

Koan Ancestors II
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On the night that Shakyamuni spent under the bodhi tree, many interesting things happened. I want to talk about a couple of them. Not the dramatic, being-attacked-by-Mara's-demons things, but important moments that speak directly to what we're talking about this weekend.

You may remember that at a certain point, Shakyamuni sees that a part of him, which we'll call the surface self, has built a house of pain that he's been living with. He is able to interrupt that, to break through it. He says, with great passion and depth of feeling, "Oh, carpenter! Lifetime after lifetime, I've been looking for you. And now I see you. The house is destroyed, the ridgepole is broken, the rafters are shattered, and I will never build this house again."

One of the ways we can understand that moment is that Shakyamuni has sunk into his free self and is looking back at the surface self from that position. He's seeing it as the builder of the house that feels constricted; the house where you feel you're in the loop that you can never get out of. The important thing here, in terms of our way, is that he says, "Oh, carpenter, now I see you." Not, "Now I kill you," or "Now I repudiate you," or "Now I'm going to send you to re-education camp," but "Now I see you." There's a coming into relationship. What does he see? He sees the emptiness of the constructed self, not as something especially empty, but something empty like everything else is empty. So, if it's empty, it's not inevitable. The ways we are, the ways we live, the things we feel, the beliefs we have, the thought constructions, etc., none of it is inevitable, because it's all empty. Just as everything else is.

Empty means a certain kind of absence of solidity and inevitability, but it also means the presence of possibility. If it's empty, it's malleable, shapeable, and affectable. We can come into relationship with it. In fact, that's what Shakyamuni does. After that night is over, he spends a couple of days absorbing what's happened. He thinks, *I'm never going to be able to talk about this. There's no way I can possibly speak about this thing I have come to understand.* But then he works his way around to understanding that he has to talk about it; he has to get up from under the tree and start walking, and start talking about what he's come to know.

That's coming into a relationship with the surface self. The free self and the surface self meet, but now, instead of being at the mercy of karma, under the inevitabilities of this karmic wheel, the

surface self is put at the service of the free self, which is to say that it's put at the service of the dharmakaya. When that happens, it becomes possible to speak; it becomes possible for him to teach. What we can see is the absolutely essential nature of the surface self. Without that, Shakyamuni is going to spend eternity sitting under that tree, and none of the rest of this mess would have unfolded over the last 2,500 years. Or, maybe it would have, but in a different way.

At another moment in that night under the tree, he sees all of his past lives. There's a beautiful image in one of the ways it's told : he's looking at the surface of a pond, which is covered with leaves, and the leaves are all touching and overlapping each other, and each leaf is a life. He sees instantly everywhere he's ever been, and everyone he's ever been, and the content of all of it. But he understood that the important thing is not that he was something here and a deer over there and this happened or that happened. The essential thing is not the narration of the stories; it's the thread, the through-line that connects all of them.

He sees that all the leaves are touching each other and make one giant thing. They're not separate anymore. And the thing that connects them, the through-line, the thread, is the vow toward awakening. That was true even before he was conscious of having that vow. It was true when he became conscious of it, and ever since then. That was the important thing to see, that through-line, that lifetime after lifetime after lifetime, whether he was conscious of it or not, he had been living out this vow toward awakening that had finally come to some kind of fruition, although my sense is that it probably went on quite awhile after that.

In seeing this through-line of the vow of awakening through his many lives, he also understood, and we can understand, the identity of our individual vow toward awakening with the vow of the dharmakaya, which is also toward the awakening of all things, our common awakening and the awakening of the universe together, which is a very, very, long arc. Sometimes it can be hard to remember that that's the arc we're on, because there are lots of steps backward, and lots of failures, and lots of experiments that go horribly wrong. But, in general, there is an arc of awakening, driven by the vow of the dharmakaya.

It's when we surrender to that free self (which is such an interesting paradoxical notion — to surrender to the free self) that we understand that that's our vow, too. Then we come into complete alignment with the movement of the dharmakaya. So it's no longer just moving through us, which it always is and always was, whether we were aware of it or not. The dharmakaya is always roaring through each of us, and roaring through everything else in the world, the great

roaring silence. Not only is that occurring, but we are becoming conscious of it. And that's the crucial thing. Because when we become conscious of the roar of the dharmakaya through us, we're no longer just receiving it; we're actually able to co-create with it. We are actually able to join our vow of awakening with the great vow of awakening of the dharmakaya, to make a particular life, a life that isn't, in the Zen expression, "living by vow," but a life that *is* vow, where there is no separation. There is complete identity among the dharmakaya's vow, our vow, and our life. They're all one and the same thing.

