

Lingzhao & The Bodhisattva Way
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Good evening, bodhisattvas. Welcome to you all.

About six months from now, during our summer meditation retreat, a band of beautiful and foolhardy people will be taking up the way of the bodhisattva, taking refuge in the bodhisattva way, in a ceremony we do every couple of years. Between now and then, every once in a while, I'm going to talk about one aspect or another of this beautiful and foolhardy act of agreeing to take up the bodhisattva way.

I want to start tonight by making a bridge with what we talked about last year in the *Sutra That Vimalakirti Spoke*, because in some ways this is a continuation of that conversation. One of the themes of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* has to do with what it means to be a bodhisattva, and particularly, what it means to be one as a householder, a layperson. Since that's what all of us are doing, that seems important.

I'll begin tonight with an essay I wrote recently for a book of koans that involve women. I'll start with some excerpts from the essay on a koan about Pang Lingzhao. It's the koan about her falling down next to her father, which speaks to many of us in the community. It also has to do with this question of what it means to be stained and dyed by being a bodhisattva so completely that nothing sticks out. There are no badges, emblems, or signs, just a life of great openness, spontaneity, humor, and good grace.

The koan goes like this :

One day Layman Pang and his daughter Lingzhao were out selling bamboo baskets. Coming down off a bridge, he stumbled and fell. When Lingzhao saw this, she ran to her father's side and threw herself to the ground.

"What are you doing?" cried the Layman.

"I saw you fall, so I'm helping," she explained.

"Luckily, no one was looking," remarked the Layman.

This Pang family — which was Layman Pang, his wife, their daughter Lingzhao, and their unnamed son — have been the embodiment of enlightened householder life in China, and now in many parts of the world, since about the eighth century. The qualities of their life that seem to resonate through the centuries involve a movement toward and commitment to simplicity and

modesty. They kept giving things up. They gave up all their money and then, eventually, even gave up the house they were living in, which became a temple that still existed in the nineteenth century (and I'll tell you a story about that in a bit). They were deeply committed to the Way, and also deeply committed to each other, which ends in a remarkable and shocking way when three of them die within a couple of weeks of each other. They were full of humor and were unabashedly eccentric, each in their own way.

Layman Pang was a student of Great Ancestor Ma, who was considered the first of the great koan masters. The first koans were stories about Ma's conversations with people, and some of those koans are about Ma's conversations with Layman Pang. During the time they were alive, the idea of awakening began to change due to the work of a group of people, including Great Ancestor Ma. Awakening was coming to be seen as something that happens in relationship. It's not an individual, deeply introverted event but something that happens in the space between people, or between a person and some other being or thing. These early koans are about the kinds of encounters and conversations in which there is a spark of awakening.

The ones that involve the Pangs made two things clear that we might take for granted today but was not obvious at the time. One is that awakening is as likely and as profound among householders as it is among monastics; and secondly, as likely among women as it is among men.

Layman Pang was someone who, as I said, renounced all of his wealth and spent his life in various sorts of communion with some of the great Chan figures of his day. Mrs. Pang (about whom I'll tell you a couple of stories because in getting closer to Lingzhao I've gotten closer to Mrs. Pang, and I have a huge crush on her) seems to have been simultaneously no-nonsense and also deeply connected to the mysterious. We don't know a lot about their son, except that he worked in the fields and raised the food they ate. But for many people, the most luminous member of the family is the daughter, Lingzhao, whose name means Spirit Shining.

Lingzhao and her father were inseparable, and they supported the family, to the extent they were supported, by making utensils and baskets out of bamboo and selling them in the marketplace. Later, as she grew older, she accompanied him on his pilgrimages around the country. When they were living the high life they lived in huts and cottages and sometimes in caves. Once when they were out selling their bamboo baskets, Layman Pang tripped, and Lingzhao threw herself down next to him, uttering the immortal words, "I saw you fall so I'm

helping.” This is a little bit of the riff I did on that : “Lingzhao’s action obliterates the idea that there is a helper and a helped. Compassion isn’t a commodity we deliver, but a commitment, as Chan puts it, to help liberate the intimacy already inherent in any situation.”

