

Good evening, Bodhisattvas.

Tonight I want to keep exploring the not-two we've been sinking into together this week: the joy and poignancy and grief of everything rising and falling, appearing and vanishing; and the deep stillness, the abiding, that both is and isn't their opposite. How might the mysterious eternal quality at the heart of everything offer us sustenance? But—to put it a little strangely—how does this same all-inclusive quality of the vastness, its very completeness, leave something incomplete in us, so that it's not enough all on its own? And how might we respond? What's the human half of the token?

To explore these questions, I want to turn to a few stories tonight, not koans but a kind of grab bag of miscellaneous stuff.

The first thing out of the bag is pretty rough fare. It presents what amounts to a bitter repudiation of the delicate poignancy of Dalong's pure everlasting body of the dharmakaya appearing as flowers covering the mountains like brocade and mountain torrents so deep they're indigo. Here the bursting out of new life in a time of grief, a prodigious coming forth that seems like an eternal recurrence, feels not like a consolation and support but a terrible, cruel joke. Instead of an intertwining of evanescence and the vastness, the writer feels a horrendous rift. It's a passage from *The Autobiography of Henry Adams*, in which Adams chronicles and reflects on the terrible death of his sister in Rome, in 1859, from tetanus, after a seemingly insignificant carriage accident. He describes her torment in drastic detail, and then his scope widens:

Society being immortal, could put on immortality at will. Adams being mortal, felt only the mortality. Death took features altogether new to him, in these rich and sensuous surroundings. Nature enjoyed it, played with it, the horror added to her charm, she liked the torture, and smothered her victim with caresses. Never had one seen her so winning.

The hot Italian summer brooded outside, over the market-place and the picturesque peasants, and, in the singular color of the Tuscan atmosphere, the hills and vineyards of the Apennines seemed bursting with mid-summer blood. The sick-room itself glowed with the Italian joy of life; friends filled it; no harsh northern lights pierced the soft shadows; even the dying women shared the sense of the Italian summer, the soft, velvet air, the humor, the courage, the sensual fullness of Nature and man. She faced death, as women mostly do, bravely and even gaily, racked slowly to unconsciousness, but yielding only to violence, as a soldier sabred in battle. For many thousands of years, on these hills and plains, Nature had gone on sabering men and women with the same air of sensual pleasure.

One thing I find startling, and hard to bear, about this remarkable passage is, as the Zen folks sometimes say, the sense of “no gap,” as if nothing is missing, as if nature is always

complete, revealing its eternal face, serenely, right now. The force and profusion, the recurrent, endless beauty of the world, is more than Adams believes he can bear: new life bursts forth, as it always does, inexorably, extravagantly, gorgeously. While the burgeoning clearly pulls on him, even that feels like a horror, a trick, a malevolent joke. And who can blame him, given the soul-crushing particulars? It would seem monumentally tactless even to ask whether a slightly different response might have been possible.

Instead, I'll shift to a story that comes back to me pretty often. It centers on a horrifying occurrence, but one that wasn't, for me, deeply personal, which is part of the difference.

A few years ago, I came in to the university to learn that there had been a terrible accident, a couple hours before I got there, in the building where I worked. A repairman had been very badly injured in an elevator accident; he was carried away to the ER, and it's pretty likely he died.

A colleague who had been there told me several awful details, which I won't go into; but I heard enough that I was shaken. Later that afternoon, I was driving up the long hills that climb toward the mountains, to pick up my kids from school. It was spring, and the desert foliage--mesquites, palo verdes, creosote--was palpably thriving, just starting to burst into bloom, and waving a little in the breeze, a whole sea of them. And what I felt was: no gap. I thought the repairman might have died, and it was as if he'd gone under, as if down in some ocean, with scarcely a blip, the waves rolling on as before, barely deflected. That's how the trees seemed, and the mountains and sky, as a breeze moved through them like a gently rolling tide: unruffled, untroubled. The world had completely reconstituted itself, as if the death hadn't even occurred. Maybe because I wasn't positive the man had died, and maybe because I didn't know him and hadn't actually seen what happened, this "no gap" quality, this nothing missing, felt heartbreaking, chastening, kind of terrifying even—someone here then gone, just like that—but interwoven in a way I couldn't quite process with a sense of the timeless quality of the desert in that moment: the stillness welling up through what moved and shifted, making it also feel still, abiding and serene.

