

Koan Ancestors  
Joan Sutherland, Roshi  
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I want to set the field for the weekend by picking up a conversation that feels like the essential thing to work with at this stage. It has to do with this question : Do you choose to live your life by self, or by vow? How you answer that question makes all the difference to how your life is, and how the world around you is.

When I talk about living a life by self, it's about living a self-centered life, but not quite in the way we usually think of it — not selfish or self-indulgent. To live a self-centered life, in our sense, is to live a life that completely believes in the reality of the self, and also believes that my opinions, reactions, and ways of experiencing things are the most important thing — more important, often, than reality.

One of the results of making the choice for this kind of self-centered life is that we are at the mercy of karma. We're always embroiled in causes and conditions, because that's the landscape at the layer of experience of what a great 20<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese philosopher, Nishida Kitaro, called the surface self. We've talked about it as the constructed self. At the layer of that surface self, the landscape is causes and conditions; the landscape is karma, and we are enmeshed in that.

The other option that our tradition offers is the possibility of living by vow. Instead of placing the concerns and the perspective of the self at the center — instead of making that mistake to which you have tethered yourself and by which your life will be constrained — you put something else at the center. The simplest way to say that is that we put at the center a care and concern for the largest field we can be aware of living in. That's what the vow does. The vow says to pay attention to as much of what's happening around you as you can, and be alert to the ways in which you might respond helpfully.

If that's at the center of your life, one of the ways things are going to be very different is that you aren't at the mercy of karma. This amazing thing happens, over and over and over again, which is the instantaneous breaking of karmic knots, ties, and inevitabilities. This is a way of beautiful interruptions, where the inevitable thing

doesn't have to happen, because we've shifted our perspective, and we're putting something else at the center.

There are a couple of ways we do that, the fundamental being the bodhisattva vow, the vow to pay attention to what's happening around us and check to see if we can be helpful. Then we elaborate the bodhisattva vow, and sometimes we choose to take refuge and the precepts. So we've got these other vows we're making, which are how we live out, in a nitty-gritty way, day to day, the bodhisattva vow.

If there is a surface self, there's also what Nishida called a free self. There's a geography to it : if the surface self is up here [raises hand], the free self is down here [lowers hand], at depth. Everything I'm saying, parenthetically, is completely metaphorical. I'm not trying to cast something in concrete that you have to sign on to. It's not two eyes, two ears, a nose, a mouth, and a free self. But it gives us a way of provisionally talking about what we think we're doing. So just hold it provisionally, similar to how scientists explain quantum field effect with maple syrup and pancakes. They're great with those kinds of haimish metaphors. This is a haimish metaphor.

When we are able to connect with that free self, we discover that each of us has a vow particular to each of us, and it has something to do with the shape of our lives in a very important way. One of things I'd like you to hold as a question during the weekend is, "What is my original vow?" The vow before everything else, the vow that, at the deepest, freest level of my being, is the engine, the modus operandi of how I live. The original vow and the free self rest in that place where we experience that we are one with the *dharmakaya*, the vastness, the universe; where we know that it's just continuous universe right through us. In that place, with that experience, we can discover the original vow that is particular to each of us, which is completely compatible and harmonious with the original vow of the dharmakaya, the original vow of the vastness. There's no rub there, no conflict. There's an absolute harmony between the universal, great vow of the cosmos to exist, and our particular vow that we live out in our lives.

It seems important that if we're using a self to destroy a self, if we're deciding that the surface self is the problem that needs to be fixed, but we're using the tools of the surface to try to fix it, we're just going to dig ourselves in deeper and. So we need

something else. We cannot use our self to manage, fix, destroy, or deny our self. When we talk about moving from self to vow, we're not talking about self-denial or self-abnegation. That's as much about the self as self-indulgence is. It's still all about the self. We're talking about this other thing that circumvents the problem of trying to solve the problems of the self with the self. We do that by what's been called the moment when the submarine captain yells "Dive! Dive! Dive!" How do we do that? How do we drop down to that place of the free self and the original vow, where we experience that we are one with the dharmakaya?

The answer to that question is why meditation and retreats and these conversations are important. It's why it is really important to keep turning our attention there, allowing ourselves to fall, allowing ourselves to be pulled. Because if we are pushed toward the depths, toward that free self we yearn for, by our awareness of the suffering of our own heart-minds and the suffering of others, which can feel so unbearable, something has to be pulling us, too. Something has to be pulling us *from* the depths. I would like to spend the rest of the evening with what is pulling, because it is so important to be aware of that deep and free place of the original vow, which is pulling us toward the free self, if we will just let it.

