

Gates II  
Joan Sutherland  
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Last week I was talking about a koan, and I want to say a little more about it tonight. It's Yunmen, one of the old Chinese teachers, who said, "Within the whole world, in the vast cosmos, there is a treasure hidden inside your body. It takes up the lantern and walks toward the buddha hall. It takes the mountain gate and puts it on the lantern." So, to touch on what we talked about last week, here is this image of the Way, that there is a contrast between the bigness of everything, "within the vast cosmos," and in your body, where there is a treasure that connects you to that vast cosmos. By some mysterious process that bit of the vastness that you carry inside of you picks up a lantern and takes you to the buddha hall. It lights the way and takes you to the buddha hall, which is not some special spiritual destination but is in fact the world itself.

Your life, the things of your day, are the buddha hall. Then there is the somewhat mysterious bit, "You take the mountain gate and put it on top of the lantern." The mountain gate was the entrance to the old Chinese monasteries and was huge, so it was really a building with openings in it that functioned as gates. Often above the openings there was a gallery, and in the gallery were statues of bodhisattvas and portraits, and sometimes the mummified remains, of previous teachers of the temple. So you've got the ancestors up in this gallery above the gate — human ancestors and spirit ancestors as well. So this is the gate that gets put on the lantern.

And we talked about what an arresting image that is, to think that we have this gate placed before us that we can walk through at any moment. It is right there. The gate isn't *in* the situation we walk through; the gate is to enter the situation in a real way. One of the images I brought up, which seemed to resonate with a lot of people because it has come up a bunch since then, is of the Emperor who unified China 2,200 years ago, who had a slightly paranoid streak. So there was a gate that you had to pass through in order to come into his presence, and that gate was made out of lodestone,

which is magnetic. So if you were carrying any weapons of metal on you, they would go *sssswooop* and get stuck on the gate as you passed through. That image of the lodestone gate that pulls out our weapons and our shields and all the things that we carry into a situation and purifies us in some way, struck a cord with a lot of people. Then we enter the situation minus the apparatus, which is sticking to the lodestone gate.

I wanted to talk just a little bit more about the nature of that gate. One of the things I encourage you to do as we take up a koan is, to the extent that you can, imagine yourself into the original circumstances of the koan. Sometimes we can tend to see them as though they appear as skywriting; they appear to be floating in the sky not related to anything. But they had a time and a place; they were embodied as well. Yunmen was speaking to a group that would have been largely made up of monastics, and monastics in ninth century China were people, first of all, who by virtue of being monastics had left their home lives behind, decisively. And because there were not a whole ton of great training temples in China at the time, they probably also had come a long way in order to be where they were. They might be dozens or even a thousand miles away from their birthplace, at this temple. They were devoting their lives to a tradition that was still seen in China as somewhat foreign and a little bit suspect.

So this is a group of people who have a kind of uprooted quality about them; they have left their homes, they are away from their native landscapes, their native place, and they have entered this slightly dodgy community that wasn't quite accepted by mainstream society. That's who he is speaking to, and if he is speaking to these people who are uprooted in this way and saying, *You are not alone; the ancestors are right there in the gate that's right in front of you*, it is speaking to us in the same way as well.

When we are feeling uprooted in our lives, in whatever ways that happens, there is another koan that begins, "I am Qingshui, alone and destitute. Please give me alms." I think we all know that place, we all know Qingshui alone and destitute, begging for help. When we are feeling alone and uprooted like that by illness, by exile, by being far away from home, and whatever ways we mean that, both psychically as well as physically, we have this gate that is right there in front of us all the time that we make, with our practice, with the blessings of the ancestors as we do that.

And we have the promise, should we do the work that allows us to pass through that gate, that what we will find on the other side is what the old ancestors called *intimate*. We will find that quality of realization that is becoming intimate, wherever we are, not depending on circumstances, not depending on being at home. Even in the times when we are feeling uprooted and off balance, there is the gate, and there is the possibility of passing through the gate and becoming intimate.

I want to talk about the concrete ways in which we do that in this practice, because it is important to touch in on that every once in a while. When we do that, it might be helpful to use a formulation that came up in the koan salon yesterday, about the wind being eternal and reaching everywhere, and the idea that you might understand that it is eternal, but you might not yet understand that it reaches everywhere. What are those two aspects? It is the same wind, but it has an eternal face and it has a reaching-everywhere-touching-every-skin quality as well.

So the gate has the same two aspects. I am going to talk in a way that is artificially pure, because one of the things I most love about this tradition is that it has gotten very busy mixing things up and making them impure, and I think that is important. So forgive me for a minute, for the sake of description, making things purer than they actually are. There is this eternal aspect of the gate, and there is also the reaching-everywhere aspect. We work with koans largely in two different ways, because the two ways we work with koans tend to make one aspect or the other more visible to us, more apparent, and give us a way to work with that aspect. Here is what I mean by that.

