

Gates I
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Good evening, everyone.

Last week we were talking about gates, about how in the Red Dust, which is the way we ordinarily experience life, there's sometimes, for some of us, a sense that there must be something bigger, truer, or realer than the Red Dust as we're experiencing it. In the beginning, it feels as though that must be something else, something different, another place, although that changes. So gates start to open up for us, and if, at some point, we don't take the gates, we sink into the Red Dust and are lost.

Those gates are sometimes bright gates and sometimes shadow gates. Sometimes something could seem as though it were a shadow gate. Something like a serious illness could start out looking like a shadow gate, but something happens and it actually becomes a bright gate, it becomes the occasion of a deepened understanding or a more open heart.

So, having brought up the idea of bright gates and shadow gates, I'm reminded of the story of an American philosopher who went to talk with a Japanese zen master, and from his philosopher's perspective, he asked, "So what are the big important ideas in Zen?"

The zen master thought for a moment and he said, "I don't think we have any big ideas. I think the only important ideas in Zen are the ones that destroy themselves."

So, having brought up bright gates and dark gates, I'm now gonna destroy that as an idea. I wanted to talk tonight about what the gates are like when we take them off the bright-shadow axis, or the good-bad axis, or the useful-not useful, the learning experience, the suffering, whatever axis we can put them on — what happens when we take them off that.

I've talked in the past about how there's a common idea, common to most of American Buddhism, that things are dharma gates; that everywhere we look, as we go through our lives, we can have these encounters with people and situations and things, and that they're dharma gates; and if we can just take the invitation and walk through the dharma gate, that we can learn something; there's something that happens there. In my experience, mostly people talk

about that in terms of encounters with difficult people, that *Yeah, it was really tough, but she was a dharma gate for me, and something happened.*

I've talked about how that formulation has always made me a little queasy, because it can lend itself to a sense that what's important is not the person or the situation, but walking through that person or situation to the learning — that the learning is somehow on the other side of that person or situation. And so it can lend itself sometimes to an instrumental view of things, that people are valuable in how they help us, how they function for us, how they act as dharma gates, rather than just *tathagata*, just themselves, vividly and fully.

So having expressed that queasiness in the past, I wanted tonight to present another way of thinking about dharma gates, not as being the person or the situation through whom we walk to the true thing, the important thing; but as something that happens before we have the encounter with the person or the situation.

This comes from (you won't be shocked to hear) a koan. It comes from a Yunmen koan, which has in it this different sense of the gate. It goes like this :

Yunmen said to the assembly, "In the whole world, in the midst of the cosmos, there is a treasure hidden in your body. Holding a lantern, it goes toward the buddha hall. It brings the great mountain gate and puts it on the lantern."

Let me unpack that. He begins by saying, "In the whole world," and then he goes, *No, that's not big enough.* "In the in the midst of the cosmos" (he goes about as big as you can go) "there's a treasure hidden in your body." So we have this contrast between the vast cosmos and the individual person, your body, your physical, actual body. There's a treasure in it, and there's an implication that the treasure is somehow linked to that vast cosmos.

We often think of the bigness of things as brightness, because the central image of this tradition is enlightenment, so light plays a big part. But there's a strong tradition also that comes out of Daoism and came into Chan that sees the heart of things, the origin of things, as dark. It's called the Great Mysterious. It's as though everything that we can perceive, everything that is tangible to us is this vast temple. At the center of the temple is a dark well, and we can look into it but we can't see anything in that well. So that's the origin and essence of everything : that which we can't see, that which is dark and mysterious. And then out of that dark well, out of that darkness, stream branches of light, which are everything that is

visible, tangible, and experienceable by us, including the things of the imagination and the things of the heart.

So if we hold that sense of the well at the center of everything — that which is impenetrable by our ordinary senses, that which is by its nature mysterious — then the treasure that's in our body is somehow a bit of that. Not a bit of light, but a bit of dark. And it's that bit of dark that connects us to the vastness, connects us to interstellar space.