I want to just stop there for a moment and see if there are any questions or comments about that piece, because there's a certain roaring quality to it.

Q1 : Can you say this again, that when we become conscious of the roar of the dharmakaya ...

JIS : Then we can co-create with it, rather than just being a receptacle for it.

Q2 : Does it mean that we all have the same original vow? Or does each of us have a particular one?

JIS : Yes! Both things are true : that the deep meaning of the vow is toward awakening, and how each of us understands, expresses, and experiences that; it will have the flavor of each of us. It is, as it always is in this Way, the marriage of the vast and eternal with the local and particular, and that's what we discover. There are two parts to that. The first part is discovering that there is the vow of awakening, and coming to accept that, the willingness to land and stay there, to surrender to the free self. The second part is, *What is my particular expression of that? What is my vow that's only mine?*

These things can't be solved by thinking about them, by trying to figure it out. They can only be solved by experiencing them. In the practice we put ourselves in the way, over and over again, of experiencing that which we can't control and can't will. We can only make ourselves available. If you had to have a catchphrase for what this practice is, it is the practice of making ourselves available, in so many different ways. And this is the deepest way : making ourselves available to the dharmakaya. This has other expressions, making ourselves available with love and generosity for the world around us.

Q3 : When you say the arc of awakening, do you mean that mankind is evolving?

JIS : Everything is evolving. The whole universe.

Q3 : You say we're evolving and we're changing ... for the better, or ...?

JIS : I wouldn't use a word like 'better,' but I would use 'awakening.' This is theory, based on experience, but it is very much a part of the Mahayana tradition. And the theory based on experience is that there is a movement of waking up in the universe as a whole, which unfolds very slowly.

Q3 : What then is the natural movement of the universe? It just wakes up and then goes back to sleep? I guess we're evolving, but in a way, nothing changes. We look at pictographs and we go back thousands of years to the wisdom of those people. I feel really small, nowadays, compared to their wisdom. Thousands of years later, we're still searching. I find that so mysterious.

JIS : I don't think in the timescale we're talking about that a thousand years is very long. Awakening isn't just a matter of understanding, or a spiritual experience. It's also a matter of embodiment. We are carrying on this beautiful project of how to embody the awakening that, as human beings, we can touch. How miraculous is that? We're in this particular phase of the experiment. We will do things that contribute to that, and we will do things that will be horrible warnings about what not to do again.

One of the crucial movements here is from will to vow, from surface self to free self. So we're no longer trying to push things via our will. We're trying to live them via our vow. The question shifts from, *What do I have to do about this?* or *What can or should I do about this?* to *What is happening and what is my place in it?* In any moment, where do I find the vow in this moment? You can go into a situation with the intention of figuring out what ought to happen, or you can go into a situation with the intention of looking for where the vow is in the situation. And those are two very different things.

If we go into each moment of our lives with the intention of looking for the vow, we're in an aspect of listening, paying attention, and receiving before acting. So the action is not driven by our sense of will, which usually comes out of our sense of right and wrong, or what's good or not good for me. It's driven by the world itself, by the situation itself. We enter with our vow and look for the vow coming toward us from the world, and then we try to find the match in that. Does that make a strange kind of sense?

Q4 : So, it's the ten-thousand things advancing.

JIS : Exactly.

Q5 : And does the vow get interrupted when we forget the dream of the universe?

JIS : Yes. It's not that we lose the vow, but I think 'forget' is a good word. We drop out of relationship with it, and then we have to find it again. Say more about the relationship of that to the dream of the world.

Q5 : The real potential for the vow to keep on flowing gets stuck, gets caught, trapped.

JIS : Yes.

Q6 : A preoccupation could be getting to what we think the end of the arc is, where things will be, once and for all. In our minds we picture that arc as landing somewhere. But then the vow, you're saying, is recognizing that you're part of this arc. You are *here*, and that's the area to attend to, yes?

JIS : Yes, absolutely. And also, if we're driven by will, it tends to reinforce that sense of a solid self behind our eyes that is projecting something into the world to make it happen. Whereas vow is so much more vulnerable. It's so much less defended and less protected, and so much more a recognition that we're part of it. As you say, we're part of a concatenation of causes and conditions.