The mythology of spiritual life is that there is this big experience you have called enlightenment. It happens and then everything is fine, and everyone lives happily ever after, and that's the story. But that is so *not* the story. I want to propose a different way of thinking about it. We are all walking toward the buddha hall, lit by this lantern, and that walk is awakening. Awakening happens the first moment we draw breath and lasts until the moment we last draw breath in this life. It is sometimes punctuated by these moments of breakthrough which happen not just in spiritual practice but in other ways as well. But the breakthroughs are just part of the process of awakening, a tremendously important part, but not the goal and not the most important part of it.

We have gone around a lot about the self : what is the self, where do we locate it, what is it like, and all of that. Something I want to propose is that we put down the self as the thing that is continuous in our lives, and take up awakening as the thing that is continuous in life. The thread, the through-line, of our life isn't this self that we construct and deconstruct all the time, but it's this process of awakening from first breath to last breath.

Because the moments of breakthrough, which can happen one or many, many times in different degrees in a life, are important, koan practice used to be focused exclusively on making them happen. That was the point : In my ancestral line in Japan, there was a sign in Japanese in the meditation hall that said, "The purpose of sesshin is kensho." The purpose of a retreat is breakthrough, is awakening. The hall in Kamakura was called the kensho factory, so it was a very singleminded focus on having this event occur. And what might be surprising to you is that it is not that hard to do, it is quite possible to have that be a widespread, general occurrence. In order to do that, you take up one koan and you stay with it for usually a long time; sometimes it can be a matter of hours but more likely it is a matter of months or even years, and you have a monogamous relationship with that koan, that's what you do.

The most famous first koan is Zhaozhou's No. Someone asks Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddha nature?" Zhaozhou replied, "No." And the koan question is : What is this No? Since we know that dogs do have buddha nature, it can't be that, it can't have its usual logical meaning, so what is it? You meditate with No, you live with No, you carry No around with you all the time, and you have what's called the great iron ball of doubt that lodges in your throat. You go through all of this kind of stuff, you stay with it as long as it takes, and at some point — hours, days, weeks, months, or years down the road — if you and *Mu* (what used to be called Mu is No, because that's what it means) become one, then you have this experience of breakthrough.

The thing that is important to notice is that that's the first koan. That's not the last koan, that's the first koan. And after that in my tradition come 749 other koans. That's important because that's saying, *Okay, good job, now, now we get down to the really important stuff*, which is making this stuff alive in your life, realizing it in your life, and that's what the next 749 koans do. Initially, they show you where in this opening the light

has shone very brightly and you can see, and where it is still shaded and you need to do more work. Then it tosses you around between form and emptiness for awhile. Then it begins this long process of integration where it's not special anymore, and it doesn't leak away anymore, which is what happens usually with an opening when you don't do this work with it. It just over time leaks away, and it remains this powerful and poignant memory of something we felt that was important. So that is one way of coming through the gate, and that is called 'seeing through the gate of No.'

There is another, which we do all the time here, in the koan salon, and in our work together in other ways, which is that we don't stick with one koan as a first koan, but we take up one koan at one time, and another, and another, and we look at them together, and we move from koan to koan to koan. It might surprise you to know that the way I trained, you didn't do that, you held the first koan, but then you did all these other koans afterwards. But that began to feel to some of us as though there was this great treasure house with a padlock on it, and what we were saying to people was *Sit there until you make the key*. You don't get to play until you make the key, and that just came to feel ridiculous. [Laughter]

Why would you do that? Why would you lock the treasure of the house away like that? So we opened it up and indeed found that being able to work with koans like that is also tremendously powerful. That's the 'reaching everywhere,' where we take the koans into our lives and bring all of our lives to the koans. We begin to feel the way they change us in our everyday lives, by taking them up and staying with them.

Sometimes when we do that I will watch a koan really grab hold of someone, and it will become very much like a first koan for someone and have a lot of the same qualities. In this way we have a different kind of opening; instead of having an opening that's the result of a tremendous amount of pressure being applied so things crack open, instead of having that kind lightning bolt opening, we have an opening that is more like the dawn, where the light comes up slowly. The sky's light comes up slowly, and it's almost only later you can see the sky has grown light.

That's also beautiful and in some ways more helpful, because in doing the polytheistic koan work, in working with a lot of different koans and really working with them in our lives, we do what we call the bucket work. We do the work that

makes strong containers, so when openings happen we have something to hold on to them with, instead of having them zap us like lightning and disappear into the ground, because we have nothing for them to be held by. I am talking about these in a way, as I said, that is too pure, because it is actually much more mixed up than that. Most of the people who are working in this way are doing aspects of both, and that's tremendous to have both things going on at once.

