sense of fullness to it, and beauty. And for me "golden" also brings in a sense of softening, or even a kind of tenderness, maybe because in my imagining of the scene I've let "golden wind" slide into "golden light," a metamorphosis that feels plausible and somehow appropriate, the golden light of autumn. That fits, I think, with some of what Megan and Sarah were saying, what Megan called the fullness of emptiness, and if the koan carries you there, that's great, it's really important; it can offer, among other gifts, deep peace, as the Celtic Blessing says.

I want to stay with the word “golden” for just a bit longer this evening; I’ll come back to it in my talk tomorrow night. “Golden wind” feels mysterious to me. It’s the name of the deity of autumn, yes, but still there's something kind of strange about the phrase: wind isn't golden, right? But autumn leaves often are, and at certain times of the day the autumn light can see golden too. So for me there’s something elusive going on here, something implicitly metamorphic and kind of magical, implying a mysterious transformation among the wind, the leaves, and the light. Maybe you'll find yourself drawn into that sense of mystery or magic at some point, and its metamorphic quality might let something transform in you as well.

Here are a couple more things I find myself wondering about as I keep company with the koan. Why does the student ask their question about the season when the tree withers and the leaves fall? What lurks in that question for them? What else are they maybe asking about, indirectly? There’s a similar sense of something important being left unstated when another student asks Zhaozhou, does a dog have Buddha nature. is this student simply obsessed with the possible spiritual status of dogs? Or what? When I ask about the dog what am I asking about? Ditto the tree withering and the leaves falling. So in his commentary on the case, the 18th century Japanese Soto teacher Tenkei asks, “when the flowers blossom in the spring sun, what time is this? When the trees wither, what time is this?” There's a kind of grandeur in his phrasing here “what time is this?” It reminds me of “to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” So, you know, when the tree withers and the leaves fall, what time is this? I think Tenkei is suggesting that we read the student’s question figuratively. What is it that's being suggested by the image of the tree withering and the leaves falling? How does that resonate for me? What does it have to do with my own life? Maybe also, as we take up the koan in this particular time, what does it have to do with the state of the world right now? And also: in my zen practice, what time is this, when the tree withers and the leaves fall? These kinds of musings are an important part of how we keep company with koans in Open Source.

But at the same time, maybe, not so fast. Yuanwu, the editor of the *Blue Cliff Record*, actually warns us about this sort of extrapolation in his commentary on the case. He’s responding to a line in Xuedo’s poem. (Xuedo selected the koans that make up the *Blue Cliff Record* collection, and wrote a verse on each case; later, Yuanwu as editor added extensive commentaries on just about everything Xuedo had done.) Anyway I think Yuanwu’s comment about Xuedo’s line is also offering advice about how to keep company with the entire case. Here’s what he says: "Xuedo’s intent was just to create a single environment. What's in front of your eyes right now, the whistling wind, is either the southeast wind or the northwest wind. It will be all right only if you understand Xuedo’s meaning this way. If you go further and understand it as Chan or Tao, this has nothing to do with it." Well, I want to say it has a little bit to do with it. If Yuanwu sounds categorical here, well, his comments are typically pretty vehement and even hyperbolic; so we don’t have to follow is advice one hundred percent. But I think what he says gives us a good way to begin keeping company with the koan; it’s also in line with our koan practice in the Open Source. So I’d suggest: don't start in immediately looking for analogies--oh, the tree image means this and the wind image means that; or the withering tree is like American democracy and the wind is like Trump, or if it’s a golden wind it’s like difficult but necessary adjustments we need to make to our system of government. Obviously. But I also wouldn’t go right away to: what is going on in my own life right now that’s like the tree withering and the leaves falling? Not that we shouldn’t go there; but we shouldn’t be in a hurry. I think letting the koan in involves letting it be literal, letting myself fall into the actual scene it evokes. So I just sit with the tree withering, the leaves falling, and really let myself sink into that. Or I let those images sink down into my body, into the hara, and then just be where I find myself. And if I

let those images take root in me, after awhile some of the associations they provoke will start to appear spontaneously. And rather than being my immediate conscious associations, which can feel a little too clever or neat or forced, instead what arises feel pretty much like what Freud called "free associations," coming up from out of the unconscious, and from the hara or the body or the alaya vijñāna; a kind of dream arising from those images of the tree withering and the leaves falling, or from "golden wind."