Because it's a bit of darkness, that's why mystics are always saying, *You can't give it a name, you can't talk about it, you can't describe it.* It might also be why sometimes it makes us uneasy, and sometimes it frightens us; why sometimes we reach a point in our spiritual practice where we feel like backing up, because we've touched that dark, impenetrable mystery at the center of things, and we're not quite sure how we feel about that. Again, because of this contrast that Yunmen brings up in the very beginning between the whole big thing and this human body, this body of a mammal, this single, fragile vessel that we walk around in.

So then he says, "Holding a lantern, it goes toward the buddha hall." Not *you go, it goes*, that bit of the dark in you, that thing that connects you to the vastness. *It* holds a lantern, *it* walks you toward the buddha hall. So, there's a sense that *it* can illuminate our path in our ordinary lives and *it* will lead us toward the buddha hall, which is not some special place apart from everything else but is the world itself, is our minds itself. We are the buddha hall for each other. The mountains, the rivers, and the intersection of Cerrillos and Saint Francis at five o'clock in the afternoon — all of that is the buddha hall that this shard of darkness can illuminate, can hold a lantern to take us toward.

There's a sense of a naturalness to that, and a kind of grace. We don't have to engineer this; we don't have to make this happen. We just have to let that shard of darkness in us hold the lantern and take us toward the buddha hall. And so our task is much less one of trying to figure it out and do it right, and much more one of allowing that to happen, of sinking into the silence, of letting the tree wither and the leaves fall, as we've been talking about in the koan salon, so that we can let that happen, not get in the way of it.

That's pretty clear, or at least understandable, and then, it being Yunmen, he does this big tilt at the end. He says, again speaking of this treasure inside of us which is holding the lantern and taking us toward the buddha hall — "*It* brings the great mountain gate and puts it

on the lantern.” Huh? What’s that? What just happened? Let’s look at that for a second, because that is quite beautiful, too.

The mountain gate is the entrance gate of an old Chinese monastery, of the old monasteries, and they were huge because you had to be able to get carts and all kinds of stuff through them. So they were often a couple of stories tall and quite wide, and sometimes there would be three of them, three archways. They were really a building that had holes in it. And above the mountain gate was a gallery, and in the gallery were images of the bodhisattvas and also sometimes the mummified bodies of the previous teachers. So that’s what you walked underneath as you entered the monastery, all of the ancestors and some kind of connection to the spirit world, to the world of the bodhisattvas, as well. And this is the gate that somehow mysteriously gets brought and placed on the lantern.

If there’s the sense of naturalness and grace that I was speaking about, there’s also a sense that you don’t do this alone; you have the ancestors and the spirits with you. They’re right there, in all of their support and all of their weight. [Laughs] That big heavy gate is right there. But they give you a gate that wasn’t somebody’s bright idea last week or in the 1930’s or something like that. This is a gate that has gone through seventy generations, through fourteen hundred years. And, there it is. They offer that gate to us.

So now we have an image of a gate right in front of us all the time. We’re walking toward the buddha hall, the lantern is lighting the way, and there’s the gate, ready for us to walk through or not, as we choose. When we do that, we’re not walking *through* anybody or any situation to the truer thing : We’re walking through that gate so that we can have a true encounter with that person or that situation. Do you see? That’s a really important difference. That gate is provided for us all the time to walk through first, so that we then encounter the person or the situation in a clear way.

The image I have is of gates in the adobe walls in this town, on a street. And people start opening up the gates, coming out of the compounds, and meeting on the street under the common sky. That’s the feeling of this. We each come out through our individual gate and meet each other, encounter each other, and walk the common earth together.

There are lots of stories in the tradition about how that gate is always there, and we always have the choice to walk through it or not, or to turn it into something it’s not. One of a million stories like that is a Japanese story of a swordsman, a samurai, who had murdered a lot of

people in his life, 'cause that was his job. But as he got older, he started to be a little worried about his afterlife. So he went to talk to a Japanese zen master about life and death and what was going to happen to him in his afterlife, having killed so many people. And he asked about anger and love, and heaven and hell. *Am I going to heaven, am I going to hell?*

The teacher said, "Why should I talk to you? You're just an ignorant, stupid swordsman. You're just a brute. You're not gonna understand anything I say. Why are you wasting my time? This is ridiculous. What difference could it possibly make?" As he was speaking, the samurai was getting angrier and angrier, breathing harder, and his face was getting red. Finally he went for his sword to go after the teacher, and the teacher said, "Okay, that? That's hell."

