

Koan Ancestors III
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I have just a bit more that I want to say on our last morning together. Over the weekend, words like gratitude, generosity, and love have come up from people speaking in the room. One of the things that's most beautiful to me in our Way is this gorgeous, reckless, against-all-odds assumption that those qualities are inherent in the universe; that it's not our job to manufacture them and bring them to the situation. They're already there. Our job is much more like discovering them in each situation. This is an old tradition in the Mahayana. Nagarjuna, a great Indian philosopher of the Mahayana, said, "When buddhas don't appear and their followers are gone, the wisdom of awakening bursts forth by itself."

This is the vow of the dharmakaya : that wisdom of awakening, bursting forth by itself, no matter what else is going on, whether we have a Dharma or not, is there, an inherent part of the very texture of the universe itself. When that strain of Mahayana Buddhism came to China, it found a receptive home, because that's also a fundamental idea in Daoism. They understand emptiness, and they understand it in a different way. They understand it in a way where emptiness and dance can be so close together, that "dance" is just emptiness with legs.

Here is a quote from Zhuangzi, one of the early and great Daoist philosophers, who's talking about emptiness. Listen to the way he presents it. He's talking about coming into conversations that Daoists had with each other, which were the precursors of the koan conversations. Zhuangzi says, "I came at him empty, wriggling and turning, not knowing anything about *who* or *what*, now dipping and bending, now flowing in waves."

That's the Daoist sense of emptiness. There is the not knowing anything about who or what that we find very familiar, and there's dipping and bending, flowing in waves as well.

Again, from the Daoist perspective that stained and dyed Chan so beautifully, there is a sense of what our task is : not to manufacture compassion, generosity, gratitude, and love, but to align ourselves with the currents of those things that are already inherent in and flowing through the universe. It is much more an orientation toward discovering and being *open to*, and aligning oneself with, than with engineering or manufacturing, or doing exercises that create these feelings.

It's not that I think those exercises aren't meaningful, but they are not the heart of this tradition, because of the belief that we don't have to create that; it's already there. When people are just taking up practice, or they have done practice in other traditions, there can sometimes be an almost frantic sense of *I'm not compassionate enough. I'm not mindful enough. I've got to become more compassionate, more mindful. I've got to become more disciplined. I have to be less reactive.* That is from the viewpoint of *I just have to find the right exercises to re-arrange myself in these ways, because it's all an exercise of my will. I will be more compassionate, I will be less reactive when I can align my will, and really get it going; and I can make it happen.* That is absolutely the surface self talking. That is absolutely the surface self saying, *No worries. I can deal with this.* My question would be, how's that workin' out?

Our task, from the perspective of our Way, is not to cultivate these feelings in ourselves, as noble an intention as that is, but rather to cultivate the willingness to be available to those things. It's a shift in orientation. My orientation is not that I will make myself more compassionate, disciplined, or mindful, dammit! It's that I'm going to keep showing up and keep showing up and keep showing up. That's all we have to do : I am willing to be overcome by gratitude, by generosity, by a burning desire to be disciplined, because I can taste something in my mouth, and I want to go all the way with that. And I will sit here until that happens.

The Buddha's vow is that it can be our vow as well. So our focus is on the willingness, the availability. Our optimistic belief is that if we bring *that*, the rest will take care of itself. We do not have to manufacture it out of our will. In fact, it's a grand delusion to think that we can manufacture it out of our will. And, if we *are* trying to manufacture it out of our will, we're going to miss it right in front of our faces, because we're doing something else, because our attention is somewhere else, on something *so* small, and something so predictably a failure, that we're missing the very thing that's right there in our faces.

Some people can hear this and criticize or defend against it by saying this is "Zen Lite;" you gotta get in there and *really suffer*. I would reply to that by saying that this is the much more difficult path, because this is a path that requires you to, without evasion, without one foot out the door, without any sort of Plan B, *absolutely* relinquish the habit body in order to realize that you're also the dharmakaya, you're also the body of the Dharma, already.

That's hard because we do it without an endoskeleton or an exoskeleton. What I mean is

that we do it without the interior skeleton of *I've got to be more compassionate, I've got to work harder, I've got to whip myself into shape, I've gotta, I've gotta, I've gotta*. That's the internal skeleton, driving us. We don't get to use that, or the exoskeleton, which is the external skeleton of what's been called harsh practices, the things that encourage us to whip ourselves into shape, to get it right and do it this way, because it's all about the five thises and the twenty-seven thats, and the eightfold this and the four that. If we can just get all that stuff together and take it all on, and be working all the steps, that's what it's really about. Workin' all the steps — somehow, that's going to take care of it. We have a lot of form, and we do things a certain way because that will hold us up.

But if we allow ourselves to only be held up by that, we grow weak inside of it, because we're asking the exoskeleton to do the work. *This* is the harder practice, because it's saying that you don't get that, either. No endoskeleton, no exoskeleton, no lists of twenty-seven thises and fourteen thats. Showing up over and over again, with every fiber of your being, and being willing for whatever happens, which isn't always easy and lovely, and puppies and rainbows. Sometimes it's really, really difficult. How could it not be difficult to shed the habits and strategies and negotiations of a lifetime in order to step into that free place? Of course it is difficult. Of course, people choose exoskeletons and endoskeletons all the time, because it's easier.

But we don't have to just do it out of raw courage and insane bravery, because there is, in the tradition, this thing called the vow food. When we come into relationship with the vow, when we walk with the vow, it nourishes us, all the time, so that we can continue to do this. That is the vow food. The vow feeds us so that we can live the vow, and that mutual nourishment goes on and on. We have to be willing to receive that nourishment. We have to be willing to accept it, trust it, and experience that it is enough. We don't need that other stuff if we've really, really, got this. Everything else is extra.

If that appeals to you, if you are a wild and crazy fox spirit who would like to keep walking out onto the ice and listening, to hear if there's water rushing underneath or not, please do. Please keep going. Please know that this is a real and deep thing, and the glory of this Way is that we do this together. *We do this together*. We embody in our small, tiny little band of crazy people the possibility that is at the root of the universe, the possibility of everyone and everything waking up together. We are all in those fields surrounding the well

at the center. We drink from that well, we eat the vow food that grows out of that well, and we accompany and support and protect, and call each other on our shit, and do all of that stuff that's essential to our waking up, not only as individuals, but as community. Because when we do that, when we put our love and our gratitude and our generosity into waking up as a community, we are living in the universe in macrocosm. We are living the dharmakaya's great vow in our own lives, not as an idea, not as a practice, but as a *life*; a life for each of us as individuals and a life for us together.

Thank you very much. Thus ends the sermon.