

Red Dust I
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Good evening. As many of you know, I've begun to write a book. For the next little while occasionally I'll be giving talks that explore some of the territory I'm exploring as I embark on this deep and humbling task of writing the book.

I wanted to touch on just a little of the background of my thinking. As maybe a few of you know, this summer I was called away to perform a funeral for an old and dear friend in another state. As I was driving through that great vast empty eastern New Mexico landscape, I was thinking a lot about when we end up in the fire, as many of us do when we're cremated.

There's a koan that talks about the great aeon-ending fire, the kalpa-ending fire that happens where everything is burned in this great conflagration, and the koan explores the question of *What's that like?* In some ways, every time one of us goes into the cremation fires it's like an aeon ending; it's a whole kalpa that disappears in the fire with it.

In this particular case, he had died in a fiery road accident in which a big rig went up. It was spectacular. So that was fiery. And his death, which was obviously completely unexpected, set off a metaphorical fire in his family. I was thinking about all these conflagrations of various kinds, and the mystery of them. What came to mind was a teaching that the Buddha gave that's come to be known as the Fire Sermon. I wanted to begin tonight with a little bit on the Fire Sermon.

The Buddha said :

The All is aflame. What All is aflame? The eye is aflame. The forms we see are aflame. Seeing is aflame. And whatever arises as a result of seeing — experienced as pleasure, pain or neutrality — that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging, and death; with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

And he goes on through this litany. He has begun with the eye, and he goes on to : The ear is aflame, sounds are aflame; the nose is aflame, aromas are aflame; the tongue is aflame, flavors are aflame; the body is aflame, sensations are aflame; the intellect is aflame, ideas are aflame. A pretty complete picture of a world on fire. And then he says : "Seeing this, we grow

disenchanted with the eye, disenchanted with forms, disenchanted with the consciousness of the eye, disenchanted with the contact of the eye, and whatever there is that rises in dependence on contact of the eye, experienced as pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure or pain -- with that too, we grow disenchanted.”

He does another litany about disenchantment with the ear, and so on through the mind and the body : disenchanted with the body, disenchanted with sensation; disenchanted with the intellect, disenchanted with ideas.

Then he closes by saying, “Disenchanted, we become dispassionate. Through dispassion we are fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, ‘Fully released.’ We discern that birth and death are exhausted, the holy life is fulfilled, the task is done. There is nothing further for this world.”

I was thinking about how I know that state of everything feeling as though it’s aflame. We talked last year about a koan involving Dongshan where he says, “I do everything as if the whole world were spewing flames.” In that koan there’s a sense of ‘everything spewing flames’ as being an indication of how vivid and alive everything is. I don’t think that’s the Buddha’s point at all; I think he is talking about another state entirely, when our own emotions and thoughts, our neurology and gastrointestinal systems are so aflame with the things that cause us to suffer, that it’s painful and difficult. That is a state I certainly understand and can remember. I also notice that it seems entirely possible to me, by my own experience and the experience of many others, that it doesn’t have to be like that all the time. It doesn’t have to stay like that. There is a possibility of dampening down those fires, even putting out those fires, and in ways that are different than the solution that the Buddha recommends.

He talks about growing disenchanted, and I think that is something that is terribly important to happen at a certain time in our lives, or over and over again in our lives. We might call it something like dis-identifying : dis-identifying with other people’s opinions, our own opinions, things that are happening, or all of that. But he goes on to say that disenchantment leads to a kind of dispassion, then to release – a state of being fully released in which you discern that the earth is depleted. So the cycles of birth and death are done and over; you’ve depleted them. The holy life is fulfilled and the task is done, and what that means is that there is nothing further for this world.

It seems to me that to this challenge of things being aflame, it's possible to have another response that doesn't end in 'there is nothing further for this world.' It might indeed end in a movement not away from the world and life, but deeper into the world and life. That is certainly, in my understanding, what the Koan Way is about. It's a way of moving in deeper, while at the same time developing the dispassion in the best sense that allow those fires to be banked and allows them not to be in the way of everything all the time. It allows them not to be demanding our attention all the time, so that we can actually get closer to life, move in closer, have less separation. I think that the great and beautiful question we ask in the Koan Way : Is that a way that's equally effective in responding to the challenge of everything being aflame?

I want to sketch out a pilgrim's path for this Way, if we say, for us, not the way that leads out of the world, then what's the alternative? What are we offering as another way of doing it? That seems to be our deep exploration as we work with the koans together.

