

Red Dust II
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Good evening. Thank you for coming.

Last week I was talking about the Red Dust, the world as we ordinarily experience it. It's the world of karma, the laws of physics, and having the alarm clock go off in the morning, all that stuff. It seems that in the journey of spiritual practice we begin in the Red Dust, and then some of us go looking for something else, going off Deep into the Mountains in some metaphorical sense, and then eventually coming back around to the Red Dust, but there is something transformed about it, which is to say that there's something transformed about us. That happens many times in life, many times in a day, that movement from the Red Dust into the Mountains and back to the Red Dust again. I wanted to spend a little more time tonight talking about some of the characteristics of the Red Dust world as we first encounter it before we've taken any kind of journey anywhere else. I want to talk in particular about two things, one is *dukkha* and the other is Gates. One of the things I like about Buddhism is that the first sentence of the first paragraph on the first page says that life is *dukkha*. There's no hedging, there's no leading up to it, no breaking it to you gently, it's just boom right there : *Deal with this*.

I've been wondering lately whether we have made a mistake in that in the West we tend to translate *dukkha* as suffering. I've been wondering if that is a mistake that's led to some misunderstandings. The word *dukkha* actually means something closer to unsatisfactoriness, and that seems a helpful thing. Life has a quality of unsatisfactoriness. I think that's because when we think of *dukkha* we think of everything from walking into the kitchen and the sink is full of dishes again to ethnic cleansing. It's a pretty big spectrum of experience. If we differentiated between unsatisfactoriness and suffering, then we could pull unsatisfactoriness in a little bit closer; it could include the dishes and things that are hard in our lives, and the ways we react to them that create unhappiness for ourselves. Then maybe we can hold suffering for the bigger stuff, the ethnic cleansing level of stuff.

When we first begin to become aware of this unsatisfactoriness of things, some of us want to do something about that. It seems to be clear in Buddhism, and in our experience as we go

on, that the quality of satisfactoriness or unsatisfactoriness isn't related entirely to the circumstances of our lives. Often we begin with the idea that if we can just line up the external world in the right way, then things will be satisfactory. If we had the right job, the right home, the right partner, the right behavior of our partner in relationship to us, if we could just get all those things lined up, then life would be satisfactory. Generally we begin to see the futility of that and begin to understand that in the mix — to some great extent — is our own attitude toward things.

That works at the level of unsatisfactoriness. It gets squishy when we move out into the realm of things I'm calling suffering. If we're talking about ethnic cleansing, it's not just an attitude adjustment that's going to fix that. We can make the mistake of becoming fundamentalist in saying everybody creates their own reality. It's all on them; if you're being ethnically cleansed, that's because of your karma or your bad attitude, or you should just feel better, or whatever it is. That's a kind of ridiculous position and not terribly compassionate. So that seems to be the value in making the distinction between the pervasive unsatisfactory quality of things in the Red Dust initially, and the kind of suffering that goes on that is much more complex and won't just be solved by meditation or koans, or changing our attitude about them.

Something I've been wondering about is whether the pervasiveness of the unsatisfactory, how much we're caught up in that, actually gets in the way of our being able to address the larger questions that I'm putting under the category of suffering. If we're so bound up all the time reacting and feeling bad, not enjoying, criticizing, and judging ourselves and others, that's a tremendous amount of energy locked up in a very tight space. It seems to me that if meditation is good for opening up that tight space, for knocking those walls down, for stopping these habitual behaviors in response to unsatisfactoriness, that frees up energy to open our hands and begin to do something about the larger communal sufferings.

Something we discover is that often there is no way to arrange the external circumstances to make things satisfactory. That's actually still in the first chapter of Buddhism. It's in the life story of Shakyamuni, when he's a young prince living in the palace. Everything is perfect. It's beautiful and lovely, he wins every race, gets every girl, and all that stuff, and still there is this feeling that something is not right. There's something out of whack, which then leads him to

make the spiritual search. So it can't be an external thing or can't *only* be an external thing; there's got to be something that happens internally as well.

