

Dharma Gates of the Ancestors  
Joan Sutherland  
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*John Tarrant introduces Joan Sutherland*

Good evening, everyone. Thank you for coming tonight. My brief is to talk about the ancestors.

*[Some conversation connected to audio difficulties]*

So this is the autumn, when for many people around the world thoughts turn toward the ancestors, and people make giant Dia de Los Muertos altars in my part of the world and have feasts for ancestors; we think about them, and maybe they think about us, too. Maybe this is the time when the veils between the worlds grow thin, and the ancestors come by to check up on us to see how we're doing. So I want to speak a little bit tonight about having a living relationship with the ancestors, because in some fundamental ways we are because they were. This tradition we're a part of is at least seventy generations — 1400 years — old. It's been carried down from generation to generation to generation so that we might experience it and know it and love it and hate it and change it and keep it, as we do now.

I want to talk about an example of something that's common in modern American Buddhism, and then talk about it from the perspective of the ancestors, which might be a little bit different. The idea I want to use as an example is the idea of dharma gates, that situations and encounters with people can be, if we let them, dharma gates; they can allow us to walk through the dharma gate and discover something new. In my experience mostly people talk about dharma gates in relationship to difficult people. "It was a really tough conversation, but there was a dharma gate there for me, and I really got something." Right?

This formulation, which is so prevalent in American Buddhism as to be almost a cliché, is something that's always made me feel queasy, because it would be easy to interpret that as meaning that what's important is what you learn out of the situation, that you walk *through* the circumstance, *through* the person, to the land of what's important for you to learn, so that we can have almost an instrumental view of people and circumstances. They are important,

interesting, valuable insofar as they help us learn something. That's the complete opposite of *tathagata*, the complete opposite of the meeting of each situation and each person — vivid, alive, particular, not going anywhere, not enabling us to go through it or around it or under it. One of the women teachers of the Tang Dynasty used to say, "Each being has its own radiance. Each being is a 10,000-foot cliff." That's *tathagata*, when we are stopped and we see the radiance of each being, each situation we encounter, and we recognize the 10,000 cliff right there for us to fall.

So if we want to think about dharma gates in a different way, not as an occasion for our learning, but as something much deeper and more profound, let's turn to the ancestors and see what they have to say about it. I want to work with a koan by Yunmen, who was one of the greatest of the Chinese koan masters, and in fact among the first, if not the first, teachers to recognize the power of koans as a way of teaching and also as a way of awakening. We have this whole line of people, from Yunmen to Dahui, to Bukko and Hakuin in Japan, all of whom took the koan tradition, ate the marrow of it, changed it, loved it, and passed it on so it would come to us so we can eat the marrow of it, love it, change it, and pass it on in our turn.

Yunmen said at one point when he was talking to the people who were gathered around him at his temple, "In the wide world, in the midst of the cosmos, there is a treasure hidden in your body. It holds a lantern and goes toward the buddha hall. It takes the mountain gate and puts it on the lantern." Here's a different way of looking at gates, and let me talk about some of what Yunmen was saying, maybe.

He begins by saying, "In the whole world, in the wide world, in the midst of the cosmos, there is a treasure hidden in your body." Immediately he evokes the existential situation of being human. He starts out, "in the whole world." Not big enough. "In the cosmos." Let's get really big, let's bring in the whole thing. In the midst of the cosmos there's you, your body, your mammal-ed body, you know, the flesh and bone of you, the imagination and heart of you, and within that *you* is a treasure. And there's some implication that that treasure connects you with the whole cosmos.

In our tradition, because the central image is enlightenment, because it's one of light, we tend to think of that treasure as maybe a bit of light, a spark of the divine. But I want to suggest something else, which comes out of the Daoist tradition, also a source spring for us. In the Daoist tradition which was taken into Chan, into Chinese Buddhism, the center of things,

the origin, was called the Dark Mysterious. It was seen as something dark, something we couldn't look into, something we couldn't understand. Out of the darkness flowed streams of light, branches of light, and those branches of light make up everything that is experienceable by us, everything that is visible and palpable, everything that is part of our daylight lives, including our imaginations and the workings of our hearts. But all of that comes out of a dark center. It's as if everything we can know, everything we experience, is a vast temple, and at the center of the temple is a courtyard, and in the center of the courtyard is a well, and down that well it is completely dark. It's the place we can't see. It's the place we can't know. And the idea that at the very center of things, at the very heart of things, is a mystery, is really powerful. There is something unattainable by us, and that is the nature of things.

