Good evening Bodhisattvas. “What’s this?”

“When Yunman could freely roll in and roll out,” one koan in the *Book of Serenity* begins. Rolling in: being attuned to sameness or equality, everything rolled into one. Including you: so it’s not really an experience you’re “having” since it’s an experience you’re inside, that’s having you; you don’t see it so much as you are it or feel it, or it feels you. No lo sé, pero lo conozco. Rolling out, by contrast, is seeing and feeling differentiation and multiplicity (and something more, and more surprising). I want to explore both these aspects tonight; they play an important part in most archetypal Zen mappings of our practice. But: first caveat, from here in the land of the Mobius strip: if I focus on an example of rolling in and stare at it for a while, it sometimes has the disorienting tendency to morph into something that feels more like rolling out; and the reverse. This wobble might be partly a function of my own wobbly conceptual grasp; but I think it’s also the nature of the beast. Since we’re isolating aspects of a continuum, provisionally making a dichotomy out of what’s not two, some slipping and sliding shouldn’t surprise us. Caveat two is related: I hope you don’t spend time during the retreat worrying about which kind of experience you’re having, especially if it feels like you’re kind of having both. My aim tonight isn’t to delimit strict borders; instead, I hope to maybe enlarge the territory you’re prepared to regard as interesting, or as Zen. “Are you ready to bet the farm,” Joan asks in her Vimalakirti book, “that you can decide which moments to embrace and which to repudiate?” In my experience—my practice history—a whole lot of what I used to be sure wasn’t “Buddhist insight” turned out to be a crucial aspect of it. Rolling out was a case in point.

Let’s start, though, with rolling in. Or kind of. Let’s start with Shitou, a few lines from “Taking Part in the Gathering,” in Joan’s translation:

The mysterious source of the bright is clear and unstained;
branches of light stream from that dark.
Trying to control things is only delusion,
but hanging onto the absolute isn't enlightenment, either.
We and everything we perceive
are interwoven and not interwoven,
and this interweaving continues on and on,
while each thing stands in its own place.

There’s already a wobble here, since the translation implicitly includes a mysterious third aspect or element. . One, things are interwoven or interpermeated (think rolling in); two, each thing also stands over against everything else, in its own place (rolled out). But, three, there’s also “the mysterious source of the bright” which is strangely both “clear” and “dark”: some undefinable source out of which stream both interweaving and not interweaving, emptiness and form. Taoism named this unnamable source “the Dark Mysterious.” (Shitou’s poem has the same title as an older Taoist poem). One of Joan’s images for this mysterious source is a well at the center of the temple, dropping down to a place (or a no-place) that’s unknowable--endarkenment in one of its aspects.

The tradition generally tells us this primordial source is not what’s meant by shunyata or emptiness, at least for Indian Buddhism, since emptiness means empty of self-nature,: things so interpermeated that they aren’t actually things. So “emptiness” isn’t the void or an impenetrable darkness or stillness. Despite this, something like this primordial darkness turns up in classic accounts of working with Zhaozhou’s “no” koan, among other places, and. approaching this unknowable origin seems to be part of the archetypal Zen narrative. Linji says of the no-place encountered in “no” practice: “the whole universe is sheer darkness.” And Hakuin recalls: “it was like sitting in an ice cave a million miles thick”—the no-place of zero degree Kelvin, nothing moving. From a certain vantage, there isn’t anything at all. In meditation, we sometimes fall into this sense of things, or non-things: a place or no place that precedes or underlies the distinction between interweaving and standing in your own place. No lo sé, pero quizás lo conozco.

Important qualifier: while it’s true that in archetypal narratives of Zen experience, things tend to get told in a certain order--first you experience this, then that--I think in practice anything might happen at any time. You don’t have to try to book a visit to the land of sheer darkness as the first stop on your awakening itinerary. And I don’t think everyone spends time in the ice cave. I know one person who was pretty surprised to find themselves there several years after experiencing kensho. Some people find the ice cave calm and tranquil; others find it disconcerting, to put it mildly. I don’t think anyone stays there forever, and the tradition certainly doesn’t want you to.

Case in point: Wumen, in his comments on the “no” koan in his *Gateless Gateway*, is quite clear that the zero-degree kelvin experience isn’t the story, or at least not all of the story: “don’t consider [No] to be nothingness.” Keizan Jokin exclaimed, at the moment of his enlightenment, “A jet-black iron ball speeds through the dark night!” This is black on black, sheer darkness in a way; but it’s also motion magically accelerating out of nothing and nowhere, some primordial energy stirring out of stillness, mass somehow solidifying out of energy that somehow generated itself out of empty blank space--the mystery at, or of, the start of things. “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Heidegger asked. So we’re on the way to rolling out here, to differentiation, from the very beginning; form is emptiness and emptiness is form, right from the start..

