

Ghosts Into Ancestors II
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Good evening, everyone. Tonight we're going to pick up some of the threads from the week so far and talk a little bit about where we might be now, and some suggestions about where we might go in the future.

The first thread I want to pick up is about stories. We tend to use a shorthand where we say stories are bad, things we ought to get rid of. It's actually not quite that simple. I want to give a brief but slightly subtler view of stories.

When you find a good story that helps you understand something, especially something that's been difficult or longstanding in your life, it's a great, exhilarating thing. As long as the story is exhilarating like that — surprising, makes you see things differently — it's great and can be worked with. What tends to happen to stories if they outlive that usefulness, is that first they get comfy. You know that comfy stage of a story? *I'm like this because that was like that.* That solves everything, doesn't it? Because I don't have to do much more — there's the explanation fully formed.

Stories can go even a step further, beyond that, where they rigidify. That's where we start getting into trouble. They rigidify and become laws of the universe. *I am like this because that was like that!* There's no movement anymore. The story has stopped. The thing to look for is the place where the story stops. The one thing we know, Buddhism 101, is that everything is changing all the time. So if a story stops, something's off, and maybe it's time to find a new and exhilarating story to jump-start the one that's gone rigid. Something to remember is that there is a version of you that is much bigger and much more subtle than any story. So look for that version of yourself and don't substitute a smaller and less subtle story.

Within that there's the second thing I want to spend some time talking about : learning to read the time. Learning to see what time it is and what time it isn't, and responding to what we can come to see and understand about what time it is. The question came up about whether ghosts are bad and ancestors are good, and ghosts are things we ought to get rid of. We don't have to go that far. Making them bad is something extra. If we listen to the time

then we will know, as Sarah [Bender, Sensei] was saying last night, sometimes it's time to carry the ghost for a while. That is the nature of the time. Sometimes it's time to put the ghost down. Sometimes it's time to transform the ghost into an ancestor. That's what we have to be alert to and pay attention to. Sometimes it's time to mourn, and ghosts are often connected with grieving and mourning. Sometimes it's time to send the mourners home; it's time to stop.

There isn't one approach that's always right. This isn't a template you can throw down on any situation. It's a way of developing the muscles and capacities to discern and work with the time, not to impose some predetermined idea on any time.

In the traditional Chinese system we've been working with on turning ghosts into ancestors, the belief was that ghosts weren't inherently bad or evil, they were things that had lasted beyond their time. Because they had lasted beyond their time they were starting to rot. And because they were rotting, they were sending up miasmas — vapors of *gu* — that would confuse our heart-minds and sometimes even create mind demons. You can see that right away we're not talking about an evil foe that must be vanquished, or a lesser thing that has to be disposed of. We're talking about something that's gone from a state of ripeness into a state of rottenness. To use Stephen Karcher's phrase, "It's time to throw it into the karmic recycle bin." Again, there isn't a sense of destroying, eradicating, or pulverizing it, like our political system. It's more a sense of 'toss it in the karmic recycle bin' and let something else happen with it.

If you don't catch something that's gone rotten, and the ghost persists, then you have a circumstance like this old Chinese story : There was a king of a small kingdom, King Wu. His father King Wen had died, and Wu was in mourning for his father. The custom was that he'd be in the mourning hut for three years, which is amazing. But while he was in the mourning hut during those three years, he received a great sign, which was a solar eclipse. This was the sign he'd been waiting for to overthrow the horrible Shang tyrant (of course the previous dynasty is always the horrible tyrant you're overthrowing) — and, incidentally, install himself in his place. The eclipse was the sign that he should set the armies in motion. So now he had this horrible dilemma. Did he stay in the mourning hut, or did he disobey all the rules, leave the hut early, and go fight against the evil Shang?

He did some divination, they said *Go*, so he went. The problem was that his father, King Wen, hadn't been made into an ancestor yet. That was symbolized by ancestor tablets that

hadn't been created yet. When you were going about a big enterprise like overthrowing the previous dynasty, you would take the ancestor tablets of your father with you as a kind of blessing on the mission. But they didn't have the tablets, so he had to take the corpse. King Wu went into battle with the corpse of his father on the litter following behind.