I can certainly remember thinking back to my own adolescence when all these questions were starting to come up, really feeling like if the world would just get its act together things would be better. The Vietnam War was going on, Nixon was president, and there were a lot of reasons to think that if we could just fix those things, that things would be better. I remember a kind of unripe fruit quality to my sense of unsatisfactoriness. That first waking to the sorrow of the world has an unripe quality to it. I'll speak only for myself; it had an edge of anger, outrage, and self-righteousness. One of the things that happens in the spiritual journey that I'm talking about over the long arc of things is that the nature of the sorrow changes. Sorrow doesn't go away but becomes something different than that early fiery outraged sorrow when we first become aware of the injustices in the world, the unfairnesses of life. There we are in the Red Dust feeling all that stuff, and as I was saying last week, feeling that the world of the Red Dust is presenting us with questions – like about unfairness, death, illness, and other kinds of stuff – that for some of us it doesn't provide answers that satisfy us. For some it does, for some it doesn't, and so we go looking for something else.

In talking with a lot of people who've ended up taking up meditation, I find that many people have experiences fairly young of what feels like another world, a deeper, truer world. They get glimpses of that and they come to meditation because they want to find out : *What was that? How do I connect with that? How do I have more of that in my life?* O-sensei, who's the founder of Aikido, had a turning experience in his life where the earth cracked open in front of him and light just poured out. That's the sort of literal version of those moments when things seem to crack and we get a glimpse of something larger, deeper, brighter, more true.

I can remember myself when I was young, sitting under a black walnut tree in the Sierras outside of Yosemite. It was in the autumn and the leaves on the tree had all gone golden. A gust of wind suddenly came up and knocked a lot of the leaves off the tree. They swirled and fell to the ground around me. When they hit the ground, a couple of the leaves seemed to fly up as if they were going to return to the tree. It was the most beautifully disorienting moment. I realized that they were yellow moths that had been caught on the wind as well, but for a moment it looked exactly as though they were the leaves returning to the tree. In that beautiful disorientation, that encounter with beauty that 'unselfs' us, knocks us off our selves

as the center of the world, something opened. It was as if a crack in the world opened for me in that moment, and I saw behind what looked now like the painted backdrop of the world. I saw a world where everything was exactly the same, except as things moved they left trails of energy that were light. The birds, the butterflies, the moths, the leaves, and everything were leaving trails of light in the air. That's not a particularly fascinating experience, but it's typical of those moments when things open up and you see something very compelling. That seems to be an answer to the unsatisfactoriness of the Red Dust world.

That Red Dust world anyway offers us clues, omens, and gates to that other place. It seems that there are different kinds of gates : there are bright gates and shadow gates. The bright gates can be those kinds of experiences when they happen spontaneously; they can be a love of reading when you're young, they can be a basketball scholarship that gets you to college out of a small town; a teacher who sees something in you and draws that out — all of those things can be bright gates. The shadow gates tend to be in the general realm of sex, drugs, rock and roll, and fast cars. But I don't want to make those bad because often those are attempts to break out of the Red Dust world, to have a transcendent experience, to enjoy an intensity that seems to break things open some. But they're shadow gates that can also lead to a lot of danger and difficulty.

So the gates open up. We take them or we don't take them, but that seems tremendously important when you think back on your own life. What were the unsatisfactorinesses? What were the questions? What were the gates that opened for you? Which ones did you walk through and which ones did you not?

Even for the gates that seem to work for a lot of people, for example, psychedelic drugs : Almost everybody who's ever done psychedelic drugs will say that they saw something that they know was real, a true thing, but it leaked away, it disappeared. This seems crucially important. The reason I think that those experiences don't stick — they stick only as a memory, but they don't stick as a felt experience — is because the kind of understanding that we're hoping for doesn't come just from seeing something. It's not enough just to see it. Even having a big experience in meditation is not enough. There has to be an embodiment of that experience. We have to bring whatever it is we've seen into our bodies, into our hearts and minds; to really make it ours and live with it, then open our hands and let it flow out of our

hands into the world and notice what happens when we do that. All of that is part of the experience of realization.

