

Yijing I
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Good evening, everyone.

It's great to be here. I've been gone for three weeks and am enjoying being back and seeing all of you. It feels like I've come home to Santa Fe. I want to talk tonight about some of what I was doing in the second half of my time away. I was up in Vallecitos in the snow, in an incredibly beautiful place doing a retreat with Stephen Karcher about the *Yijing*. The *Yijing* is an old Chinese book of divination which usually gets translated into English as *The Book of Change*.

As many of you know, I'm interested in the Chinese roots of this tradition of meditation and koans which was called Chan (the Chinese pronunciation of the word pronounced Zen in Japanese). It has seemed to me that as Chan and Zen came to the west — to America and other places — a lot of the mythology of it dropped away. We got a lot of the practice and philosophy, but we didn't get the mythology. It was my hunch that we were missing something important. There's a lot of the life tied up with the mythology of things, and if you lose that you lose something of the heart, soul, and imagination.

Several years ago I found a book by Stephen Karcher on the *Yijing* and it blew me away, because the way we inherited the *Yijing* was through a very Confucian prism. Confucianism got ahold of it about 2,000 years ago and changed it into something other than what it had originally been. Stephen had the ability, for the first time as far as I could tell, to see through the Confucian curtains and back to the earlier Daoist and, even before that, shamanic, origins of the *Yijing*. In doing that, he laid out a mythological landscape of the China of the first millennium BCE, and I've found so much there that survives in the koans — images and sayings and things like that — but also so much there that felt as if it were the mythological landscape of Chan and of the koans.

I met Stephen a while ago, and this retreat came up and I thought it would be interesting to be immersed in this for ten days. Where we were in Vallecitos felt like we were not only immersed in the mythological landscape, but the actual landscape of China a thousand years

ago. It was really something. I have some preliminary notes, just the beginnings of some things that I know will be a long inspiration for me that I hope you'll find interesting. I hope you'll find that in some way it enriches your own meditation and koan practice if you're foolish enough to be doing that. [Laughter]

I'll begin with an example of what I mean. This is a little piece of that mythology that I find instantly interesting, exhilarating, and helpful. In that world, when a person dies, they split into two parts. (Parenthetically, 2500 years ago, the Chinese were a tremendously sophisticated group of people and so we can assume that they were understanding this metaphorically rather than literally, just as we understand it metaphorically.) There were two aspects of the person after death. One is the spirit, and that spirit aspect can become an ancestor if we do the right things, which means that we can go on having a relationship with that spirit and it will, in fact, bless us.

The other part of a dead person becomes a ghost. This is so interesting to me : the ghost is, in turn, made up of two parts. There is what we might call the karmic residue of the person : the stuff that was difficult about that person, that was painful and caused pain for others. The other part of the ghost is *our* difficulties, our karmic residue about that person. So we participate in the making of the ghost. The ghost is made up of that person's life and our relationship to that person as well. It's interesting to me that we participate in the making of our ghosts.

An archetypal situation is when your parent dies. In ancient China, when your parent died you went into a mourning hut and spent a good amount of time there. When that time was over, you who went in as someone's child, then came out as an adult in your own life. And what went in as a corpse came out as an ancestor. A syncretic transformation goes on : both you and the dead person are transformed. The spirit part that becomes an ancestor is the part that is refined and purified after we've dealt with the ghost part, what was difficult with that person and how we related to that difficulty. The first job is to deal with that, which lets the ghost rest in the tomb. We're saying, *You can sleep through eternity now. You don't need to haunt anybody anymore.*

Another thing I found both moving and helpful is that the stuff that was difficult in a person and in your relationship with that person wasn't thought of as evil or bad, but as what had gone past ripe to decay. So you don't have to make it bad, but it's past its time. And in

passing its time, it's moved past what is full into decaying, which was seen as creating miasmas of putrefaction that would cause mind demons. That seems like a metaphor of something that really happens. Stuff gets old and lives past its time; it decays and there are fumes that create demons in the mind. We work with all of that material. To use a much later metaphor, we take that stuff that decays and put it in the great karmic recycler and allow for it to change into some other form.

That leaves us with the spirit that can become an ancestor. The implication is that if we do that work in the mourning hut of purifying our relationship with the ghost, we can discover, uncover, recover, a bit of that dead parent, or dead whomever, who can bless us, who can be an ancestor to us. Ancestors have responsibilities to us, just as we have responsibilities to them.