This is a great image. How often do we go on a great enterprise with a corpse on a litter, dragging it behind us? How much simpler to turn the corpse into an ancestor. Then we can just take the tablets. Not so difficult.

This reminds me of the Psyche story that we worked with several years ago. When Psyche goes underground, she's faced with the horrible task of getting a box of beauty from the queen of the underworld. She's in despair about being able to complete this. A friendly tower gives her some great advice for how to navigate the underworld. One of the four things that the tower tells her is that when you're on the ferry crossing the River Styx, corpses will float by, reach out their hands to you, and implore you to pull them into the boat. You must not do this. You must not rescue what is already dead, even if it beseeches you to. So you have pretty much the same message there : if it's dead, let it go. Let the river take it. Don't try to save it, that will only cause problems.

One of the things we might think about is this idea of going into the mourning hut. You go into the hut as the child of the dead person and a corpse, and you come out as an adult with an ancestor. We can think of that as a metaphor for those moments in meditation when we decide to go through something, not around it or away from it or over it, but right through it. If we're willing to spend the time and do the work in the mourning hut, a genuine transformation can occur. That's not just with ghosts and ancestors. That's really any time in our meditation when something arises and we choose to go with it and through it.

I want to talk a bit about what happens next from the traditional Chinese perspective, and then also from the perspective of our own way. What does this make possible? In the traditional Chinese perspective, the first movement that we're engaging in, in a large sense, is one of emptying the heart. That is described as making a sacrifice for the sake of the repose of the dead. This is the invitation to the dead to lie down and rest. "Make a sacrifice for the

repose of the dead. Let the mourners go home.” There comes a time when it’s time to stop mourning the corpse, whatever that corpse is. Let the mourners go home.

If you remember from the story of Psyche, another bit of advice she got was : When you get to the palace of Persephone, the queen of the underworld, don’t sit on Persephone’s throne. Don’t become the queen of the underworld yourself. You’re there to get something — the box of beauty — but to bring it back out, as the text beautifully says, “under the ordinary constellations of the sky.” So don’t take that throne. Let the mourners go home. There’s a time to stop.

The traditional Chinese advice goes on, “If strangers come, do not feast them.” So again we have the same advice to Psyche : there are times when we don’t help. There are times when we don’t take whatever comes, but we enter the mourning hut and do the work that we need to do there before coming out and meeting with others.

If we do that, if we empty the heart that way, empty the heart of the sorrow that is connected with the ghost, then a wave of blessing will fill it instead.

There’s an old Chinese saying that if you keep a green bough in your heart, a singing bird will alight there. When we let go of the ghost and allow the ancestor, the ancestor brings with it a wave of blessing that’s like a singing bird alighting in our heart. We’ve made room for that. We’ve allowed for the possibility of the transformation from ghost to ancestor.

When we do that, the old Chinese thought, something opens into our deep selves, into what we might call the deep psyche or the unconscious — the parts of ourselves not as known to us every day as some others. This is the world the Chinese called the pigs and fishes, the riches of the underworld. The things that are down there, the mysterious pigs and fishes that can bring us great things.

If we do this work, they promise, we will develop a great trust in the processes of life. That seems tremendously important and is very much my experience. If we’re willing to do the work of transformation that’s necessary, if we’re willing to empty our hearts to let the blessings in, to connect with the realm of pigs and fishes underneath everything, then you can have a growing faith in the processes of life — in how things are. Things stop feeling, in Stephen Karcher’s wonderful formulation, so random. There’s a Dao, a flow of things that we can discover and learn about and enter.

When we develop this fundamental trust, which we have talked about as trusting your life, then we can come from a strong place in helping others. We can stand someplace strong, which is an image that Sarah's been using, and be helpful because of that fundamental trust. We're not in a primary conflict with life.

Okay, that's coming up to where we are now. I want to talk about the last steps in this process. We've identified the ghost, we've explored what our gu is in relationship to the ghost, we've considered what the ancestor might be like without the gu, so the last steps : Who's the ancestor now? When you remove your own stories, feelings, and projections on the ghost, what is left? And that being who is left, is that the ancestor?