That’s a little chewy, so I’ll say it again. In Chan, what we want to do, to the extent that we can, is liberate the intimacy already inherent in any situation. In Chinese to become intimate is a synonym for becoming enlightened; they’re used interchangeably in the literature. The idea is not that this intimacy is something we manufacture and deliver, but something that is already inherent, everywhere, in everything, and our job is to find it and to bring it out, to liberate it.

“What is most intimate?” the koans suggest we ask over and over again. It’s a good question to carry around. Situation after situation, encounter after encounter, what is most intimate here? Usually the most intimate response to another’s difficulty begins with the willingness not to flee. Fleeing can take the form of abandoning the situation, and it can also mean escaping into helping, into a whole constellation of ideas about what ought to happen. Helping is often full of agendas and presuppositions and certainties. Intimacy is being willing to stay and accompany and listen, to be vulnerable and surprised and flexible. It’s a willingness to fall with someone else and see what becomes possible when we do.

This sense of falling is large in the literature of the koans; it comes up over and over again in many different ways. You have a koan where somebody says, “The clear-eyed person (the bodhisattva, the awakened one) falls into a well.” One way we can understand that is : clear-eyed, awakened, we still make mistakes. Absolutely that’s true, and there’s something else that’s true. It’s suggesting that for a clear-eyed person, for a bodhisattva, for someone who is awakening, if a well is what presents itself, we are willing to fall in the well. If the world presents a well, down we go, because that’s what it means to be really engaged with life.

Layman Pang’s final remark, “Luckily, no one was looking,” is about what it’s like when we relate to each other as Lingzhao did, without self-consciousness — which is another way of saying *intimately*. He’s not worried about a third person watching the situation and judging it. The one who fortunately isn’t looking is ourselves — that is, our inner tendency to monitor and pass judgment, distancing us from our interactions even as they’re happening. How free it is when we aren’t keeping score! How potentially generous is a life lived with no one looking.

There’s another meaning I take from Lingzhao’s spontaneous fall, and that’s a reminder that we are all falling together, that in some ways that’s what life is. All of us fall from one end of the

universe to the other, lifetime after lifetime after lifetime. It happens that we are falling together, this lifetime, through this world. As we fall through this world, it offers us an invitation : *Come and see what life is like here in this place, in this little corner of the universe.* What we discover here is that life is made of flame and water, wind and earth, sorrow and beauty, love and fear, light and dark, and everything in between.

It's quite possible that not all parts of the universe are made like this. I remember reading that when the great clouds of interstellar gas that float in space bump into each other, they make a chiming sound. So it's possible that there are parts of the universe that involve floating and chiming. Not so much this world; this is a more complicated place. But as we fall through this world, if we pick and choose instead of accepting all of life as it offers itself here, we're in some way refusing the invitation. If we say, "I'll take your sunsets but leave your diseases," we're being stingy in a way that hurts ourselves most of all. Elsewhere Lingzhao says that, as we walk or fall the Way, the heart-mind of the ancestors — which is another way of saying the deepest reality — is in every blade of grass, and they all hold us up.

When Lingzhao throws herself down, her kindness is clear and unhesitating, completely without self-concern. It's also funny! Those are the qualities of her enlightenment, what it looks like when all the energy bound up in the small story we're constantly telling ourselves, in all the picking and choosing of reaction and opinion and judgment, has been liberated into awakening. It's free, that place, and Lingzhao lived there all her life. She, like others in the old stories, chose the time of her death. She sat down, folded her hands, and disappeared. A poet wrote that her basket had completely poured out its contents, and she shot out of life like an arrow.