(Please follow the pdf of the koan booklet for the next paragraph)

I want to mention one other piece that has to do with the way down and the way back up. In the booklet, in the lower left corner of the left-hand side, is 'emptiness.' In Chan, that *Wu*, that emptiness, gets attached to a lot of things. From Daoism you have *wuwei*, which is empty action, an important part of Daoism. You have *wusheng*, which is 'unborn' — you've probably run across that in Zen literature. You have *wuxin*, right above it, 'empty heart-mind.' It's usually translated as 'no mind,' but that's what it is — it's that empty heart-mind. There's something that happens as we're on the way down from the surface self to the free self, where that emptiness — empty action, empty mind, not born, not dying, the whole *Heart Sutra* litany of *not's* that is the *wu* character — that has to do with stopping our habitual ways of doing things, interrupting the pattern.

What is it like to have a heart-mind that isn't full of all the stuff it's usually full of? That's what it's talking about. What is it like to recognize that everything is unborn and undying; that all of that is empty? All of that is happening in a material sense, but at the same time, not happening at all. What is it like to act without our usual preconceptions, our usual ways of doing things?

So the trip down is about shedding and deconstruction, interruption, and putting down, which is the way we loosen the grip of the surface self. It's the way we get out of the loops. We keep putting down and putting down and putting down. That's why the first koan for people often is Zhaozhou's *No*. We have the practice of saying "No" over and over again, which is a weird practice if you're looking at it from outside; why would you want to do that? Why wouldn't you say "Yes"? Because you *have* to say "No" for a while. You have to question everything. You have to destabilize everything. There's that great poem of Amichai's :

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.

It's that quality of digging up, of destabilizing. That's why it's scary, because it does destabilize. We do confront the emptiness of everything. We do confront the fact that we're not solid and eternal, and we, too, shall die.

That's how we break the dominion of the surface self and the dominion of karma. We're basically saying, also, "No" to all of the karmic momentum that's brought us to this point. Karma only exists right to here; and from right here we sit, as a result of all those causes and conditions that have previously occurred. We have the ability to do something different, right here. So we break the inevitability of the control of that roaring momentum of karma, of causes and conditions. That's a really big No, that contains within it tremendous potential for change, creativity, weird possibility, the unexpected, surprise.

Resting, resting on the two-thousand dollar beautiful bed, of that place and the free self, where each of us, and the dharmakaya, and the vow are the same, where we *are* the vow. And, after a nice rest, rising up out of that place and coming back into relationship with the surface self in the way that Shakyamuni did, which enabled him to get up from under the tree and start walking and talking. When that begins to happen, all of those terms, like no-action, no-birth, no-mind, flip in their meaning, and they become the action and aliveness of the dharmakaya, the

heart-mind of the dharmakaya.

Can you see that if you have, for example, *wuxin*, 'emptiness heart-mind,' it becomes the heart-mind that *is* emptiness, the dharmakaya, the vastness? That's the promise : when we can reunite surface and free self, we will be able to discover the activity of the vastness in our own lives, the aliveness and the heart-mind of the vastness. And we can do something about that, which is deeply expressive of our vow in the world.

Q6 : Is that manifestation? You talked about manifestation last night as being the hand over the moon. There's a relationship between the light and the hand. I almost feel it as the hand being warmed over the moon. The moon often represents emptiness, right?

JIS : Awakening, yes. I love the image of the hand warming itself. That's really beautiful.

Q7 : I thought of it as the hand warming the moon.

JIS : Oh! That works, too!

Yesterday we were talking about a *radical*, which is a piece of a character that repeats in many different characters. There is a radical that appears in both 'Chan' and 'ancestor,' which is the heavens with the three streams of *qi*, radiance, coming down from the moon and sun and stars. There is something about manifestation as the hand, which is how we do stuff, connecting with that radiance, that *qi* coming from the heavens. I love the idea of them warming each other; that the warming can be coming from either way. That's beautiful.

Q8 : The koans never ask you to choose. That's beautiful.

Q9 : I thought of little kids playing in tents, making patterns on a wall from the light, so that each hand moves in a different way, and the light streams through it.

