Good evening, Bodhisattvas.

"What about after the fifteenth of the month?" Yunman asks in case 6 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, pondering the difference an opening makes (the 15th supposedly being the time of the full moon—what about after that?). "And he responded for everyone, 'every day is a good day.'" Say what? If this makes you think that after the fifteenth it's the time of perpetual beer and skittles, or that Yunmen thinks so—all tranquil darkness or stillness, or all bright radiance and Quaker Oats-- most commentaries I've seen follow the case itself in warning us away from this response. Xuedo's poem includes the line "how lamentable is shunyata!" Every day isn't a good day because it's full of Zen pyrotechnics and elation or because we're lodged so safely in the vastness that we're immune to everyday troubles. That's not the promise. Soen Roshi writes somewhere that Zen is like soap. It's good to use the soap to clean off the accumulated gunk that encrusts us. But then it's good to wash the soap off, lest soap encrust us.

One of my favorite Norman Fischer talks, "The Music of Our Lives," evokes Zhaozhou as an embodiment of this sort of non-pyrotechnical, suds free zen. Here's a passage toward the end of Norman's talk:

> A monk asked, "What is the most important principle of Zen?" Zhaozhou said, "Excuse me, but I have to pee. Just imagine, even such a trivial thing as that I have to do in person." A wonderful teacher, Zhaozhou. And if you think about all these stories, it's very ordinary stuff. It's not like master Yunmen saying, "Body exposed to the golden wind." It's not like master Rinzai with his shouts ringing in the ears of his student for days on end. It's not like master Deshan with his staff, 30 blows every day. I think master Zhaozhou must have been very much like Suzuki Roshi. As with Suzuki Roshi, I think with Zhaozhou sometimes you didn't know whether anything was going on or not. Whether there's any Zen or not. When Rinzai shouted at you, you might or might not have understood, but you knew something was going on. When Deshan reared up and whacked you, you might not have understood, but you knew, this is definitely Zen. But when Zhaozhou says, "Have a cup of tea" or "Wash your bowls," you don't really know.

This sort of after-the-pyrotechnics-what-then mode of Zen teaching can sometime feel a little, well, Warholesque. Andy Warhol, silk screener of endless Campbell soup cans and the like, was asked what his work was about or what it meant. "Um, I dunno," he deadpanned. Zen masters likewise sometimes offer responses to urgent queries that can feel blandly unhelpful, or like dismissive non-sequiturs. Zhaozhou, as we've already seen, was a past master. Here he is in case 30 of the *Blue Cliff Record*:

> A monk asked Zhaozhou, "I've heard that you met directly with Nanquan. Is this true?" Zhaozhou replied, "Zhenzhou produces giant radishes."

Or case 45:

> A monk asked Zhaozhou, "The ten thousand things return to one. Where does the one return to?"
>
> Zhaozhou said, "When I was living in the province of Qingzhou, I made a cloth robe. It weighed seven pounds."

There's more going on here, of course, than bland flatness. Both these cases suggest that anything, and therefore everything, is "it," a point we'll come back to. But they don't seem especially hopped up about it. I don't think either the radishes or the cloth robe are being shot from the Quaker Oats gun here. Zhaozhou's responses don't seem designed to provoke an intense, kensho-inducing moment where the radishes or the robe blast dramatically into the foreground, as intensely, drastically themselves—any more than the student is being prodded into a cataclysmically transformative reorientation.

Such pyrotechnics-free deflections are partly a method for pulling the rug out from under someone who is, as the saying goes, overplaying their Zen (committed to practice as wall to wall high drama). The teachings are quiet or bland enough, though (they hardly seem like teachings) that one images the student noticing only sometime after the fact that the supposed Zen Magic Carpet he counted on riding to Enlightenment has vanished beneath him. Here's case 49 of the *Blue Cliff Record* (also case 33 of the *Book of Serenity*), "Sansheng passes through the net":

> Sansheng asked Xuefeng, "I'm the golden carp who has passed through the net, but I wonder what to eat now."
>
> Xuefeng said, "I'll wait for you to come out of the net, and then I'll tell you."
>
> "A spiritual friend to fifteen hundred people and you're still not intimate with the koans!"
>
> "Well, I'm old, and as head of the temple I have a lot on my mind."