There is a way in which that moment of getting a glimpse through the gate of No is like seeing the emptiness of everything all at once. That is why it is such a big experience, because it is like it is everywhere, it is eternal, there is nothing left out; you see the emptiness of the whole thing in one big shot. But when we have the more domestic, local moments of seeing the emptiness of things — as we did on the koan retreat this weekend, or maybe some of you have begun to have the experience where there's a habitual tangle you get in with somebody, and you find yourself starting to tell the story about the habitual tangle, "She always" and "I never" and "Blah, blah, blah", and you can't do it; it's like you can't even make it up anymore; you get a couple sentences in, you just stop, and sometimes you just dissolve into laughter; it is just not possible to believe anymore in that story — that's also seeing the emptiness.

It's seeing a particular emptiness. But it is exactly the same as that breakthrough moment of the emptiness of everything, it's just more local. That's going on all the time; we don't have to wait for some promise down the road, because it's happening right now. We talked over the weekend about being tilted and letting the koans tilt us, and that's awakening, right in that moment when we let something surprise us and push us, and we fall over and start to fall freely for a moment. We let the rug be pulled out from underneath us for a moment and we fall freely. That moment of falling freely is exactly the same moment as happens in a big breakthrough. It's our willingness not to right ourselves too quickly but to allow ourselves to fall over and over and over again in the small moments that lets that dawn sky lighten over time.

I will close with one of my favorite stories about this. Several years ago there was a documentary that was really popular in Northern California, where I come from, called "The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill." Did you see that? There was an eccentric and lovely man named Mark Bittner, who was living near this colony of wild parrots

who lived in this particular neighborhood in San Francisco. No one was quite sure where they had come from; maybe a truck had overturned and opened up, and the original parrots had flown free. Anyway, they were fruitful and multiplied and became this large colony of wild parrots. He became their guardian and caretaker. Then at a certain point, long story short, he had to leave the neighborhood and then decided he wanted to write a book about the parrots. Someone gave him a little cottage back near where the parrots were, but not quite there. So he hunkered down in the cottage and started to write this book about the parrots. It was all about how much he loved them, how special they are, and what a tremendous experience he had with them.

After a couple of days they actually found him, so all the parrots came swooping over. They were beating their wings against the windows, pecking at the windows, squawking and making this tremendous ruckus. He would be writing about how fantastic the parrots were, and how deep his love for them was, and then he would have to get up and shoo them away because they were making so much noise. He tells the story ruefully, and there is something so important there about spiritual life : We think that it's about getting still, concentrated, and focused, and we shouldn't let anything disturb us, and meanwhile the wild parrots of awakening are beating their wild wings against the window, squawking and calling to us to pay attention, pay attention.

So in this impure way that we are walking together we value both of those things. We value the silence and the concentration of going deep, and we value the brilliant colored feathers and the songs of the parrots as well. We don't have to choose one or the other. The stillness and the concentration are tremendously important; they are necessary but not sufficient. It is not enough. It's just a technique, and sometimes we can mistake the technique for the goal; we can think the goal is to get concentrated and still, but it's just a technique. And it's no more or less important than the technique of being able to walk out among the parrots, and instead of shooing them away, saying from the bottom of our hearts, "There is nothing I dislike," and being able to be completely in that moment.

So I'll stop there to leave some time for questions and comments you might have about this.

Q1: I have a question about the gate on the lantern. Is that also representing, like the gates no longer having [Unintelligible]

JS: Nice, yeah. This massive thing and yet somehow ...

Q1: ... it's sitting right there ...

JS: ... Yeah, it's sitting right there ...

Q1: You're okay sitting, right [Unintelligible]

JS: And not having to ditch it, you know? Laying a burden down doesn't mean we have to ditch the gate; we just have to realize that the gate is floating.

Q1: Great.

JS: Anything else?

Q2: Let me see if I got this right. [Laughter] You basically said be the awakening, is that correct? Allright then, who or what deserves awakening?

JS: Nobody,

Q2: Nobody.

JS: If the through-line rather than the self becomes the awakening, what's that like? And there is no one watching. Luckily no one is looking. That is another one of the koans, right?

Q3: In that line is there an idea that the self kind of pops in and pops out, it never completely disappears?

JS: Oh, sometimes it completely disappears, but it rises and falls and we climb into it when we need to, and then we can sometimes let it go when we don't need to. But it is very interesting for that to be the thing that rises and falls and appears and disappears, and this other thing is the base note.

[Unintelligible]

JS: First breath to last breath, and probably on the other side of that too.

Okay, anything else? Thank you all.