

Awakening as Homecoming
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Happy Bodhi Day! A powerful Bodhi Day to you all. If you want to fall back against the vastness or against that tree older than the forest it stands in, then close your eyes and just let the words wash over you. This is a good night to do that.

We have been speaking about the seasons of awakening and the winter solstice, which fast approaches. Our tradition often represents it as a homecoming, the deepest homecoming we can know. Earlier we were speaking a fair amount about death and dismemberment, and there's something quite true about that, in the sense that this deepest homecoming we can know involves, like the sun at the solstice, returning completely to the dark, dying completely to the dark, and then being reborn. In our tradition this is called the Great Death and the Great Rebirth, and they ain't kidding.

To say more, to characterize the Great Death and the Great Rebirth, just sounds sappy or like something out of a book you can pick up at the airport. So I won't try, but I do want to give you a flavor for the cosmology, for the grand topography of that journey home and back, and to talk about a winter practice called turning the light inward, which is the way tradition suggests that we might return home to that winter solstice dark night, which is the source of everything.

From the Daoists, the people of Chan inherited this sense that the source of things is dark. You might remember reading in Shitou's "Taking Part in the Gathering" about the source that is clear and unstained, and from that dark stream branches of light. We've talked about it as the well at the center of the temple, that well which we hope to be able to go and sit down next to, whose extent we can never fully understand; the well remains essentially a mystery at the center of things. We can't measure it or plumb it or drop a bucket down it. But despite its essential mystery, there's something about it that feels like home in a way that nothing else does when we are able to sit there.

[Telephonic sounds from the next room] Sometimes it sounds like a fax machine! It is miraculous, and takes every form in the universe, using its skillful means to awaken us.

[Laughter]

So there is this dark, this night of the winter solstice, this deep well, this mystery, this thing that is subtle and wondrous, which are other ways of translating the character which speaks of that dark. From it stream branches of light, so that everything we experience, everything we can know, everything that is manifest in the universe, is the light that streams from that dark — including us.

Linji talks about us as that lone brightness standing before him, that lone brightness that can hear, understand, and speak the Dharma. We are that light, as everything is that light. Deep in a retreat, when the trees start talking to us and we begin to see the radiance of things, when something lights up for us and we see a light that seems to come from inside whatever that thing is, it is beautiful and awe-inspiringly perfect to us, because we know it's the light of home. It looks like the light of that place that is called, in the tradition, our old home gate. It is the lantern hanging there. And when we see it in other things, we remember home and maybe long for it. For a moment we remember that everything is made of the light streaming from that dark, and we remember what it is like to stand there, at the source, and to know that everything there is one.

For a while, maybe, it seems we only know that in bits and pieces. We see for an instant how everything is the light pretending to be each thing. There is the light pretending to be a chair, or my hand. There is something so beautiful about that holy play. Yes, everything is a dream; yes, everything is impermanent; yes, everything rises and falls, and sometimes we struggle so much with that, but sometimes we can see that it is all the play of the light that streams from that source. Sometimes we feel that we might be able to enter that play, revel in it, delight in it, love it.

How do we go home? How do we return to that old home gate that is the source? If we are already that light, how is it we don't know that? How is it that we can't feel that connection to the source all the time? How do we bridge the gap? The answer is, we go back. We talk a lot about stepping into the moment just before, and tonight I want to talk about that in a big way.

This is turning the light around. We're generating light all the time, with every movement and action, and, even more subtly, with every thought, feeling, and physical sensation. We make that light that comes from the source, that has gone through so many transformations to get here, to become this gesture, or that word. If the tradition were starting today, maybe we would call it energy instead of light. But they called it light, and that's beautiful, so let's go on calling it light. We walk around, sit, and sleep, everything we do transforming a tremendous amount of this light all the time into deed, word, thought, and feeling. So we have this light right here. We don't have to go anywhere, we don't have to get anything; here it already is, completely available to us.

Mostly we're busy turning the light outward and throwing it out into the world in one form or another. So this is taking that light and turning it inward, turning it back toward the source. In a retreat like this, we begin to do that by sitting down and shutting up, making fewer gestures, emitting less of that light in movement, action, and word. We bring it in. We stop chasing the extensions of our own light into the world. Think about everything we do, say, think, and feel, then notice how we follow their movement into the world. We're always chasing our own light out, away from us.