To give that a little bit of a body, I'd like to talk about the way it feels to me right now, which is that we begin in the pilgrim's journey in the Red Dust. The Red Dust is an old Chinese name for the world of our ordinary lives, and I just love it because it is beautiful, the image of the Red Dust world. It has a strangeness because it comes from another continent and a time long ago, and that seems to me to somehow mirror the strangeness of our ordinary lives; the way it feels strange and dreamlike – like a Red Dust world from another time and place – and yet here we are living in it.

The Red Dust is made up certainly of the material world, other people, and all of that. It is also made up of our stories about the material world and other people. It's made up of karma and imagination and all those things as well, but I think it's important to say that there are aspects of the Red Dust world that would be common for all of us. We'd probably all agree that we're sitting on a wooden floor, but there might be lots of things that we would describe right now in this particular room in the Red Dust world that would be different for each of us. It is made up of that combination of the exterior world and our interior world in relationship to it.

It has a couple of important qualities. One is the dreamlike quality that is immediately invoked by the Red Dust. There is a sense of dream, illusion, or things not being quite what they seem. For some of us there is also a sense of something else, that if we could just sweep

the dust away, if we could just clear it away a little bit, we could see something truer and realer than the appearance of the Red Dust world. We also maybe find that the Red Dust doesn't just blow outside, that it also comes inside and settles in our hearts and minds. Sometimes things can feel heavy under the weight of the Red Dust. Sometimes they can feel obscured when the mental wind comes and picks it up, and our minds and our hearts are full of whirling dust.

That's one quality. Another is that the Red Dust poses questions to us that it refuses to answer. What I mean by that is, if you think of the story of Siddhartha, before he became the Buddha, he's living in this palace, and everything is perfect and controlled. Nothing ever changes or happens. Through the intervention of the gods he sees the Four Signs : He sees someone who is ill, someone who has grown very old, someone who has died, and then he sees someone whose eyes are clear in the face of all that. There is nothing in the context of the palace to explain to him what those things are or what they mean.

That's what I mean by saying that life by its nature poses these questions : Why are we born? Why do we die? What are we meant to do? What does all of this mean? Why is there evil in the world? Why is this country so _____ (fill in the blank)? These questions are asked, but for some of us there is no satisfactory answer. It may be, and certainly is, that for many people Catholicism, the John Birch Society, high colonics, or meditation is the answer that the world provides, and it's a satisfactory, sufficient answer. But for some of us it's not.

In the long arc of things there comes a time when we have to leave the Red Dust town, because if we don't we will just sink into it and become part of it. So then we go into this other realm, which I am thinking of now, which is Deep into the Mountains. Deep into the Mountains is when we leave the Red Dust town for a while, or for a long time, and look for that reality that we've caught glimpses of in the Red Dust world. When you've caught a glimpse of that — either through a moment in the natural world, the judicious application of psychedelics, or whatever it is that does it for you — when you see that world that seems obscured by the Red Dust, you can't not believe it's real.

Many people leave the town to go Deep into the Mountains to look for that shining world of which they've had glimpses in the town. There's a whole long passage that happens there that involves not just solitude, meditation, and training, but also purifying fires, times when we feel as though we are having everything stripped away from us. But if we stay with it,

something beautiful can happen. It's equally important that we don't stop there. If we stay Deep in the Mountains we get lost just as surely as we would have gotten lost in the Red Dust world, just in a different kind of way.

In the koan journey, you have to come back. There has to be a third movement. The koans call it Returning to the Charcoal Fire, which is when we come back to the Red Dust world, but transformed in some fundamental way that also transforms that world for us. So we are a new person living in a new world; but it's right there, it's the same world, we just see it and experience it differently. In seeing it and experiencing it differently we allow it to be different as well.

The image of returning to sit by the charcoal fire is particularly poignant to me because of that sense of the raging fire, the fire of the Fire Sermon where everything is aflame all the time and it feels out of control. That fire has been brought into containment, it's in a fire ring or brazier or however you want to imagine it, so now it has the capacity to give light and to warm us rather than to create obscurations of the world.

I think of a fire as a place where people gather around and tell stories, but my sense is that the stories we tell around the charcoal fire are different from the stories we were telling ourselves earlier about life in the Red Dust. There is something in there where we've stepped outside of the mono-vision of our own stories and are creating stories that contain more of us, that contain a larger view, and have more than one voice. One of the things about making this journey is the willingness and, in the end, the deep desire to give up the monologue for the conversation. That seems like the great Mahayana move.