So maybe that hidden treasure in us is a bit of that dark. It's the thing that connects us to the vastness, to the whole cosmos. It's the bit of the dark that we carry around inside of ourselves, and maybe it's the place we connect to the dark. It's the place we can fall through the bottom of into the vastness, without knowing, without grasping, but just falling.

We carry that with us all the time. Sometimes I think that maybe we get afraid in our spiritual practices because it is a bit of the dark, and as we come to know that, there can be something a little scary about that, about thinking that it's a portal into the vastness, into what is completely unknown. Maybe that's why we back off sometimes. Maybe we think, *I don't know, I'm not sure I want to go there. I'm not sure I really want to fall through there.* But if we hold it as a treasure, if we allow ourselves to live with it and grow with it, something can happen, and that's what the rest of the koan is about.

The original gangsta, Bodhidharma, who brought Zen from India to China, talked about how, in your spiritual life, if you have a dream of a night sky and it is full of the constellations, something big is about to happen. That's always meant to me that if you dream of the vastness, if you dream of that Dark Mysterious, but you begin to see lights in it, you begin to see the patterns and shapes of the constellations, something's coming in. Something's about to be manifest. Something is going to become part of our lives, part of our ordinary day-lit lives, and that's a big thing, that's a wonderful moment. We can come into a relationship with the darkness. We can't grasp it, control it, contain it, order it around, make it do things, but we can come into relationship to it, we can listen to it, we can sit down next to that well in the center of the temple, and see what happens when we get really quiet.

So that's "in the midst of the cosmos, inside your body is a treasure". The next line is : "Holding a lantern, it goes to the buddha hall." Not *you* but *it* : it holds the lantern and it goes. If we allow ourselves to come into some kind of relationship with that bit of eternity that we carry inside of ourselves, that bit of the primary and ordinary mystery, then something begins to happen beyond our will, beyond our ability to engineer. *It* begins to move with a lantern toward the buddha hall. That buddha hall isn't some special place, the happy place of your meditation or anything like that, some removed place. It's your very life, it's your life itself, it's the world itself. The promise that Yunmen is offering us is that *it* will begin to move. It is the natural progression of our life to move with that lantern toward the buddha hall.

So what's the *it*? What is it that holds the lantern and moves? Mostly we have an experience that there's a kind of continuity. We wake up in the morning and we pretty much know who we are, most days. There's something that persists from yesterday, and we're pretty sure will be there tomorrow. Buddhism 101 says it's not the self; that's not what that is. The more we meditate, the more we spend time with the koans, the more we realize that, in fact, the self does rise and fall, come and go. Sometimes we crawl into the self and use it when we need it, and sometimes when we're in absorption in meditation or physical exertion or making art, the self really does disappear. It really isn't there.

So if the self is not the continuous thing, what is? Maybe it's that bit of the dark that we carry in us, and what happens when we come into relationship with it. Maybe it's our awakening that is the continuous thing. Maybe our awakening is something that begins with the first breath we draw and continues to unfold all the way through our lives until the last breath, and probably before the first breath and probably after the last breath, too. But maybe that bit of the dark in our body, in our human bodies, is the through-line, the base note, the thing that moves from beginning to middle to end and carries us, carries the lantern toward the buddha hall.

Maybe our awakening is happening all the time, and maybe we sometimes have big experiences in meditation that are breakthrough moments, and they're part of that awakening, but just part of it. Maybe the awakening is every day, day in and day out, always occurring. Maybe we're never away from it. Maybe we're never not walking toward the buddha hall, we're never on a detour or in a dead end. We never forget it and it never forgets us. Everything that happens, every moment of our life, is a moment of awakening, is a moment of

walking toward the buddha hall, because we carry in our human bodies — in our flesh and our bones and our blood and our imaginations and our feelings and our thoughts — we carry that bit of eternity with us.

Okay, maybe so far so good? And then, because it's Yunmen, it takes this twist at the end. All of a sudden this *it*, our awakening, is grabbing the mountain gate and putting it on top of the lantern. Okay, what's that about? Where did that come from?

The mountain gate was the entrance to the old Chinese monasteries, and if it was a pretty big monastery it was a pretty big gate. In fact it was more than just a gate, it was really a building with holes in it, with openings in it to come through. Often, above the openings, was a gallery, and in the gallery were images of arhats and bodhisattvas and portraits of the former abbots of the temple, and sometimes even the mummified bodies of the abbots of the temple. So this gate is the entrance and it's also the ancestors, and the connection to the spirit world through the bodhisattvas. It's that gate that gets put on this lantern. If we're walking with the *it* toward the buddha hall, and the gate is on the lantern, that means that that gate is always in front of us, always right there.

