

Guanyin's Cloak
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
Morning Star Retreat
San Geronimo Lodge ~ Taos, NM
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Good evening, bodhisattvas!

What a deep joy it is to gather on a snowy night like this, around the fire together, to do nothing but support each other's awakening. How great is that?

Just as we are doing, people have been gathering for generations at this time of year to celebrate, commemorate, join in awakening; and to celebrate and join in with the light and the dark and the deep silence of this time of year and the awakening that can arise from that.

As we sit this week the moon will be waxing and will become full just as we're leaving. Our last night here, Thursday the eighth, is the night people have traditionally commemorated as the awakening of Shakyamuni under a tree in Northern India 2,500 years ago. That thing we commemorate — becoming a buddha, becoming bodhi, becoming awakening — means something like this : buddha is that which remains after we have let fall away the ways we usually see, understand, and experience things. We let the habits of our heart-mind, the customs of our interior lives, fall away, and then we begin to see the way the world is, inside and outside. When all of the habits, customs, and default positions and defenses fall away, what remains is buddha — awakening. When we look with those eyes we see, of course, that it was always there, and that it is in everything. Everything is that buddha, everything is that awakening.

We have an image on the altar, a statue that's perfect for this retreat, because the figure not only is sheltered under the tree, coming to stand up from that tree as Shakyamuni did, but is actually *of the tree*, coming from inside the tree. Awakening does this. It comes from inside everything and shows itself to us if we're only willing to look. Our awakening grows in us. Each of us, whatever our condition, however we come here, whatever our circumstances, are that sheltering tree for awakening. This retreat is to allow us to meet in a grove together, a grove of sheltering trees, and to allow that awakening to come up out of us and into the world in the way that the figure in that tree does.

During this week we will be in the dark and the light. The light will increase as the moon waxes; the dark stays steady. Hakuin spoke of the light of bodhi's movement up and out, the light of awakening, that we commemorate at this time of year. He spoke of it as a purple-golden light that spreads from our meditation, from the meditation of everyone, including the trees and the mountains, into the world at this time of year. That sense of a purple-golden light has the dark in it as well : the dark of the purple and the radiance of the gold.

This is a perfect time to sit because of the deep stillness and silence, the way the snow makes things intimate, bringing things in and making the world small. The paradox is that the small world contains everything. Everything is here, contained by that snow. As it falls on the ground and builds up, it's called Guanyin's cloak : a silver cloak laid out across the land that makes everything equal. All of the particularities, differences, and distinctions get covered by this silver cloak of snow, which makes everything the same, connected, equal. When I imagine that, I notice in myself a sense of great relaxation. How wonderful to relax into that sameness of everything, that equality of everything. This is not the season of discrimination and differentiation and discernment, which it is a lot of other times. This is the season when we can put all of that down and look out over that cloak of equality and relax our heart-minds that are so good at discrimination and differentiation. Just let that go for awhile.

In years past we've often had a silver bowl filled with snow on the altar because of the koan image of Zen as snow piled in a silver bowl. This year I would like us to imagine the whole world as that silver bowl, the whole universe — if your imagination can stretch there — as that silver bowl, and the falling snow filling that bowl. What is that like, to be contained in this great silver bowl where the snow falls, and the snow piles up, and the snow melts, and the snow disappears? How is that?

At the beginning of a retreat, I usually give something to carry with you, if you wish. This time what I'd like to do is pick up something we've spoken about on Thursday nights and in the koan salon, and I invite you to dive deeply into it. This is the question that began as : "Do you trust your life?" and then morphed into : "What are you keeping faith with?" I like that formulation a lot. What is the deep thing you are keeping faith with in your life? What is the deep thing you'd like to be keeping faith with in your life?

There are so many ways to think about that question. What is the through-line? What is the companion of your heart? What do you trust more than anything else? What do you care

about more than anything else? What remains true in good times and bad times as well? What is still true, no matter what the conditions or circumstances? What is the silver bowl that holds all the ups and downs of your life? What's that place like, where you're not caught and you're not stuck, but that actually holds everything that happens?

In our way, I believe there has to come a time when we drop down, find that place, and see what it's like : experience it; know it; be able to rest there. In the beginning of a retreat, perhaps, we drop down. We do some purifying. We clear away the stuff that's in the way, so that we can drop down, fall down, lie down in that place. But we have to know what it is, we have to be able to identify it. We have to know it when we feel it. I ask you to consider that, to think about your practice as a way of falling into, lying down in, that place. Because it is when we are intimate there, when we know completely and finally what it is we are keeping faith with, from that simple clarity, that awakening blossoms. The sheltering tree gives forth its light. We join the season. We join the waxing moon. We join the turn of the sun at the winter solstice. We give birth to that light in ourselves, and then we offer it to the world.

So what are you keeping faith with? Here is an old poem, to send you into this purple-golden light of our retreat.

Still night, cold waters
No fish are biting
I fill my boat with moonlight and go home

Let's go home together.