

Sheltering in an Old Shrine  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

I thought of talking about the Zen idea of an explanation, which is itself a joke, and what came to me was a brief and wonderful thing that James Thurber wrote in one of his stories : “‘Shut up!’ he explained.” I thought, well, that’s not bad for a retreat : Shut up! she explained. (*Laughter*)

Here’s another explanation, a strange, beautiful, and mysterious Zen explanation : One of the ancients said, “On the way to a service in the village I ran into a wild storm of wind and rain, and sheltered myself in an old shrine.” If ‘Shut up, he explained’ is a good instruction for a retreat like this, then this idea of being in the midst of life — on my way to the village to perform a service; on the way to the supermarket; as I was sitting at my desk at work; in the middle of the night — and running into a wild storm and sheltering in an old shrine — seems like a good description of a retreat. We shelter ourselves in an old shrine together.

What is the shrine? It’s that we’re doing something in a particular way that people have been doing for thousands and maybe tens of thousands of years. One of the reasons we have forms, and bells mean certain things, and we sit a certain way and don’t do other things, is because all of it is the architecture of our retreat. It’s a way of building a field or a building in which we can sit without having to think too much about anything at all. I would encourage you to see our forms that way, as an architecture of the old shrine rather than as a restriction — as something in which we can take shelter. What does it mean to take shelter moment by moment in the architecture of these ancient forms, so that when we do them we enter a lineage of people who have been doing just this for a very long time?

Another thing about the shrine is the number of times some of us have sat in a rectangle like this, and this rectangular shape made of human beings sitting on cushions is perhaps our most fundamental shrine, and what’s just behind us doesn’t matter. We’ve sat many different places under many different circumstances in different states and different countries and different weathers, and here it is : here is the shrine, this simple rectangle of people deciding to come and sit down, facing each other, in the presence of each other, and do this great work of sheltering.

Once we have shelter — have gotten here and made the commitment to spend the time — what do we do? One way to think about what we're doing in this old shrine is welcoming the Noble Guest. What is the Noble Guest? That's a question I put to each of you as something to hold during this retreat. For you, what is the Noble Guest in this retreat?

The simplest way to talk about the Noble Guest is to say that everything that happens to you, everything you experience, is the Noble Guest. That includes your boredom, your frustration, the difficult feelings that arise, and the reactions you have to things. What happens if we don't turn it away? What happens if we welcome it? It also means all the moments of grace that open; all the moments where we get a glimpse of the radiant world that is just inside this world. That, too, certainly, is the Noble Guest.

How do we prepare for that? How do we make this shrine and ourselves ready to welcome that guest? Tenney [Nathanson, Sensei] mentioned how we often talk about the fasting that happens in a retreat. One of the great ways you can fast is from all of your usual preoccupations, worries, obsessions, concerns, ways you spend your time, distractions ... You know the list : judgments, opinions, stories, operas, epic poems! All of those things, fast from them! You can pick them up again on Sunday if you want to, but what would it be like to put them down, to *not* eat them or indulge in them? That's one kind of renunciation and fasting that helps us prepare for the Noble Guest.

There's a beautiful line in Dongshan's "Poem of the Five Positions," the five different relationships between the vastness and the particular, and it begins, "For whom do you bathe and make yourself beautiful?" That's a great question to go into a retreat with. Who is that Noble Guest for you, and what does it mean to bathe and make yourself beautiful? One clue I'll suggest is that the beauty we're talking about is not a matter of adornment, of adding things or trying to cover things up. It's a matter of stripping away, getting simpler, becoming as naked as it's possible to be. The more simple, the more stripped down, the more beautiful we become in the terms of this practice, the more able we are to welcome the Noble Guest, just because there isn't much between us. We make ourselves available by making ourselves simple.

We spoke of the silence, and you might think of the silence as a Noble Guest. You might think of silence not as the absence of conversation or other kinds of noise, but as the presence of something. When we are silent that's part of the fasting; that's part of getting simple, stripping away. The Noble Guest can come right up to us because we're not putting out a force field of words around us. The

silence is the presence of the Noble Guest, whom we can also think of as the vastness itself, waiting for us to stop long enough to come say hello, waiting for us to *Shut up, she explained*, and whoosh, in it comes to where it always was but we just weren't noticing it.

