

Good evening, Bodhisattvas. Welcome to our fifth annual spring Desert Sunrise Retreat. It's wonderful that we're able to gather here from so many different places, and sit together this week.

Here's a Little Zen joke: I want to begin tonight by talking about silence. But I do. We'll be holding our retreat in what the tradition calls "noble silence," and that involves more than simply keeping our mouths shut. We have to hold the silence in the right spirit. And that's not possible if we have an ignoble attitude toward words. As a koan school, in particular, we have a deep affinity for language. So we're not too shocked to find our founding teacher Joan Sutherland, in her book *Vimalakirti and the Awakened Heart*, recounting this dialogue between Shariputra—the favorite Mahayana fall guy—and the goddess who lives in Vimalakirti's room:

Shariputra asks the goddess how long she's been in this room, and she replies that she's been there as long as he's been free. . . . But when she asks him how long that is, he won't answer. She asks him why, and he says, "Liberation cannot be spoken of in words, and so I don't know what I can say to you." This sounds like Zen 101: Zen is a special transmission outside the scriptures, not dependent on words.

The Goddess responds, "Words and speech are manifestations of liberation." She's implying that when you say that liberation can't be spoken of, you're making words special—in this case, specially bad—instead of realizing that words are as good, bad, capable of illuminating and capable of misuse as anything else. It all depends on what you do with them.

Agreed, a hundred percent. But just to mix things up a bit, here's a koan—as best I can I remember it—that seems to cut the other way. An old monk, long enlightened, and a young monk, fresh off a kensho, are walking together in the mountains. "Everything is so beautiful!" the young monk says. "Yes!," replies the old monk. "But what a pity to say so!"

Ok then, checkmate. Except it's a koan, a story. Which is to say: the joy of saying, and the possibly deeper joy of not saying, are held for us here in words, in a narrative that gives us a taste of the radiance and tenderness of the post-kensho world. It's a world we might even fall into, later or even right now, as we listen to this story or remember it, letting it work its way through us.

Words, that is to say, are one pretty good way of practicing together, waking up together. And practicing together is a pretty good way of practicing. Here's Joan again, later in the *Vimalakirti* book:

there's always something new happening, too—because we gather together, because we don't think words are bad things, because we speak and listen. The Way is always growing and changing in relationship to circumstances, and everyone in the gathering is participating.

If all this sounds like I'm recommending yakking haphazardly in retreat, I'm not. But it's a brief for holding our noble silence in a particular way, softly rather than militantly. If words aren't especially bad, if they can be vehicles of liberation, then if we lay them down for most parts of the retreat we do it as a practice, not a fierce opinion or settled preference. We do it so that, in the silence, a couple things can happen more easily. If we don't have to anticipate social interaction, if we're confident that we can just glide by our companions rather than engage them, it helps us allow our edges to soften. Keeping silent, we have a better chance of sensing the big silence we move through, of blurring into it and letting it hold us: a silence inside sound even, or a stillness inside movement. We need to be able to count on each other in order to do this—here in a group, in close quarters, we can only soften this way if we trust each other to hold the silence together, in a solitude that turns out to be intimately companionable.

So: enough talk about silence, no? Or: what a pity to say so!

Preview of coming attractions:

In the talks I give the next couple evenings, I'm going to try to evoke a few kinds of archetypal Zen terrain, offering a very rough sort of map. Not so you can make rigorous discriminations, pinning down precisely which Zen territory you are in at the moment; but to encourage you not to forego any of your experiences this week, not to dismiss them too quickly as "not what Zen is about." I'm hoping, that is, to expand your sense of where you can travel, of what the territory includes. You don't need to be scared to sail out past the Rock of Gibraltar. You won't fall off the edge of the Zen world, which isn't flat, and doesn't have an edge.

So we'll talk about "rolling in" and "rolling out," which is lingo used to describe our experiences of something like "sameness" and "difference," the one and the many. The invitation is to revel in our awareness that, as Shitou says, "this interweaving goes on and on," but also that "each thing stands in its own place," which isn't an exile, or a letdown we have to learn to resign ourselves to. We'll look at some koans that evoke these different aspects of practice, and then, another night, at a kind of middle ground that seems to include them both.

As a placeholder tonight, and also for the joy of it, here's the end of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," a passage I love partly because it rolls out so exuberantly, before tenderly rolling in. The exuberant rolling out parts used to strike me, a long time ago now, as attractive but dangerous; and, for sure, Not At All Zen. Too bad for me!

Here's Walt rolling out:

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me . . . he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable,  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

And then rolling in, dissolving back into the flux of interpermeation:

The last scud of day holds back for me,  
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadowed wilds,  
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air . . . I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.  
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop some where waiting for you

So: talking and being silent, keeping company with koans and sitting in the deepest stillness, rolling out and rolling in: the great way isn't difficult, you just can't pick and choose. We might call it Mobius Strip Zen, topology's own "not one and not two," where the opposite surface from the one we're on at any moment turns out also to be the same surface after all. So that at any moment, at any step, we might find ourselves on the other side, which isn't the other side. This difference-as-sameness can sometimes make things feel a little fuzzy, a little dreamy—a good thing.

Almost done. But time for our requisite first night koans, which keep exfoliating. We have a custom of beginning with the same koan every year, but we also keep adding to the collection. So: "Reverend!" Shitou calls to Wu Hsieh in our traditional first night koan. Wu Hsieh has turned his back on Shitou and is walking away from him smugly. As Wu Hsieh turns back around at his call, Shitou says: "'From birth to death it's only this; don't seek anymore for anything else by turning your head and revolving your brain.'"

Last year we added this overlapping koan:

Once when Xuefeng was living in a hermitage, two students came to pay their respects. When Xuefeng saw them coming, he slumped against the hermitage door and then came out. He asked, "What's this?"

One of the students said "What's this?" back to him.

Xuefeng hung his head and returned to the hermitage.

Afterwards, the students went on to Yantou. Yantou asked, "Where have you come from?"

"From Lingnan," one student replied.

"Did you get to see Xuefeng?"

"I did."

"What did he have to say?"

The student told the story.

Yantou asked, "Then what did he say?"

"He didn't say anything; he hung his head and went back inside."

Yantou said, "Too bad! I'm sorry that years ago I didn't tell him the last word. If I'd told him, no one in the world would be able to touch old Xuefeng. . . . Although Xuefeng and I were born on the same branch, he won't die on the same branch as me. If you want to know what it's all about: 'It's just this.'"

And here—for the first time anywhere!—is the same story seen from the other end of the telescope. It's my own little reversal as riff, not a "real" koan from an actual koan collection:

Once when Yantou was living in a hermitage, two students came to pay their respects. When Yantou saw them coming, he opened the hermitage door and then came out. He said, "If you want to know what it's all about: 'It's just this.'"

One of the students also said "It's just this."

Afterwards, the students went on to Xuefeng. Xuefeng asked, "Where have you come from?"

"From Yantou's place," one student replied.

"Did you get to see Yantou?"

"I did."

"What did he have to say?"

The student told the story.

Xuefeng said, "Too bad! . . . Although Yantou and I were born on the same branch, he won't die on the same branch as me. Now let me ask you: 'what's this?'"

Different stories? Same story? What might it be like to wander back and forth between them? To dream them, or let them dream you. "What's this?"