I'll focus tonight on what we might call a spiritual ecology of that place. This, in particular, is the spiritual ecology developed in Daoism and Chan, which was an attempt to speak metaphorically and imagistically about free self and the original vow, so that you can experience directly the power of the dharmakaya's original vow moving through you. You can experience coming to match that power with your own power and your own original vow, the one that's particular to you.

Here is a very old and simple description of our relationship to that vow, and the sense of it evolving our awareness of a much larger, more expansive, ancient, eternal thing. It comes from Mencius, who was one of the great Confucian scholars. He said, "The ten thousand things are all here, in me. And there's no greater joy than looking within and finding myself faithful to that. Devote yourself to this."

We're going to look at the ancestors of the koans, words that relate to this deep spiritual ecology. I want to introduce them so you can spend time, as you wish, with them, tonight and over the next few days.

*(Please refer to the koan booklet in pdf form linked on the website under this transcription to accompany the next few pages.)*

On the left of each little grouping is the way a Chinese character is written now. That's how you would run across it in a book today. On the right are older forms of the characters. I included them because sometimes you can see things more clearly in the older forms. As they're more pictographic, you can get a stronger sense for what it's saying. Then there is the English translation with it. Sometimes there's a bonus older character, like the first one, "self" : on the left is the way we write "self" now; on the right is the old form of it, which doesn't really make a whole lot of sense until you look at an even older form of it, which is that tall, thin figure hanging off the bottom. When you look at that, you can see that "self" comes from the torso. Can you see how the torso morphs through the old form into the new form?

Next to that is "Dharma," which has layers of meaning. It has one layer of meaning as the Dao, the way things are, the totality of everything. It has another meaning of the teachings, the Way, and a third meaning of everything that exists being a dharma; everything that manifests in the world is a dharma. In the old pictographic form, on the left you can probably understand that that's a depiction of water, of a river flowing. On the right, it's a person leaving an exit. So, the meaning is "going." So, it's water going, the way water goes, the flow of water, the patterns that water make as it flows. When this majestic concept called Dharma came from India to China, this is how they chose to represent it, as the flow of water.

Hanging off the right, I threw in another character just for grins. In that version of water flowing, there's also a unicorn in the upper right. I don't know why, but if anyone has a theory, I'm interested in why a unicorn should appear in that old form of the character.

The next grouping is "original vow," which applies both to the dharmakaya itself, the vastness itself, and to each of us. On the pictograph form, maybe you can see that the word "original" is about the roots; there's a tree and the roots hanging down, underground. This word means not only original, but also fundamental. So it's not just

what was there at the beginning, it's what's there all the time. It's what's there at the root of every moment, at the heart of things always. "Vow" is a combination of "spring," as in a source of water, on the left, and a head on the right. So it's a head at a spring.

The next group begins below that, on the left, and that's the heart-mind. As we've often said, in Chinese there's one word for both heart and mind. On the right is the pictogram it comes from, and that's meant to be a depiction of a heart, of an actual physical heart, with its chambers and its blood vessels and arteries coming off of it.

Next to that is "thought" and "feeling". The word for thought involves the heart and a field. So thought is the "field land" of the heart. And "feeling" involves the heart. On the left, the upright thing with two dots coming off of it is another way to write "heart". So it's "heart" and the blue-green color of the landscape. It's the landscape color of the heart.

It's being suggested to us that our hearts and minds are much bigger than what's encapsulated in our bodies, and that they're continuous with the world, with the fields and colors of the landscape. We extend into the world and the world extends into us; our heart-minds are made up of the fields, the places we see, the landscapes we're in, and the colors, the smells, and all of that. Those are inextricable; we're always that big. That's the place of the free self, the place of experiencing that we're always that big.

Below that is "emptiness". Next to the modern character on the upper left is the older character, and then hanging off the bottom of that is a figure that is the oldest representation of the *Mu*, or *Wu* in Chinese, of Zhaozhou's "No". This is Zhaozhou's "No". This is the vastness, emptiness, shunyata, dharmakaya. This is a huge word in our tradition. You know what it started out as? It started out as a woman dancing, holding fox tails! That's what that is a pictograph of.

So what does that say about emptiness? It's not a vacuum; it's not an absence. It's a dynamic, living presence — so much so that, down on the left below is the word for "dance", and it's basically emptiness with feet. Yes! Let that soak in. Buddhism comes to China, China says, how are we going to translate that? And this is how they chose to translate it. This is so deep in their understanding of what the nature of dharmakaya, of the vastness, is. It's dynamic and alive, and full of so much.

