

Sitting in the Fire III
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Good evening.

Tonight I wanted to pull back the view and talk about why it is we do this practice, what it is we're doing, why we do it, and how we do it. I've had a feeling that some things aren't clear and they're important so, one more time around on 'neither for nor against.'

What I want to make clear is that a practice of coming to everything with an attitude of 'neither for nor against,' including toward ourselves is not an attitude that leads to whatever, passivity, indifference, or nihilism. On the contrary, what 'neither for nor against' does is that it deprives us, in a very dangerous way, of all our distancing mechanisms — our habitual ways of putting space between us and the world through opinion, judgment, story, and preconceived ideas. The practice of 'neither for nor against' is a way of stripping ourselves naked, so that we go naked to meet the world. In doing that we, instead of telling the world what it's about or trying to discover what the meaning of the world is, we simply listen to what the world has to say to us. We simply listen to what our inner lives have to say about themselves.

There's an old Theravadin definition about mindfulness, allowing things to speak for themselves without interrupting. This is a practice of not interrupting. This is a practice of listening and letting things speak for themselves which is gloriously dangerous and risky, because we're in danger of hearing things that subvert our habitual way of seeing, understanding, and experiencing. The kind of neutrality that's implied in 'neither for nor against' is something that is open-minded, interested, and curious about the way things are, rather than loading up the situation with pre-judgment. It's a way of meeting things buddha nature to buddha nature with nothing intervening. That's quite beautiful and risky. It can be scary but is the way that leads to happiness as far as this way understands what happiness might be.

One of the things that it can show us if we do the practice for a while is how much we're substituting what we think about and our opinions and emotional reactions for what's actually

happening. So, we not dealing with what's happening but we've substituted, put between us our own habits of heart-mind and then we're in relationship with *that*. We never get outside of ourselves into any sense of the true world, because we're in relationship with our own opinions.

One of the things that has been particularly vivid to me during this retreat is how often people say to me, "I don't like the koans," or "I don't like this koan," or, "this koan makes me angry," or "this koan makes me anxious," or "this koan bores me." Whatever it is, and what I ask you, humbly, is that maybe the koan way is not for everybody, maybe not for most people, but don't reject it until you've done some 'neither for nor against' with it. Try that and if you still don't like it, okay. But try that. If we say, "I don't like the koans," or "I don't like this koan," or "this koan makes me anxious," that's not 'neither for nor against.' That's a kind of judgment and distancing about the possibility of a relationship with the koan.

It's very different to say, "This koan makes me angry," or "this koan evokes anger in me." That's a crucial and subtle difference. If you hear it, if you understand it as, "this koan evokes anger in me," there's a next question of, "Oh, why should that be? What is it here that's evoking anger in me?" This koan evokes anxiety in me. What is that about? Why is that happening? It keeps things moving and open, and it keeps the possibility of something happening alive.

Certainly the koan tradition, like any tradition, has a lot of deficiencies and it's easy to rattle them off; like for the most part, absence of women which for me is a large deficiency. The absence of koans about householders lives, about sex, about relationships other than monastics together : those are deficiencies and I don't minimize that. At the same time, one of the particular gifts of the koans as a spiritual practice, is exactly their apparent otherness, their foreignness. They're not coming out of what we already know. They're coming from a different place. Some of that is the cultural and time stuff (some of it is a 1000 years old), and some of it is coming to us from the vastness. They're really messenger birds from the territory from outside of what we truly know. That's tremendously valuable. Think about interviewing yourself and being interviewed by a very wise stranger.

So, Jane, what's it like to be the leading rbi batter in the National Softball League? Well, Jane, it's great. Well, Jane, you really blew it again, really messed up on that. Yes, Jane, I really screwed up on that and I'm hopeless. That's an interview in the territory of what we already know. But a wise

stranger comes and asks really unexpected questions. Questions that startle us and knock us out of our habitual ways of doing things and that can be tremendously valuable. So, if it helps, maybe you can think about it like that.

Okay, public service announcement over.

This kind of work, 'neither for nor against,' is important to our way, but it's not the sum total of it by any means at all. It's not the end of our way to get good at deconstructing our habits of mind and heart. All those kinds of deconstructive and inquiring activities are forms of purification. We are clearing out the underbrush and getting rid of the stuff that's in the way in the service of something much, much, much bigger. It's crucial. You can't get to the bigger things without that kind of purification, but it isn't the end.

As we do this purification, it isn't only a matter of deconstruction. It isn't only a matter of getting rid of what is in the way, causing difficulty, or causing obstruction. Another way to hold purification is that it is a making whole what has been partial. If part of it is a stripping away of what needs to be stripped away, part of it is also an inclusion of what needs to be included. Those things that we push into what other wisdom traditions call 'the shadow', the stuff that we don't want to acknowledge about ourselves; stuff that's difficult and painful. Purification is also the inclusion of that; the welcoming of it into our sense of who we are as a whole being.