So even “rolling in” isn’t quintessentially about the void; it’s about things revealing themselves as not separate, as not “things” but an endless weave, or wave, of morphing energy, figured in Shitou’s poem as light emanating from the Dark Mysteriouss. This isn’t our usual take on things. Me, at least, I’m used to seeing form not emptiness, stuff that looks separate from other stuff, not all interpermeated, interwoven. Things, that is, almost always fill up my perceptual foreground and dominate my attention, while the background they stand out against is a field I’m mostly aware of only dimly, if at all. When this habitual, unexamined sense of things shifts for me sometimes, noticing emptiness seems kind of like figure and ground changing places, sliding through one another, so that the background looms forward and fills my attention, while all the individual creatures and objects I had fixed in my perceptual foreground recede and blur.

In these moments, I'm mostly aware of the embracing or immersive field itself, while the "things" I'm used to regarding as distinct from each other, no longer my main focus, have also turned blurry, interwoven into the field itself . There are film sequences where this sort of perceptual shift is brilliantly rendered: among them Bertolucci's "Little Buddha," Scorsese's "Kundun," and, more surprisingly since it's not a movie about Buddhism and is in many respects quite objectionable, Sam Mendes's "American Beauty." In this sort of experience, the field itself comes to dominate our attention, more palpable than the usually salient, supposedly discrete things within it.

A typical kind of precipitating event for this sort of figure/ground reversal provokes, for me, one of those is-it-rolling-in-or-is-it-rolling-out confusions. Joan talks of meditation making us "fetchable"; moments of awakening, she notes, are experiences of our suddenly altered relation to someone or something else. It often feels like the particular creature or thing that fetches us looms abruptly forward, zooming toward us with a kind of hyperrealist intensity: the peach blossoms, the sound of a pebble going "tock" against bamboo, a plastic window tassel lifted up slightly in the breeze coming through the open Zendo window, the little red dot on an old-fashioned radio dial that unexpectedly brightens and dominates your field of vision. There's a vividness, a sharp particularity, to what looms forward at superspeed to fetch us. But a common feature of these moments is that this hyperreal, particular presence seems to pull us not just toward itself but right into the field—a sort of Alice in Wonderland, down the rabbit hole effect. We feel we've become part of an inclusive interweaving into which all other individual creatures and things have also tumbled. So we're rolled in. But the peach blossoms or window tassel generated this shift by suddenly seeming more themselves than they had ever been: they rolled out, ka-boom! Maybe, if we're lucky, they roll us out too, and we're suddenly intensely present to ourselves, standing in our own place too thank you very much. It's first shoe, second shoe: first we're rolled in, then rolled out.

But let's stick with rolling in a bit longer. What does it feel like, this field where nothing seems separate from anything else, where it's all interwoven, ourselves included? That's probably a pretty individual experience, not one size fits all. Me, I tend to register the embracing, immersive space in a visceral, kinetic way. Whereas most of the time I'm not aware of the air I move through as an actual, physical medium, in these experiences of rolling in air can sometimes feel thick and viscous, almost like water, and I sense it buoying me up (as it actually does). And light sometimes shimmers like something being poured. Kinetic interweaving—my sense that my body is registering physically how other creatures or objects might feel when they move the way they do—is multiple, soft, and diffuse in the rolling in phase, as if the waves of air that buoy us all up also play through us, arriving as echoed rhythms of the myriad beings, rolling through the field. Sound can have similar qualities, augmenting the sense that I'm bathed in the blur or blend. Here's Whitman in a wonderfully strange moment in "Song of Myself," where a "you" who's ambiguously the poet's lover or his own soul also takes the form of a voice emitting a stream of viscous sound: "Loafe with me on the grass . . . . loose the stop from your throat, / Not words, not music or rhyme I want . . . . not custom or lecture, not even the best, / Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice." Whitman called this sort of blurring and mingling "the merge."

Here's another figure/ground reversal: inside the play of sounds, we sometimes feel the presence of silence; inside of motion, stillness. Or maybe not inside them but actually as them: sound as silence, movement as stillness; form as emptiness, emptiness as form.

There's profound tranquility in such moments. We can can rest in, and we might feel a deep longing to stay there forever. Case 23 of the *Blue Cliff Record* opens in a spot that seems to embody this radiant stillness: "When Baofu and Changqing went on a picnic in the hills, Baofu pointed to the top of a hill, saying, 'That's the top of Miao Peak.'" (Joan's footnote: "Miao Peak is the Peak of Wonder, the center of Paradise, according to the *Huayan Sutra*.") His companion senses trouble, though: "'That's true, you're right,' said Changqing. 'But a pity,' he added." A third party agrees: "Later Baofu told Jingqing about this. Jingqing said, 'If it were not for Master Changqing, skulls would appear in every field.'" Rolled in to this experience where it feels like nothing is missing, where there's no business you need to attend to and no gnawing sense of lack propels you, you might opt out of life's characteristic ruckus. Which turns out to be a bad thing, a koan school no-no--the wasted life committed to nothing but tranquility turned into a graveyard, littered with skulls.

