

Ghosts Into Ancestors I, Introduction
Joan Sutherland, Roshi & Sarah Bender, Sensei
Springs Mountain Sangha ~ Colorado Springs, CO
September 27, 2008

The matter at hand is turning ghosts into ancestors. Who better to ask about turning ghosts into ancestors than the ancestors themselves? We're going to be working with some practices based on ancient Chinese practices. They come from a time that is at the very beginning of our way, one of the source springs of our way. People understood from the very beginning of our way that ghosts — particularly family ghosts, but in general anything that haunts us — are among the most challenging of companions on the Way. At the same time, ancestors can be among the greatest gifts of the Way.

If you can make ancestors of your ghosts, you will find that you are keeping company with beings who have no limitations of time and space. They can be anywhere at any time. You will find that when you are weary, you can lean back on them and they will hold you up. When you are confused, you can read their words or ask them questions, and they will answer. We lost a dear member of this sangha this summer. I was struck by how many people told me, right around the time of his funeral, that he was already talking to them. He'd already said things to them that were particularly wise and particularly funny, as you would expect from this person. We can cultivate a relationship with the ancestors in which that is happening more and more. Also, when you are joyful the ancestors will beam at you, and that's a very nice experience to have.

I want to talk tonight a bit about some basics and give you some method if you want to use it over the next few days. What's a ghost? Well, one idea is that a person who dies splits into parts. There's one part that's quite light and airy and ascends immediately into heaven. We don't have that much to do with that part of the dead person anymore, which has gone on to another existence entirely. There's another part that's heavier and thicker, slower and more entangled in the world, which stays put for a while. That can be the aspects of a person that were difficult, that were full of karma; that's why it's heavier and thicker. But it can also be the part of a person that was engaged in life, part of the world. That's the part we can connect with and begin to work with in beginning to turn the ghost into an ancestor.

The ghost would leave the tomb, wander around, and generally cause mischief among living human beings. The first part of the task was to convince the ghost that it just wanted to stay in the tomb. *Please, lie down. You had a long and good life, and it was so busy and full of things. Wouldn't you like to sleep for a while?* You begin by inviting the ghost to rest, to not have to worry anymore. Then in one of those magical things that happens, the ghost begins to become an ancestor because we say, *And, if you will rest, I will stay here with you for a while. I will keep you company. I will sing you to sleep or read you a story — whatever it is that will help you to relax.*

There was a ceremony, particularly when one of your parents or grandparents died, where you would go into a mourning hut and spend time with the newly dead person. The idea was that a corpse and a son or daughter would go into that mourning hut, and after a while, an ancestor and an adult would come out. So within that mourning hut, corpses transformed into ancestors and sons and daughters transformed into autonomous adults.

We don't know a lot about the particular ceremonies that were performed in the mourning hut. It's a little bit of a black box, but in a way that's a gift because it enables us to find our own ceremonies. I'll talk a bit more about that when I talk about method.

One of the brilliant insights of the Chinese was that a ghost is made up of two things : that part of the dead person that is heaviest, thickest, and most connected to the world and to karma; and our feelings and stories about them. A ghost is a collaboration between ourselves and the person who has died. It's an independent thing separate from the person who's died and separate from ourselves. That idea allows for the possibility of ghosts changing, because we're participating in the ghost; we have a part in it and we can change that. And if we do, the ghost changes and can become an ancestor.

I'll tell you a story to show the way we participate in the making of a ghost. There are two sisters of my acquaintance who had a father everybody would agree was pretty difficult. He died twenty-some years ago. One of the sisters just had an experience where she happened to be having lunch with a group of people which included a medium, a woman who could see dead people. She was going around the table and telling everybody who was around them. She would say to each person, *Oh yeah, Uncle Tim. He's really there for you. He thinks you're fantastic and you can really rely on him. He wants you to know that everything's okay.* She went around and there was a positive figure for each person. And then she got to this sister, and said, *Oh, oh dear. Your father is right here. But he's not your guardian angel. He knows that you want him to apologize*

or to make an acknowledgment of what happened, but he's not going to do that. Being right is more important to him than apologizing. So I would be careful. To the sister, that made perfect sense. That was exactly her experience. The other sister had had the experience of working with her father as a ghost after he died. For the first year or two after his death he would come to her in her dreams in the same difficult, painful way that he used to be when alive. After a while as she continued to pay attention to and work with it, he became a neutral figure in her dreams. That was a huge shift, just to neutrality. A bit further on, he would every once in a while come bearing a gift. He became a benevolent figure in her dreams. Two sisters, same father, two different ghosts because of the participation of each sister in the making of the ghost.