This is the gift of the ancestors: this gate, always right there in front of us. And now we've made the big loop around to the beginning, about that idea of dharma gates being something we discover in situations and walk through to figure something out, to learn something. What if we bring the gate with us? What if the gate comes first? What if the gift of this koan way is a portable gate that's always right in front of us, that we walk through into the situation — not out of the situation, but into the situation?

Another ancestor story: The first emperor who unified China was called Qin Shi Huang Di, and aside from being really paranoid and controlling and casually murderous, he was probably a lovely guy. He had a place where he received people, and there was a gate through which everyone had to pass if they were to come into his presence. The gate was made out of lodestone, which is magnetic, so if you were carrying a concealed weapon it would come shooting out of you and get stuck on the gate. If you were wearing concealed armor, you yourself would go flipping over to the side of the gate. That lodestone gate can be a lovely image of what happens with meditation and the koan way. All of our defenses, all of our preconceived ideas, our fixed positions, all of the stuff we bring with us into a situation, maybe, if that gate is a lodestone gate, gets pulled off of us in some way. So that we come into

the situation as what Linji would have called true people of no rank. Without our defenses, with less to defend, with less to assert, with less to need to explain, or want to be understood about, with fewer fixed positions, with fewer preconceived ideas, with fewer predetermined outcomes — all of that stripped from us by the lodestone gate.

If we are willing to do the difficult work of meditation and other forms of practice like working with the koans, if we are willing to allow the gate that the ancestors give us to act upon us, then we come through that gate and enter the situation in a really different way than our ordinary way of doing it. And when we do that, something becomes possible. That something is the quality of realization, of enlightenment, that was called “becoming intimate.” It makes it possible for us to become intimate with whatever radiant being, whatever 10,000-foot precipice, awaits us on the other side of the gate.

I live in a part of the country now, in Santa Fe, in the old part of town where people often have big walls that they live behind. When you walk down the street what you see are a series of walls, and the walls are punctuated by gates. And somehow, when I think of us being able to move through this gate toward becoming intimate, I think of all of those gates suddenly opening and people coming out and meeting together on the common road under the common sky, and having some kind of meeting there that has that quality of intimacy, of true persons of no rank meeting each other.

Maybe I’ll close with one last image from the ancestors of what that might be like, when we are willing to walk through the gate that is the gift of the ancestors and come into a situation looking to liberate the intimacy that is already there. That’s what the old Chan teachers said, that intimacy is inherent in every situation, in every moment, and our task is to liberate the intimacy already inherent in the moment.

Another of the old Chinese teachers, Zhaozhou, said, “It’s as though you see a word”—and of course he was thinking about a Chinese character—“and you don’t know what it means but you recognize the handwriting.” There’s a sense that as you enter the situation, you don’t know what it means yet. You can’t; you just got there! You don’t know what the word means yet, but you recognize the handwriting. There is a *something* that makes us all kin. There is that bit of darkness, of the vastness, that everyone and everything carries within, hidden in its body, and if we see that, if we connect with that, if we connect shard of darkness with shard of darkness, bit of the vastness to bit of the vastness, then even if we don’t know the meaning

yet, we recognize the handwriting. We recognize the thing that makes us all kin, and that makes it possible for us to liberate the intimacy that's always right here, always waiting to be freed.

I will stop there and would welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1 : Could you talk more about the mountain gate?

JIS : What about it?

Q1 : I didn't really understand what it was suggesting?

JIS : I'm suggesting, offering for your interest, a thought that the mountain gate is the gift of the ancestors. That it gives us a gate for us to walk through into any situation rather than entering a situation looking for the gate where we're going to learn something. So it's the gate of practice, it's the gate of meditation, the gate of koans, the gate of inquiry, the gate of silence and joy, and all of the things we do as a part of our practice which strips us, over time, of our habitual ways of seeing things, our habitual responses, our predetermined ideas, our fixed positions, so that we can enter a situation without that fixed position, which is a way that enables us to become intimate in a situation. Is that responding to the question?

Q1 : Yes. Thank you.

Q2 : A gate is a two-way thing. And I have a sense sometimes of being in the temple and walking out of the temple into the world, and I'm wondering is that different from each moment by walking through the gate? Because it feels like it might be different, it might be not different... but coming from that the understanding that your life is a process of awakeness?

JIS : How is one different from the other?

Q2 : I don't know. I'm asking because I'm not sure if it's like...the image has the sense of always walking into the temple, and what I've seen more and more is the sense of that it's in fact the world that I walk into.

