

Awakening as Readiness  
Joan Sutherland, Roshi  
Desert Sunrise Retreat ~ Amado, AZ  
February 17, 2011

Good evening, bodhisattvas.

For a very long time, maybe more than a thousand years, we in the koan tradition have been called the school of sudden enlightenment. That's been an important part of our identity and what it is we think we're doing. The good part of that has been that in the koan school there has always been an absolute, unwavering commitment to the idea that we can wake up, that we can be enlightened — everybody in this room and everybody not in this room, as well. That's not only an unshakeable belief, but an unshakeable experience that happens over and over again. A great deal of the practice is aimed at just that, a sudden and complete experience. As J.D. Salinger might have said, a “stunning and final” transformation of consciousness.

The downside, maybe, is that there's a sense of thunder-clappiness, or lightning-ness about sudden enlightenment; it is something that comes from outside, and we can long for it, yearn for it, try to put ourselves in the way of it, but fundamentally it's an arbitrary event. It will or it won't happen, and it comes from somewhere else. Recently I've been fascinated by the fact that some scholars of Chinese Buddhism whom I trust like Peter Hershock have been reconsidering the phrase *dunwu*, which has been translated as sudden enlightenment. They are saying that another way to look at it (and maybe a more accurate way to translate it) would be as the “readiness for awakening.” We become the school of readiness for awakening instead of the school of sudden enlightenment.

Why should that matter? It makes a fundamental difference because it changes how we understand the project, how we understand what we're doing and how we go about doing it. If we have a sense of our aspiration as a readiness for awakening, that's not so thunder-clappy and lightning-like; it becomes something within our own power to accomplish. We can be ready right this very second for awakening. We're not at the whim of something from somewhere else; we are engaged deeply in a known practice that leads to a known effect ... we hope.

I want to talk about our practice as readiness for awakening. As many of you probably know, Chinese is — not completely, but in large part — a pictorial language. Many of the elements that make up the characters come from pictures of things. The character for tree looks like a tree, and if you put three of them together you get the word for forest. The nouns and verbs that are straightforward like that are straightforward in their pictorial designations. But how do you draw a picture of readiness? How a culture chooses to do that tells us a lot about itself. In this case we're talking about something thousands of years old : the picture of readiness is of a servant with a slightly bowed head — not in submission, but in attention — receiving the mandate of what they're to do next.

That's us. We are standing, attentive, with slightly bowed heads, looking to receive the mandate of what we should do. Much of this practice is about developing the capacity to respond to circumstances, to what we're confronted with. That's our understanding of compassion : the ability to respond well and truly to whatever we confront. If the ability to do that is something we wish to attain, this moment of readiness is quite beautiful. Here we are, attentive, waiting, ready, available, desirous of being helpful, desirous of receiving the mandate.

What are the pieces of that? One of the old Chinese teachers, Baizhang, said that this *duan*, this readiness, is the willingness to relinquish misleading thoughts. It's a great definition because you don't have to go into *bad thoughts, wrong thoughts, horrible thoughts, thoughts unworthy of me, thoughts totally worthy of me*. They're misleading in relation to being attentive, present, and ready to receive the mandate of how to respond. That's the only definition of misleading : does it bring you closer to that state of readiness, or does it distract you from that state of readiness? There's the willingness to relinquish those misleading thoughts — not annihilate, destroy, scold, fight with, wrestle with, scald, burn, destroy ... just relinquish. Let them go, put them down.

In the Asian languages with which I'm familiar, out of which East Asian Buddhism comes, the words we translate as 'relinquish' or 'renounce' give equal weight to the space that's cleared. When we English-speakers use those words we tend to emphasize what we're giving up : what you're giving up for Lent, or giving up something in order to go into the monastery or join the communist cell. But in those Asian languages there's equal weight given to the space that is cleared by the relinquishment or renunciation, and what becomes possible in that

space. When you say, *I have the willingness to relinquish misleading thoughts*, you're saying not only am I willing to put down these things that are not helpful, but I want to clear a space for something else, for readiness to happen.

What's that moment like? Another meaning of the word *dun*, now suggested to mean this readiness, is "to pause." That's important when we think of Baizhang's willingness to relinquish misleading thoughts : there's a stop, a pause. We're not going to keep moving in the same direction we've been moving. We're going to work with thoughts, feelings, habits — the ways of being that mislead us, that try to substitute themselves for the present moment. All of these misleading thoughts, feelings, habits, actions, and reactions have the goal of substituting themselves for what's actually happening. They reinforce the idea that how we think and feel about what's happening is more important than what's actually happening. They pull us out of a direct relationship, a direct standing there, head slightly bowed, attentively waiting to understand as much as we can about what's going on. They pull us away from that into the much smaller room of what we think, feel, and react to about the situation, and try to convince us that that's what's important.