Very well, Xuefeng implies: continue being the proudly enlightened golden carp who thinks no ordinary grub befits you (which means you're still flailing in a net). But Sansheng might spend awhile thinking smugly instead: not much Zen here; this teacher himself isn't much of a carp, now, is he? So Yuanwu, who edited the *Blue Cliff Record*, comments on Xuefeng's final, apparently bumbling answer: "Xuefeng lets his move go. This statement is most poisonous." If you think it's all pyrotechnics, too bad for you! If you think I haven't just answered you and told you what the carp eats swimming along after kensho, too bad for you too. So if, as they say, there are thorns in the soft mud of Xuefeng's answer here, there's also soft mud, full of good nutrients. I'm old, I have a lot on my mind, there's a lot of temple business. Imagine, even such a trivial stuff as that I have to do in person. So the carp who has passed through the transformative net of kensho gets rewarded by hanging out with all the other fish, joining in good old regular fish business.

A lot of the koans in this mode tend to make you look twice, since the world they offer you is so ordinary. The famous three pounds of flax koan works like that, at least for me. It's case 18 of the *Gateless Gateway* and case 12 of the *Blue Cliff Record*:

A monk asked Dongshan, "What is Buddha?"
Dongshan said, "Three pounds of flax."

At least as I imagine this encounter, Dongshan isn't having a Quaker Oats moment, nor is he trying to provoke one in the student—though you can never predict what might precipitate a kensho. . I imagine the flax as simply what's at hand, or, if not that, just what swims into Dongshan's mind for no particular reason. So it's not NO or MU suddenly rolling out to fetch you right now, BLAM! It's got a little of the Warholesque in it—um, whatever . . . anything will do. You can turn that "whatever" inside out into good Zen doctrine, of course: yes, it is anything whatsoever, it's everything, that's precisely right. Which is kind of the point, but not exactly, if it's just doctrine, Zen 101. It's saved from being mere doctrine, I think, by something it's hard not to overstate—I mean, it's hard to talk about it without overstating it, at which point it would turn into something that sticks to you, Zen soap. "In every moment and every place," Torei Zenji says, "things can't help but shine with this light."--Unless you go doggedly looking for it, or try to make it more than it is, determined to turn up the wattage to confirm for yourself you're having A Real Zen Experience. Sometimes it's bright, sometimes its faint, mostly you don't even notice it, or you hardly do, except for just a moment or out of the corner of your eye. It flickers in and out, seems to disappear into just radish and flax and robe. So be it. It certainly doesn't depend on you to bring it into being. It's doing just fine on its own, thank you very much, even when you're not sensing it. So you can relax. You probably didn't lose it, and it certainly didn't lose you. "No, that was it. You didn't miss it," Joanne Kyger says in a poem. Actually, that's the entirety of the poem.

And there's a poem by James Schuyler, titled "December 28, 1974," that slips into this kind of relaxed acceptance of the quiet, unremarkable luminosity lurking in things, having hankered first after something more drastically transformative. Here's the poet's demand for dramatic self-transformation, followed by a recognition:

To be encubed in flaming splendor,
one foot on a Chinese rug, while
the mad emotive music
tears at my heart. Rip it open:
I want to cleanse it in an icy wind.
And what kind of tripe is that?
Still, last night I did wish--
no, that's my business and I
don't wish it now.

I think we all know this longing to be suddenly, even drastically, changed; but we know dramatic visitations of the vastness can't be forced. The poet recognizes as much, though perhaps with a little more modesty than the situation requires:

"Your poems,"

a clunkhead says, have grown
more open." I don't want to be open,
merely to say, to see and say, things
as they are.

And then, the poet having given up forcing it, things do open—just a little, quietly, since he opens to them, quietly, not demanding more. It feels like a gift, and enough:

The fields
beyond the feeding sparrows are
brown, palely brown yet with an inward glow
like someone of a frank good nature
whom you trust.

I love the clunkiness of the comparison here, to "someone of a frank good nature / whom you trust." It makes the fields with their faint inward glow a little less poetic, less grand, more familiar and ordinary—homey, and intimate. The slight awkwardness here is Schuyler's way of not overplaying his lyrical sensibility, washing off a little soap. As in that other koan: young monk, newly awakened: "everything is so beautiful!" old monk, "yes, but what a pity to say so!" But the koan itself does say so, quietly, managing simultaneously to wash away the soap that it is. The inward glow here is something the poet just barely senses, as if seen out of the corner of his eye. As Robert Creeley puts it in another poem: "To look at it is more than it was." But by the same token, it's always there, and always here, usually just below the threshold of conscious awareness.