That's an example of the mythology that seems immediately useful. I'll talk a bit more about some of the philosophy and metaphors later on.

We have a koan from centuries later that goes like this :

A Chinese teacher named Caoshan has been through a mourning period and has just taken off his mourning clothes.

One of his students asks, "What's it like when you take off your mourning clothes?"

Caoshan replies, "Today I have fulfilled my responsibility to my parents."

The student asks, "What's it like when you fulfill your responsibilities to your parents?"

Caoshan says, "I love to get drunk."

Now, no one's ever thought that this is a koan that means, "Party down! They're dead!" [Laughter] But when you have this mythological context, there's something richer about the koan. Caoshan has been in the mourning hut. He's done the work of dealing with the stuff that's decaying that makes the ghost. He's therefore developed the ability to have this person be an ancestor. He's done all of that and has come out and put aside his mourning clothes. In doing that, in fulfilling that responsibility, he's able to step into the world and get drunk on the world as his own person — have his own relationship with the world and become completely intoxicated by the beauty of the world.

There's a way we can take the metaphor a step further. We do that over and over again in our practice : when we're willing to step into the mourning hut for a while, when we're willing

to do the work that arises naturally in meditation, when we're paying attention, then over and over again we can step out and be free of something, and that enables us to be intoxicated with the world as we experience it, unmediated by the decay, putrefaction, and karmic residue.

There were lots of ways I saw similarities between the hexagrams and the koans. The *Yijing* is a divination system and there are sixty-four hexagrams, which are graphs made up of six lines of different kinds, actually thirty-two pairs of hexagrams. You do a certain operation to get the hexagram, and the hexagrams will give you certain meanings, which is the divination. Each of the hexagrams is made up of two trigrams, two graphs made up of three lines of different kinds. They're beautiful. As a couple of examples of that, there's a primal pair of trigrams, the earth and the dragon. Then there are three daughters and three sons as well, so there are eight trigrams all together. The eldest daughter is called Penetrating. She's like the wind; she penetrates everywhere, there's nowhere she can't go. There's nothing she can't accomplish through that ability to penetrate like the wind. The middle daughter is called Radiance. She's the fire, bright and illuminating. The youngest son is the Mountain. He's both the stillness of the mountain and the limits of things. He marks the boundary where the world ends. They're quite rich images in and of themselves, and they interact in different ways in these hexagrams.

Something that seems similar between the hexagrams and the koans is that the koans don't work in a logical way. They don't say, *The world is like this, and like this, and like this; it happens in a sequence, and if you don't get distracted and pay attention to the sequence, you'll be okay.* The koans say *The world is like this and like this and like this* [claps hands loudly with each *this*], and it's coming at us all the time, and it's not logical. The goal isn't to be able to figure out how to manipulate that stuff as it comes at us; the goal is to become fluid and flexible internally, so that whatever comes at us, we can dance with it, we can deal with it.

This system of the hexagrams is very much like that. Sun, who is the eldest daughter, the wind, penetrates everywhere and shows where the work needs to be done and where things are clear. Somehow that feels very much like a koan to me : the penetration everywhere, invisible like the wind, that shows both what is clear and what is not yet clear.

An important aspect of the *Yijing* that comes into the koans is the idea of how important it is to be able to hold the opposites. You can hold two things simultaneously which are apparently contradictory or opposite. You neither have to resolve them into one (they don't have to become one, they can remain two and that's okay), nor do you have to pick one or the other. Holding both at the same time is a theme that comes up over and over again in the *Yijing*.

One of the useful distinctions that the *Yijing* makes is the distinction between discrimination and judgment. If you're holding two things, it's useful to be able to discriminate between them, to be able to say, *This is this and that is that*. It's good to be able to discriminate because you might want to attend to them differently, depending on their different natures. If you've got a ghost in one hand and a spirit in the other hand, if you can discriminate the ghost from the spirit, you can attend to them in their proper ways. But you can do this without judgment, without saying that one is good and the other is bad, and I need to pick this one and annihilate that one. That's a nice distinction between discrimination and judgment.

In the *Yi* system, when you can hold the opposites like that and discriminate but not judge or choose, there's a gate that opens in the heart, and what's called the bright omen comes in. The bright omen comes into our heart and there's an epiphany. That's the nature of the epiphany in the *Yijing* : the willingness to stay with the apparent opposites.

