

Freedom's Body I
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
Springs Mountain Sangha ~ Colorado Springs, CO
October 14, 2009

Good Evening, bodhisattvas.

Freedom's Body in koans.

Something that may have escaped your attention until now is that the koans are full of bodies : talking bodies, walking bodies, sleeping bodies, dreaming bodies, male bodies, female bodies, old bodies, newborn bodies, sick bodies, dying bodies, and all kinds of bodies doing all kinds of things all the time.

Did you notice that? It's important because it's not enough to have an intellectual or a psychological engagement with the koans. You have to have engagement at the level of the body. You have to imagine your way into the bodies that are in the koan and the body of the koan itself.

Early in my koan training I was having the trouble that many people have. You can't get in. I didn't know how to get in. I didn't see the entrance; I didn't see what this had to do with me. I was working on a koan "Why can't the man of great strength lift up his leg?" I couldn't for the life of me figure out what that had to do with me. Then my teacher made a change : "Why can't the woman of great strength lift up her leg?" Just by changing the gender that koan was mine. I could get right into that koan and understand it.

It's tremendously important to make the koan ours. It's necessary but it's not sufficient, because the next thing that has to happen is what happens naturally — that you can do anything. You can be the woman of great strength. You don't have to translate it into your own terms anymore. You can be the old Chinese guy, the newborn baby, the donkey, the oak tree in the garden, or whatever the koan presents. That movement is really important, that you're not bringing everything in the koan to your own terms but you're going out to become what the koan invites you to become.

A beautiful thing is the difference in how you describe the self. Describe the self as *I'm feeling great this morning 'cause I got a really good night's sleep and then I got that nice phone call and the news on the stock market is really good today.* Or do you describe yourself (and this is also describing the self) as *the air is fresh, the wind is crisp, the sun is warm.* That's also a way of

describing the self and it's tremendously important to be able move from 'I got a good night's sleep and I feel great' to 'the sun is warm, the air is fresh' and to know that both of those are ways of describing the self. That's what the koans can give us — that sense of the larger self, the impersonal self in the best sense of impersonal — the larger than the personal self. I'll talk about that some more over the next few nights.

We have a koan like the one about Dongshan when he's sick. From the teacher's perspective I empathize with Dongshan. He's really, really sick; actually he was in his final illness. Someone comes to him and says, "So when you're really, really sick, is there also someone who's not sick?" He says, "Yes, there is. When I'm sick there's also someone one who is not sick."

The monk asks what might be the obvious question : "Is the one that's not sick taking care of the one who's sick?" Dongshan says, "No, when I'm sick, I'm taking care of that one who is not sick."

That's a mysterious and beautiful thing. When I am sick and really sick all the way through to the bottom, I am taking care of that one who is not sick. That bit of the *dharmakaya*, that bit of the vastness, of the eternal, that lives in me, I'm taking care of it. In order to really understand that koan, you have to be willing to be sick all the way to the bottom. You can't figure it out. You can't work it out intellectually. You have to go to what you know about sickness, what you've experienced about sickness, and find that place in your own experience where being sick is taking care of the eternal.

This is by way of encouraging you to be the bodies in the koans, to let the koans in the bodies be you. Don't limit yourself by silly little inconsequential things like gender, age, continent, century, sentience, or non-sentience. Be the non-sentient bodies in the koans. That's important too, to know what that is.

Then, come into relationship with the body of the koan itself. By that I mean each koan is itself a being, each koan is a body, a spirit, a soul. If you sit openly enough and with enough perseverance and sincerity with a koan like *No* or "What is the sound of one hand?" they will start breathing. Each koan breathes differently. The breathing of *No* is different than One Hand is different than Original Face. Each one has its own way of breathing.

If you can be open, sincere, and quiet enough to pick up the sound and rhythm of that breathing, you can breathe with the koan. This is another way, instead of bringing everything

to you and making it a part of yourself, you step out and become part of something else. You let the koan breathe not only itself but breathe you as well. With no big agenda, with no big idea, but just to do it and see what happens when you do. What can you learn about a koan if you spend some time breathing with it? What can you learn about a koan if you sleep with it, dream with it, bathe with it, walk with it, argue with it, wrestle with it? Whatever it is that can happen if you let it.

If you're looking for a place to start, start with breathing. Start just sitting with the koan and seeing if you can pick up the rhythm, the sound, the movement of that breathing, and if you can match it yourself. See what happens when you do.

That's a way of really understanding that 'I got a good night's sleep' and 'the sun is warm' are equal descriptions of the self in a particular moment. When we do that, we expand the sense of what our body is, from a physical thing or an ensouled thing that has feelings, likes, dislikes, and all of that, to something really quite large. The koans contain these kinds of bodies as well, beyond bodies of the physical or the ensouled. That might best be evoked, though not described, with a line from the Chinese poet Hanshan, who in one of his poems talked about "a tree that is older than the forest it stands in."