Here's another story, in which no one dies. The last retreat Joan taught was in summer 2013, way up in the mountains at Vallecitos Ranch in northern New Mexico. She was quite sick, and retiring from active teaching, and the knowledge that this would be the last retreat we would ever sit with her colored everything that happened. The final morning, she held a leave-taking ceremony in the hall, which involved the same lovely rigamarole we'd watched and participated in so many times: Joan walked from place to place as we sat on our cushions, blessing each of us in turn with water shaken from a bough she carried. I'd seen her do the ceremony several times. This time it was unbearably beautiful, and heartbreaking.

A little later, after the retreat was over, though she was very tired she invited me to come sit with her on the back porch of her cabin for a little while. It wasn't heart-wrenching the way the ceremony had been; it was simple, and quiet, and somehow complete. We talked a

little about this and that, and sat in silence some. A bird came by and perched in some nearby branches; the same one, she said, she'd watched with pleasure as it came by every day during the retreat. I'd seen the same kind of bird outside my cabin often, I said, and had also felt drawn to it. Ellie came in to help Joan start closing up shop, put away all the Work in the Room gear, for the very last time. Was there anything else, Joan asked? Were we done? Nothing else, I said.

And finally: there's the dying of beloved animals, dogs and cats. It's incredibly sad, and often feels devastating. But our relations with our pets are typically less complicated, less fraught, than our relationships with our intimate human companions, and so, in my experience, there's something "simpler" about the experience—not in the sense of easy, but distilled, pared down to the basics of loss and the world that remains. Everything feels bleak and vacant. And then, I also notice something else. One time, driving back home after euthanizing a cat I loved so much, it was a long bank of rushes by the side of the road waving in the wind, full of motion and life and also, somehow, silence and stillness. "There is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend," Ralph Waldo Emerson writes with a peculiar mordancy, though he's also being tender: "The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population." The loss is wrenching, and it drains the world. And at the same time that's not all that's true: the world is still complete, and beautiful, burgeoning, perfect.

The relation between these two feelings, for me anyway, is subtle. If there were only the sense of no gap, of unbroken completeness, it would be inhuman; and if that's all I felt I would be inhuman, too. The poet Wallace Stevens evokes that cold condition:

He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest

In a permanent realization [. . .]

Just to know how it would feel, released from destruction,
To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis,

Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass,
Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury center of time.

That's an ice cave.

But what if you feel that stillness, but don't cling to it. In my experience, sensing that timelessness completion allows me to fall into time and loss and heartbreak more fully, and, at least sometimes, with a sense that, however hard it is, it's not a mistake. "I thought the point of Zen was to let me feel things less," said a student sitting their first retreat with Joan soon after the death of a beloved companion, "but now I see the point is to let me feel them more."

The eternal vastness goes on being the vastness, and the stillness and silence hold us, not because they're sad for us, but because that's what they do, that's what they are. And that sustains us, but not by giving us "refuge from." It gives us "refuge in."

It's pretty common for people to describe their experiences of the vastness, the dharmakaya, as filling them with joy and tremendous gratitude. The radiance often seems flowing and viscous; you can feel it buoying you up, an ocean of air and light. But it doesn't seem to hold you, yourself, in any particular regard; the vastness isn't the special protector of particular creatures or things, it isn't the faithful guardian of Tenney as Tenney. If you're bathed in something that feels like love—another common description of these moments—it doesn't laser in on you because it thinks you're special. The scope of this intimate attention seems, paradoxically, boundless, universal.

So the tenderness for particular companions is our job, and fortunately we're here to do it: to feel and care for all the particular losses and heartaches we can, and to let our hearts be broken. And *because* the vastness is here, *because* we feel it holding us, we're maybe a little more able to do that, and let ourselves fall open.

When we do, we're not alone. One gift of our practice is that we increasingly feel our companionship, in the poignancy and tenderness of all this, not just with other people, but with all manner of creatures, of flora and fauna and even the supposedly non-sentient. Each particular thing that comes forth directly from the vastness, timeless and perfect, is also caught in time, our fragile companion.

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

Dalong said:

Flowers cover the mountains like brocade,
mountain torrents so deep they're indigo.