Here they are, these people from a long time ago, almost a millennium and a half, and here are a couple more stories about them to give you more of a feel. This is Tuesday morning at the Pang household :

One day while the Layman was meditating in his hut (he had a little hut out back where he would sit), he suddenly cried out (and I will add parenthetically, loud enough for his wife and daughter to hear it in the house), 'It's hard, hard, hard, and I've put ten coats of linseed oil on this platform, too!' (Imagine this. He is sitting on a floor and he's saying, 'Ooh, it's so hard to get up off the cushion and to stand on that floor.')

Mrs. Pang said, 'It's easy, easy, easy. Just turn your eyes to the floor, lower your feet to it, and be on your way!' (What's the problem?) Then Lingzhao said, 'It's neither hard nor easy. (And this is where that quote comes in :) The heart-mind of the ancestors is in every blade of grass.'

In other words, the point isn't hard or easy, sitting down or standing up; it's none of that. It's that in every blade of grass, in every movement we make and every choice, the heart-mind of the ancestors is there. If it's hard, the heart-mind of the ancestors is there. If it's easy, the heart-mind of the ancestors is there. No problem appearing anywhere.

Here are a couple of stories about Mrs. Pang. This one I love. Imagine your way into this scene :

She goes to a temple one day, but it's the mealtime, so they're not going to let her in. The gatekeeper tells her she needs to go back. So she takes the comb out of her hair and her hair falls all the way to the ground. She walks away from the temple with her hair wiping out the traces of her footprints coming and going, and she says, "I've gone back."

I love that image of wiping the traces away with her hair as she walks. Later on she went back again, in a really big way. I mentioned before that her daughter and her husband and her son all died within a couple of weeks of each other. They all, according to the stories, chose their deaths, and she was the last one left. She cremated all of them. Then she went around the neighborhood and said goodbye to all her friends and walked away, never to be seen again, although it was assumed that she lived for a good while after that, but nobody knows what she was doing or when she died.

That moment is so vivid. We probably all know such moments from our own lives, when in an instant, through no conscious act of our own, everything changes. There was before and then there's after, and everything is different. She cremates what needs to be cremated from the past, and then she walks away into the new life. What comes next? Where did she go, and what did she do? We don't know, but maybe we have a sense of it from our own lives.

I mentioned that the Pangs turned their home into a temple, and over time the temple became a shrine that people made pilgrimages to. There's a mention in a nineteenth-century gazette, an almanac of that place, that the shrine still existed, and that it was considered a place of miracles. People went there looking for miracles. The two things the gazette mentions are the pomegranate in the courtyard outside, which bloomed in the winter, and Lingzhao's dressing stand inside the house. That was all that was left.

Why do these people speak to us, if they do, so long after, when we know so little about them? I think it's because, even though the details are few, they're very vivid and there's

something palpable about them. We begin to get a feeling for what they might have been like. They're locatable; we can imagine the house, the field with the son growing the crops, Lingzhao weaving baskets and her father tripping. All of these things are imaginable to us. So, in some sense, they're us; they're something we recognize. They're our friends and neighbors.

But they're also a bigger us. They're something we aspire to as well as something we recognize in ourselves. I have a sense that these people, who are bodhisattvas, live at the gate that stands between our ordinary lives and that life we aspire to. That life often comes into this life, and often our life goes into that place, but they're there at the gate all the time. Part of the aspiration of the bodhisattva vow is to be able to live at that gate, and to feel the mixing of the ordinary moments of our life with that expansive, spacious part of our lives that is always there, too, but which sometimes slips out of our awareness.

When we take up the bodhisattva way we are consciously choosing to join their lineage. We're saying we are of the lineage of Lingzhao and Mrs. Pang and Layman Pang, and all the others — that we recognize that it is our own, sometimes in actuality, sometimes in aspiration, but ours. Deeply ours. Not just as something we receive and learn about, but as something we take on for ourselves and will dream on for the future. We are the Lingzhaos of the future : we will dream what it means to be a bodhisattva on into the next generation.

