

Vernal Equinox Poems & Noble Questions
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM
March 19, 2009

Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Last week I was suggesting that maybe for the ten days or so between then and the vernal equinox this weekend we could take some time to remember, that, maybe appearance to the contrary, this way is not fundamentally a self-improvement project. But it is a way of awakening so that we can more wholly and truly meet the world, and participate in the great awakening of the world, all together.

The next morning, I was reading a poem by Mary Oliver that seemed to be a benediction on that thought. This is an excerpt from a poem called, "To Begin with, the Sweet Grass" :

What I loved in the beginning, I think, was mostly myself.
Never mind that I had to, since nobody else had to.
That was many years ago.
Since then I've gone from my confinements, though with difficulty.
I mean the ones that sought to rule my heart.
I cast them out. I put them on the mush pile.
They will be nourishment somehow; everything is nourishment somehow or another.
And I have become the child of the clouds, and of hope.
I have become the friend of the enemy, whoever that is.
I have become older and, cherishing what I have learned, I have become younger.
And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?
Love yourself; then forget it.
Then, love the world.

So, "Love yourself; then forget it. / Then, love the world."

It's our custom, at times like the equinoxes and solstices, to read some poems. Then I thought I'd come back at the end to say a few more words about this great legacy of our Way, which is a twelve-hundred-year-long, profound intimacy with awakening. I'd like to continue speaking about grounding ourselves in that, and to remember that that is our heritage.

First, some poems. Every spring we read Pablo Neruda's poem, "Spring."

The bird has come
to give the light:
from each trill of his
water is born.

And between water and light that unroll the air
now the spring is inaugurated,
now the seed knows that it has grown,
the root is portrayed in the corolla,
at last the eyelids of the pollen unclose.

All this was done by a simple bird
from a green branch.

Stephen Mitchell, trans.

For those of you in the koan salon, that's why the spring salon is called Bird Returning,
because it's the bird that brings back spring.

Another poem I always read is Yehuda Amichai's "The Place Where We Are Right."

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined
house once stood.

Chana Bloch & Stephen Mitchell, trans.

And then, to go along with that, a poem by Rumi.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

Coleman Barks, trans.

This is from Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill," and it's also something I always read in the
Spring.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white

With the dew, come back, the a cock on his shoulder: it was
 all
 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
 The sky gathered again
 And the sun grew round that very day.
 So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
 In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking
 warm
 Out of the whinnying green stable
 on to the fields of praise.

This is a poem by a nineteenth century Vietnamese wanderer and pilgrim, a woman who
 walked all around the country with a backpack full of books (and, I think, a bottle of wine, if I
 remember right). Her name was Hoxuan Huong, and this is called "Spring-Watching
 Pavilion."

A gentle spring evening arrives
 airily, unclouded by worldly dust.

Three times the bell tolls echoes like a wave.
 We see heaven upside down in sad puddles.

Love's vast sea cannot be emptied.
 And springs of grace flow easily everywhere.

Where is nirvana?
 Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten.

John Balaban, trans.

Last week I read a translation of mine of a poem by Li Qingzhao, who was writing at the
 same time that the great koan collections were being made in China, and who was related to
 the circle of people who were doing that koan work. So since some you said that you enjoyed
 that, I wanted to bring in another poem of hers, a spring poem.

Spring has come to Long Gate.
 Already, a few blossoms
 of the plum tree
 have opened,
 and red petals
 lie scattered
 on the young grass. Jade
 white clouds
 tumble,
 become a dragon,

and disappear, just
like this morning's dream,
though I was startled
and broke open
the first bowl of spring.
The shadow
of flowers
 leans heavily on my gate,
and the pale moon's light
spreads out
against the curtain
in the yellow dusk.
Three times in two years
I've borne the sorrow as
you journeyed east; now
that you return,
my heart is unrivaled
as the blossom of spring.

Joan Sutherland, trans.

This is "Spring and All," by William Carlos Williams.

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance— Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted they
grip down and begin to awaken

This is “Arriving Again And Again Without Noticing,” by Linda Gray.

I remember all the different kinds of years.
Angry, or brokenhearted, or afraid.
I remember feeling like that
walking up the mountain along the dirt path
to my broken house on the island.
And long years of waiting in Massachusetts.
The winter walking and hot summer walking.
I finally fell in love with all of it:
dirt, night, rock and far views.
It's strange that my heart is as full
now as my desire was then.

This is Anna Świr. She's a contemporary Polish poet whom I adore. For those of you who come to retreats, the piece that we say at the end of the night, “Always I carry a light inside of me” is her as well. This is another of hers called “I Am Filled With Love.”

I am filled with love
as a great tree with the wind,
as a sponge with the ocean,
as a great life with suffering,
as time with death.

Czesław Miłosz & Leonard Nathan, trans.

Lastly, Naomi Shihab Nye, another contemporary poet I recommend to you. This is called “Kindness.”

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,

all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken will stare out the
window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the
Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple
breath that kept
him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you
must know sorrow
as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day
to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

To find that kind of kindness that seems like the only possible answer, there is something we have to do, which is confront the question that the Buddha confronted after he had experienced harsh austerities and almost killed himself. When he was thinking *Hmmm, maybe this isn't the way*, the question that rose up inside him as if from somewhere else was, "Are you afraid of this happiness?" That's a tremendously important question for us to ask. He decided that he wasn't afraid, but it occurred to him that that question is so frightening because it puts us in touch with a happiness that is not based on desire. It's a happiness that's not dependent on the relative state of the satisfactions of our desires, but something else entirely. And that kind of happiness can be destabilizing and frightening. What I want to suggest is that there's a

way to look at that question. It's linked with another question we turn away from a lot, which is, "What do I want?"