The silence can also cause us to realize that there is a deliberate fasting of the senses that happens in a retreat. We keep our eyes down, lowering the amount of visual information we're receiving. As we sit here we don't have a bowl of M&M's next to us; we restrict our sense of taste. We ask people not to try to smell good, or smell in any way in particular, so that that sense is also lowered. Everything is dimmed. We don't touch things while we're sitting, and because we don't, the feel of the cushion underneath us can become exquisite because touch is so rare. But in lowering the intensity of all of those things, there's one sense that we can't dim, and that's our hearing. Our ears are just there and receiving. The silence and the fasting of the other senses allow us to use our hearing as a gateway to the vast world. It's interesting that Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, is She Who Hears. It is in the act of hearing and allowing oneself to take in what one hears, that awakening leading to compassion can enter. During this retreat you might want to lower the intensity of the other senses, fast in the ways we're talking about, and allow the silence, so that your hearing becomes the way in which you receive the Noble Guest.

The tradition talks about three levels of hearing. The first, not surprisingly, is with the ear, and that's the physical act of hearing that involves sound waves, eardrums, electrical impulses, neurons firing in the brain, and also the ways we interpret the sounds through the stories we tell. Then there is hearing with the heart-mind : not just sound as a physical experience, but something that we allow to enter and permeate us. We welcome it in with our heart-minds and allow it to become part of us. Then there's a third level of hearing, which is called hearing with the spirit. As I understand it, that means as we get deeper into the retreat and things are a bit off-balance (which is part of the point : we're not in our usual balance but there's more potential, things are more open), then we might begin to hear without interpretation. Sound might exist in and of itself, and we might hear it without being a hearer. There might be hearing going on without an agent of that hearing or even a location of that hearing, so that sound — without story, without label, purely itself, uninhibited by us — and hearing — without a hearer, without a location, without an interpretive faculty — meet and become one thing. What kind of welcome and joining with the Noble Guest could that be? It's something to think about and carry forward with you.

Here's a clue to another sense of the Noble Guest : the Noble Guest could be who *you* could be.

The Noble Guest could be what Suzuki Shunryu called your inmost request. What is it you might be when uninhibited, when in the shelter of the shrine? We have an extraordinary opportunity these days to explore that, because you don't have to do anything else; there's nothing else going on. So who is that? Maybe it will occur to us that we and the Noble Guest are not separate. We are one thing, the same thing. We are welcoming back to ourselves that which we push away, or that from which we are distracted in our ordinary lives. We are allowing ourselves to be completed in a retreat like this. How great is that?

We will struggle, difficult things will come up, and we'll have to figure out how to attend to them and work with them. I suggest that you don't hold that as the purpose of being here, but instead hold the possibility of completing yourself with the Noble Guest as the purpose. The old teacher said, "I sheltered myself," not "I took shelter." I sheltered myself in an ancient shrine. What is the nature of that self that is sheltered? So that we don't have to think about it anymore, right now we can eliminate the partial self, the constructed self, the self that's telling the story, the self that carries all our habitual ways of doing things and thinking about things. It's probably not that. So what is it? What is that self that can be sheltered in the old shrine, that meets the Noble Guest and sees a face no different from her own?

These are my invitations to you for these days. Fast, listen, explore what that completed self might be. Don't spend your time doing all the stuff you can do any other time. Do something different. Do something beautiful. Do something that makes the world — this tender, wounded, chaotic, painful, gorgeous, poignant world — infinitesimally better because you did it on these days. Do something you can bring back to that world because you really got it. You took the time, you didn't let yourself get distracted, you didn't let yourself fall into the grooves of habit and usuality. You let something else happen, you took shelter in the old shrine, you welcomed the Noble Guest. Something got completed, and that is something we can take back into the world — and that's tremendously important.

Thank you.