Chanqing's pivot here turns out to be entirely characteristic of the koans. "When you get there," Yuanwu's commentaries in *The Blue Cliff Record* say mordantly over and over again of such Mystic Peak moments, "you need a place to turn around." One koan says: "you have to be able to put it to use on the road."

This turn isn't only an act of self-preservation (those skulls again) or a moment of generosity (be useful to others), though it's those things in part. Rolling out is also a coming forth, qi overflowing its borders, and once this surprising surge takes hold of you it feels like the natural, inevitable expression of what's happened in rolling in. This emergence can feel like a torrent, or a benign explosion, powerful and ebullient: WHOMP! it says, or, like a comic book, BLAM! "Yippee!" Frank O'Hara exclaims in a poem, "I'm glad I'm alive!"

This might not feel like Zen to you, at least initially; depending on your preconceptions about the practice, it might even seem like anathema. You might insist anxiously to yourself that retaining your Zen credentials depends on stifling this exuberance, tamping it down.

Case in point: some years ago at a retreat outside Santa Fe, Joan's koan seminar included a couple cases featuring birds, and a hearer's response to them. Here's the first one:

> Asan concentrated deeply and sincerely on Zen. One day during her morning meditation she heard a rooster crow, and her mind suddenly opened. She said:
>
> Fields, mountains, flowers, and my body, too
> are the bird's voice —
> What's left that could be called a hearer?

Definitely Zen: Asan loses her sense of a separate self, subsumed in the immediate experience and transformed, like everything else seems to be, into the sound that fetches her. What's not to like (at least if you want to be Buddhist)? Here's the other koan, from a poem by that troublemaker Ikkyu:

> . . . the instant that crow laughed
> a hearer rose up from the ordinary dust.
> In this morning's sunshine
> an illuminated face sings.

At the retreat, it was definitely one koan wins, one koan loses. That was the overwhelming consensus: second koan not so good, most people said, or anyway not so Zen. In Ikkyu's poem getting fetched registers not as a dissolving into the field, but as a blossoming back up out of it: here I am! The crow calls—intensely itself, crow all the way down, through and through—and in doing so calls you to come forth too, calls you into form, into being. Your own particular being: tathagata, your suchness.

A couple years earlier, I was pretty suspicious and standoffish about this sort of thing too. Someone quoted the passage I read to you last night from the end of Whitman's "Song of Myself," and I—I was finishing writing my book on Whitman, after all—I thought I had something to say. I said yes, ok, the very end part was real Zen (all interpermeation). And it's beautiful, Walt dissolved into the field:

> 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

But the lines right above those, I insisted, didn't fit:

> 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.

My barbaric yawp: please! Definitely Not Zen, I felt, and said so: too much exuberant self here. My dharma friend Mary replied: "I'd like to think that in this moment both Walt and the hawk learned something." And I learned something too, or started to, thanks to Mary. The hawk, seeing Walt and responding, gets to be a hawk in spades. And, called and fetched by the hawk, Walt gets to be Walt all the way through: untamed, just himself, untranslatable, nobody else, barbaric yawp and all. Tathagata. "There is that lot of me and all so luscious," Whitman says more provocatively earlier in the poem. "The smell of my armpits aroma finer than prayer." That could serve as a quintessentially American, tall-tale in-your-face capping poem for the "intimate" koan Joan loves: "what is that under your robe?" "Intimate, intimate."

The tradition makes it clear that, for Zen, swooping and yawping are totally kosher: turning around and blasting back up into the ruckus is part of the Mahayana turn. Here's Miaozong:

> Each being's eternal radiance appears before you. Each being is an 8,000 foot precipice.

And here's Shitou again:

> We and everything we perceive
> are interwoven and not interwoven,
> and this interweaving continues on and on,
> while each thing stands in its own place.