So we pause, we decline to go there, to step into the smaller room with those habits that want us to believe that how we think and feel about something is more important than the thing itself. Having stopped that habitual response, we listen. What's actually going on here? What can I understand by listening openly, without judgment, without prejudice, for awhile? What can I understand, and what can I see that I can't understand? Just as important as seeing what there is to know about something is accepting what we *can't* know. I can't know someone else's complete motivation. I can't know the reasons that brought them to this moment and brought them to this action. I can't know all of it because the world is way too complicated. I have some humility about what it is possible for me to even hear if I listen with attention. But I listen anyway, to get as much as I can. We pause the habitual flow of our thoughts and feelings and reactions, and listen. What difference does that make? How does that make us more ready?

Part of this pausing, relinquishing, and listening is humility. That can be a hard word for some westerners, because we associate it with humiliation. But we can reclaim it for ourselves. Humility comes from the Latin *humus*, which means the ground, the earth, the soil, and originally *humilitas* was to be close to the ground. That's a good thing a lot of the time. We can

think of it as meaning something lowly, or we can think of it as something close to what's actually happening, close to the earth, grounded, and that doesn't seem like a bad thing at all.

If we're willing to allow for this humility, we can begin to think of all the good reasons there are to have it. What are you humble in front of? What do you feel humility in the face of? Maybe it's something as simple as how long a retreat day is! Maybe it's a humility in front of what you've seen happen in your heart-mind today during the retreat; to see the endless stream of thought and feeling, the endless misleading that's going on, the endless pulling out, the endless habit, the *Oh, not again!* that happens over and over.

Maybe you feel humility in front of the question of the Great Matter of life and death. Maybe there's humility in the largeness and mystery of that; in the face of the vastness, how big things are and how mysterious. Humility in the face of the complexity of the world, of the human heart, of the ways it's possible to feel such deep happiness in this life. Humility in the face of what we receive : those things for which we are grateful, those things we don't even think about but that keep us alive. There are so many reasons that have nothing to do with humiliation but everything to do with reality, to bow our heads in the face of this life and this world. There are so many reasons to allow ourselves to be acted upon by what we don't know, what we can't know, by the great mystery of things.

The biggest reason of all is because it's truer than not doing it. When we get down to the fundamental practices of which this practice of humility is one, we don't do them because they're good for us. They might be good for us; that might be a byproduct, but that's not why we do them. This is not a self-improvement project. We do them because they bring us closer to the way things actually are. For example, in Santa Fe we've been talking about the importance of relationship to our practice, and one of the things we talked about was sangha life. We don't become a sangha, we don't sit here together as a sangha because it's 'good for us.' (And some of us might say, yes, like cod liver oil is good for us.) We become sangha because one of the fundamental truths of our way is the interpermeation of everything : everything interpermeates everything else.

This is right down at the roots of the Dharma. We express interpermeation through sangha; we do it because it brings us closer to what's true about the nature of things. We practice readiness for awakening because it brings us closer to our actual condition. We do stand in this vast universe with heads slightly bowed, and, if we are very lucky, with the

willingness in our hearts to receive the mandate, to discern what is asked of us and to do our best to provide it. From the point of view of the koan way, that is a good life, a happy life, to the extent that we can do it.

Our practice, standing in the place of readiness for awakening, is exactly the same as being awakened. We're standing in the same place, we're in the same attitude, so the practice brings us to something true about the nature of human life.

That moment of pause, listening, and humility is the same as sitting in the dark, not having a plan but waiting and hearing, discerning what the next thing is. It's not knowing. It's being what Iris Murdoch called 'unselfed' — those glorious moments when we are willing to put something else at the center of our attention so that we are unselfed. How lovely that is, when all of our self-concern drops away and something else takes center stage. All of those things — being unselfed, sitting in the dark, not knowing — are in this moment of readiness.

Here's an example of the kind of thing that happens to the extent that we are willing to take this stance of readiness for awakening. You would be excused for thinking that somebody decided that the best way to sell Buddhism in the West is to say that it's a way of happiness. We're all going to be happy! That might be true, although I guarantee that happiness is going to look a lot different from what you thought at the beginning. At least as importantly it's a way of transforming sorrow.