So if we can work with that stuff that we contribute to the ghost, things can change. In a perfect symmetry, the Chinese word for the 'stuff' that we have to work with — the stuff that's gooey, stagnant, cloggy, and fetid — is *gu*. [laughter] Use it. What's the *gu* that we participate in in the making of this ghost? If we can work with that, ghosts can become ancestors, and then they go to live in the Yellow Springs, which is a watery world under the earth. Once they're living in the Yellow Springs we can communicate with them. They go from being lonely figures locked up in tombs by themselves to this whole lovely life that they have down there in the Yellow Springs. We are freed and they are freed at the same time by this work.

I want to say that, of course, I'm not necessarily asking you to accept this mythology as your mythology. But you can see the psychological brilliance of this. If you want to understand it in terms of psychology that's great, because it absolutely works that way.

A little bit of method if you want to take this up during this retreat : The first thing to do is identify who the ghost is that you want to work with. You may have come with an idea of someone or something and that may stick, that may be indeed what you're going to work with. But, for the beginning at least, keep your eye and heart open to the possibility that someone surprising might show up. Don't turn that away. If someone surprising shows up, check that out. See if maybe there's something you weren't expecting that's going to happen.

These ceremonies were developed for family ghosts, but it doesn't have to be limited to that. It could also be, for example, a family pattern, a legacy or heritage that's difficult for you. For instance, the children and grandchildren of survivors of the Holocaust find that the Holocaust is a tremendously strong legacy that gets passed from generation to generation.

Alcoholism would be something like that. At the same time, so would a valuing of education or encouraging of creativity. There can be good ghosts as well. A ghost can be someone you loved, someone who's gone who loved you and you felt connected to and who meant a great deal to you. It's pretty easy to make that kind of ghost into an ancestor. If it's a more difficult figure, then it takes a bit more time and attention.

So it can be a person, a family pattern, and every once in a while it can be a living person. That's trickier because with a living person, the relationship isn't fixed yet. It still has more life to be lived, and there might be a way that you're intervening too soon in the relationship. You have to feel that out. The one thing I would say is that if you want to work with a living person, you also have to ask what ghost you are for that person. There has to be a reciprocity of relationship.

Okay. The first question is : who or what?

The second question is : what's my *gu*? What am I contributing to this ghost? That can take some time to come to understand, and a bit of ferocity and courage as well. Use your meditation. Use your inquiry. Use the koans. (I'm going to hand out the koans tonight that we'll be talking about tomorrow in the koan seminar.) There might be something in one of the koans that helps you do that inquiry about what you're contributing to the ghost. Use your dreams. You can ask your dreams simply, *What do my dreams want me to know about this ghost?* And you can do the same inquiry in your meditation, *What does my meditation want me to know about this ghost?*

The third step is to begin to dismantle that part of the ghost in which we're participating, to see if we can begin to deconstruct it and let it go. Maybe a little, maybe a lot. We'll see. And to imagine what it would be like if we took the *gu* away. When we begin to explore that, we raise the question about whether this person can become an ancestor for me once that *gu* is untangled.

That's the general arc of things. For those of you interested in taking this up, let's talk about it as the week goes on, and let's design for each of us the ceremony in the mourning hut, because it will be different for each of us. Please feel free to talk with me and to talk with Sarah [Bender, Sensei] about it as the week goes on. We can find a course together. On Saturday night with the ceremony, in some symbolic way, we'll mark the transformation of

ghost into ancestor. That may not be something that you complete this week, but you can see it as marking an intention to continue to work with it.

Sarah, did you want to say something?