Originally, 3,000 years ago, the *Yi* was involved in the shamanic practice of making literal rain, making the rain fall when it was needed. Over time, that sense of rainmaking became metaphorical. Every time we're willing to hold the opposites and the bright omen comes into our hearts and we have an epiphany, this is a small moment of rainmaking for ourselves and for the world. There's an infinitesimal piece of the world that we redeem every time we have that kind of epiphany.

There's a tradition of that in Chan and Zen; there's an old tradition of that in Buddhism. It's said that when Shakyamuni woke up under the bodhi tree, all the prison doors and all the jails opened up, and people were free; people who were stuck in hell were freed from hell. So that sense of the whole world waking up together in that moment is also in this tradition of *Yi* : we make a little rain, we bless the world with a little fertilizing moisture every time we have an epiphany that comes with our willingness to stay with the opposites. It was called holding two worlds in one thought.

There's also a way in which the hexagrams of the *Yijing* and the koans are a mode of communication between those two worlds. You can divide them any way you want : the world of form and the world of emptiness; the human world and the spirit world; the conscious world and the unconscious world; the inner landscape and the outer landscape. It's not just a matter of holding both of those at the same time, but of letting them talk to each other, of letting them communicate and stay connected so that they don't get polarized. The problem is not that they're two things, but that when we make a big duality they get polarized.

Earlier this year we were talking about a reconciliation of the worlds of form and emptiness. This is another way of talking about that; we can keep those worlds from being split apart too far, keep them connected and talking with each other. One doesn't have to become the other, but they have to remain in communication.

Walking in both worlds, having a foot in both worlds, in the mythology of the *Yijing* is embodied by Yu, the Limping God, and in Buddhism and Zen and Chan by Bodhidharma. Bodhidharma is the person who brought Buddhism from India to China, according to the legend. When he was old he decided to go back to India. He was sighted going through the mountains, climbing his way back to India, wearing one sandal. That image of one foot shod, one foot barefoot, one foot in this world, one foot in the other, is an image that persists all the way through. Isn't that beautiful? That's holding the opposites together and not allowing them to become polarized, but having one foot in each world.

One more story. This is a little vignette that comes out of four hexagrams in the *Yi* that are moving and powerful in ways that aren't clear to me yet. There are two brothers. One is the king of the city; he's gotten the mandate to rule and things are good. He's the abundant king, so everything works well and there's enough of everything; the stoplights work and trains run on time. But he can't exist by himself; he has a brother who's called the wandering sage. This brother's job is to go out of the city gates and into the borderlands, the wild places, and walk around. In doing that, the wandering sage brother notices that something's happening at the border. The Lady of Fates, another name for Sun, penetrating wind, has shown up at the border. If you don't have the brother out there walking the hinterlands and wild places, you won't know that the Lady of Fates has shown up at the border. That's a beautiful image to me. He escorts her back into the city and brings the king and the Lady of Fates together. In that way the city is renewed.

You can see this as an internal process : the part of us that makes sure that we're fed and sleep sometimes, that the kids get fed and the rent gets paid and all that, that's the good king in the city. But we need this part who's also out walking the borderlands who will notice when the Lady of Fates shows up and is knocking at the gates, and will bring her in to make her a part of this triad.

If you combine those three into one, there's a sense that we're called to leave the city every once in a while. The city is who we've become — all the stuff that makes us who we are in the world. Every once in a while we have to be willing to leave the city and walk out into the wilderness and rediscover the pure intent that caused us to build the city in the first place. We have to keep doing that in order to renew our lives. We have to be all three of those characters in cycles over and over again in our lives. When we've gone out into the wilderness and remembered the pure intent, then how do we go back to the city and keep living our lives, perhaps with the changes we make as a result of the encounter?

And if that's true about our lives in the world, as represented by the city, it's also true about our spiritual lives. The same character, over time, ascends the sacred mountain, which is the process of spiritual life. She gets to the top of the sacred mountain and finds the temple there, and she stays there and it's beautiful; the view is good from the top of the mountain. But after a while, even that sojourn in the temple up the mountain becomes a trap, a way of limiting us, and you have to come back down the mountain into the ordinary village, into the thoroughfares of ordinary life to escape the trap that exists even at the top of the sacred mountain.