One of the things we talked about with Vimalakirti was the idea that bodhisattvas are self-born. By that we mean that a bodhisattva is born every time someone takes up the intention to be a bodhisattva; every time someone puts the bodhisattva vow at the center of their lives, a bodhisattva is born. It happens not with an ideal perfection of behavior, but with the sincere intention to walk toward that, to move toward that in our lives. We put the vow to do what we can for the benefit of others at the center of our lives, and then we spend the rest of our lives exploring what that means. In every situation, what does it mean if the bodhisattva vow is the center? What are the implications of that? How does that affect things? Again, not getting it right all the time, not being perfect about it, but just staying true to the inquiry, *What is it like to have the bodhisattva vow at the center?* As we do that, our self-birth is midwifed by our loved ones and our families and our co-workers and our sangha.

It's a very old and venerable idea in all of Buddhism that to have a human life is a precious thing. It's not that it's precious because it's better than any other life, but because of one thing : because, as human beings, we have the ability to choose to shape our own lives; we're not

simply the receivers of circumstance. We make choices all the time. We shape our own lives, and the preciousness of human life is the gift of being able to do that, and also the responsibility. Taking up the way of the bodhisattva we say, *I choose this way of shaping my life. I choose this way of receiving the precious gift of human life and doing the best that I can with it.*

There's something exactly like that in the koan way. The koan view of human life is that our lives are acts of co-creation among ourselves and the world and the vastness. The koans are a way of constantly circulating that sense of creation among our own particular circumstances, the world around us as we find it, and the vastness that is always there as well. If you have the koan way as an active engagement in the imaginative creation of a life, then you have the bodhisattva way and the vows and the precepts that are part of that as a method. They speak to each other. They deepen each other. The vows and the precepts and the intentions of the bodhisattva way give a shaping and bit of structure to the active imagination that the koans bring. At the same time, the freedom and the spontaneity of the koan way keep us from becoming sludgy and pure (because you can be both at the same time!) about how we hold the precepts, and how we think of the bodhisattva way. It keeps things moving and questioning and lively.

In one part of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* a long list is mentioned of all of the bodhisattvas who are gathered to hear a great debate between Vimalakirti and Manjushri. This isn't arbitrary; there's something important in having the list of everyone who's present in this room. There's the Unblinking Bodhisattva, the Wonderful Arm Bodhisattva, the Jeweled Hand Bodhisattva, the Lion-Mind Bodhisattva, Pure Emancipation Bodhisattva, Universal Maintenance Bodhisattva (the great celestial custodian!), Jewel Courage Bodhisattva, Root of Joy Bodhisattva, Joyful Vision Bodhisattva, Sounds of Thunder Bodhisattva, Serene Capacity Bodhisattva, Store of Virtue Bodhisattva, Delights in the Real Bodhisattva. It seems important because it's saying there is not one idea of what a bodhisattva is. There is not a single template that we have to figure out how to crunch and shape ourselves into. Our job is to find the unique, particular, and never-to-be-repeated bodhisattva that you are, and you are, and you are. Each of us has to discover that for ourselves. That is the great gift that we give to life : to figure out which bodhisattva is us. It's a recognition that not only is everybody's skill set or gifts or interests are not the same, but also our life circumstances aren't the same. We're all shaped by different life

circumstances. That matters; that's not something to be gotten rid of or homogenized. It's something to be included and explored and made part of who we are.

If we think of the bodhisattvas as celestial figures floating above us who have nothing to do with our lives, this takes them completely out of the world of aspiration for us. We can't aspire to that, because it has nothing to do with human life, and we're here living human lives. It puts them in the realm of the devotional; they become religious figures rather than aspirational figures. I can't think about how they are me, how I am them, and what my relationship with them is; we can only feel devotion for them, or worship them (which is not a bad thing, but it's a different thing).