If you can get a good sense of who that ancestor is, what it is like, then the next questions are : What can I ask of this ancestor? And what can I offer it? It becomes an exchange; it becomes a conversation. What can I ask? What can I expect, and what can I offer the ancestor in return? We both send and receive in that relationship. I think of Jianyuan in the koan from last night saying, "This is just what I need to strengthen me." That sense of having a relationship with the ancestor, or many ancestors, from whom you can receive and to whom you can joyfully give.

The next step, once we have identified the ancestor and seen what we might give and receive, is something that we'll do tomorrow in the ceremony. I mentioned that when ghosts became ancestors they were represented by a spirit tablet. They were wooden things that sat on the altar with the name of the ancestor, and maybe some dates and a saying. We'll be making those tomorrow night for our ancestor, those of you who want to. In the transformation from ghost to ancestor, the ancestor is represented by the spirit tablet. It's not like it lives in the spirit tablet, or anything like that, it's just represented in the same way that it might be today by a photograph on our dressing table or an altar.

One of the things I love about the way the Chinese relate to the ancestor tablets is how much a part of life they are. They're in your home. The two most recent generations are on an altar that's visible all the time. It might be your great-grandparents and your grandparents. Then when your parents die, your parents kick your great-grandparents off the altar and they go into the ancestor cupboard. Next to the altar is a big cabinet with all the generations of the ancestor tablets. Once a year they get brought out and dusted off and placed on the altar.

Once a year the ancestors who are still on the altar are given a feast. You would cook Grandma's favorite foods, or the stuff Dad loved. You would sit the tablets at the table and offer it to them, and the whole family would eat it. There was a sense of the ordinariness of it. It was an ongoing part of life. There's something about the ancestor cupboard that touches me. There's the sense that you go in and there they are, then you will them to the eldest child. So the next step is to begin to think about the ancestor tablets and what you want that to be like and what you'll do with it once you have it at home. Maybe it will be the first of many.

The next last step I want to suggest, which is also something to take home with you, is the thought that we are ghosts and ancestors in the making. So how are you doing? What sort of ghost will you leave? What sort of ancestor might you become? That's something we can start thinking about now. That's something we can start working with and doing something about now. You are an ancestor in training. What does that ask of us? What would we want to give that, if we thought that way?

I'll close with a few thoughts from the perspective of our way. I've been so moved to talk with so many of you who are working with this material in very different ways. Everyone has their own way of doing it. Some of you are working with a dead relative. Some of you are working with parts of yourself that got lost somewhere along the way that you're looking to reconnect with. It seems important that, again, we're not imposing a template but making an inquiry, noticing what response we get to the inquiry, and working with that rather than trying to impose something on it.

If we think about the possibility of a deep faith in the processes of life, of the ability to trust our lives, essential to that is a growing conviction that as we move through the world there is nothing we need to defend, protect, or assert. That doesn't mean that we go about just open to what happens or that we don't ever do anything. It means that in some ways we lose the need to have a protective stance all the time. We lose the need to convince, to make an argument, to make sure that we're understood. It's just not as important if we trust life.

In the koan we talked about last night, it said that Prince Nara realized his original body, which is something like the body that needs no defense and no assertion, but simply is. For those of you who work with koans with me, you might think of Huineng's Original Face, and the question, *What is your original face?* When Ming realized his original face, Huineng said to

him that when you know your original face, or your original body, nothing is secret anymore. Nothing is hidden. All you have to do is check inside and you will see it for yourself. That doesn't mean that everything is immediately clear and that we understand everything completely. It's not that simple. But there is something that happens. There is a possibility of seeing through this secret, of coming into relationship with things that seem completely mysterious.

Another one of the old Chinese teachers, Zhaozhou, said, "It's as though you see a word and you don't understand the meaning yet, but you recognize the handwriting." So any encounter we have, any meeting we have with someone else, any time we enter into a new situation, we don't know the meaning yet. We can't because we just got there. But we recognize the handwriting. We recognize the kinship we have with everyone and everything else. We recognize that we are at home in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. The handwriting is familiar. When that is true, it becomes a delight, a joy, to find out and discover through our own experience what the meaning of the word is.