Q10 : It confirms the act of thoroughly appreciating each moment for what it is, because it all has a place. I was thinking of how, as a parent, you spend all this time helping children develop a will so they can function in the world, as if that's the most important thing. And then they have years and years of school, which is largely about that. Then, in the teenage years, it seems to collide : all these efforts to be in the world with waking up to the spiritual again, but on a new

level, and the forces go wild. Then they grow out of it and they become people, and then they are us, and then they are doing it again! My point was that, when I can appreciate each stage, it's always fruitful. I feel I know it all, and then I lose it all again. Then life really is a continuous moment.

JIS : I think what you're saying is important, because then we're talking about seeing, at the same time (maybe paradoxically, but it's a beautiful paradox) the emptiness of everyone and everything, and the through-line in everyone and everything. You watch your child grow, and you realize that each stage is empty because you know it's going to become something else. And there's a through-line, which is the vow, as lived through that child; we hold both of those things at the same time. It's important, as much as we can, to speak to the through-line, and not to the empty, constantly changing thing, in all our relationships. That way we're not getting stuck on the surface of the changes, but we're having a deeper relationship at the level of the through-line.

The character for 'friendship/companionship,' which isn't on here – this is a bonus character – is two moons, side by side. We are coming from that place in ourselves that connects to the radiance, and we are relating to other people as a place where the radiance exists, and we are speaking or acting moon to moon. That's really friendship, the kind of companions we can be to each other.

Q11 : Right before you said that, I started asking myself, what's the through-line with my best friends? We've had fights, we've broken up, we've gotten divorces, we've gotten back together, and I've always felt like that's really okay. Now it's more clear to me that what I'm relating to is the radiance of each person, or each being, along with the foibles and the annoying things, and how we get into conflict. I haven't said this to any of them, because when we get into a fight, it feels solid. But, from this age, I see it's not. I really like the two moons.

Q12 : Can you speak to the difference between a full flip and a partial flip?

JIS : That's great. Say more about that. What do you mean by that?

Q12: You can flip and turn, say, 230 degrees around. You're just that far. And then you have to use the will to animate that kick of the vow more, to remember the vow. So it seems like you have to tack back to the side of the will. What about the full flip? It seems that a lot of the Zen literature really espouses the importance of that full flip.

The other part of my question is, does the full flip, by necessity, happen all at once, or is it like a gymnast learning, for whom it takes years to really learn the flip?

JIS : That's a great question. Sometimes I think it happens all at once, but I think mostly it doesn't. There's a certain kind of insane persistence to go all the way through. You're right that there may be a time when you do have to use will to turn the horse around, to go into a different direction. But there is a time when it's not necessary to use will, when the surrender is complete, and the vow is just acting on its own. Again, I think we get back to this idea that we not engineer it through will, but make ourselves available. The proper service or function of the will is to put us in positions where we're available to it, not to make it happen. So we have a realistic and healthy relationship with the will of the surface self, which is, *I'll do another retreat, I'll sit again this morning*. I'll do those things and then trust that the vow is walking towards us as much as we're walking towards it. We might have that partial flip for a while, a long time, three seconds, eight lifetimes, and we just keep walking toward the vow and trust that it's walking toward us.

Q13 : I feel there's a moment where the free self brings a bushel full of good news to the surface self, and the surface self is blown away, and very different. Then, over the years, you realize that the surface self has got a lot of other histories and other allegiances and wants to sneak off with somebody else, and stuff like that. So it's a back and forth kind of thing. The free self, in a way, has to have a kind of sense of humor toward the surface self, too, and be patient with it. And the surface self has to have enough experience with the free self that it's willing to sit down with the free self for a retreat, or something like that. I love Zhaozhou's awakening, where the last little commentary is, "Be that as it may, it will take him thirty years before he really gets it."

JIS : Absolutely.

Q14 : I've been experiencing this as a coiling and uncoiling. For example, I sometimes think about fear, worry, and doubt, and how that plays in our lives. I was in a coil moment. It dropped away, and it became concern. It was fascinating to experience those things as concern. It was much more appropriate. There was an awareness that the fear, worry, and doubt has no purpose, and that concern could be beneficial. That's what I'm observing happening — coiling and uncoiling and unloosening, and then falling a little bit out of it and then coming back into it in a

re-wrap. And so we vow, and so we begin, and so we vow, and so we continue, and it's a process. It's very interesting and it's really amazing and incredibly liberating, but it's a process.