We're talking about the way that the bodhisattvas sit here on the cushion next to us. Everything that happens is a buddha. Get sick, the sickness is a buddha; have difficulty, the difficulty is a buddha. We might add to the glorious bodhisattva list from Vimalakirti : Not Feeling So Well Today Bodhisattva, Too Much To Do Bodhisattva, I Kind of Wish I Were Someplace Else Bodhisattva, Not Liking The Direction This Is Going *At All* Bodhisattva, Not Sure I'm Up To This Bodhisattva, and Flying By the Seat of My Pants Bodhisattva, because they're as true and as real and as important. They also take away the sense of eternal, unchanging figures. Today you might be Flying By the Seat of My Pants Bodhisattva and tomorrow you might be Jeweled Hand Bodhisattva. We're moving in and out of different states all of the time. What remains constant is the aspiration. As long as the aspiration to put the vow at the center of our lives remains constant, it can rise and fall and ebb and flow and appear like this and appear like that, because there is the constant throughline of the vow at the center. We don't have to worry moment by moment.

If we have a fixed, unchanging idea of what a bodhisattva is, we're going to be spending a lot of time reinforcing the self by asking, *How am I doing? How am I measuring up?* We're going to bring in what the Korean teacher Soen Sa Nim called checking mind; our mind is always checking on how we're doing and how we're relating to this ideal. In doing that we're digging the grooves of the self deeper and deeper. We can forget that the point is the aspiration, not how we're doing in any particular moment. To stay connected to the aspiration is to pour solvent all over the solidity of the self.

If we have this sense of bodhisattvaness as something that changes over a lifetime, then how we are as a bodhisattva might look very different when we're nineteen and when we're forty-

five and eighty-two, and it might look different from Tuesday to Wednesday. We can also realize that what it means to be a bodhisattva changes not only in our individual lives but over history. Our sense of what a bodhisattva is is different from what it was a hundred years ago, and 1,500 years ago. We have the history of people taking up their aspiration and expressing it in different ways, and, as a result, things have changed over time. We understand things about racism and misogyny and the way our personal choices affect the life of the planet in ways that people didn't before, and had to learn. We start there; that's our platform covered in linseed oil that we can stand on because of the joyful effort of all of the bodhisattvas that have come before us. It's great that we get to enter that stream and use the wisdom, love, and compassion that they expressed in their lifetimes and begin there, with that momentum behind us. We start there, and we continue to expand the territory of what it means to live the bodhisattva aspiration. It's been getting bigger and bigger, and we, too, will make it a bit bigger.

When we look to past figures like Lingzhao and her mother, we can ask what we see in them about awakening and about being a bodhisattva that hasn't changed. What's still exactly the same? The thing that we recognize in them is what we aspire to in ourselves. And what *has* changed? What is different? What will our particular expression of a shared aspiration with them be? We have a shared bodhisattva landscape with all of these people through history, and we stand in this landscape with everyone who has ever chosen to orient their life in this way. Then we get to explore and discover the particular way that each of us stands there, dances there, weeps and sings and walks there.

Q1 : I want to ask you about this notion of checking mind. You say the job of each of us is to determine what the unique bodhisattva is that we're meant to become. To actually explore and determine that requires a certain amount of reflection. I'm assuming that part of the job of a bodhisattva is to learn as we go through life. It seems like the essence of learning is having an experience and then reflecting on it. How is that different from the checking mind question of *How am I doing?*

JIS : Everything depends on the inquiry you make. If in your reflection you ask *How am I doing?* this is an inquiry that reinforces the self. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say it's largely a useless inquiry, because what are we comparing it to? What's our gold standard? Our gold standard is something that exists in our mind as an idea. We're comparing an illusory self

to an illusory gold standard, and trying to decide how it's doing. Another option is to ask a question like *Was the intimacy liberated in the circumstance? What was the quality of it? What happened?* It's not about us but it's about what happened in this shared space. What went on? What can I learn about what happened? What can I learn about how my participation affected things? That's a completely different inquiry. The reflection is as deep and sincere, but the focus is on *How's the world now because of my participation? Rather than How did I do?*

Q1 : That's helpful. I have a second, related question : If you take that notion of awakening as something that happens in relation to another person, like in any relationship, could it be a valid question to ask, *How are we doing?*

JIS : Yes. Absolutely. That *is* the question.

