

Welcome everybody. It's wonderful to be here with all of you, gathering from so many different places to embark on our retreat together. "All ashore that's going ashore?" OK then!

We usually call our spring gathering the Desert Sunrise Retreat; that's our official name for it again this time, and it's lovely. This year, though, as Megan and I have been preparing, we've also been thinking of this one as the World of Dew Retreat.

As most of you know, that phrase, "the world of dew," comes from a really heartbreaking, beautiful haiku by Kobayashi Issa, the 18th and 19th century Japanese poet and Buddhist priest. Joan Sutherland's translation, which many of you also know, is

The dewdrop world  
is the dewdrop world  
And yet  
And yet

Another translation—I'm sorry but I can't remember whose--has slightly different phrasing, which I also like:

The world of dew  
is the world dew  
And yet  
and yet.

It's a poem for the death of one of Issa's young children; I think knowing that helps us hear the nearly unbearable quality of his grief.

So, which retreat are we going to sit together this week?: The Desert Sunrise retreat, or The World of Dew retreat?

They don't feel the same, do they? "Desert sunrise" feels serene and magisterial, evoking calm and a quiet joy: the world comes forth again, emerging right now as suchness, Tathagata. This "now" might also feel mysteriously timeless, since sunrise has kept on repeating itself almost since, well, the dawn of time; so maybe we feel eternity, in that elusive and unusual Zen sense of the term, manifesting itself right here and now. Issa's world of dew, by contrast, is a poem of heartbreaking evanescence and loss. We can hear utter devastation in Issa's lament, and also, perhaps, an almost unbearable tenderness.

So you could take your pick, I guess, like in a restaurant. I'll have the Desert Sunrise retreat, thank you very much; or, I'll take a risk and try something out of my usual comfort zone—I'll have the world of dew, please. But here's a suggestion, or an invitation: maybe one way to feel our way into our retreat is to keep company with both of these. How might these apparent opposites intertwine? Or, maybe, how are they always already, inevitably intertwined? What's it like to let that into our practice? How might this intertwining be, in some unlikely way, a gift? And if it's a gift, how do we requite it? "The gift has to circulate": this I know, because anthropologists tell me so. So how can we receive this gift and pass it on?

At the risk of going too deep into the weeds on our first evening, I want to explore this intertwining a bit more by taking a closer look at Issa's poem. It turns out the tension I've been talking about, exemplified so far by the contrast between desert sunrise and the world of dew, is also lurking inside Issa's poem itself. That might help us hear how the relation between these apparent opposites is intimate, inevitable, built into the way things are and our own responses.

Two very different readings of the Issa poem turn up when we sit with and talk about it at Desert Rain. Listening to these conversations, I can feel the poem do a kind of duck/rabbit, shifting from one sense of things to the other. Here's the most common reading, in our conversations and also in the commentarial tradition as I understand it. Issa begins by acknowledging his intimate acceptance of an inescapable truth central to Buddhism. It's as if he says: "*I know very well* that the world of dew is the world of dew." The Diamond Sutra teaches that all composite forms—and there aren't any other kind in our world, since everything is intertwined—are like a dew drop, a bubble, a thought, a dream—"they are thus to be regarded." That's the emptiness perspective, and Issa acknowledges it as a given, and as fundamental Buddhist wisdom. So, he implies, he knows in his bones that attachment is attachment to delusion, to what lacks an intrinsic and enduring "self-nature." But that's not all that rises in his heart, and not what we can hear next in Issa's voice: "And yet, and yet." *Even though* I know very well that this world is the world of dew, that if I let myself love its beautiful particulars they will break my heart, that's what my heart does, in its responsiveness, that's what I do. I love my young daughter unreservedly, completely, and now I'm completely heartbroken, broken open. And that's as it should be. Joan says: "all of the Mahayana is in that 'and yet, and yet.'" That's a poignant and beautiful comment on the poignancy and beauty of the world, and of our tradition.