That's the large arc of things. I'll start back at the beginning in the world of the Red Dust and speak over time about the various different stages on that journey. One of the things I've been thinking about a lot is when we have a story or a view of our childhoods. Particularly I think in mainstream American culture, the pull and romance of childhood is so strong. By romance I mean, in the old-fashioned sense, as in the adventure story or the compelling narrative of childhood.

If you'll forgive me for being a little autobiographical about this, it's a way I can make the point a little clearer about what it's like to give up the narrative that we had as inhabitants of the Red Dust. I was thinking about my own childhood. I grew up in a family which will probably sound familiar to a lot of you; it's a very common American story : The description

of the family that was given was really different from what people were actually experiencing. From the get-go there was this huge disconnect between the appearance of things and the experiences that especially the children were actually having. Those experiences involve some pretty difficult stuff, as they often do in those circumstances.

I can tell you a story about my childhood that involves danger and violence and all that kind of stuff, and that would be true. Those are facts, those things happened. What's more interesting as a way to hold my childhood is that – if I believe any of this, and I don't know if I do – I seem to have come in roaring with questions. I came in like *Okay, let's go, let's figure this out. This is really big, really beautiful, really strange, and we're just gonna go for it.* If I came in like that, I had a childhood perfectly suited to promoting, provoking, and stimulating that in me because of this disconnect between appearance and what seemed like felt reality. Is that a good thing? Is that a bad thing? I don't know, I can't even say anymore. I don't have much of an opinion about it.

I want to make it clear that I'm not saying that the goal is to replace a bad narrative with a good narrative, to find something to feel happy about. That's not the point, but the point is : Can you expand your view to take in contradictory and paradoxical truths about your childhood simultaneously? What's it like when you do that? What's it like when you step out of the tight story and begin to see it in a lot of different ways, and to hold all of them as possibly true and possibly not true, so that there is a creation that's going on all the time that you are aware of. You are creating your own past, in a way, and you are aware of the fact that you're creating it.

I'll stop there to leave some time for conversation, but I'll keep expanding this idea. I wanted to give a flavor for the beginnings of the journey in the Red Dust, and how our relationship to what happens there can change, having had the experience of stepping out and going Deep into the Mountains and then coming back.

So please, I'll welcome your comments and questions.

Q1 : That journey can happen in the day.

JIS : Very much so. Mostly does.

One of the things I'm noticing as the book starts to take shape is that there's a big arc that I'm talking about, within that there's spirals. You keep going back through various things.

There's sections that I notice recurring. There's going to be Sorrow One, Sorrow Two, and Sorrow Three. Because something like sorrow really changes. It's not that you never feel sorrow again, it's that you have a completely different relationship with sorrow as you move through it.

Q2 : I love when you use the term movement, I think of music — three movements, that container. It's beautiful.

Q1 : I was thinking a lot lately, too, about the whole childhood story and how that works. It seems like nowadays, like *what a treasure chest it is*, all the stories are there. If it wasn't buried then, and you live your life, and you do things with it consciously or subconsciously, and then you grow and you grow and you grow and grow. What would you do without it, really?

And then to have the opportunity to lay down your life and go dig up, and say *This is a treasure*, seems like a complete cycle of growth. I'm just feeling how grateful I am that no matter what happened, I'm so happy it did, because how else could I have done this path? That's the part I'll never be able to answer, that I don't want to answer. Because I just know that that *is* the path. There's something about that that is completely accepting, without making a story into it, just being with it and knowing that it's truly something that is ... I don't know what the word is.

JIS : Yeah. And it doesn't require you to revise history to say that things were other than they were, it's not *that*. I think what you're saying is so connected to this fundamental mahayana move where you're inside your story and that's the most compelling thing, the thing that directs everything; and then at a certain point, you start listening and you hear that everybody has a story like that. And, while you can honor the particular shape of your own story, the particular way that the tree of you has grown crooked in response to the particular story of you, it changes when you look around and say *Every single person in this room has a story*. And maybe that's *as* important — that shared humanity, that shared experience of the Red Dust — is as important as whatever the particular facts of my own life are. And how do we shift our attention from the particular facts of our own life — without abandoning them — shift our attention more toward what we share, what we have in common, the beautiful ways we grow crooked together.

