

Seasons of Awakening  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

A couple of weeks ago we were talking about the seasons of awakening, and in particular about the autumn of awakening. What seems quite important is that awakening is not just a sudden flash of something, and it's also not a straight-line march to the Emerald City; it has cycles and rhythms and movements. It's less like embracing a pillar and more like following a snake.

One of the ways I think about it is seasonally; there are times and seasons in awakening. That doesn't necessarily mean that when it's autumn you're going to experience the autumnal aspects of awakening, or now you'll begin to experience the wintry aspects. It may be that you, like our ancestor Nakagawa Soen, discover that in the midst of winter you find invincible summer. If that's the case, then *Yay!* But it's likely that you will experience some wintry aspects, as well as some autumnal aspects. It seems like a good night to talk about this turn from the autumn of awakening into the winter.

In the autumn of awakening, we do as you do in the autumn : a lot of harvesting and pruning. Harvesting has to do with the kind of concentration we do when we come into a retreat like this, or at other times in our lives, but let's talk about it in terms of this retreat. We are harvesting. We are gathering. We are concentrating. In order to do that, in order to pull energy in, ground it down, and begin to develop that great engine of samadhi underneath our practice — that great engine of deep, concentrative meditation — we do some fasting. The koan tradition speaks about the problem of leaking, and what it means by that is that when we allow our energy to be pulled out by distractions, it leaks. Anybody who's ever engaged in a creative process knows that one of the worst things you can do is talk about it too soon, because something leaks away before it's ready. It hasn't concentrated enough.

In the koan tradition, one of the main sources of leaks is habits and opinions. When we allow our habits and opinions to shape our heart-mind, we leak a lot of emotion. It doesn't get plowed back into this concentration. You notice I'm not saying it doesn't get cut off or rejected; it doesn't get plowed in. It leaks away. So we fast, at all different levels.

We fast from whatever habits we have, from whatever we do, each of us, that help us through the day. We fast from emails and the *Huffington Post* — all those things that pull our attention out that we find we can actually do without for a week. We keep that energy for meditation. As we sit, it is to be hoped that we begin to fast from our habits of heart-mind. We begin to do less of those things we're always doing that cause us difficulty. That energy is liberated to get plowed into those deep concentrative states. So that's the harvesting part of the autumn of awakening. As we do that, we might find that there are strange fruits and vegetables in the field. We're surprised to discover them, and that's all right. We let them in, too, and see what there is to say about them.

At the same time, we're pruning, we're letting go. There's a differentiation to be made between leaking and letting go. One is more prone to benefit our practice, and one is more prone to distract us from our practice. I place no value on that; I simply report and you can decide what you want to do with it. If something is leaking, you're still attached to it. You follow the leak as it spreads away from you. If you're letting something go, it's genuinely dropping. It is coming to find a separate existence from you, and you're free of it. It gets to go live its life in freedom, somewhere else. This is the pruning, the fasting, the letting things fall away of the autumn.

When we think of that in the West, often images of renunciation come to us, because that's how it's generally framed in many western traditions ... not all, but many. In the koans, in most of the Mahayana, the emphasis is not on what is put down or let go of; the emphasis is on the space that gets created by that putting down, and what becomes possible when you do. For example, in some autumn in the past, someone asked Yunmen, "When the tree withers and the leaves fall, what is that?" There's a great image of autumn : the tree closing down, the sap going down to the roots, and the leaves falling. What is that? That's an image of renunciation, when things get simpler. Yunmen responds by saying, "Golden wind is revealing itself." He's flipped it on its head. That stripping away is good, but don't forget what that renunciation makes possible : the revelation of the golden wind. So that's how fasting, stripping down, letting go are held in the tradition. We keep looking for what becomes possible, what golden wind is revealed.

In this autumnal time of awakening, what we do very well is what's called the wisdom of differentiation. You might remember that we've talked about the wisdom of differentiation

and the wisdom of equality as being two inextricable and equally important aspects of wisdom. The wisdom of differentiation is the one that brings those strange fruits and vegetables in from the garden, washes them off, looks at them, and thinks, *Okay, this I'm going to make jam out of, that's going straight onto the compost pile.* It's what sees the important differences, the wisdom that knows when you're speaking to a three-year-old child you speak to a three-year-old child, which is different from when you're speaking to a sixty-five-year-old parent. The autumn is a lot about that kind of wisdom of differentiation.