I think we make a mistake when we think the vision or the big experience is the realization. The realization is also all of the stuff that happens afterwards, or it will leak away because it needs to be embodied, integrated, and shared. By which I don't mean you stand on a soap box on the corner and tell everybody about your great experience; it means you find the way that's truest for you to share what you now know.

So if we call this realization, then realization has two aspects. It has the aspect of seeing and understanding something, and it has the aspect of making it real. When we find the gates out of the Red Dust world, take them, and go Deep into the Mountains in whatever way we do that, we can't stop there. It's incomplete until we come back and notice how the world has been changed by our experience.

In the life story of the Buddha, which I appreciate more and more all the time as quite a profound myth, there's one version of the story : When the Buddha has enlightenment under the tree, there's a light that rolls out from the tree through the world, and all the prison doors are unlocked and everyone is set free. It even goes down into the hells, and all the denizens of hell are freed and enlightened too. That to me has that quality of when we bring our realization to the world, the whole world is transformed, the whole world is changed in some fundamental way. We find a different kind of sorrow : no longer the sorrow of outrage, a feeling of unfairness and injustice, and *Just get it together, world*, but more the sorrow of a completely broken-open heart. The sorrow of a heart that is willing to press itself up against the great broken heart of the world and not turn away. That is the ultimate fruit of the spiritual journey : that willingness to be brokenhearted in a brokenhearted world and to open our hands and do what we can.

I'm going to stop there tonight, and I will keep talking about this if it's interesting to you. I'll talk about what happens in the Deep in the Mountains part that allows our hearts to break open in that way, and what it means to come back, in the koan image, to sit by the Charcoal Fire again, to come back to the world. I would welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1 : Could you talk a little bit more about the bright gates?

JIS : The bright gates are the graces that come into our lives, what Gregory Bateson called the 'unearned fish'. It's important, if you are working with sea animals and you want them to do certain things, to make sure you give them unearned fish. There are ways that sometimes oases open for us, when someone treats us with extraordinary generosity. My image for my bright gate was as a thirteen-year-old, standing in the aisle of the UCLA bookstore discovering the *Daodejing*. The whole world opened up in that moment. That was a big bright gate for me.

Q1 : So, do they have to be happy occasions or can they also be bad things that happen, but ultimately graceful things?

JIS : That's really interesting, because then you begin to blur the distinction between the bright gates and the shadow gates. What might appear initially as a shadow gate — a serious illness is a good example — in the end seems to have become a bright gate.

Q2 : That reminds me of when we talk about *maya*. There is a good side to *maya* and a bad side. There always seems to be that blurring of the boundaries once you get beyond that level.

JIS : Yeah, which is why it is really important not to make hasty judgments about things, not to think you know. We don't know the end of the story, by the nature of things.

Q3 : I had a really sweet bright gate last week. I was complaining how I felt like I didn't have time for myself. "Fortunately I'm here to do it." I was walking toward a project and I stopped and picked up a piñon nut. All of a sudden, I had all the time in the world. I just stood there, opened it, ate it, and of course there are thousands of them everywhere. So, now it's like I'm walking and there is this constant reminder of that moment of having absolutely all the time in the world, and it's been so sweet. I mean there's piñon nuts everywhere.

JIS : And they're all liberated. [Laughter]

How about that distinction between unsatisfactoriness and suffering and thinking of dukkha more as unsatisfactoriness? Is that resonating with anybody?

Q4 : What comes to my mind when talking about unsatisfactory people, places, things, that I started deconstructing, is seeing how much energy I waste, and how much time I continue to waste on it. That expression : *What are you waiting for?* And I hear it and *Okay, okay* and it just calms me. And I'm still wasting time. [Laughter] What is it?

JIS : That's a great question, What are you waiting for?

Q2 : Waiting for the satisfactoriness?

