

A World of Sudden Joy
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Good evening, bodhisattvas. We meet tonight on the cusp of spring. Even though winter is threatening to reassert itself at any time for the next couple of days, still the promise of spring is curled up in all the buds on the trees, just waiting to burst out. I was thinking of something our recent ancestor Nakagawa Soen said :

In the midst of winter
I found
invincible spring

It's that invincible spring that I want to talk about tonight.

Last week in the koan salon we began working with a koan that goes, "The stone woman gives birth in the middle of the night." That stone woman is an old Chan and Zen image for the vastness or emptiness, *shunyata*. It's that thing that doesn't change, doesn't move; it's perfect and complete in and of itself. And then this miraculous thing happens : into the darkness of the void, the vastness gives birth to everything that is. That is the great mystery of life, the fundamentally miraculous nature of things.

We spend a lot of time, as we need to, talking about how we deconstruct the obstacles that stand between us and life : how we deconstruct the things that cause us suffering and cause us to cause suffering to others. We work really hard, and it takes years — sometimes and mostly. We're diligent, we sit, we come to retreats, and we really do work hard at it. So, just for tonight, on the cusp of spring, I want to remind us that we do all that not as a particularly intense and painful self-improvement project, but because of the fundamentally miraculous nature of life. What we're trying to do is to be aware of that and participate in that more and more often. To do that is not to elevate our state, or go to some higher plane, or do anything like that. It's actually to get more realistic about the way things are. If *that things are* is fundamentally miraculous, if there is this giving birth and dying and giving birth again going on all the time, in all of life, out of what is perfectly still and whole — if that's the way things

are, then the more we can see that and the more we can understand that, the more realistic we're being about the nature of life.

In the salon some people talked about things that happened in the night with this koan — the stone woman gives birth in the middle of the night — which is, of course, perfect. I woke up at four o'clock this morning with this talk fully formed and ready to go. So this is the dharma talk born in the middle of the night — not the first to come like that, and, I hope, not the last.

At the same time, in this spring-y week when we were talking about that koan, I also went to a Purim celebration. Purim is the Jewish holiday that celebrates the story that's told in the book of *Esther*. It's a happy and celebratory occasion. I was talking to the rabbi, who's a teacher of Kabala, and he was saying that *Esther* is the only book in the Bible that doesn't mention God.

I thought, "Well, that's interesting; what's that about?"

He said, "It's because it covers up the true thing. There's a deeper story that's covered by the story of Esther, and at the end of days all of that will be revealed."

I said, "What's the end of days like?"

He said, "The end of duality, and everybody will laugh."

I thought, "That's a pretty good end of days, the end of duality and everybody laughing!" And so then, of course, I asked, "What's the deeper story that the book of *Esther* is covering?"

He said, "That everything that occurs is miraculous."

So there we are again : we're right back with the stone woman giving birth in the middle of the night, and everything that occurs is miraculous.

What I hope is that we get flashes of that as we go. Then we get more flashes, and then the flashes start linking up so that we have whole hours or days — or weeks or months or years — that are like that. That's my spring hope for all of you in this practice, and I mean that, deeply. That is what I hope for everyone in this room, and for everyone else in our sangha : we know that more and more, and those moments become more and more continuous.

For some reason that isn't rationally apparent to me but that makes perfect intuitive sense, I started thinking about one of our ancestors with whom I feel a great affinity. He was a Chinese teacher named Dahui, who lived in the twelfth century. There were a couple of interesting things about him, one of which is that he valued and honored women. He invited

them to come work with him and made them his successors. That was relatively rare, and so one of the great treasures of Dahui's temple is that we have records of what it was like for women to be practicing a thousand years ago.

Dahui invented the way of working with koans that we still use today. It's called the *buatou* method. Before that, people were working with the koan as a whole, even if it was really long. What Dahui found was that there was a piece of the koan that was the salient part, the part that you would take into your meditation. For example, you would end up with something like, "What is most intimate?", even though there was a whole story that came before that. You would take the story into account, but what you would sit with is, "What is most intimate?" Interestingly, *buatou* was developed as a creative collaboration between Dahui and one of his women students, Miaodao. It was in their work together that he refined and clarified this way of working, and it's the way I still work with people today. Miaodao was the first person to have a great awakening with it.

The quality of the kinds of awakenings that, in his time, Dahui was making a field for comes through in something he said. Someone asked him once, "What is it like when you awaken?" He said, "You see the sun in the hands of an old woman selling fans." So there again, we have the fundamentally miraculous nature of life : you see the sun in the hands of an old woman selling fans.

The other thing that's interesting about him is that he was politically active. During his life there was a minister who came along and tried to impose an educational system that involved the old classics — but his take on the old classics. It was really a system of indoctrination rather than teaching. Dahui held up the koans as a form of inquiry in contrast to this indoctrination that the minister was trying to ram through the government. For his pains, Dahui was sent into exile and suffered a lot. Half the monks who were with him died in their exile, but Dahui eventually came back. I'm interested in what was for him an obvious connection between the inquiry of this Way and the natural stand against totalitarianism and indoctrination. The other side eventually lost, and Dahui came back into favor.