When we move into winter, we move towards the wisdom of equality. We move toward that image I mentioned last night of the snow as Guanyin's cloak that covers everything in a silver cloak, creating a feeling of the equality of everything. All the differences, the eccentric bits, what makes things distinct from each other, are covered under this one white, silvery coat. We move into a time neither more nor less important than being able to discern what's jam and what's compost. It's just a different time, when we see everything as equal. Everything has equal value and meaning. Everything has no meaning at all.

In this retreat we commemorate the night Shakyamuni sat under the bodhi tree. At a certain point things opened up for him and he said, "How wondrous! Everything from the beginning — every being from the beginning — has always had this heart-mind into which I am now awakening." That's the wisdom of equality : my awakening happens in this vast heart-mind that we all share equally, that we all make together.

Rather than we *enter* this heart-mind, it's probably more accurate to say that we realize that this heart-mind has always been there, and we've always been there. That's the great gift of the winter of awakening and the wisdom of equality : the recognition that we, too, are part of this one vast, completely interpermeated heart-mind.

The loveliest description I've come across of that in a long while is in the book *Bringing Zen Home : The Healing Art of Japanese Women's Rituals*, on the contemporary women who are developing domestic zen, in their homes in the midst of their lay lives. They speak about this vast net of what they called interconnectedness, or interrelatedness. For them, healing, which is what they saw as the aim of their practice, was to deeply know — not intellectually, but with every cell in your body — that each of us is an *integral* part of that interrelatedness. An integral, *necessary* part. When they thought of prayer, they thought not of a petition addressed

to a particular figure, but a request that is put out into this vast interrelated net. At the same time that they put these prayers out into the net, they were also listening for them from others. So there's a reciprocal relationship of compassionate exchange, listening and responding to prayers. This description feels like a beautiful evocation of this wisdom of equality.

I want to talk about the relationship between the wisdom of discrimination and the wisdom of equality, and why it's so important that we have both, and let them inform each other, make each other wise. As human beings we have a tendency to base our discriminations and judgments on things like *I like this, I don't like this; this is good for me, this is bad for me*. But if differentiation is riding on the wave of an understanding of the equality of all things, suddenly how we feel about it becomes much less important, and not the basis of differentiation. The basis of differentiation becomes looking and listening, paying attention, letting things speak for themselves, and trying to see, hear, and understand who they are and what they're saying; which is a very different basis for discriminating than *I like this* or *I don't like this*. That's what you can have when you have both wisdoms operating together.

As I said last night, when I think about the winter of awakening and the wisdom of equality, I notice a relaxation in myself. It's as if all of that discriminating function that's connected to the obsessions of the self can go off-duty. And how great is that to just let it rest, to let that lie fallow under the snow of equality, and to take each thing as it comes across that snow for awhile?

There can be some disconcerting things about the winter of awakening. In this position of radical equality and of letting go of the usual criteria of the self, we can feel off-balance or destabilized. We can feel a process of deconstruction going on inside us that can be difficult to go through. When we feel that discomfort and uncertainty, that feeling of being off-balance or tilted, it's natural to say that there's something wrong, a problem that has to be fixed. *My practice has gone wonky and I've got to do something to regain stability.*

What I'd like to encourage you to do, you'll be shocked to hear, is the opposite : don't try to regain stability. Try to stay with what's off-balance, off-kilter, uncertain, feeling like it's being deconstructed, because that's part of it, too. Hear that. It is part of it, too, as important a part of the practice as anything else, and our goal is not to right the ship as soon as it starts heeling in one direction or the other, but to ride it, and to see what happens. If that's hard to accept, think about this. In the winter, plants die, animals go hungry, and branches crash to

the ground under the weight of snow, but would we say that winter has gotten off track? Would we say that winter is wrong? No, we would say, That, too, is part of it; that, too, is part of the cycle of the seasons. The same thing in our practice : there's nothing wrong; there's only a wintry thing happening.