But most times when we bring up the poem, at least a couple people offer a surprisingly different take, which can't simply be dismissed as a "wrong" reading; it's a possible way to construe the poem, based on what it says, and a possible way to hear Issa's voice—its tone, its feeling. In this reading, the speaker implicitly says, perhaps a bit dismissively, yes *of course* it's true that the world of dew is the world of dew, everyone knows that; but that's not the whole story, maybe not the most important part of the story. "And yet, and yet": I also know something else (Buddhism also knows something else). It's true that everything that arises also passes away. And yet: I also have a deep experience of something like the opposite: there's no arising and no passing away. Everything is vastness, emptiness, shunyata. That might sound like mere abstraction. But I experience this timeless, eternal aspect things directly and intimately.

This pretty much turns the first reading of the poem inside out. And as usual in our practice, an either/or take is probably less helpful, less true, than a both/and one.

But this second reading raises, for me, what I'll call a question of tact; that sounds kind of precious, but I think it has some important implications. Our practice affords us a deep experience of the timeless, eternal aspect of things, offering us support and sustenance. So, how can we accept and affirm this solace in a way that isn't ham fisted? And how can we offer it to others without sounding, or being, obnoxiously tone deaf? The temptation to avoid here is, well, avoidance, clinging tenaciously to some potentially grotesque Zen version of "the power of positive thinking"—Zen as a kind of I'm OK, you're OK super power that we can yank out of our back pocket when we need it, brandishing it triumphantly to face down tragedy and loss. Just to set your teeth on edge, here's a really cringe-worthy version: Hey, Issa, it's ok: of course the world of dew is the world of dew, but

don't forget, your daughter is really timeless, eternal, so there's no need to grieve. Or even: "buck up, Sport!"

The koan tradition, of course, is intent on disabusing us of this temptation. The Five Positions, for example, which we took up recently in the Open Source Koan Series in which most of you participated, insistently draws our attention to how crucial it is to bring our experience of the vastness into intimate touch with the rest of our lives, including what's most difficult. A deep experience of the first two positions—sinking into the vastness, and coming forth again into the world of form as the vastness—isn't helpful, is in fact dangerous to our health, if we rely on it to keep sorrow and loss at bay. To the contrary: maybe these experiences help us let heartbreak in, allowing a deep and mysterious intertwining.

Here's a passage from Joan's book *Through Forests of Every Color* that offers a beautiful evocation of how awakening, which includes awakening to the dharmakaya but not only that, fosters our capacity to accept and engage heartbreak and loss:

The heart of awakening is continuous with the heart of the world. It experiences a particular kind of ache, perhaps from the perpetual stretching of the chest to hold it. This heartache is for the poignancy of life's persistence in the face of so much struggle and pain, and a wish against evidence that we could all find our way free of them. It takes some dedication to learn to hold the heartache along with the wonder and awe, to accept that life's poignancy is fundamental to its nature. This is part of the mystery at the center of things, which means holding it without explaining it.

She goes on to say about the koans: "They help us discover the unique shape our gratitude takes. They strengthen our hearts with tenderness so we can hold our impossible lives there."

That's probably plenty for tonight. But I'll bring in just one more thing, a short koan from the *Blue Cliff Record*. You can invite it into your sleep, if you like. Maybe it will turn up for you again tomorrow. It starts this way:

A student asked Da Long, "The physical body decays. What is the pure everlasting body?"

The Buddhist trope of the trikaya, the three bodies, is lurking here, and it might be helpful to quickly unpack it. "The physical body," Joan's note says, is a translation of Rupakaya. Most of us don't know that term, but Rupakaya is just Nirmanakaya plus Sambhogakaya. That's all it means. The Nirmanakaya and Sambhogakaya bodies decay. So then implicitly we can understand "what's the pure everlasting body?" to mean "What's the pure everlasting body of the Dharmakaya?" Back to the koan:

A student asked Da Long, "The physical body decays. What is the pure everlasting body?"

Da Long said, "Flowers cover the mountains like brocade. Mountain torrents so deep, they're indigo."

Thank you.