Good evening, Bodhisattvas. Here we are on the last night of our retreat together.

In Open Source retreats, we have a tradition of turning at least part of our attention outward during the last evening. If you got anything valuable from our retreat, Joan used to say, please go out and give it away.

Turning toward the precepts is one good way to engage this shift of focus. But first I want to hover a little while longer with the quiet light we talked about last time, and see whether that might open out naturally toward the territory illuminated by our vows.

Let's start with another one of our reversible koans, which we glanced at the first night. Tonight I'll read only the "real" version:

> 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?"
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> 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.'"

Yantou's apparent invective against Xuefeng here is a common feature of koan repartee, and after a while we get used to taking it with a grain of salt. Invective, that is, is often praise, though typically double-edged, so that what looks like dumping on the other teacher—in this case a former Zen littermate and close friend--is often a way of saying: that's their teaching: good! here's my different teaching, a complement! (you can spell that with either an "e" or an "i"). I've seen a version of this koan where Yantou suggests that while Xuefeng's teaching is closer to the source, it's maybe less helpful to students, whereas Yantou's own teaching, he thinks, will bring them right along. Yantou's teaching, we might say, gets to the point. In relation to Xuefeng's question, "what's this?," "it's just this" seems, well, pointed: "this" is a deictic, a pointing word. Xuefeng also asks about "this." But how to respond? The student might well be confused about what Xuefeng's "this" is pointing to. That could also be true of Yantou's "just this," I suppose. But since it poses itself as an answer, and sounds so declarative,

Yantou's "this" feels, to me at least, like it looms, or zooms, forward, from out of the mysterious domain of Xuefeng's question: it's got at least a quotient of Quaker Oats to it, kaboom! Xuefeng's question, by contrast, feels recessive: what's *right here* in Yantou's teaching, *just this*--or even "*just this this,*" as a Japanese teacher in New York used to say--fades into the indefinite expanse of whatever might be indicated by Xuefeng's enigmatic question. Xuefeng's "what's this?" leaves you wondering, or wandering; it doesn't get to the point. Which is maybe the point, or the no-point. Not knowing is most intimate.

"What's this?" "To look at it is more than it was." If sometimes we just barely glimpse it, out of the corner of our eye, if we start getting a sense of it just as it slides or shifts as we feel our way toward it, that fleeting, elusive quality itself reveals something essential about "this." We're sensing one aspect of "form is emptiness, and emptiness if form": in such moments we feel it everywhere but can't separate it out, can't quite fix in it our gaze or turn it into a tamed and mastered object we can bag and bring home with us in triumph. The inward glow is everywhere, and enduring. But each thing it plays over or moves through is fleeting, as is each momentary configuration of the landscape, just like our flickering glimpses. So "what's this?" can feel tender and intimate, a fragile recognition of, and response to, a world of fragile creatures and forms. But it's accompanied by a mysterious sense of something abiding, something that feels tranquil and sustaining so long as we don't try to bank it or pin it down.

Soto Zen, especially, likes to say that the question is in the answer, and the answer is in the question. Yantou's answer, "it's just this," has a question in it: what *is* this "this," or how do I see it for myself? And Xuefeng's question is an answer, of sorts. That is: you don't have to bang your buzzer because you've figured it out, you just have to hold it lightly, or let it hold you. "What's this?" Sometimes it's KABOOM!, "just *this* this." But often it feels fleeting, metamorphic, tender, provoking wonder or awe not triumphal display; intimate. So there's nothing lacking in "what's this?" Remember Kyger's poem? "No, that was it; you didn't miss it." Wansong says in his commentary that the student, instead of parroting Xuefeng's question back to him, could have simply put his hands together in prayer position. I'd go for a full prostration, in reverence to all of it.