JIS : Yeah, I don't have a sense of it as walking into the temple. It's interesting to me that in Yunmen's koan the image is of walking toward the buddha hall but not into the buddha hall. There's a sense that what you're doing is you're always walking toward, you're always on the path of the world, moving somewhere. So I don't have a sense of moving into the temple. I actually have a sense of moving out in the same way that you're thinking.

Q2 : And also, things walk through the gate. Is that what you mean?

JIS : Yeah. Somehow in my imagination I have a sense that this gate is so close in that we step through it into the common space where we meet others. And so we meet everyone else coming through their gate on the common ground.

Anything else?

Q3 : How does such a heavy mountain gate sit on top of a lantern, I mean, carried toward the buddha hall?

JIS : Well, ain't that the thing about the ancestors? So heavy and so absolutely light at the same time, you know? Just floating there.

Q4 : I have the question of what you just said about the gate about being so close in and stepping into the common space where there's an intimacy that happens : I'm wondering how that relates to that shard of darkness? A shard of darkness also to me feels connected, and doesn't come through the gate. It's back.

JIS : It's back?

Q4 : Yeah. It does not come through the gate, that shard of darkness.

JIS : How so?

Q4 : It's just how it feels to me. It's like what comes out into the light, or comes out into the common space is that some kind of engagement and intimacy and direct participation in our lives. And the dark well, the dark thing that can't see never comes through. It's just an endless well. And that feels also connected. It's like there are two places of connection, when you come out into the common space. There's that connectedness and also the well. It's like it goes deep, everybody's wells...am I making any sense?

JIS : Yeah, although I would have to say I have the sense that that bit of the dark comes with us, and it is what we recognize in other things. Somehow when we recognize it in everyone and everything else, there's no thought of walking through somebody to the lesson on the other side, because there's such a sense of kinship. All of us contain that, and all of us are connected in the same way. We're all written in the same handwriting. And if you really know that we're all written in the same handwriting, it makes certain ways of treating each other impossible. You know? You just can't do it anymore. You can't buy a Hummer anymore, you can't buy a blood diamond anymore. Your heart isn't made that way.

Q5 : With the word that we recognize the handwriting we don't yet know the meaning, is that sense of recognition itself the meaning?



JIS : Yeah, I think so. I think it also blossoms out into the intimacy. Becoming intimate is a matter of discovering the meaning in the recognition of that. It goes around in a nice circle : Whatever we do together, if that intimacy is there, what we're doing is less important than the recognition of that commonality.

Q6 : This might be too conceptual. You were talking about the jewel within every human mammal, and to me it sounds almost like the atman / brahman or something, this notion of there being this "thing" and then it connects with this other "thing" and then you have oneness, and that's interesting in and of itself because it seems they're dualistic. And then you're talking about this hole that is the well, or whatever it is. Sometimes my mind is like, well, which one is it? Is it the jewel or is it the hole, or how do they go together? Do you know what my question is?

JIS : I think so. They're all just ways of talking about it; they're all just images to try to talk about something that you really can't talk too well about. So I'll throw out another one. Instead of editing we'll increase [unintelligible]. Glad to oblige. The poet Rilke used to talk about *inseeing*, and to explain what he meant by that, he used the example of a dog. When you *insee* a dog, you see that place inside the dog where you meet God, exactly where the dog, if you can follow in one direction, just feathers back into the vastness. And then, if you go the other direction, it becomes more and more dog, dog, dog, dog, until it's just completely dog! Does that help you?

Q6 : Like it goes in a circle? I was wondering.

JIS : So that sense that there's not a *this* and *that*, but a sense of "dog" emerging out of the vastness and becoming more and more and more doglike, and I think that's what we're really talking about, but that we trail the vastness behind us, even as we become more Jennifer-like, you know, or Joan-like. We're still trailing the vastness like toilet paper on a shoe! It's a continuity. It's a continuum, and all of it exists simultaneously.

Q7 : I really enjoyed your talk a lot. It's nice to hear someone speak simply so I can feel like I can understand things, and I appreciate that a lot. I was finding frustration with this sense of the gate as being like the carrot on the mule. There's ever reaching for the carrot and never getting it. But then, I thought, do I want the carrot? I don't really want the carrot. I want the path. Am I really then on this path, and who cares about the carrot?

JIS : My suggestion would be that the gate is a way to more fully experience the path, to experience the path in a deeper, stronger, realer, truer, more painful, difficult, wonderful way.

Q8 : Is it possible that the gate on top of the lantern casts a shadow that is the shard of darkness?

JIS : Oh, that's nice. Sure.

Anything else? Thank you.