A tree older than the forest it stands in — that's a body, an amazing body. What is that? What is the tree and what is it like to stand and lean against that tree older than the forest it stands in? What is the perspective from there? What kind of body is that? What kind of body does that reveal about ourselves and about everything else, as well?

Enjoy the bodies of the koans. Let them bring you out of yourself and into a larger sense of self. Let them breathe you. Let them take you to that forest where it's possible to stand against this ancient tree. Which is another way of talking about what's in the koan which is the ancient shrine we take shelter in. When Shō takes shelter from a storm of wind and rain in an ancient shrine, he's leaning back against that tree that's older than the forest it stands in.

So let me use that as an entrance into the koan. Let's see what it's like living with this koan for the last twenty-four hours. I'd love to hear questions you have.

Q1 : I don't want to say it's bossy, but it speaks more clearly than some for me. It's been easier to listen to, in some way. It dislikes my BS. It's very direct saying, *bullshit* again and again and again. It *says find something real, find something better*, and that's kind of interesting

that it spoke up so quickly that way. And then, my personal windstorm last night [laughter]. Maybe noise isn't the way you speak of a koan, but it's definitely speaking to me.

JIS : That's an important koan, one that won't let you get away with anything.

Q2 : I'm wondering if I can shelter myself in an old shrine without the windstorm to drive me there.

JIS : Yeah, what would that be like?

Q2 : It would be like discovering a treasure in the field when you weren't looking for it. It just opens up in this place.

JIS : The air is warm. There's something about how we make an assumption about the connection between the three things that Shō says. *I'm at the temple, I'm on my way to do this service in the village. There's a storm. I take shelter.* Those are cause and effect relationships, but we're putting a lot of value on what it's like getting lost in the storm. The storm is something to escape from. What if it's just like Shō rolling through the day. I was at the temple, and then I was walking, then there was a storm, then I was at the old shrine. What if (as I think you're suggesting) that's hitting the middle over and over and over again, no matter what the activity.

Q2 : Didn't need the storm to get to the shelter.

JIS : And there it is in every one of those activities.

Q3 : I was struck by the comment with the question about the *kalpa* in just the question : would the self be older than the beginning of the universe? You were talking about the tree being older than the forest ... talk about being ancient. I found that question startling because it wasn't anything that had occurred to me ... exciting. Could the self be older than the beginning of the universe? That was so massive and so intimate and took me back to taking shelter in the temple.

JIS : Does it make you wonder what the nature of that self might be?

Q3 : Yes, it's like the two sides of the brain are saying, *how could that be possible?* And of course, why not, and there's absolutely no way to rectify that.

Sarah Bender : Except to ask the question, "What sort of self might that be?"

Q3 : I haven't gotten further than that. That's never occurred for me to ask.

SB : You said something interesting. You said it felt massive. That's an interesting statement, like how big?

Q3: In the universe. Where can you go from there? I think I can feel that. My stomach can feel that. I can feel the massiveness, the expansion of the universe. I can feel that.

SB : That makes an interesting question come up. If you can feel it, then there's some way that you know it intimately. So what does that say about the self?

Q3 : Like you say, it comes back to the self.

JIS : You said intimate, didn't you?

Q4: Yeah. So is it intimate knowing or intimate being with that expansiveness?

JIS : What is the difference?

Q4 : If we use knowing in that way of familiar. The reason we know something is because we are that.

JIS : That's the fundamental proposition of the koans. We know it by becoming it, by being it. That's how you do it.

Q4 : That being existed before we are being?

JIS : Yeah, that's the paradox.

Q3 : I'm struck by the fact that the four directions and the eight dimensions seem like a pretty good description of life ... all of the things that tangle up to make that. Overwhelming.

JIS : So, how are you thinking about 'hitting the middle' as a response to that?

Q3 : It seems like one step at a time. It doesn't do any good to say, *Oh my god, not that*. It's like, *Okay, what's next?* Time to eat. Time to do the paper, get some sleep ... stay in the middle instead of bailing out of the fire in the basement. No choice. This body. This now. Whatever wild storm is flying around this body.

Q4 : I thought of a student of mine in 1980 who had just escaped from Vietnam. He was in a tiny boat with a tiny outboard motor with his wife, newborn infant, and two little toddlers. He cooked food for them on this boat escaping from Vietnam and a typhoon came. I said, "Oh my god, what did you do?" He told me he rowed with the typhoon in this tiny boat. For me I

would have run away from the typhoon. I would fight it, struggle against it. It was a miraculous thing. To me it was also “hit the middle.”