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The case on which the magisterial *Blue Cliff Record* comes to rest also diffuses our attention, letting it soften and drift out into a diffuse and shifting light. But that's not how the koan starts, with a question Yunmen poses to his students: "What is the blown hair sword?" That's the sword so sharp, John Tarrant says, that it would instantly cut in two a single hair blown against it. Joan goes him one better, saying it's the sword that cuts whatever blows against it into one. It's a Tathagata machine, a suchness or thusness engine, image of a heightened perception in which one thing looms forward with perfect sharpness, exactly itself. So the response Baling offers to the sharp question his teacher Yunmen poses is startling in its quiet beauty: "Each branch of coral holds up the light of the moon." The sword's brilliant illumination gets spread out and refracted into a gentle underwater light. It's an evocation, Joan points out, of the warm water coral beds: vast, multifoliate, appearing undulant, with the moonlight of awakening

playing over them. So the sharp insight of enlightenment, of kensho, Manjushri's flashing sword, is disseminated, warmed, softened, flickered and given back, shimmering quietly. You can, Joan says in her talk on the koan, lie back and rest in that sea, in that undulant light, always. It's an image of great peace, the great peace in everything. And it feels both eternal—the warm sea water, very old, bathing everything--and evanescent, fragile—the light, as the moon moves and the waters shift, playing over and held up now by this branch of coral, now that one. Reading the koan today, we can sense the fragility even more poignantly, since the coral beds are vanishing.

So the koan might provoke, or invite, not only our awe and tranquility but also our tenderness and compassion—the domain of the bodhisattva. What's the loop between our bodhisattva vow—our commitment to awaken in order to help save all beings—and our readiness to be fetched by the fleeting and fragile beauty of the world? Joan offers a formulation in the Vimalakirti book that initially surprised some of us because it's so beautifully sweeping: "When we make the bodhisattva vow, [Vimalakirti's] room [but read the world] is radiant all the time, independent of circumstances or conditions." In this account, the bodhisattva vow comes first: our sense of the inescapability of suffering, provoking compassion and the desire to be helpful, softens our gaze and lets us see the radiance of the world. But the world's radiance and our compassion are also a Mobius strip, and our commitment to the vow and our perception of the world's fragile beauty sustain and deepen one another. "Taking the form of Guanyin," a koan says, "find shelter for the homeless person." It's something of a surprise to find this koan, as we sit with and maybe struggle with it initially, intertwining pretty soon with "everything is so beautiful!" A pity to say so?

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It's no accident, I think, that the coral sea is a dream-like image, and that the often challenging or even drastic *Blue Cliff Record* comes to rest here. "What's this?" also invites us into a kind of dream. "Everything is part of the dream of awakening," Joan writes in the Vimalakirti book. Why "dream"? One way to construe the phrase is that awakening is a dream, not in the sense that's it's not real—a mere pipe-dream—but because as we awaken the world reveals its dream-like qualities. Awakening wakes us to emptiness, endless interpermeation, a flow in which nothing is as solid, stable, or separate as we are typically committed to believing. Everything floats up into existence out of, and as, the vastness, back into which it dissolves. "I marvel . . . ," Joan writes, "as my hand figures out, moment by moment, what it means to be a hand, and my heart learns what a heart is on a sunny morning after days of fog. Are they, am I, pretending? Not exactly, but sort of, if pretending means a series of assays and approximations, one not-knowing flowing into another, with lots of pauses to listen. Outside my window, are sub-atomic particles pretending to be trees? The world isn't only a dream, but it is, in part. How do we tend to a dream?" A question for bodhisattvas.

But "dream of awakening" also suggests that the world's awakening is not entirely real yet, not quite here—not fully realized, but always in progress, in process. So that if everything is part of the dream of awakening, that's not the only story it's part of; or else the story or dream of

awakening has lots of twists and tragic turns to it. Though the koans are stories of awakening, they hardly scant loss and suffering. A flowering of the Mahayana, the koans offer awakening as part of the useful equipment of the bodhisattva. It ought not to make too much of itself. But it shouldn't make too little either: it's a crucial resource, though not a get out of jail free card. Remember the koan from a couple nights ago about the summit of the mystic peak, full of a quietude one might want to sink into forever? "That's true, but what a pity!" said Changqing. And later, Jingqing said, "If it weren't for Changqing, we'd see skulls in every field." That's a warning about getting stuck in tranquility, in "empty emptiness." You can't turn away from your life; that's a living death. But in his commentary, Yuanwu says something surprising, and kind of out of character. Why might we yearn to linger at the summit of the mystic peak, resting there forever? "The great earth is so vast and desolate," Yuanwu says, "it kills people with sadness." Yuanwu is typically fierce and mordant, but his comment here is full of pathos and tenderness. It also suggests, I think, that the deep peace of the mystic peak, or the coral sea, is a crucial and necessary resource as well as a respite. We can't stay there; but we can carry it forward within us, and need to, into our inevitable encounters with desolation, and sadness, and suffering.