That's pretty much what I want to say about the koan for tonight. But as usual I'd like to bring some poems into the retreat, and I want to say just a bit about them now. I don't want to burden everyone with multiple handouts tonight, so they can wait till tomorrow. There will be two poems, and a little bit of a third poem. I'll talk about one of them in some detail tomorrow night; the other two are pretty much just FYI, or for Work in the Room if you want to bring them in. The poem I won't really talk about tomorrow night is a really beautiful one by the English romantic poet John Keats, "To Autumn," There's such a feeling in it of the richness of early autumn, the moment just before harvest, when the bounty of the natural world seems so full and rich that it's almost overflowing itself; and then the poem shifts a little and there's just the first hint of the autumnal landscape and its creatures beginning to slip toward winter, toward something sparse or bare, the golden light just beginning to fade from the scene. It's very beautiful, and tender, and I think all this resonates with an aspect of the Yunmen koan, the "golden wind" part, the fullness of emptiness arising and just beginning to fall away.

I'll also pass out just the final stanza of a long poem by the early twentieth century Irish poet William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children." It focuses on the mystery of process, of time and inevitable change and metamorphosis, evoking both the sense of pathos these provoke and, maybe, a feeling of deep and inexplicable tranquility lurking inside that. For me all that resonates with our koan, and I think it can help illuminate it, open up the probably contradictory feelings the koan provokes. The poem evokes our characteristic reaction to process, to the autumnal, including our visceral protest: we are who we are, thank you very much, and we feel like process impinges on us from the outside, threatening our supposed stability, which we prize. But the poem also suggests, to the contrary, that process brings us into being and makes us what we are, that there's no "me" outside of or apart from process and change, formation and dissolution, arising and passing away; the self that objects to these owes its very existence to them. And there's no way around that.

The other poem is "The Snow Man," by the American modernist poet Wallace Stevens; that's the one I'll bring into my talk tomorrow night. It resonates most directly with some startling moments in the commentary to our koan, which draw out an aspect of it more severe and daunting than "the fullness of emptiness." "The Snow Man" does this too, in spades. Here's the great eighteenth century Japanese Rinzai teacher Hakuin commenting on a line in Xuedo's poem on the case: "When you read this, can you feel your hair standing on end?" Yikes. So there's something really dire about the koan and particularly about the student's question. Maybe "empty emptiness" isn't quite the right name for it, but it's pretty close. So, on the one hand, if you're experiencing the fullness of emptiness, the golden quality of that golden wind, that's wonderful; it's certainly worth the price of retreat admission to sink into that and let it carry you day after day here. But, on the other hand, if if the koan starts to feel rather drastic as you keep company with it, if what you experience is a wrenching sense of falling away or dying back, you haven't made some kind of strange mistake or wandered into some idiosyncratically personal response that's left the "real" koan behind. But then also—I shouldn't mention this but I will—if there's falling away there's also coming forth; if there's

what the tradition calls “rolling in” there’s also what it calls “rolling out.” So if something suddenly goes KABOOM for you, that’s also not a mistake. There’s no overt KABOOM in the golden wind koan, but there’s a whole lot of KABOOM elsewhere in Yunmen; among Chan masters he’s kind of the king of KABOOM, and I’m guessing we’ll mention some other Yunmen koans at some point during the retreat where that’s dramatically overt. And I think it lurks at the edges of our golden wind koan.

So there are a lot of really different places the koan might take you, and probably none of those will be a mistake. That’s kind of Open Source gospel, I guess.

I want to close by reading you the Stevens poem; it hits us over the head with what I’ve been calling the drastic aspect of our golden wind, the withering and falling away. ”The Snow Man” is a really stark, zero degree poem of winter; it presents something like the inevitable aftermath of our koan’s autumnal scene. Here’s another thing I shouldn’t say: for me something rather surprising, and mysterious, happens at the very end of the poem: right inside the drastic sense of complete bareness, complete falling away, there’s just the faintest sense, the slightest glimmer, of something it would be hard to put your finger on, hard to give a name to. I’ll talk about that tomorrow night, since I think it’s also deeply related to our koan. I think if this poem enters your meditation or your musings during the retreat, that’s entirely appropriate. And it might be surprisingly helpful.

Here’s the poem. By the way, in the title “Snow Man” is two separate words, not one; so, not quite Frosty the Snowman, you know, but: what would it be like to be a person made out of snow, or a person turned to snow? So: Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man”:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
>
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place
>
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Thank you.