So we get simpler and quieter; we turn the light of action and words inward. As we sit, with any luck, we begin to turn the light of thought, feeling, and sensation inward as well. Whatever method we're employing, whatever we're doing when we're sitting, fundamentally we're taking that energy of thought and feeling and turning it back on itself, examining it, inquiring into it. Every time we do an inquiry as simple as *What is this?*, or bring up a koan, or notice thoughts rising and falling and have just a little bit of distance from them, we're turning that light inward, on our own heart-minds. We're getting a little bit closer to the source. With any luck, after we've been sitting for awhile, we begin to experience that those thoughts and feelings are rising in a larger and larger, quieter and quieter field. And we don't have to do so much about them. We don't have to attend to them so much, or worry about them, because they just rise and fall, easily, of themselves, in this large field.

That large field is the field of our awareness, and when we can feel the field, and we can feel how our thoughts and feelings rise and fall in it, when we can have that much distance between awareness and content of awareness, we're turning the light back. We're seeing the

true nature of thoughts and feelings, and of our awareness, our consciousness. We keep stepping back into the moment just before.

Maybe we can begin by letting go of opinions and reactions. Maybe that's the first layer of thoughts and feelings that we can allow to fall back into the vastness. Then we can take another step back, and we can keep company with our primary thoughts, and we can notice them rising and falling, and get some distance from them. And take another step back. And get closer and closer to silence, closer and closer to a marvelous, dynamic stillness, which is before and before and before.

So far we're in the territory of what we can *do*. We can actively engage in these practices, and we can actively succeed in doing this. At some point, if we are fortunate — and I promise it will happen if you stay with this — grace comes in. At some point, fortunately, it isn't all up to us. It isn't all up to our intelligence, skill, will, stubbornness, vows, or anything else. There is a grace that enters. I like to think that that grace is the light from the source coming to get us as we walk towards it.

As the tradition would say, at some point the bottom falls out of the bucket. Everything drops away and there are no more steps, processes, doing or not doing. Suddenly we are home, at the source. We have gone all the way back down the light to that original place, where we can see how everything streams from the dark of home. We are there with everything, but even to say, *I am here with everything* makes a bigger separation than there is. There is just home.

Then we take one more step, into the night, the dark, the source. And then there's nothing to say about that for a few moments, or a few days, or a few weeks, or a lifetime. But we have gone all the way back; we're through the old home gate.

That's not the end. Before Zhaozhou was Zhaozhou, when he was a person not unlike any of us, he had the experience of walking in that night. He went to ask his teacher about it, because he was feeling pretty good about it. It's nice there in the dark. It's awesome there in the dark. He asked about this Great Death, "What about the Great Death?" And his teacher said, "I am not interested in your Great Death. I will speak to you when you have given yourself completely to the light" — to the dawn, to the new day that comes.

So that is the next step : from that night into the dawn, into the Great Rebirth. It is a Great Death in the sense that nothing is ever the same. Our egos or small selves or whatever you want to call the poor dears, the darling dear creatures who keep the organism moving through the day, just aren't quite the same after that. Something does fall away irrevocably, and then something returns. It is so important that Touzi, Zhaozhou's teacher, said, "You must surrender completely to the daylight." Because that's the next part of the journey; that's coming all the way back, *whoosh*, up that endless stream of light from the source back to you, back to the very edge of your skin, right where you left it. Except now, when you stand in front of Linji and Linji says, "You are a lone brightness that hears the Dharma, understands the Dharma, and speaks the Dharma," you know it. You know it with every cell in your body, and you know that home is here. You bring home with you, and you spend the rest of your life, with any luck, enjoying that home with all the other emanations of light in the world around you.

You look the same; it's the same life, the same stuff happens. But you know you are that light from home. And you know everything else is that light from home, too. You are *really* all family. We are *really* all family. If the great question of the journey home is, *Who am I? Really, who am I?* The great question of the return is : *Now what? What do I do?* The reason there are 750 koans after the first koan is because it takes a long time for this emanation of the light to come to see what its most complete expression is as you. That's the great work of a human life : to be able to play wholeheartedly and completely in this vast, holy play of manifest life; to look into the faces of other people and dogs and rugs and school buses and see that light of home right here, and want, deeply, to know what can we make together. What does the light streaming from the dark look like, right here, right now, in this moment, with these emanations?

This is the promise of Bodhi Day. This is the promise of our way. Even though it's difficult to be articulate about it, even though it's difficult not to sound stupid talking about it, what a gift we have been given! What a gift for us to be able to meet together, follow this way together, help each other down that pathway of light, push each other as gently as possible, as firmly as possible through those buckets with no bottoms, so that we can meet at home, and so that we can come back together and ask, *What now?*

Please eat up every last bit of this. Leave nothing on the plate. Use this. Don't waste a crumb of it. Tonight, right now, here. Let's go.

Thank you.