Here's a more drastic koan. "One time when Dongshan was washing his bowls he saw two crows fighting over a frog. Someone who also saw this asked, 'Why does it come to that?' Dongshan replied, 'It's only for your benefit, honored one.'"

This is likely to feel, initially, both upsetting and, in Dongshan's startling response, preposterous. What on earth is the benefit, what could it possibly be? But the koan means what it says, and asks us to open ourselves to the scene and feel our way toward the gift it offers us. Otherwise we can't repay it; and we know that a benefit conferred must be requited (anthropologists tell us so: see Marcel Mauss's classic study *The Gift*, or Lewis Hyde's wonderful contemporary book of the same title). So: what's the benefit already conferred on the "someone" who asks Dongshan "Why does it come to that?," and might that benefit render his question moot? That is: might our demand to know "why" nature is made the way it is be unanswerable? and might we learn how to respond, and be able to respond, not even "despite" not knowing why things are like this, but precisely because this "why" question has no answer? Or, back to the previous koan: what's the benefit conferred on Yuanwu in feeling deeply that, whatever else is true of it, sometimes "the great earth is so vast and desolate it kills people with sadness"? And how can he—how can we-- requite this sobering gift? Some questions for bodhisattvas.

Here's a beautiful poem, part of *The Five Positions,* a double cycle of poems attributed to Dongshan:

> For whom do you bathe and make yourself beautiful?
> The voice of the cuckoo is calling you home.
> Hundreds of flowers fall, yet that voice is not stilled;
> even deep in jumbled mountains, it is calling clearly.

We can take up the precepts right here, where longing and beauty, a feeling of exile and the deepest sense of being at home, awaken and call to each other. It's like our proverbial Mobius strip, topologist's enigma and delight. Take an ordinary paper ring, cut it, and turn it half way round (180 degrees), then tape it back together. At any point it's got two opposite surfaces, and, if you walk it, at any moment you'll be on one surface rather than the other. Exile isn't home, and suffering isn't joy. But after a while, walking along, you might notice that you've now come back to the same place on the paper circle you started out from; now, though, you're somehow on the opposite side. But, since you never jumped from one surface to the other, a topologist will tell you it's also the same side. So, to confound that old Pete Seeger union song, "which side are you on, boys, which side are you on?" Well I thought I was on the form side, but since I'm on the emptiness side now and since it's the same side . . . I thought I was on the suffering side but . . I'm confused. As in the koans. Baizhang: "before I was crying, now I'm laughing": pathos and radiance, fragility and a mysterious "this" that's both evanescent and unchanging, eternal; and suffering and tragedy and abiding beauty and joy, with tenderness keeping it intimate: not one, and not two. A gift for Bodhisattvas, which includes the gift of asking that you pass it on.

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Part two (shorter): a couple brass tacks

In his commentary to *The Gateless Gateway*, Shibayama Roshi says repeatedly that the koans are not stories about ethics—if they were, he says, they wouldn't be koans. Instead, he claims, the koans bring us to that root sense of things from which ethical conduct arises. That's loosely related to how the tradition talks about the precepts. The formal precepts, the vows we make in which we commit ourselves to the bodhisattava path, are the overtly ethical part, asking us to inquire into and work with both our behavior and the inner life that shapes it. But these "formal precepts" arise from the somewhat mysteriously named "formless precepts," which are expressions of how the world calls to us, and how we respond, once we're affected deeply by the emptiness perspective. If practice helps us know in our bones that form is emptiness, and emptiness is form, in the formless precepts we pledge to deepen our commitment to this root sense of things, requiting the transformative benefit we've received. The formless precepts find expression in the refuge vows: I take refuge in awakening; I take refuge in the way; I take refuge in my companions.

Pretty much everything I've said in my talks so far has concerned the formless precepts, though indirectly. The formal precepts come to our aid when it's time to get down to brass tacks—which is pretty much always. I want to say just a little, before throwing things open for conversation, about my recent hanging out with one of them.