JIS : I love what you're saying : fear and doubt, and then concern. That's beautiful, and that's exactly it, because you're moving from a question of, "What does this mean for me?" to, "What does this mean?" That's a huge shift.

Sometimes in the West we can take for granted a linear idea, like the Big Bang. There's nothing and then there's a giant explosion, and then there's nothing but a sort of linear progression. But, actually, that's not what's happening at all. The vastness and manifestation, emptiness and manifestation, are constantly giving birth to each other. You're describing that very process. We can look at it as, *Oh, not again!* or *Haven't I been here before?* Or we can look at it as, *It's just emptiness and manifestation, endlessly giving birth to each other.* Each time there's a bit more stuff that gets involved in the birth. Because we've done stuff; we've changed; we've moved. Things have happened that now get included in the new negotiation.

Q14 : I've been pondering the hand over the moon and manifestation. In the context of this week, I was thinking of two situations that cost me financially and were a problem; I had pushed through when the indications were not to. Which, to me, is the expression of will. But, I'm struck that it's the moon and not the sun, because if the mind were to think of manifestation, I would think of harnessing the sun's energy. But it's the moon, and when you were talking about the moon warming, I thought, well, what is the temperature of the moon? I created a question to live with around harnessing the moon as manifestation, and what relationship that has to will, and particularly, in my case, when it wants to act up. I can feel I am hitting a wall, and then I feel indignant, like, how dare the world treat me this way! I'm just curious, you know, what *is* that relationship?

JIS : Maybe one thing to throw into the stew is, when the sun is up, it's nothing but light. It takes over everything and it becomes one thing. When the moon is up, she sits in the darkness, and is completely comfortable there. The two things co-exist; one doesn't annihilate the other. Somehow that seems important.

Q13 : Also, the moon's image has something to do with emptiness, substantial and insubstantial at the same time.

JIS : You want to say more?

Q13 : The light coming from the moon is reflected light; it's bounced off something else, and we are getting what feels like an image, but it's insubstantial, like an image. To make patterns with moonlight is in a way, then, to dance that dance among the things that are empty or real.

JIS : And isn't everything reflected light? It's all reflected light. The moon just makes us aware of that.

Q15 : I was thinking of the power of the moon and the tides, the power that ebbs and flows and comes and goes. I think of it as different from the way I think of sun energy — solar panels on houses that power things that move forward in one direction. Lunar energy seems more to be in a cycle or a flow. It's different; it's not directional.

Q16 : I'm struck with the Chinese metaphor of *yin* and *yang* — the action orientation of the yang, and the yin as dark and mysterious. You're talking about the tides. That's unseen. How is this working? It's these unknowns we have to rest in. They're begging you to listen and pay attention. I imagine that the marriage of them both is listening for when to act and when to not. It's like the empty action — you get information from both sides and follow some impulse based on that.

JIS : And always knowing that any gesture you make is a gesture in the darkness. We don't know what it's going to be, or do, or cause.

Q17 : I have a question about the characters themselves, and their directionality or intention. The way they would be written.

JIS : The Chinese goes top to bottom, and right to left. You write characters from upper left to lower right, in general. What's mysterious is that when you look a character up in a dictionary, you look it up by its radical, by a piece of it. Usually it's the one that's upper left-most, but not always. Some radicals weigh more than other radicals, and so even though there's a radical in the upper left you're going to actually look at it in the radical that's at the bottom. All of this stuff is mysterious. It's completely unsystematic and beautiful — and really frustrating when you're learning. When I was in graduate school, we had a course in learning to use a dictionary. It took a quarter to learn how to use the dictionary.

Q18 : Is it intuitive, after a time?

JIS : You begin to get the pattern, for example, of which radicals weigh more than other radicals. You look at a character and then have an intuitive notion of where you should go.

Q17 : To discover the radicals, do you just look for repeating patterns?

JIS : Yes. Look at the two characters that make up 'universe.' They have the same roof, so that would be the radical for those two characters. And 'roof' is one of the 214 radicals.

I would like us to go outside for about 15 minutes, and just walk around, each on your own, in silence. Hold the question, as you walk, "What is my original vow?" Resist all attempts to try to figure it out, but see if the landscape speaks to you. See if the landscape will tell you about your original vow. If you walk out to meet it with sincerity, it will begin to walk towards you.