That's the emptiness side. Next to that, on the right, is the form side, which is "manifestation". In the pictograph there maybe you can see a hand over the moon. I don't know what that means, but that's a thing I would love to spend some time with this weekend : why should "manifestation" be a hand over the moon?

On the top of the next page we have a cluster of four things that all have to do with weaving and silk. The first, on the upper left, is the dark mysterious. This is the original place, and in the phrase "rivers of light stream from the dark," this is the dark they're streaming from. This is everything we don't know, everything that is beyond our control, undomesticated, wild and free. Our practice is about meeting with our own wildness and freedom.

When you look at the old pictogram, maybe you can see that that darkness comes from two silkworm cocoons with three threads coming out of the top of them. The mysterious dark inside the cocoon, the hiddenness of the cocoon, gives birth to something—in this case streams of silk.

Next to that is the great cosmic loom. In the first koan of the *Book of Serenity*, which is one of the old koan collections, there's a comment : "Creation is endlessly running her loom and shuttle, weaving the ancient brocade." Everything that is manifest is that brocade, constantly being woven on this cosmic loom. You can see the silkworm cocoons in the upper right of the old pictogram, and then there's a tree next to it representing the wood of the loom.

Then we go to a word that means both the warp on a loom and a weaving, and came to mean "sutra". You can also probably see the cocoons of silk, with the silk dangling down from them. Also included in that, on the right of the pictogram, is water above and earth below. On the cosmic loom there's the warp. The essential stuff is woven into water and earth and culture—the very fabric of the cosmos. All of that came to mean "sutra", which is a sacred text. There was a sense that the Dharma of the sutras is part of the warp, part of the essential thing onto which the brocade of everything is woven.

The last part of that cluster is "gateway". This is the gate of the koan collection called *The Gateless Gate*, and it's the gate that Yunmen is speaking about when he says, "Barrier!" Check out what it is. It's a doorway to the loom. It's a doorway to the great

loom. That is our gate, our gateless gate, which takes us right into the universe of the cosmic loom.

Below that is the word for “universe,” which is spookily modern : it’s “space and time”. When you look at it, the little things on the top are roofs. Can you see that each one has a roof? Something is underneath the roof. On the left, what’s underneath is streams of breath, streams of *qi* coming from the universe down into the world, and held in “home”. On the right, it’s a seed that’s beginning to sprout. Space is breath under the eaves of the universe, and time is the endlessly generating seed. So this is our breath-seed-home, which is the universe.

Finally, two that go together : The first is “Chan,” which is what we do. At the left part of Chan you’ve got two horizontal lines and three verticals coming down from that. This represents the way that *qi* comes into the world; the horizontal lines are the sky, the heavens, and the dark mysterious above it. This is my etymology : everybody believes that the large horizontal line is the heavens. I believe that the shorter horizontal line above that is the dark-mysterious. From that radiate three streams of light, from the sun, the moon, and the stars; those are the three lines coming down. It is in that radiation of light from sun, moon, and stars that *qi* constantly flows down into the world. You might have caught the rhyme with the silk cocoons and the three threads coming out of them. The part on the right means “alone,” complete in itself. It means “exhausted” in the sense of completed, gone all the way through, utterly and entirely done. So Chan, the word that the Chinese chose to describe what we do, is this combination of the radiant streaming from the universe into our world, and being completely and entirely alone with that. So is it us alone in it? Or, is it the thing itself, alone and complete? Or is it both?

Related to this is the word for “ancestor,” which is that radiance streaming from the dark, caught and held under a roof. That’s what an ancestor is : that which allows the radiance to pool under a roof so that we can experience it.

Please do as you wish with this. Spend time on it, bring it into your meditation, riff on it. We’ll be talking about it all weekend, but this is really for you to do with as you wish and see where it takes you. You can’t be wrong about any of this, so just go with where it takes you, as we do with koans, and let’s see what happens. Look at these

ancestors of the koans, these beautiful metaphors and images, these powerful ideas encoded in pictographs that could be carved on a wall somewhere around here. How did these then grow into the stories that became the koans?

Any questions at the level of meaning? Anything that went by too fast?

Q1 : Under “manifestation”, also in feeling, is that thing on the bottom both “moon” and “gate”?

JIS : It’s “moon” with manifestation. With feeling, I’m remembering it’s actually a well with a tree above it. The lower right element is a well. The sense of it was that the centerpiece, which is marked by the two horizontal lines, is the well. Then there are all the fields around it that are made possible by the well at the center.