I'll focus on one of the Three Pure Vows, since I've been finding it useful lately to spend a longer stretch of time than usual with these big, wide pledges that undergird the more specific particularities of conduct and thought explored in The Ten Bodhisattva Vows. The Three Pure Vows are global, and they keep us pressed up against the fragility, suffering, and radiance of the world, the tenderness those qualities elicit in response, and how we might act accordingly: I

vow to do no harm; I vow to do good; I vow to do good for others. Since the Three Pure Vows are so clearly impossible to fulfill perfectly, they invite us to devote our energy and attention to inquiry and exploration, rather than proud or guilty score keeping, or fretful nit-picking.

I've been spending my time the past month or so with "I vow to do no harm," a formal precept that seems to engage the formless precepts with special sharpness. Why do I keep causing harm; and might a focus on this precept make even a small difference in the lives I touch? So here are some brief initial field notes, which don't claim to be ready for prime time.

I've been finding that if I carry "I vow to do no harm" around during the day, it tends to slow things down by a useful nanosecond: the old chestnut about responding instead of reacting sometimes has a chance to kick in. Or, when I do cross the line into thoughtless reaction, there's Joan's really useful "step back to the moment before." In a way I've already blown it and it's too late, but in a way it's not, and if I can take a beat, and a breath, I might get at least a partial do-over. I can often mitigate the incipient hurt, and at least I don't have to let things snowball. I'm also finding it useful to—as Joan recommends—dive right back in then to the messy situation at hand, and do the best I can, putting my initial unhelpful reaction, and my reaction to my reaction, into a "keep for later" mental folder so I can engage them later, when things are less pressing and I'm feeling less pressed. Meanwhile, in the present moment, the partial do-over often seems to go better than my initial flub. Then later, when I return on my own to my original, not so great "take one," I can notice at least a little about what provoked my reaction. Was it something in the real situation or about the other person that I really do need to attend to, think about, and deal with (engaging either the other person or my own possibly distorted reaction to them—or both)? Or was it just me being congenitally grumpy, or momentarily viscerally jumpy, or defensive, or doggedly attentive to what I thought I was supposed to be doing? (Quick parenthetical aside: my own personal Master Bodhisattva Vow, my hardest one, because its opposite feels so visceral: I vow to be interruptible. OK, back to the main narrative.) If it's myself I need to look into: is there some deep-seated discomfort I need to investigate? Or—surprisingly often—something that feels more like just habit. And, if it's just habitual reaction, can I wean myself from it, at least sometimes? I'm sure my efforts are at best intermittent and the successes partial. But the practice does seem to make at least a little difference. I hope it's informed by the tenderness I was talking about earlier. As Joan says, not "how am I doing?" but "how are we doing?"

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I want to end by saying a little bit about "I vow to do good for others," skipping over "I vow to do good."

"Everything is part of the dream of awakening." That's true, a lifeline. But among the other stories that feel pretty compelling right now, in March 2020, might be "everyone has the capacity to fall in love with a strongman" (think "I alone can fix it") or "fascism is a persistent tendency of the body politic." Given everything that's happening now, and everything that's happened in the last few years, it seems remiss, to put it mildly, not to give a pretty wide

horizon to “I vow to do good for others.” And it seems dangerous not to try to find something we can do to be helpful, even though we know we can never do enough; or to not be the kind of bodhisattva we suspect we *can* be because we’re painfully aware of the kinds of bodhisattva we’re at least provisionally pretty sure we *can’t* be. And, if we don’t think, here in Desert Rain, that we should take action in the big arena of public life as a sangha per se (maybe we don’t want to act in the name of someone in our group who might not be comfortable with what we’re proposing to do), perhaps we can be drafting bodhisattvas. I don’t mean only grabbing somebody else and drafting them to be one more bodhisattva in our project, but the other way ’round, in the sense of slipstreaming, or drafting behind someone else to reduce the wind resistance and get the benefit of their forward motion. If one of your sangha mates has found a place or a way to take meaningful action, maybe they can remember to invite you to slipstream, if you want, and join their efforts. In Arizona, which looks miraculously to be a possible swing state in both the presidential and upcoming senatorial elections, maybe local political action is a good basket for some of us to put some eggs in. But if not that, then what? Or if that, then what else too? It’s a question I hope we’ll come back to in the coming weeks and months.