Q3 : Can you talk it in terms of forgiveness? As long as you're connected to your story, there's story blame, and the story just becomes who you are. I notice in my own family, well in

everybody's family, you know how 'you are who you are because...' But it's a problem, right? But it's really compelling, and I think it's also how people get through life, in a way ... and I guess it's a relief to hear that there's a place where the past doesn't have that grip and there's no blame anymore.

JIS : Forgiving oneself as well as whoever the others are. Forgiving the situation. Where does the forgiveness stop? Forgive us for being human. Forgive us for being embodied. Forgive us for living on this poor blasted planet. Where does it stop? It seems to me that [forgiveness] is a very big practice, a beautiful practice.

Q4 : All of it grabbed me. There's one piece where you talk about going to the mountain and not to get stuck there either, and to come back to the Red Dust world. It struck me, do we know when we are on the right-most road when we're in the mountain? You have a point of return and there's something that really grabs me about that. Do we have to know? That question is on fire for me.

Do we see a path that's circular, the journey. Or is it panes of glass that somehow fuse or some other image where you can be in all of those places in a really short time frame. [snaps fingers]

Q5 : I feel like I had *that* experience this week. I was with my mother-in-law and we moved her into assisted care and it's so painful. I had dinner with her in a setting in which she totally did not want to be in. And as I was seeing the place and thinking I was seeing it through her eyes, and I realized that, on some level, she had some strange acceptance, she also had confusion, and she had incredible compassion — at a point in time that all her world had been confined to this place. And she still could see with this hugeness what other people's pain was. For me, it was like being in all those places at once. A kind strange place that has been created that has so much pain, and yet she was experiencing compassion from a place of such love. Here we were in this place where everything had come together in a beautiful, horrible, all-those-things-way.

JIS : The return to the Red Dust world is rich. My family has a place up in Yosemite where we've been going for forty years every summer. One of my favorite things about it is getting home, opening my suitcase for the first time, and everything smells like ponderosa pine. And so in the beginning you can open the suitcase and smell the mountain, and after a while,

everything begins to smell like ponderosa pine. So that in the return to the Red Dust, there's a complete integration of both worlds.

Q6 : I was thinking about what you're saying about the Buddha's initial Fire Sermon and how when we become dispassionate, then we dis-identify with the world and then there's nothing further left for us in the world. I struggle with that because I know a lot of the original texts take us to that point and move us away from the world, and here we are trying to live in the twenty-first century and *remain* in the world. I wonder, is there a mahayana move towards that? Or was it the basis centuries ago rather than a modern basis?

JIS : It was a huge change when the Dharma moved from India to China, because in India it had largely been a matter of getting off the wheel of birth and death. And when that message is brought to China, it was raising a problem that the Chinese didn't know they had. They don't have a sense that life is fundamentally difficult. So that's where it began to switch and have a different orientation. One of the great things about Buddhism is that we don't have any gods that we have to deal with, like perfect revelations and all of that.

The Buddha was really a person of his time and place, and at that time and place the culture was so violent, so on fire, so greedy, that to go away, to turn your back completely probably was necessary. You had to make that strong a break. We might say that we live in a similar time, but we are trying to do a different move. I sorta do believe that the Buddha would be trying this too, now.

Q6 : I know that the differences in society between India and China are what caused a lot of the changes. One of them was that the Indians have a very single-minded perspective whereas the Chinese had a totally different basis for their society. I struggle getting my head around, is it just a historical difference that created what we live for now as opposed to then? So many people say that they turn to religion and are turning away from the world, and I feel that I need to have a real basis for saying why I'm not turning away from the world.

JIS : Well, the koan tradition began with a Chinese teacher in the Eighth Century named Great Master Ma who was living in China at a time where there had been a civil war, which lead to famine, which lead to all these problems. And two-thirds of the population died in ten years, an unbelievable cataclysm. And he walked through that China for twenty years. He walked through the China of the dead and the dying, the famines, the warfare, and all of that — and then he sat down and started teaching. What he taught came entirely out of that

experience. He wasn't teaching *Okay, everybody let's turn our backs*. Some people came into the monastery in those days looking for three squares and a cot, and those people were just kicked right back out. His whole teaching was *Figure it out right now. Find your original nature. Get awake right here, right now, so that you can get out there and do something about rebuilding a shattered culture*. And from the beginning of the tradition, it's so clear that that's the orientation. So there's a good historical reference you can use.