JIS : One of the things that can happen if you take the bodies in a koan like this seriously is : the monk asks the question about when stuff like that happens and Shō gives the answer, “Hit the middle,” and the monk immediately bows. What if that isn’t just *pro forma*? What if that immediate bowing is his hitting the middle? *Oh, hit the middle; I can do that.* Which is exactly what you’re saying. Just that. Bow to what’s happening. Then when Shō speaks again, it’s a benediction. There’s a kind of blessing he puts on that immediate bowing.

That’s how you find shelter in the shrine.

SB : This is how it is for me — how we bless each other.

Q5 : Hitting the middle, just relax. The peaceful body. Celebrate life all around. Within reach. It’s the blessing. Celebrate exactly what you have. It’s a beautiful thing in contrast to always reaching for something you can’t quite get hold of.

SB : Which is that not saying something, again. That reaching for the thing you can never get is the ‘setting sun’ mentality as opposed to celebrating the color, the smell of fresh air, which is establishing life.

Q5 : Is it not also finding the middle is feeling that equilibrium in your body? There’s just a bodily knowing that this is not a yearning and not a pulling back, it’s almost just a muscular relaxing of tension if I trust my body to know what the middle is. It was something like coming down here, I didn’t know. The roads were so bad. I don’t think I should go through Wyoming. I was really tense. My daughter said maybe they’re trying to tell you something. Maybe I’m not supposed to go. Then I found I could do the route through Utah. There was a sense in my body that said, *you’re familiar with that route.* I knew that route, I’d travel that way before. There was a real relaxation and it was like this. That’s what I’m laying as the middle way for me, when my body knows.

Q6 : There’s something about the last line that ties in to the question you asked, Sarah : what is the self prior to the empty kalpa? It seems it is the peaceful body establishing life. There’s some knowledge. It is what we know or are, being, consciousness. It’s almost too hard for me to describe. We lose it soon after being born, being peaceful bodies establishing life as

we get hit with the four winds and the eight dimensions pretty quick and we're dervishing around.

Q7 : I wonder if that's really true, or that peaceful body establishing life. Pause ... *bmmm*
It's what we know or are ...

SB : You know how it feels.

Q7 : It does feel kind of ancient. There's an ancientness to that place. It's not a new place. It seems an ancient place. It's old. Not just like fifty-one years old, but old. Really old.

SB : It's that knowing question. What do you make of the fact that you know that? You recognize that. I was actually questioning, do you know when we lose it? Do we lose it when we're born?

Q7 : That's my usual exaggeration. What is it? I know it. We all know it. We don't lose it. It's buried, we get distracted, very distracted.

Q8 : You asked us to consider when we left the dining hall at noon to imagine hitting the middle, and my journey is to allow myself to be in the world with people when I've not been and where I'm going. I went off by myself and Liz came up behind me and said, "This way." And we put our arms around each other. Hitting the middle for me, instead of just trudging off, somehow I was open enough that my world, in that moment, just went *whoosh*. It became larger by my willingness. It was my experience of hitting the middle at that moment. It was different. I want more of that.

Q9 : Talking mostly of people, relating to people, I was thinking of things. The temperature was going to be below zero on Friday night. My irrigation was supposed to be turned off Monday. The worry thing : it was going to be bad, explode all over the house. That didn't happen. The guy came Monday morning and walked around the house and said, "It is totally frozen solid. I can't do anything with it." So, that was it. OK, that's what's happening. *I'll just do my day, okay.* And then he did one more step. He turned the inside water off. The smart thing to do and then he added to my relaxation by saying, "Of course, it can be fixed." The inanimate thing I was fighting for two days, not wanting it to be bad and trying to hold back the freezing and waiting till Monday. Hitting the middle by choosing to be in a different place. Thanks to all of you for your hitting the middle examples, because I wasn't getting it. It

was so rich for me to have you sharing your examples, extremely rich and I'm getting it.
Thank you.

JIS : We need to close for tonight but please stay with the koan; there's much here that we're beginning to touch. See what happens for the week. See where it takes you. Let it spin where it spins and let it take you where it takes you. Let it breathe with you as it breathes with you. One small suggestion : when you're thinking about this peaceful body establishing life, notice that the ways we've talked about it tonight were largely on the scale of our peaceful body. Even if it was the peaceful body existing before the beginning of the world, it's the peaceful body that establishes life through each of us as individuals. Play with the scale of the peaceful body. It's that, but it might be something else, too. It might be on a really, really, large scale. The peaceful body that is establishing life we're talking about are instances of that. See what happens when you play with the scale of the peaceful body.

Thank you all, very much.