And when he said that, the samurai sort of went, *Right*, and just dropped it, let it go. And the teacher said, "That? That's heaven."

That's a strong sense that the gates to heaven and hell are always right in front of us, and it's always ours to choose, whether to walk through or not. The other thing that is important about that story is, again, the sense of naturalness, that hell is a state we work ourselves up into, and heaven is pretty much what happens when we let all of that go, which is to say a radical thing : the baseline looks more like heaven than like hell.

We were talking last week about *dukkha*, the First Noble Truth, and the unsatisfactoriness of things. Here we have the tradition saying that yeah, there may be a certain inherent unsatisfactoriness of things, but if you let your struggle with that go, the baseline, the base note, the thing that happens when you stop whipping all this stuff up, looks an awful lot like heaven, has a kind of peaceful, and even loving, quality about it.

If we choose to walk through this gate that's on the lantern, that's carrying us toward the buddha hall, then really, long before we have whatever encounter it is we're going to have, we're making the choice, which is to allow ourselves to be touched by life, to be marked by life. When we walk through that gate, we walk through it without a lot of preconceptions or preconditions about the way things are gonna be. We are saying, *I am willing to feel the caress, to take the hit, to weep hearing a story from the other side of the world, to have an encounter with beauty which changes how I think about everything.* We're willing to have all of those things happen. We're willing to be marked by life, to be shaped by life, to have it affect us, and to affect it. And that's different from the good / bad, useful / not useful axis. Can you feel that? So it's not a

kind of evaluation and judgment; it's a radical willingness to walk through the gate and engage with life.

I thought I would close tonight by reading a short piece I wrote, which conveys that sense of what it's like to walk through the gate and engage like that in an ordinary way. It's part of a longer piece about how we decide to do things, if one of the foundations in Zen is "The Great Way is not difficult, just don't pick and choose." How do we make a decision? How do we do things in our lives? This is called, "Is This a Good Day? Is This a Bad Day?"

Changes, even the ones we choose, don't come without loss. My dog, Gracie, has a recurrence of cancer soon after we arrive in Santa Fe. One day I drive her down to Albuquerque for the tests that will tell me whether there's anything to do, or whether this is her death beginning to walk toward her. Is this a good day? Is this a bad day? I drop Gracie off and head for the nearby home of a friend of a friend, where I wait for the results. On the interstate, a rock cracks my windshield. What kind of day now? Once I arrive at the house, I sit looking out a picture window at the Sandias, watching the light change and the peaks start to shimmer as the very long day wears on. Good day? Bad day?

The friend of my friend asks me if I want to see the kiva she's building by hand in the back yard. She's created this lovely beehive structure from mud bricks she makes herself. It has a tamped earth floor below ground level, a place for a fire, and one opening at the apex of the roof, through which the sky is visible. On this hot and windy day, the air inside is cool and still. It's perfect.

She received the inspiration in a dream. When she started asking around for advice on how to build it, she discovered that there are people all over the Southwest building kivas after dreaming about them. Standing outside the low doorway, with her dog and the mountain in the golden light, I wonder, is this a good day? A bad day?

I call the veterinary hospital and discover that I won't have the test results today after all. Disappointed, tired, I pick up my dog, who is wobbly from anaesthesia, and we head off for home, the red sun setting in my rearview mirror. She sleeps with her head in my lap.

Is this a good day? Is this a bad day? Does any of it have to do with good and bad? Aren't those just the wrong questions to be asking? Isn't this a day that shows how inadequate, how limiting, categories like that are in the face of what is beautiful and mysterious, terrible and mysterious, about life, every day?

Thank you very much.