The last story I'll tell you is about one of the women around him, who was called the Lady of Chin. She was the mother of the prime minister, so she was probably a woman with a pretty busy social dance card, but she was a serious student of Chan. It's recorded in the official record of Dahui's temple that she worked on the koan *No*. She worked on it hard and

studiously. Then one day she suddenly broke through and stood up as if she were in the meditation hall — which means she wasn't in the meditation hall, she was somewhere in the midst of her busy life — and she experienced a world of sudden joy. I love that the old, dry Chinese chronicles talk about this sudden world of joy. That's another way of talking about awakening.

Here's an evocation of that world. One of Dahui's political comrades had a daughter named Li Qingzhao, who was one of the greatest poets in Chinese history. She had a life that was quite rich and full; she knew great happiness and also great sorrow. A lot of her poetry was about reconciling the fundamentally joyful and fundamentally sorrowful natures of life. She reminds us that when I'm talking about this world of sudden joy, or an invincible spring, or seeing the sun in someone's hands, I'm not talking about everything being happy all the time. It's something so much deeper and stranger than that. We can feel sorrow and still be connected to that joy. It's possible to feel the sorrow all the way out to the edges.

Sorrow and fear, disappointment and anger, all those emotions we think of as afflictive — it's not that they themselves are a problem. What becomes a problem is when we go dead inside them. To feel grief, for example, and to feel it all the way out to the edges, is no problem at all. If you really love someone and they've died, where else would you rather be? What else would you rather be doing than grieving that loss? But if you go dead inside it, that's when you're in trouble. I can't remember if it was in *Gone With the Wind*, but in one of those movies like that, there's a scene where a woman is getting dressed, and you see her in her underclothes. Then they come in with a contraption, the skirt hoop, that's about six feet in diameter, and they tie it to her waist and then her skirt falls over it. So she's walking around inside this cage all the time. There's something about going dead inside of our sorrow — or our anger, disappointment, or fear — that's like being trapped inside this kind of hoop. Or being trapped inside a cocoon in which we wither, and so it never breaks and nothing else ever happens; we and the cocoon just wither and dry up together.

When I talk about a world of sudden joy — and awakening and all of that — I'm not talking about a state of the absence of difficult things. I'm talking about a state of living difficult things right out to the edge and, in doing that, in being willing to take that on, staying connected to the deep joy underneath everything, even in the midst of difficulty.

In another conversation I had with the rabbi, I was talking about how our tradition has a lot of names for this awakening. There's awakening, enlightenment, realization, seeing your true nature, becoming intimate. The rabbi said this beautiful thing : "A language that contains many words for the same thing is being spoken by a people who really understand that thing." When you have a lot of words for something it means you really understand it, because you have a differentiated and subtle relationship with it. Yes, we do have that, and we should own that as ours. Our great gift is this deep, subtle, and long-lasting relationship with an awakening that isn't just something that happened in the past; it's happening right now, right here in this room, among all of us. This is our deep legacy, our deep heritage. Here on the cusp of spring, let's not forget that.

Back to Li Qingzhao, who wrote a poem about this. She wrote it in a particular form that was set to the rhythms of popular songs, so it has this lovely, long, snaky line that's different from a lot of Chinese poems, which are quatrains of couplets. It goes like this :

Often I recall that day,
the river pavilion
in the setting sun, and
we too drunk to know
the way home. As
our high spirits
fled, we started
to return late
in our boat,
but were confused
and entered,
 deeply,
a place where
the flowering lotus
was in full bloom.
And struggling to go through,
struggling
 to go through,
we startled
a whole sandbank of herons
into flight!

So there's a time, the river pavilion in the setting sun. Then things go sideways a little bit, and you're drunk, confused, and tired, and you just want to go home. You lose the way, and you're struggling in the boat. You're so intent on getting home, and on having had your high

spirits flee and all the rest of it, that you don't even notice that what's hanging you up is flowering lotuses! You don't see that; you just see the struggle. Then all of a sudden there's a great whoosh and roar as the entire sandbank of herons rises up in front of you. Anybody who's gone down to the Bosque del Apache knows what this looks like; it's a magnificent thing. And suddenly your relationship with the deep awakening of the world is restored. Suddenly you're connected again to that sudden joy.

I wish you sandbanks of herons. I wish you struggling through the lotus flowers and noticing that that's what you're doing. I wish you a connection — just for tonight. We can go back to the hard work tomorrow, no? Between now and the vernal equinox, hold on to the beauty of our heritage; hold on to the promise of awakening. Hold on to that deep joy that we might connect with in moments, but then the moments get longer and become more continuous. It is possible to have a life always connected to that deep joy. For the next week just try to believe that, and try to live as if that were true, okay?

Okay. Happy spring.