Can you go from not trying to jump in and fix it too soon, to actually trusting it? Can you take the ride? Can you allow yourself to be knocked over? Can you spend a good amount of time doubting, not knowing, and trusting the doubt? It's an odd thing, but can you trust the doubt as equal to everything else? If you find yourself thinking, *This can't be right. I've got to shift my posture or change my breathing or fix my thoughts*, see if you can examine the belief that's underneath the impulse to fix. *I think I ought to fix this; I think I'm off track because I believe ...* what? What do I think about the way things ought to be? Examine that belief. Is it true? Can you know if it's true?

I'll say something I apparently think it's important to repeat : remember that by coming here, sitting down, and spending your time like this, you are asking for something unprecedented. You are asking for something outside the realm of what you already know, because if you already knew it, you wouldn't need to be here! You could be off having fun somewhere! So if that's the case, if you're surrendering yourself to the possibility of something you can't yet imagine happening, remember that you can't yet imagine it. You don't know what it's going to be like, or what it's going to take. You don't know what the path from here to there looks like. So don't try to 'fix' things too quickly. Don't think you know. You might not know, and this moment in your awakening might appear as a very strange fruit or vegetable from the garden. Don't throw it onto the compost too quick. Hang out with it for awhile, and see if there's something there that's important.

As you do this — in general in your life and in particular as the week goes on — you may find yourself, at moments or for days or for the rest of your life, standing on the bare ground of winter, on that cloak of white stretching to the horizon under an infinite sky. It's possible that you will do enough deconstructing to get there. It's possible that things will fall away, whether you will or no, and you find yourself there. There's something indescribably beautiful about the simplicity of that place, the perfection of it, and the way, when anything comes

toward us on that bare ground, we see it so clearly against the snow, against the sky, and meet it simply and clearly.

It's also true that it can be a disconcerting experience. It can seem as though all this falling away has gone a bit too far, and there's a disorienting quality to it. You might experience this for an instant or for a while. I read a good description of such a moment in a book called *Searching for Guanyin*, by a Canadian woman who went to China, lived there for two years, and did pilgrimages all around the country to places associated with Guanyin. Since childhood she had a strong sense of affinity with Guanyin, and she's looking for a particular image that's come to her in dreams and visualizations; she's on the trail for this particular Guanyin, looking a certain way in a certain location. As time goes on she begins to realize that what she really needs to do is accept the formlessness of Guanyin, and that's difficult.

She walks into a store that she'd been in a year before, and the store is full of the heads of bodhisattvas that have been removed from whole statues, so it's a room full of decapitated bodhisattva heads. She remembers that the year before when she walked into the store, she was gazing at them and it upset her. She wanted to gather them all to her, take them away, and preserve them. This year, because she was in this unsettled place where she was beginning to consider the formlessness of Guanyin, it wasn't she who was looking at the heads, but the heads who were looking at her. They began to say to her, "What are you looking for? We don't mean anything. We have no meaning at all." And that was terrifying.

This is the sometimes-difficult aspect of standing on the bare ground; the things we thought we cared most about have no meaning at all for awhile. We've lost our usual way of understanding, seeing, and feeling about them. They're just there, and they're frighteningly autonomous. There's a companion fear of the loss of self : if I am not the things I think are important, if I am not the things I think are horrible, the things I think are beautiful — if all of those meanings fall away — who am I? And what is the world? What is the world if each thing is entirely autonomous, free of the meanings I put on it? That can be disorienting, to say the least.

Fortunately, after winter comes spring. In Sarah Truman's book, as she's standing in the shop where everything has started to laugh at her and she's feeling pretty horrified, a stranger, a woman named Lily, comes up and starts talking to her. Lily whisks her out of there, takes her out to lunch (a very smart thing to do), and talks to her about the formlessness of Guanyin

not from the perspective of what is *not* there, not as an absence of the image she had held onto so tightly, but as a different kind of presence, the presence of possibility. She's a very modern woman, and she speaks of Guanyin as a wave, a field, a vibration. She calls her supersonic. Guanyin is the one who hears all sounds by being supersonic. Gradually the author begins to see that the bare ground of formlessness holds tremendous possibilities. Suddenly it can be a wave, a vibration, something supersonic, and anything becomes possible.

So if we are willing to hang out with what is uncomfortable, with what it feels like when the meanings fall away, something else can happen; that renunciation can lead to the blossoming of a different kind of spring, when meanings we could have never imagined suddenly become possible.