I don't mean transforming sorrow into happiness or anything else, but transforming the kind of young sorrow with which we come to practice into a mature sorrow. By young sorrow I mean the sorrow that comes from not getting what you want, things not turning out the way you want them to turn out, or the world not being the way you think the world ought to be. That's young sorrow, and there's nothing wrong with that. Young sorrow is usually mixed with or made up of disappointment, frustration, despair, even anger.

We don't lose sorrow, but that young sorrow, over time, transforms into a mature sorrow, which is something like : See this world, so imperfect, so not perfectable, so much struggle, so much pain, and yet things persist in trying. Things go on living. The sun rises, the flowers open, the rain falls, people try and try again. Is there not something ineffably beautiful about that? Is there not something so poignant about the way things go on trying in an imperfect and sorrowful world? Is there not a great tenderness about that, and do we have to change that into anything else? Isn't that something true about the nature of life?

The move is from *I am suffering* — I am sorrowful because I'm not getting what I want, or because the world is not as I think it ought to be — to *How poignant and tender the world is* — that in its imperfection all beings go on trying. There is no need to fix a sorrow that is tenderness; it's something true about life. This is the kind of transformation that holding to a readiness for awakening makes possible. Our happiness transforms as well. If we start out thinking that happiness is about getting what we want, or about the world being the way we think it ought to be, over time that transforms into a happiness that is not based on our circumstances and conditions, but is an ability to see the happiness of others, and to find joy in the joy of others, unreservedly. Happiness is no longer personal; it is an appreciation of joy, of exuberance, in a world that is also difficult and full of sorrow. Happiness is a long view, as sorrow is a long view, and both are true.

The great thing about that kind of happiness is that there are so many more occasions to be happy! Not just our own, but those of others around us, and those at a distance which we become aware of. This is the state of readiness for awakening : pausing the old, usual ways, the ways that probably brought us to practice because they've become painful to us. Listening instead, and feeling a humility that comes not from a sense of being less than or lowly, but from a sense of awe. This is a willingness to open ourselves to that awe, to be naked in front of it, not defended against it but knocked over by it, brought to our knees by it, and not turning away from that awe, whatever that is for you, however you experience that.

Allowing a mature sorrow and a mature happiness to ripen in us into a long and wide view becomes, over time, indistinguishable from sudden enlightenment. Maybe the difference is that because it's over time it gets into us so deeply that it will never let us go. There's nothing thunder-clappy about it. It is old and deep and it persists. The transformations that arise out of that are ours forever. The universe doesn't do takebacks with that kind of awakening. That's why a little matter of scholarly debate about how to translate a word might make a real difference, opening us to a different way of understanding what it is we're doing, enriching and complicating it — all of those good things.

I will stop here and welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1: You like to quote Peter Herschok, that it's not enough to know what buddha nature is, you have to know what buddha nature does. You radicalized that in a nice way. If I'm

having a bad day then knowing what buddha nature does, feels like paying back what I owe. Like, *I better do this now*. But you explain it as a deepening of the same thing. What brought me to this place is what I keep doing. Readiness to awaken involves the slightly bowed head, the attentiveness, so at the end of retreat you'll sometimes say, "If you got anything from this, just give it away." Knowing what buddha nature does is really just giving away that same thing by continuing to manifest in whatever way you can.

JIS : Yes. I'm just speaking for myself, but there's something so profound about imagining that slightly bowed head as my fundamental stance and attitude — with a movement already into the next step. Where do you go when you receive the mandate, what do you do? And to keep looking for that again and again and again.

Q2: Your translation of this has shifted my entire feeling about Rinzai, because I could never, ever think about becoming "suddenly enlightened." I just do not relate to it, I'm not drawn to it at all. It doesn't feel real. But being ready for it, that's always where I try to be. So all of a sudden a gate opened. Thanks! I feel more at home now.

JIS: Good. Good.

Q3: I like how one is a servant, but at the same time the readiness feels like being the host, welcoming whatever comes to mind.

JIS: It's exactly the place where the host and the guest come together and become one. A common metaphor in Chan is the host and the guest : who's the host and who's the guest, and what role are you playing at any given time, with another person or with a situation? The largest sense of host and guest is that the vastness, the universe itself, is the big host, and everything that is manifest, all phenomena, are guests of that host. One of the things the koan way is about is discovering how to develop a flexible relationship, so that sometimes you're the guest and sometimes you're the host. How do you become the host? Linji said, "If, wherever you are, you take the role of host, that place is a true place." In Chan there's the idea that the universe only exists because of the things that make up the universe, so in that sense the universe is our guest, and we're its host. Which is another thing to feel a bit of awe about!

Thank you.