In another koan someone talks about stepping off the top of a hundred-foot pole. It says that when you do step off the top of that pole, the original body will become apparent in every direction, in all the world. One of the reasons we do this work with ghosts and ancestors is to make it clear that this movement toward our original faces, our original bodies, isn't an event that occurs just within our own psyches or our own heart-minds. It happens in all the realms. It happens in those interior landscapes, but it happens in the exterior landscapes of the world as well. And not just the visible one, the invisible ones as well: the worlds of our ancestors, the worlds of what has been and has passed, the worlds that we can't see. In all of those worlds, we can begin to walk without the need for so much protection. Without the need to assert so much, but with a fundamental sense of trust in the processes of life in all those dimensions, in all those realms. So part of what this work with ghosts and ancestors is about is building the confidence that we can inhabit our original bodies. And those bodies can walk more and more freely in whatever realms we're walking in.

I will leave it there and hand it to Sarah.

SB : I'm reminded of that last bit of our precepts where Bodhidharma says, "Your presentation of the actual body is the harbor and the weir. This is the most important thing in

the world.” *Anā*, we don’t have to understand it. It takes its power from the ocean, essential nature. We can accept it with respect and gratitude.

Stephen Karcher also says that if someone is to be a diviner, is to walk among the different worlds we inhabit, it’s essential for that person to have a portable altar with installed ancestors. That seems to me to speak to this. It’s an expression of your willingness to be supported by the unseen; to be supported by and helped by what went before and then to carry that towards what is to come.

When Joan gave me a preview so we would not both be saying the same thing, I said, “Well, that seems pretty full and complete.” I hope not to clutter the field, but there are some things that I thought I would come at from a different angle.

First of all, nothing and no one is a ghost or an ancestor. By that I mean that each thing just is, as it is : watch, carpet, wall, us. And our thoughts are what they are and the memories of our loved ones and our unloved ones [laughter] is what it is. A helicopter overhead can mean someone is watching us to keep us safe, or it can mean someone’s about to bomb us. A door slamming can mean *Ah, the wind*, or it can mean my spouse is pissed off. Someone’s sighs can mean, *Finally I get to relax*, or it can mean, *Oh man, I’m so sick of you doing that*. So we are all the time ghosting and ancestorizing. There aren’t any ghosts and ancestors in one way. Not to contradict this work we’re doing, but to say from another perspective, it’s our minds. It’s *the* mind. Nothing just stays still. Things are much more dynamic than that.

If you look at the very first page of the *Dhammapada* (which I don’t do very often) there’s a wonderful quote : “He abused me, mistreated me, defeated me, robbed me! Harboring such thoughts keeps hatred alive.” It’s a simple statement. It may be true that he abused me, mistreated me. But there’s no ghost in that. Could be that’s the fact. But *harboring* such thoughts — and that gets back to what Joan was saying, when its time has passed it’s done — but holding it, it starts to fester. That’s not different than one of the fundamental teachings, the importance of what our mind does with the stuff. Our mind is ghosting and ancestorizing most of the time. This just rises. It just is. If you’re over-identified with those thoughts, if you think they have to be real, if you think that they are you, you’re going to see them as real and solid. And you will carry them as real and solid. They can clog things up.

If, on the other hand, you’re completely mistrustful of your mind, and think it’s deficient and that only some other much more enlightened mind could deal with your life, then you’re

tempted to hate the ghosting and lust after the ancestor. *No more of the ghosts. Let me only have ancestors. Let me be surrounded by only loving ancestors.* No ghosts need apply.

One of the beauties of our meditation is that it lets us get good and familiar with mind, with the activity of mind, the rising and falling within the spaciousness of our mind. This very mind is the Buddha. And it makes ghosts? Okay. So this very mind is the Buddha and it makes ghosts. Hmm. Okay. So if neither response is wrong, if neither the ghosting nor the ancestor is wrong, then what? One moment you might be haunted. You might wake up in the morning with a shakiness inside, *What will become of me? Am I gonna become a little old bag lady? What if I get really sick and have no health insurance?* All of those things that can rise up first thing in the morning.

The feeling is being crowded then. It feels like a crowding and blocking by the memory of our past pain or the anticipation of more pain — the hard lessons and closing doors. The stance is either crouched with sword in hand, or racing around and shooting randomly in all directions. If your mind is not wrong, then what is this for?