So, if our work was only about even these two kinds of purification toward the making of a cleaner, wholer self, I would give you a refund and send you home because it's really about something much larger than that. When you clear away and when you include what has been exiled from yourself, what's left on the bare ground on which you're standing, is not just some kind of nihilistic nothingness. We aren't paring down to the smallest possible thing in the world. What is left on that bare ground as you stand there looks suspiciously like a kind of unconditioned, unshakable love. That's the point. To be able to stand on the bare ground and know that we have within us the possibility for unconditioned, unremitting, unshakable love, which is to say a love that arises spontaneously, that isn't dependent on the right causes and conditions, and isn't shakable by anything we experience. One of the beauties of 'neither for nor against' and practices like that, is that it can put us in a state of being where nothing can threaten that love. Nothing can shake that. There is nothing that can make us wonder about the rightness of that.

That love needs no reinforcement. That love needs nothing in particular to persist except that we allow it to, and it will continue to come forth by itself and persist by itself if we let it. How do we get from purification to an unconditional, unshakable love? That's what I want to talk about tonight. How do we make that the ground underneath our feet all the time?

Let's bring in what the tradition thinks we're doing here from the perspective of this ancient, strange, somewhat 'other' way. What's the point? I was thinking hard about this and trying to distill it down to what it seems to me is the essence and this is about as distilled as I can get. First, the reason for this practice is to come closer to what is actually true. That might seem unexciting and dry but it's the well-spring of everything. The more intimate we get with reality, as much as it is possible to know what reality is, the more intimate we get with what is true, the better things are for us and for the world around us. We do the kind of deconstructive work inherent in 'neither for nor against' because it clears away what is between us and the world. It allows us to get closer in to the world; to rub up against it; to meet chest to chest with the world, heart to heart with the world. It allows us to see more closely what's actually there, at least what's likely to be there. So that's one movement of closer to what's true.

You notice we often talk about things facing in two directions. So we have the direction looking into the world and we look into the vastness which is equally important to getting closer to what's true. One of the greatest irreplaceable gifts of this tradition is that if we take it seriously, bring our sincerity and persistence, our insane persistence, to it, we can have a direct experience of the true nature of things, of the vastness itself. We can know that for ourselves. That's an incredible gift. Once given, it can never be taken away; once given it can never be damaged, nicked, modified, or doubted. It's so real and vivid.

I'm a little queasy about saying 'the true nature of things,' because then we tend to think of that experience of the vastness as being like the true world that's somehow behind this world which is the false world. Let me say instead that it allows us to see the full nature of things. It allows us to add an experience of the radiant, eternal, unchanging nature of everything to our perception of the rising and falling, the ephemeral nature of everything. It's when we include those two views that we have the full view of the nature of things.

We come closer to the world, we come closer to the vastness. We bring those two together and see that they are really 'a one thing,' an incomparable gift.

The second thing, I think the tradition thinks this is for, is for us to live our human lives to the fullest. I've often said, because I'm trying to push against a certain attitude in contemporary spiritual traditions, that the koan way loves being human. The koan way sees it as a great gift; the koan way says you've got this fantastic, red, bloody beating heart; you've got this brilliant intelligence; you've got these this bodies that are so capable; you've got creativity; you've got an ability to connect with and work with each other and love each other. All of that is true in addition to everything we were talking about last night that is painful and difficult. So, the gift we can give to the world is to use all of those capacities, faculties, gifts of our humanity for the benefit of the world. We do that by coming to feel for ourselves a sense of freedom that's so big in this tradition. How can we get free and what does being free make possible? How can we be spontaneous, which is based on the notion that being human is fundamentally a good thing; and if we can clear stuff out of the way and get down to that ground of love, what comes spontaneously and naturally out of that ground, up through our bodies, out our hands and out our mouths will be a good thing, maybe not always right but a good thing, a good try, anyway. So, we are enabled to the extent that it is possible, to be helpful in co-creating the world. There is a view that the world is being created every moment by all of us and everything else who is participating in it, which is a way of enabling us to give the most and the best we can to that co-creation. If there is pain, if we don't like the way things are, the invitation is get in there and help make it different. You can do this and we can do this together.

One of the ways we can do this together is the third thing that I think this practice thinks it's for. That's the best way to say it, 'that the practice thinks it's for,' and that is to support, encourage, and teach us how to have a deep relatedness with each other, with other beings, and with everything that is alive in the world. It is out of that deep relatedness that the most helpful and beneficial kind of co-creation can happen.

- Seeing things more fully and truly by becoming more intimate with the world, by coming to experience and knowing the vastness, and seeing those two things together as the fullness of life

- Becoming more and more helpful in co-creating the world we want to live in and,

- Deepening always our relatedness to each other and to everything else, as well.

All of this, all of these aspirations, all of these potential gifts are grounded in this unconditional, unshakable, and unsentimental love.

Do you understand the unsentimental part? It's not about feeling nice. It's about turning what Simone Weil called "a just and loving gaze" on things. That's neither for nor against, "just and loving" with a clear eye and an open heart. Not nice, necessarily; not simply because it feels good, not simply because it's good for us personally, but because it feels like the truest thing. To love and experience in that way is to trust in what we can do — not the nicest thing, not the happiest thing, not the thing that makes us feel the best, but the truest thing knowing that it makes us feel the best. Part of that unsentimentality is also that we have to allow our hearts be broken. With unbroken hearts we are not awakened.