One lovely, and brave, thing about Schuyler's poem is that, in the aftermath of this quiet recognition, which already feels like enough, the grander sort of experience the poet had been hoping for kind of sneaks up on him right at the poem's end. So there's no particular need to hanker after it too much; it comes or it doesn't. Here it wells up in the poet's heart, a momentary intensity born of his quiet contemplation of the fields' inward light:

Yes, the sun moves off to the right
and prepares to sink, setting
beyond the dunes, an ocean on fire.

So beautiful. And: no need to expatiate, to hang around dwelling on it: seen, responded to fully, done. Nothing's own doing.

So don't worry, the tradition says, mordantly but with an unstated tenderness, about such intense experiences: they'll pass. It's not as grumpy as it sounds; it's a slightly rueful Zen joke about Zen integration. Everything is so beautiful! Yes!, but what a pity to say so. Another Zen joke about integration. That inward, soft light flickers in and out of focus, in and out of view, and we don't need to worry about it too much or make more of it than it is. And then it's everything, and not everything. "Just get so you can follow along with circumstances," Linji said.

"Everything goes as it goes," said Suzuki. Sometimes it appears then fades; more rarely, it gathers and intensifies, bursting open, an ocean on fire. But it's always here.

From this perspective, some of the koans might usefully be turned into modular, hypertext versions of themselves, one telling ending with high drama, another version settling instead into a quiet abiding, nothing special. Here's one, which we also spent time with at last year's retreat, in its classic form (that is: here's the "real" koan):

> Shenshan was mending clothes with a needle and thread.
> Dongshan asked, "What are you doing?"
> Shenshan said, "Mending."
> Dongshan asked, "How are you mending?"
> Shenshan said, "One stitch is like the next."
> Dongshan exclaimed, "We've been traveling together for twenty years now, and you can still say such a thing! How is this possible?"
> Shenshan asked, "How do you mend?"
> Dongshan said, "As if the whole earth were spewing flames."

We can retell it this way, as I think Norman Fischer did in one of his Zen talks in Tucson a couple years back:

> Dongshan was mending clothes with a needle and thread.
> Shenshan asked, "What are you doing?"
> Donghan said, "Mending."
> Shenshan asked, "How are you mending?"
> Dongshan said, "As if the whole earth were spewing flames."
> Shenshan exclaimed, "We've been traveling together for twenty years now, and you can still say such a thing! How is this possible?"
> Dongshan asked, "How do you mend?"
> Shenshan said, "One stitch is like the next."

Told like that, it's maybe a little Warholesque. But it gives off a lovely, quiet light.

Here's a koan, *Blue Cliff Record* 24 and *Book of Serenity* Case 60, that might seem determinedly deadpan:

> The nun Iron Sharpener Liu came to visit Guishan. Guishan said, "Hello, you old cow, you've come" [Joan's note: "Guishan often referred to himself as an old buffalo, and here he calls Liu an old buffalo cow. She was known as a fearsome debater. She became one of {Guishan's} dharma heirs."]
> Iron Grindstone said, "Tomorrow there will be a huge community feast on Mount Tai. Will you be going?"
> Guishan flopped down and lay on the floor.
> Right away, Iron Sharpener left.

Sacred Mount Tai, it turns out, was several hundred miles away, way too far to travel to get there in time. It was also renowned for provoking pyrotechnical experiences generated by the resident magical Bodhisattva Manjushri, and Chan students were always chafing to go there, while Chan teachers typically worked to dissuade them from seeking this reputed Chutes and Ladders boost. So Guishan flops down and, in some versions, falls right asleep. Iron Grindstone Liu, well pleased, goes away, lacking nothing. Are they blowing off the festival, or joining in and celebrating, minus the magic? In case we missed it, the commentaries on the case adduce the feelings that fill them as they go about their business, at ease in their ordinary lives. “Growing old in great peace,” the *Book of Serenity* says; “at peace in one’s house, enjoying one’s work.” “A dog carries the amnesty in its mouth,” says Xuedo’s poem in the *Blue Cliff Record*--coming eagerly to greet you when you get home, Joan says (carrying your slippers, or your newspaper?). It’s heimish, homey. Nothing special.

But, like so much of our lives, it’s tender. And just a little radiant. Every day is a good day. And yes, what a pity to say so!