Q1 : So, as soon as there's more than one, it's a good question.

JIS : It's a good question. That's a great way of putting it.

Q2 : I like the idea of the gate. I realized that I was making a new rule of going to the gate and making sure I'm at the gate. Then I realized, *there's me making a new rule*. Immediately after that I realized that I'm always at the gate. But when you're talking about co-creation, my choice at the gate is how intimate to be with the gate. Do I just be with the gate, not get there, push it open and slam it shut? That told me that when I get to the gate there's a certain dissolving. I like that image a lot.

JIS : What we can do is walk towards the gate. That's our conscious effort. Then it's important to see that the gate is walking towards us, and to find that place where we meet, rather than having it be all about, *I'm now going to walk to the gate*, and then whatever happens when I get there. There's already something happening between us. What is that? We don't have to have any bigger plan than *I will walk toward the gate*. If we do that, the rest will take care of itself. But we have to do that, and we have to trust that the gate will be walking towards us, even if we can't see it yet.

Q3 : Could intimacy in this situation be defined as liberating the sense of oneness that you have? I think of intimacy as being very close and connected to another person, and so I love this idea that in every situation there's an opportunity to liberate a sense of real oneness with others. I sense a lot of joy in that; it seems like it would feel very complete and joyful.

JIS : It can be a rock as much as another person. It's based on the assumption that the intimate state is the natural state, and then we do other operations in our heart-mind that separate us from that. All we're really doing is getting back to the natural state of things, rather than having to create some new wonderful state. The thing about oneness is it's true and yet it's a tricky word that's gone dead. It's why I like 'intimacy' because there is that sense of, *Oh, this is you and me speaking with each other*. It's not all mushy, but, wow, it's really YOU. I'm right up next to you and you're beautiful.

It can also be : *You're really heartbroken, and this is really difficult, and I'm feeling that heartbreak, too*. Falling down together. The joy doesn't come because it's happy; the joy comes because it's intimate. It can be intimate in sorrow and intimate in difficulty, as well.

Q4 : I find myself thinking about the relationship between responding and aspiration. I've had aspirations and found that they needed to fall by the wayside because things came up that needed responding to that defined what the aspiration was differently.

JIS : That's great. The only difficulty in what you're describing is sometimes the aspiration is too small or too narrow and then that's what will be shown to you over and over again. Follow the way the aspiration keeps getting blown open until you find that place where's there's nothing outside it, where there's nothing that can come and take your attention away from it, because everything is included in the space of that aspiration.

Q5 : Can you just talk a little bit more about falling into a dark well? I'm struggling with it.

JIS : What troubles you about it?

Q6 : Well, if you take the image seriously, falling into the well is really bad news! You expect that you'd be falling to your death, because it's a tunnel, it's dark, there's water at the bottom, and there's no way out.

JIS : Fortunately!

Q6 : What does this mean as an amateur bodhisattva, that when a dark well presents itself you jump in?

JIS : We're speaking of metaphorical wells here, and the sense is that we don't pick and choose; we don't refuse things because we have the idea that we know what's at the bottom of the well. Because we can't possibly know. We can go through life saying, *I'll do this but I won't do*

this. I'll take your sunsets but leave your diseases. That's picking and choosing not to fall into the well, and until it happens, we have no idea what the dark well of disease or sorrow or difficulty is going to be. We can't know, but the vow is not to turn away. The vow is not to refuse it. The vow is to do that, too. That's as simple as it is : to be willing to accept all of life, *if* that's what presents itself.

Q6 : You're saying, in terms of really experiencing the image, not to be literal about it, but the deep well is the deep unknown? Because being a bodhisattva doesn't mean that we have to give up prudence.

JIS : Right. It doesn't mean that you go out and step in front of cars in traffic, but it means that if you are hit by a car, you would fully live that experience, rather than spending your time wishing it hadn't happened. *Oh, I get to experience what it's like to be laid up in a hospital with a broken leg! Hub, that's interesting.*

Thank you all very much.