Those cycles in each are endlessly renewed. You go back to the mountain and come down again, and this happens over and over again. I can grow tired of the enlightenment mythology where it's linear and you go from here to there, and once you're there it's done. I find myself refreshed by this sense of the cycles : walking out into the wilderness and back into the city and up the mountain and down again. All of that is necessary for a completely realized spiritual life and life in the world.

I will leave it there and would love to hear your comments or questions.

Q1 : I'm interested in the dragons.

JIS : In that mythological landscape, dragons are not creatures of fire, as we think of them in the west. They're actually creatures of water. They're the ones who make the rain cycles. Dragons are thought to sleep at the bottom of pools and streams and rivers and to rise up into the clouds. As they cross through the clouds, that's what brings the rain. Then they come back down and go to sleep again under the water. They are the rain cycle, magnificent and forceful. They're the creative energy. The primal pair is the earth and the dragon. The earth is the living, vibrating, gorgeous field for all of life. The dragon is the movement of energy through that field, in all the different ways that energy moves through it. The dragon is also the undulating line that connects us to the ancestors and the past, and through our descendants to the future. The idea of the *Yi* is to learn how to ride the dragon, which is to be in harmony with the Dao, because the dragon represents the way the energy moves through the Dao.

Q1 : That's beautiful!

Q2 : I appreciated the death and ghosts. That mythology felt very shamanic to me.

JIS : I'm glad to hear that struck something in you.

Q2 : What a beautiful thing to have built, both mythologically and practically, into a culture. Most of us, or I should speak for myself, have challenges with one or both parents. So to have that laid out as a conscious thing that could be done; that you can not only free them, distinguish between the part that's a ghost and the part that can become an ancestor and bless us, but that we can continue that relationship, which is obviously true, but in this case, in a constructive way. It doesn't get any better. Really beautiful.

JIS : At the retreat we did a ceremony involving the ancestors. What my ancestors told me was that they wanted me to do the death ceremony, the kind that I do for people when they die now. In the fall, around Dia de los Muertos, as it's called in Santa Fe, I'll do the ceremony you do forty-nine days after someone dies. It's a beautiful and powerful ceremony. I'd like to do a forty-nine day or forty-nine year ceremony for all of the ancestors for whom we've never done that ceremony. A sort of catch-up.

Q3 : There's a longing for mourning, just a place that we can go. We need time, we need space. This is essential. They have that in so many other cultures, instead of being expected to keep on going. What a healthful way to be with the rhythms.

JIS : Back then, if you stepped into the mourning hut, everyone would take care of what needed doing.

Q4 : Could I ask for clarification about the process after someone dies?

JIS : There's the stuff that belongs to the dead person — their karmic stuff. And then there's your karmic stuff in relationship to them. Those two things together make the ghost. To the extent that that's difficult, painful, devastating — whatever it is — it was seen not as an evil thing, but as something that had lasted longer than it should have, that had gotten over-ripe. It passed through ripeness to decay. Something that's decaying shouldn't be here anymore.

Q4 : Entanglements? That stuff?

JIS : Yeah. Things that had gone on too long. As it decays, it sends up waves of putrefaction that infect the mind and cause mind demons.

Q5 : So, it's not the fermentation that creates the intoxication in the koan?

JIS : No, it's not.

Q5 : It's a process that's not healthy at all. It has moved beyond the edge of ripeness.

JIS : Yes. It's gone past.

Q5 : It's the stuckness.

Q6 : Has Stephen Karcher written a translation of the *Yijing*?

JIS : Yes. It's called *Total I Ching, Myths for Change*. I recommend it highly. He's also staying with me this week, I have the great pleasure of hosting him, so this conversation is continuing. It's a dharma nerd's heaven. [Laughter] He's going to be doing some events and a talk this weekend.

Q7 : I'm not sure how to articulate it, but when you spoke about having feet in both worlds, to not judge them but ultimately have them communicate — those are wonderful seeds.

JIS : I'll tell you a story about that, because it's one of my favorite images in the whole world : It was the Roman festival of Vestalia. On that day all of the matrons in Rome would walk barefoot through the streets. The idea was that they were walking on the older contours of the land, beneath the cobbles and plazas. They were walking through the meadows and on

the grasses in their bare feet. That's another image of being able to walk under the land and over the land.

Q5 : They actually did this?

JIS : They literally walked barefoot through the streets and that was the meaning of it.

Thank you for your good attention and questions.