For people who have taken up the spiritual path, "What do I want?" is such an embarrassing sort of question; we're not supposed to ask that. We can ask, "What is the great matter, what is life and death? What is the meaning of this? What am I meant to do?" Those are all noble questions. But "What do I want?" — that's sort of weird, slimy, and icky. But then "What do I want?" doesn't go away just because we feel that. We delegate it to the lesser gods in the city of ourselves, or to what we call the out-of-control employee, the ego. And so we get responses to the question of "What do I want?" that are the responses that seem reasonable to the lesser gods and to the out-of-control employee. We get impulses, habits, cravings, addictions, or strange, funny, and weird ways of trying to work that out; or we get denial, *I'm not going to go there, I don't have those feelings*. So we haven't solved the problem; we've actually made the problem worse by not taking it seriously. I want to suggest that — as good, deep, noble spiritual people — the thing is not to turn our backs on that question, but to actually take it more seriously than we do.

If we take that up with ourselves, if we wrench it from the hands of the lesser gods and the out-of-control employee and apply our whole heart-minds to that question, then something else can happen. We can take the question of "What do I want?" down, and in so doing we can find that place within ourselves, outside ourselves — wherever it's located in the ether — where "What do I want?" and "What does the world want?" meet and touch. And then, "What do I want?" instantly becomes the noblest of questions, because to answer "What do I want?" is to answer "What does the world want?"

We bring up, from time to time, Dongshan's question, "For whom do you bathe and make yourself beautiful?" This is one way of looking at that. We bathe and make ourselves beautiful for that encounter in the place where what we want meets what the world wants.

What we can do is prepare ourselves and take that question on honestly. What we can do is to ask, "What is my inmost request?" What is it I want, in that deep place below and not dependent on desire, that place that exists no matter what the surface is doing, no matter what's going on in the circumstances of our lives? In that place, if I go there beautiful, if I go there holding my question honorably, what do I meet and what can I discover?

I want to suggest that that be part of your vernal equinox practice. For another couple of days, to work really hard (laughs) at joy and ease, and see what you notice. See what happens when you begin to hold the question like that. Find the place where what you want meets what the world wants, sit there, and see what that's like, okay?

Happy Spring.

Q1 : Last week you made the comment of holding true to tradition, and honoring the tradition that we're in right here. I was wondering about holding to tradition and allowing for innovation, and how that really works.

JIS : For me, holding to tradition is not about holding forms. It's about working your ass off to understand the spirit, to try to come as close as you can to what they were up to, and what they meant and what the beauty was. And then finding the forms that want to express themselves now. So a huge part of my job is listening, paying attention, and trying to find out what the koans want, trying to find out how this Way wants to express itself. I don't really have to do very much except pay attention as best I can. That's the way I understand it, to get right down next to the koans, crawl on the ground with them, and see what it is that they're wanting, and how they're growing and changing organically, because they do. They move on their own, and we just have to notice.

Q1 : So it's not about holding on to the symbology ...?

JIS : I don't think so. I think there are images and metaphors that are beautiful, and that's why I use them all the time, because they're powerful. The fact that people have been using them for twelve hundred years gives them a kind of power. Every time they get used, every time they get shared, they grow. We find that as we spend time together working on the koans, as we develop a common language and a common vocabulary, we can start referring to things metaphorically, and everybody get the reference. There's something lovely about that. So, I'm not saying, throw all that out, but I'm saying, be judicious about what continues to live like that and what was just a form, just a momentary vessel of a time and place, whose time and place has passed on. And try to avoid the danger of substituting the forms for the spirit.

Q2 : Is Chan still alive in China today?

JIS : Yeah. Nobody knew that until recently, actually, because China took control of all the religious institutions. So there's this sort of Disneyland version of Chan that's government-controlled. But as people go there and spend more time there, it's clear that the Chinese did what they always did, which is take to the mountains and hold onto things there. We're starting to meet some of those people, and so we'll begin to have a sense of it. For instance, we thought that the Yunmen line had died out. Turns out not; turns out that it's been a continuous line all the way through, and there are still Yunmen Chan people today. I'm just so excited to wait and see, and hear what they have to say.

Q2 : What are the lines of contact like? How often is that?

JIS : It's pretty wonderful. It's people like Bill Porter, Red Pine, whose work I highly recommend to you. He's a fantastic translator. He goes over and finds these people somehow; he sits down and spends a couple days with them, talking with them and writing it all down. It's very *ad hoc*, in a nice way. And some of the big temples are still left, but that's a hybrid where you can see how the tradition was a thousand years ago, and at the same time it's gotten taken over a bit. If this is of interest to you, there was a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chan master called Xuyun, who really had it and wrote a lot. You can read his autobiography and get a flavor for what it's been like fairly recently there, that we just didn't know was happening.

Q2 : Where you can find it?

JIS : I've come across a big, double-volume version, and then there's a smaller, excerpted version of it. Either one is good. It's spelled Hsu-yun or Xuyun. Thanks.