In our meditation, in our practice, on our cushions and in our daily practice, I think that one move we can make is to let ourselves soften to it. Work with what wants defending. What am I afraid of losing? And trusting that there is something there that wants to release. In other words, it's not static, but a movement of the heart-mind. Can we trust the movement of our heart-mind and inquire what is moving here under the layers?

Another moment, your mind might be ancestor, gratefully receiving what's offered. What if you don't make that privileged either? Because once that is privileged, you turn it into a ghost. Like the stories Joan talked about. That great story that enlightens everything, that's just vivid and bright and puts everything into a new perspective. That's what I mean by ancestor — receiving a wisdom that comes sometimes unexpectedly. But if we hold on to it and try to hoard it in some way, we're ghosting that very thing that was an ancestor moments ago.

One thing that helps is to remember that it is not about you. That gift that arrives so bright and lively, is for responding with. It is to hand on. It is to give. *What can I offer here?* keeps it moving. Then, rather than waking up asking *What will become of me?* in that stance, you're on your feet asking *What will come of me?* That's the last move Joan talked about : what

kind of ghost or ancestor am I? That's walking forward on your two feet rather than crouching defended or spraying bullets.

In this regard I was reminded of a koan that says, "Sickness and medicine correspond." The whole world is medicine. What then is the self? We could say, ghosts and ancestors correspond. The whole world is ancestors. What then is the self? What are you? I think that when we practice that move of opening ourselves to the activity of ghosting and ancestor-ing, of noticing what rises, what we feel like defending against, of noticing what comes through, what we offer the moment, then when we walk back and forth through that doorway, as we allow the coming and going of the different activities of the mind, we develop the kind of trust Joan was talking about. Trust in mind is not unlike trust in life. Because what other location of life do you have? Your response to life, your experience of life, is mind. Then with that comes a freedom. We get freer and freer to notice those moments when there is no ghosting or ancestor-ing going on, we just simply rest in what is. There are times, like at a retreat like this, where we are working so hard at trying to make that transformation, trying to ease it, trying to figure out what's a ghost, what's an ancestor, it's really helpful to notice those moments when nothing is required at all. When we can simply rest in what is.

That's a good place to stop.

JIS : Do people have questions or comments?

Q1 : Someone happened to mention a couple of weeks ago, 'ghost sickness' among some native tribes, the Navajo for example. I don't know anything about it. Do you?

JIS : In some Navajo beliefs, a person dies and there's a ghost and the ghost is malevolent. If you run into one of those ghosts, you can develop ghost sickness. If a person dies in a house, they'll abandon the house and punch a hole in the wall for the ghost to leave by. And they won't live in that house any more for fear of ghost sickness.

Q2 : Is it a current belief?

JIS : I think so.

SB : I think they don't even mention their names.

JIS : Yeah, that's right.

Q2 : What's a weir in the 'harbor and the weir?'

SB : It's a place where the fishing is really good. The weirs were branches and sticks that were woven together in such a way as to make an area where fish would breed and stay there. It was a way of stocking a pond, but it would be a piece of the river.

Q3 : You mentioned looking at our dreams this week. How would you handle a dream of an ancestor?

JIS : It would depend on the dream. But one thing you could do would be to bring the dream into your meditation. If there were things you didn't understand, you could just inquire, *What is this?* and then notice what happens in your meditation. You can also take a dream and work with it in meditation. If something happens in a dream and you want to see what the next thing is, or have it be different, you can do that in meditation. It can be quite powerful. But mostly it depends on the nature of the dream.

Q4 : I'm struck by how different this is culturally. In many cultures there are exorcisms where you separate them out and get rid of them. This is a practice of recognition and acceptance. It's very different.

JIS : I think that the fundamental move of this Way is a move of inclusion and integration.