It's so hard to describe any of this in reasonable language, and I apologize for that, because I get up here and talk anyway! I'm sorry. But I see things in images, topographies, or landscapes, and this is one that came to me about the passage from winter into spring. Do you remember another thing Shakyamuni said earlier on that long night under the bodhi tree, before he begins to see the nature of his suffering, the nature of his habits of the heart-mind? He says, "Oh, carpenter, I see you. Over and over again through countless lifetimes, you've built this house of pain, and now I'm ripping out the rafters and tearing down the ridgepole, and I will never build this house again." Here's an image of the house of pain that *we* construct. We spend time and energy and our good hearts and souls on constructing, and then maintaining, the house. And on repairing, protecting, and decorating! And re-decorating! And adding wings! And building swimming pools. Lifetime after lifetime we construct this house of pain.

What beautifully happens in the winter of awakening is that the house of pain crashes to the ground in an instant. *Oh, carpenter, I see you, and I will never build this house again!* And, there you are, standing on the bare ground with the house gone. To be on that infinite plain with no horizon, under an infinite sky with no end — how do we live there? It's hard to stay right there like that, and, in fact, we're not meant to live there. We have to come to that place, and we have to pass through that place. We have to be willing to stand there, but it's not a place we stay. So what's the next thing?

I was reading an essay on deep ecology, and the etymology for *eco* in ecology is ‘earth household.’ The moment we understand that being on the bare ground of winter is *exactly* the same as being in the earth household, and recognize that that’s where we live, that’s the turn from winter into spring. We bring warmth to that winter landscape : we bring the warmth of spring, the warmth of other beings, the warmth of the vast net of interrelatedness that the Japanese women speak about.

But it’s the same place. The bare ground is the wisdom of equality; the earth household is the wisdom of differentiation. We can see things distinct against the bare ground, and we know that everything shines equally with the radiance of that ground. In the earth household we know that it matters how we treat each of those radiant things. It matters that we are in relationships of compassionate reciprocity, that we send prayers out and receive prayers, and we do what we can about them. We trust that others in this net will do what they can about ours. These two things — the earth household and the bare ground — exist simultaneously. It’s not just that that they exist together, but that they’re the same thing.

When we talk about being the hands and eyes of Guanyin, we’re talking about our capacity to bring the warmth of spring to the crystalline wisdom of winter — not to replace it but to join with it and create this new thing, this earth household on the bare ground, not only for ourselves but for all beings, together. The seasons of awakening are about going around and around in this cycle, doing the careful work of the autumn in order to be able to stand on that beautiful bare ground of winter, in order to be able to bring warmth, to melt the snow, to help create the earth household, which reaches its fullness in the summer, and then tips over into autumn again. Around and around it goes, and in the world inside ourselves around and around it goes.

How could we possibly think that we can control that? How can we possibly think that we could somehow corral that process into careful little channels? Please don’t try. Please have the courage to let the cycle pull you in and take you along with it. Have the courage to discover what your autumn is, your winter, your spring, and your summer. Have the courage to trust in what’s happening, even if you don’t understand it. There’s something so much bigger going on, and it’s interested in you. How cool is that? Let it be interested. Let it pick you up and carry you a while, because that’s the offer.

Become wintry. Become simple. Find that simple clarity of the natural world in you; that is to bring the earth household inside us. Each thing in the natural world so simple and clear, and simultaneously part of this vast interrelated, interconnected, interpermeated network that we can't possibly understand in its complexity. Both those things are true. But the piñon doesn't need to understand in any cognitive way that whole network in order to be a piñon. It just has to know how to do that really well, and in doing that, there's another kind of understanding, the heart-mind to heart-mind understanding that the Japanese women spoke about through this interrelated network. They said that's how all things speak to each other : heart-mind to heart-mind. So, if we can find the simplicity and clarity of each thing in the earth household, and we open our hearts to the network, then we participate in the network without having to understand it all, without having to figure it out. We participate with our simplicity and clarity, and our willingness. Please, as we sink into this beautiful winter, be willing. If you are willing, if you stay willing, the rest will take care of itself.

Are there any simple, winter-like comments or questions?

Q1 : This is a very auspicious night for me and my family. My son's been in the wilderness for nine weeks. He's fourteen and tonight is his last night.

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

Thank you.