Suzuki Roshi's commentary on Shitou's poem, in *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness*, emphasizes this dynamic return to particularity. Gerard Manley Hopkins called it "inscape," like the aspect of Taoist "inner pattern" that's unique to each individual living creature, emerging in everything it does. Suzuki gets there by subverting the expected application of a classic Buddhist distinction. He begins by laying out the traditional dichotomy of *ri*, the absolute or the source, and *ji*, the relative. Emptiness as interpermeation, where things interweave and thus resist categorization, are *ri*, which is undefinable (if you define it, it's not *ri* anymore, Suzuki says). But—hang on!—as Suzuki tells it, it turns out that individual creatures and things, in their suchness, their thusness or Tathagata, what Hopkins called their "inscape,", are also, you guessed it, *ri*, the absolute, and undefinable. Here's the passage:

> the various beings that we see and hear are interrelated, but at the same time, each being is absolutely independent and has its own value. This value we call *ri*. *Ri* is that which makes something meaningful. . . . Even though you don't attain enlightenment, we say you already have enlightenment. That enlightenment we call *ri*. . . . It is very strange that no two things are the same. There is nothing to compare yourself to, so you have your own value. That value is not a comparative value or an exchange value; it is more than that. When you are just sitting zazen on the cushion you have your own value. Although that value is related to everything, that value is also absolute.

And then, with a characteristic charming demur: "Maybe it is better not to say too much."

A bit further on, mulling over this "interrelated and also absolutely independent" Mobius strip, Suzuki says: "If you don't understand Zen words, you don't understand Zen. . . . Zen words are different from usual words. Like a double-edged sword, they cut both ways. You may think I am only cutting forward, but no, actually I am also cutting backward. Watch out for my stick. Do you understand?"

So rolling out isn't simply multiplicity or difference, something we need to put up with when we fall into the dilapidated suburbs of the "merely relative." Rolling out is also *ri* right here, in its local and particular manifestation. Tathagata: you and the crow and the swooping hawk and the cypress tree in Zhaozhou's courtyard, and even Miaozong's disconcerting "each being is an 8,000 foot precipice"; and, really, whatever is before you, WHOMP. Sometimes it feels eruptive, like Quaker Oats. (Sorry: Nineteen fifties tv commercial: big Revolutionary War era cannon, into which oats are stuffed, then heated, to come blasting out, BLAM, and THWACK into an invisible plexiglass shield right before they are about to blast through your tv screen and hit you in the face. "Quaker oats," says the voiceover: "shot from a gun." Meant, I guess, by some marketing guru as an image of ultimate freshness. For me, all these years later, unlikely image of Tathagata. And as long as I'm exfoliating images, there's also the pneumatic tube, which creates a vacuum in front of the little container inside the tube that speeds your package to you instantly, thwap!, since there's no air to impede the motion: your library book at the NYC 42nd street reference library, or your prescription at CVS, arriving, as Norman Fischer said Katagiri Roshi put it, "at superspeed." Direct from the source, in an instant, without friction or hindrance: Tathagata. Your original face. Not you in your karmic aspect: quickly, before your parents were born. Thwap.)

But this Taghagata face of things need not always manifest itself with such high drama, all cawing crows and hawks and Quaker Oats. Here's *Gateless Gateway* case 12:

> Every day, Juiyen called "Master!" to himself and answered, "Yes!"
> Then he would ask, "Are you awake?" and reply, "Yes!"
> "Don't be deceived by others, anytime or anywhere!"
> "No, no!"

Just, simply: here I am.

On the whole, though, accounts of transformative moments of rolling in and rolling out tend to the pyrotechnical. Here are two hinge moments, great teachers recounting dramatic encounters in which their own teachers tried to give them a place to turn around, from their attachment to rolling in, to let rolling out roll out. Both are from Zenkei Shibayama's commentary on Zhaozhou's "no" koan, from his Gateless Gateway commentary. The first is about Hakuin:

> we read the following moving story of his first encounter with his teacher, Master Shoju. Shoju asked Hakuin, "Tell me, what is Joshu's Mu?" Hakuin elatedly replied: "Pervading the universe! Not a spot whatsoever to take hold of!" As soon as he had given that

> answer, Shoju took hold of Hakuin’s nose and gave it a twist. “I am quite at ease to take hold of it,” said Shoju, laughing aloud. The next moment he released it and abused Hakuin, “You! Dead monk in a cave! Are you self-satisfied with such Mu?”

The second is about Shibayama himself:

> My teacher also asked me once, “Show me the form of Mu!” When I said, “it has no form whatsoever,” he pressed me, saying, “I want to see that form that has no-form.” How cutting and drastic! Unless one can freely and clearly present the form of Mu, it turns out to be a meaningless corpse.

Hakuin: The formless form comes into form. And it does.

These Zen stories, which are unmistakably Zen stories, are pretty wonderful, and they highlight transformations of perception, and also of person, that are extreme, dramatic, and often lasting. They’re a key part of the romance of Zen, especially koan Zen, and of its promise.

They can recur: Hakuin, a Zen genius, supposedly had eighteen major kenshos and too many minor ones to count. But for most of us these rare high points are mostly either conjured in anticipation or seen in the rear view mirror. What then? Do they, to mix metaphors, have an afterlife? Stay tuned.