SB : On the cultural level we have all kinds of ghosts and karmic ties. It's one wonderful kind of work to do this transformation that Joan's describing. We also have something that we can do almost on the cellular level that parallels and works hand-in-hand with that. Concretely sitting in meditation or walking along you can get that haunted feeling, you can get the hunch in the shoulders, that tightness and feeling of uneasiness that something uneasy and troublesome is picking on you. In our meditation, taking a minute, bodily, to turn around and rather than taking a gesture of protection, to say, "Who are you? What are you?"

As I felt my way into this, what felt helpful, because it takes courage to do this work, was two things that neurology has been discussing again (pieces of old wisdom rediscovered). When you feel that haunted feeling, it can be really helpful to just touch ground and to feel that you're alive. To feel that the ground is still supporting you. That the light is still inside of you. Not that this isn't real, by any means. But to just touch for a minute and affirm that you're here and all right. That's a practice of gratitude. *I'm here. I have what I need.*

Along with that, facing, intimately what is inside, allow yourself the gesture to offer something. What can I offer here? What can I offer to myself, what can I offer to this ghost? What can I offer in response to the situation? Both of those have a healing power that empowers us, encourages us to be able to do the work of staying, just being with so that we can then investigate, as Joan was suggesting, "What am I bringing to this?"

I have one example of this that comes from Bernie Glassman's book *Bearing Witness*. When a group in meditation at Auschwitz were sitting where a whole lot of children had died, it was so heavy that even the rabbi who usually had been able to come up with a prayer in almost all of their situations, was stuck. Everyone sat in silence for a while. Then someone in the back of the group began to sing a lullaby in German. Everyone took up that lullaby and began to sing. And the situation turned and opened. Something new was possible. Possible, I think partly because in each other's company there is that natural awareness that we have each other. So we can have the courage.

JIS : The last thing you said is so important. We don't have to go off into our separate mourning huts to do this work. We can do this work here, together in the presence of each other. We can use the support of each other in the retreat. That's a wonderful thing.

SB : This turning into the dark is not a small thing. What an offering in a time when culturally, we are haunted. We can offer this.

JIS : Does anyone have questions about method, what to do? [passes out koans]

Q1 : If we have a lot of ghosts do you think it's most effective to just pick one that's most vital?

JIS : Yes. And then you can apply that as many times as you want to many different ghosts. But yeah, it's good to start with one.

Q1 : This is not someone that we've not met; someone from past lives or an ancestor? It's someone who's been in our life?

JIS : That's usually the most powerful way to do it. If you find that someone outside that category shows up, pay attention to that.

Q2 : I'm unclear about step two. Once we've identified the ghost, then what?

JIS : Then you begin to do an inquiry looking at how you contribute to the ghost. What are your feelings and stories that are the *gu*, that are your part of the ghost? Because that's the part you can change. You can't do much about the part that is who the other person was. But you can do something about your feelings and stories that contribute to the ghost.

Q3 : I wonder about enlisting the help of an ancestor. How would you go about working with this with a good, old, reliable grandma? How do I bring her into the mix?

JIS : How do you usually bring her in?

Q3 : She just shows up I suppose. She snaps into whatever I'm doing.

JIS : See if you can invite her in. Talk to her in your mind, in your heart. Invite her to come and I'll bet she will. But if you invite her, you have to listen to her. [laughter]

Q4 : Can your ghost be someone who you love deeply and there's not a lot of issues but you think things may not have gotten done; you wish it could have lasted longer? Is that *gu* to work with?

JIS : Absolutely. It's wonderful to work with someone you love. If you can turn someone like that into an ancestor, that's such a strong alliance, such a strong relationship. There may

be things that interfere with the strength of that relationship, even missing and longing and wishing it were different. What if it could be exactly how it is, completely that, and you are entirely open to it? When I told the story about how our former sangha member started talking to people right away — well, some people make really good dead people. [laughter] I've told this story before, but when a person dear to a lot of us died, a friend of mine said, "He is the biggest dead person I know." There was the sense that he'd been great in life and he was great in death. So what's the greatness of this person in death as well as in life?

That's it. Thank you.

– 0 –

Stephen Karcher's work with the Yijing, and his deep understanding of the mythical landscape of ancient China, was a major source of inspiration for this talk