Q5 : *What are you waiting for before you drop all this BS? Waiting? Attitude? Why can't the people behave?* [Laughter]

Q4 : All of that. It just keeps me busy and exhausts me so much. *What am I waiting for?* I've observed it over and over again.

JIS : The poet Auden was talking about the world's inexplicable unwillingness to behave and he called it the 'disobedience of the daydream.'

Q4 : Disobedience of the daydream. I feel the same thing when I sit in front of you and I feel like he should be shouting at me *What are you waiting for?* [Laughter]

Q5: When I heard you call it unsatisfactoriness before, it's crystallized as dukkha, I've thought that's monkey mind. It's a distortion originating in my mind and I can deal with it in my mind. But, you're suggesting that it's something integral to life. And yet, it's not the same as monkey mind. There's a way to get beyond it, even in the context of The Four Noble Truths.

JIS : Maybe not get *beyond* it, but not have it be so painful all the time, not have it be so compelling. Yes, it's a feature of life here on this planet, that things are cranky and sharp-angled, and we bump into each other. I don't think that's just an internal event, that's an external event as well. But, by changing how we experience it, we make a huge difference for ourselves. What I'm suggesting is that making a huge difference for our selves *isn't* enough — that we also then have to do what we can to make a difference in the larger field.

But, if we're waiting for the world to start behaving, then we're in a fundamental fight with life for being life. And that's a tough way to live. If you're in a fundamental conflict with things being dukkha, then that's where all your energy is gonna go, and that's a tough way.

Q6 : I'm interested in where you would put pain in distinction between unsatisfactoriness and suffering.

JIS : Physical pain, emotional pain, all of that?

Q6 : The example that came up for me, just to get it out of ourselves, was animals fighting and one of them gets hurt.

JIS : Yeah, so that's interesting. I've been playing with was can we draw a bright line between unsatisfactoriness and suffering, is there a bright line between them, or is there a kind of zone where they both exist. That seems like a kind of zone phenomenon. We've talked a lot amongst ourselves about the difference between pain and suffering. That pain can be just

pain, and that we can feel really bad about feeling pain and that then can become suffering. That's a zone between the two. Which the more I think about it, is it's pretty much a zone.

Q7 : Pain can also be joy. I experienced that personally. Once I was doing a three-month retreat and then I got shingles. I was interviewing with Joseph Goldstein and I said, "Well, I have shingles." He said, "Well, you can go to the doctor and be treated or you can stay here and we'll work with it." So I stayed and what I noticed was that they engaged me so much that everytime the bell rang, I was like *Oh, I did another hour!* And so much joy and so much self-confidence. I could tell when I was getting well, that's when I started doing my old trip again. [Laughter]

JIS : Absolutely. So that's what we were just talking about, what looks like a shadow gate can actually be something else. There's where you don't make that leap from pain to suffering.

Q7 : It's probably the most joyful I've ever been. It was unpleasant, but it was joyful.

JIS : Sometimes the big stuff is easier to deal than the small niggling stuff of everyday — it brings a focus.

Q7 : Oh, I've never been so concentrated. I had no choice, in a way. If I deviated in just *that* much, then it became suffering.

Q8 : The old Socratic question that drives us, this feeling like life is a question, how does that differ from unsatisfactoriness. The question has an unsatisfactory quality. There's a question coming up and it's uncomfortable. Does that fall into that zone?

JIS : I think the question itself is the first gate, it's the first offer of the gate. Can you bear the discomfort of the first gate and take the invitation, which is to explore the question. In Zen there are three legs to the tripod of practice : great faith, great perserverance, and great doubt. So it's a strong value that we take those questions seriously and we learn to come into relationship with them — not to *solve* them, but to let them take us where they're going to take us. So can you think of the question as a gate and can you bear the discomfort of staying with it?

Q8 : A shadow gate?

JIS : If it feels like that maybe it is. But let's see what happens. It can become a very bright gate. There's an old saying, "If there's lots of mud, the buddha will be big." [Laughter]

Thank you all.