Q5 : I'm curious about reading the signs or reading the time. I can get a little touchy feely. I feel like it's a slippery slope sometimes, yet sometimes something comes that is so powerful and so unexpected. My son and I were driving in the car, right before I came to retreat. He was in the back seat and I was in the front. And it was 5:00 in the afternoon and we saw a shooting star. Both of us saw it coming through the atmosphere, they call them fireballs I guess, and that's what it was! Blue-white fire coming right in the middle of the afternoon. It was so spectacular. We danced around. I can't get this out of my thoughts because it was penetrating the illusion of the blue sky, like not understanding that the stars are still out there when we can't see them, and then having it violated so perfectly. Every time I look at the sky I expect it to happen now. Now it's possible so it must happen regularly. So what about that?
[laughter]

SB : I think you're meant to go conquer the nations. [laughter]

JIS : It's a good question because you are faced with that slippery slope you were talking about. I can remember years ago when it turned for me when a friend of mine said, "I was out walking in the woods and I got a bad case of poison ivy. I keep trying to figure out, what does that mean?" [laughter] It means don't walk in the woods where the poison ivy grows. But that's the slippery slope where everything is infused with meaning.

Q5 : And all for me!

JIS : Yeah. Only for your benefit. [laughter] So what's the middle way? That's always a good question. The middle way is to appreciate that stuff like you did with your son, dancing. That's such a perfect response. Take it in; don't ward it off. But don't have any big ideas about what it means. We can't know what it means. We might even develop a little story about what it means. But if we do, hold it provisionally. Let it be there lightly and then fall away, because as soon as we start thinking we know what anything means we're doomed.

Q5 : Those poor people with Comet Hale-Bopp. That was taking the story too far.

SB : Or the people of New Guinea who really wanted to see what the ancestors had to offer and so ate their brains and transmitted a horrible viral disease.

JIS : Can we delight in and appreciate the strangeness and unpredictability without thinking we know what it means?

SB : There's a wonderful quote from John Keats who wrote about developing negative capability : "... When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." I love that.

Q6 : It could be irritable or it could be hungry.

SB : Hungry for fact or reason though?

Q6 : Hungry for understanding. What does the shooting star mean? Wanting to hold on to it.

SB : Yeah. But to me those feel different. Hungry for understanding can hold it open. Whereas that irritable reaching for fact or reason tries to peg it down. *This means this!*

Q6 : Yeah.

Q7 : To add onto this thing about signs, I was trying to make a decision about something that felt really big in my life. I was looking for some sort of sign. I was asking and waiting and asking and waiting. Trying to weed through what felt like fear and something that didn't feel

authentic. And I realized I wasn't going to get a sign. I mourned the loss of that. I knew I had to decide from some other way. So that's been interesting.

JIS : What did you do instead?

Q7 : I wanted to stop asking and just make a decision. And it kept opening up again. Is that really right? At the last moment I allowed it to open up again when I didn't want it to, didn't want any more indecision, then things got pretty quiet. I still asked but there was no external sign. It was more of a movement that I felt. It wasn't something I wanted or didn't want. It was more like *What's necessary here?* So, it's something that couldn't even be interpreted afterwards. I couldn't say this is why I made that decision, because of this or that. It wasn't something I couldn't package up or take with me. I guess I don't know what happened. It wasn't fireworks.

JIS : There's a listening to the time going on there. You were listening to the time when there wasn't an answer yet. It wasn't ripe. Even though that was frustrating, you waited until something happened. And then something happens, you get that inexplicable movement, and you try it. Then you notice what happens. That's the next step that's really important. *Okay. I land here for now. And I try this.* Then you notice what happens when you do. And *that* becomes the time you're listening to. Then that works or it doesn't work. You do it again and again and again. It's a series of, "Step by step in the dark. If my foot doesn't get wet, it's found the stone." That's how we know.

Q8 : If we're in a place of uncertainty and doubt, would there be any time to call in the ancestors?

JIS : Sure.

Q8 : How?

JIS : It doesn't have to be fancy. *Now would be a good time!* The more you develop an easy relationship with them, the easier it is to do that. Just call, just ask, just pray.

Q9 : I love your dharma talks. They are so full of myth and legend and story. There's so much underneath. It reminds me of an article I was reading about Bedouin tribes and that their way of communicating is through stories. One of the elders was sitting with a group of children and they asked him, "Tell us a story about such and such." He started and one of the children interrupted and said, "That's not the right story. That's not how you told it last time."

And the man said, “The stories always have to change. But the truth in the story is always the same.” It reminds me a lot of when you speak to us.

JIS : Thank you. Thank you all very much.