Q2 : Who made up these pictographs?

JIS : People in the Shang and Zhou dynasties, so people almost 4,000 years ago.

Q2 : So they invented this language?

JIS : Yes. I was talking with someone recently about pictographic language versus an alphabetical language. This language was developed, it seems, in large part in order to perform divinations. Some of these are oracle bone characters. The Chinese needed language so they could do divination. In the West, the Phoenicians needed language so they could be merchants, in order to keep track of their stuff! So they developed an alphabetical language, which is much simpler. Someone said a beautiful thing : “This is the written language of people with not a lot to say and a whole lot of time to say it.”

Q3 : Putting the symbols together to create language, so that you can tell a story or ask a question : how does it work with tense and grammar and inflection, etc?

JIS : This is one of my favorite subjects, so I’ll try to be brief. In classical Chinese, which is the language of the koans, there is no verb tense at all. There’s no number — you don’t know “how many” of something. There’s very rarely a subject of a sentence. You have a completely different sense about what you’re doing. These are so tathagata, these things. They’re so thus. You’re putting up a thus and a thus and a thus and a thus, and it’s up to the reader to make the connections between them. So there’s a very

strong sense of an eternal present in classical Chinese, because it's uninflected.

There is a little particle you can add when you want to make really clear that something happened in the past, but it's rare. More often there are locutions such as, "at the time when". It's like "once upon a time", so you know you're talking about something in the past. But, it's such a different experience reading classical Chinese, because of that timeless present, tathagata quality of the language.

Q4 : In the same period, would that have been true about the spoken language, as well?

JIS : No. It would have been more inflected. Classical Chinese is a literary language. A modern Chinese speaker can't necessarily read classical Chinese.

Q5 : I have a question about the language of divination. At that time were people studying divination?

JIS : Yes, and they used what are called oracle bones : tortoise shells and ox scapulae, and other things. They would carve the question into the tortoise shell or ox scapula, and put it on the fire. Then they would look at the cracks that occurred in the fire as their answer. There are a lot of them that survived because they're robust.

Q5 : It seems like the people who were teachers/diviners would really need this whole system; they would be receiving information, so to put it out to the community they would need a system like this.

JIS : That's interesting. They were very strong on recording the questions. I'm not exactly sure why, but that's intriguing.

Q6 : So, in the classic Chan koan collections, the case itself would have been in language that was more inflected, but somehow the koan makes a field that has the feel of something like these characters?

JIS : It's uninflected in the koans. That's what makes it so challenging to translate them.

Q6 : How about the commentaries?

JIS : They tend to be a little more informative, a little more discursive in the way that they're written, but they're still classical Chinese. They're still pretty uninflected.

Q7 : You're saying that while we're diving, something is also pulling us. And your question is, "What is pulling us?"

JIS : That's one of the questions. My experience is that if our suffering and the suffering of others pushes us, what pulls us is the intimations or convictions that most of us have that there's something larger.

Q8 : Are we going to go toward the friendly commerce between the surface self and the free self?

JIS : Yes, because in the end, the huge mistake of trying to deal with it at the surface level is that you think that the surface self needs to be whipped into shape, or destroyed. There's a lot of spiritual practice that's about that. But, actually, it's about the free self and the surface self coming into the right relationship, because the free self absolutely needs the surface self. So that's the movement.

Okay, as with all our retreats, not everything happens in the daylight or the lamplight. Not everything happens in the bright. We also value what happens in the dark, what happens underground, what we're not yet conscious of. So we bring our dreams into the retreat, and for those who want to, we'll talk about it in the morning. It's quite remarkable to watch what happens with people's dreams, even over a very short retreat like this.

If you wish to do this, when you go to sleep tonight and tomorrow night and the next night and the next night and the next night, for ever and ever ... see if you can go easily to bed. As you're settling in, you can ask to dream about something and remember it. If you want, you can ask to have a dream about one of these images or something that's come up, or you can ask for a dream in general. When you wake up in the morning, don't jump out of bed. We start at nine, that's not so early, so don't jump and scare away the dream. Just lie there, keep your eyes closed, and see if anything comes to you, if you can feel or remember any part of the dream. If you can't

remember storyline or images, see if you're waking up with a particular feeling. If you have a feeling, go into that, and see if you can follow the feeling back to what the dream was.

Dreams are the koans of the night. Koans are the dreams of the day. Our practice rolls on through all states of consciousness. That's what a lot of what these koan retreats are about — watching how we hold the thread through whatever state of consciousness we're in, meditating or talking or eating or walking around or sleeping and dreaming.