With unbroken hearts we remain potential, not yet ripe, still shiny and hard. To ripen, we have to break. We have to be willing to feel the sorrow of things, the poignancy of things, tenderness of things, to let ourselves be marked by that. We have to be willing, as much as we are willing, to let our hearts be broken. We have to be willing to surrender to a sense of awe and wonder about the miraculous nature of the world. We cannot give that up. We cannot turn away from that. We cannot let our sense of the difficulty of things cause us to turn away from the fundamental miraculousness of life and the world and ourselves, each other. We have to continually open to that sense of awe and wonder.

How do we do this?

Let's begin with, What is at the center? Those of us here in Santa Fe together have talked in the past about "at the center of things, there is a well." We hope through our practice we clear a path to the well, sit down next to it, and when we look inside the well we realize we can never see the bottom of it. That well is the fundamental mystery of things. There is a mystery we cannot crack; it is our nature not to know it and that's at the center. A lot of our time is spent denying the fact of that un-seeable-to-the-bottom well. Some of the things we talked about last night were when we get close to the bottom of that well, we bounce off of it because it's frightening to think that at the center of things is something we can't know. It's already there. We don't need to do anything about that. It's provided for us. Our job is just to get comfortable living next to that well. Peering into that well and finding it beautiful even as we know we can never see to the bottom of it.

More recently we've been talking about putting something else at the center of things. We've been talking about *bodhicitta* and the bodhisattva's vow. Bodhicitta is the desire for awakening so that we can help in the awakening of all beings, and that's essentially what the

bodhisattva's vow is. We've talked about how if we choose to put that at the center of our lives, it makes it almost impossible to put any other version of ourselves at the center, any other way we identify, any other collection of causes and conditions, any other kind of definition of our selves at the center, because the space is taken up by our bodhicitta, our yearning, our longing for awakening for ourselves and everyone.

One thing I want to suggest is, the center is getting crowded. We've got two things at the center. We've got this well and we've got our bodhicitta, and I don't think they're different. They are two faces of the same thing. When we look out the gate toward the vastness that appears in us as 'not knowing,' as a kind of awe and trembling at the mystery, at the heart of things; when we look through the gate that leads to the world that appears as our bodhicitta; as our desire for awakening for the benefit of all beings : I see them as one in the same, just different views on the same thing.

Having those two things at the center leads to a steadiness and courage that are important. When we have that steadiness and courage, there's nothing we need to turn away from and to defend against, because there's nothing that can threaten what we know for ourselves. If we know the vastness for ourselves, if we know the full nature of things, if we know that what matters most to us in the world is our own bodhicitta, our own bodhisattva's vow, nothing can threaten that. Nothing needs to be defended against. Everything can be included. Everything can be attended to. Nothing can threaten what you've experienced for yourself, and nothing can threaten what you have come to feel for others which is the bodhisattva's vow. Nothing can threaten what you have come to feel for others once you have felt that unshakable, unsentimental, unconditioned love. Nothing can change that.

What is not at the center is an image of self-perfection, self-improvement, or even wonderful virtues like wisdom or compassion. The reason those things cannot be at the center is because our ideas of self-perfection, self-improvement, even our ideas of wisdom and compassion are limited, because as we begin they come out of what we already know. That's all we have. That's all they can come out of. So we are limiting ourselves from the beginning, we are limiting our aspiration to what we already know if we think of things like self-improvement, wisdom, self-perfection. By limiting yourselves to what you already know, you are closing yourself off to what is autonomous in this process, what has nothing to do with you.

What comes, like the koans, out of the vastness to get you if you make yourself fetchable? What rises out of that well at the center of things. What the bodhisattva's vow makes possible completely by surprise, completely autonomously because you couldn't have planned it. You can't make it happen, it's not in your control and it's wild, untamed. To put any of those other things at the center is to domesticate the journey. *I'm going to make myself better. I'm going to make myself even wiser, more compassionate.* All of that stuff is domesticating the journey before you even start, rather than allowing the journey to un-domesticate you. And that's what the journey is for, to un-domesticate you.

I want to talk a little bit more about bodhicitta. In one of the old texts it's called, "the earth which supports everything unconditionally and the mountain which towers impartially over everything." It occurs to me that it's a beautiful way to think about it, because in the earth, which supports everything unconditionally, we have something to stand on; we have something that is going to support us no matter what we're doing. We have something to rest on. We have something to lie down on when we need to lie down. We can lie down on that earth of bodhicitta. In a mountain, which towers impartially over everything, we have a way to make choices. We have a way to remember that everything is *tathagata*, everything has buddha nature and everything's buddha nature is the most important thing about it. That mountain towering impartially over everything reminds us to meet each thing like that, with our own impartiality and our own 'neither for nor against,' so we can experience its *tathagata*. It is in that impartiality that the ability to make decisions that might be helpful, might be beneficial, can come.

I've spoken a couple of times over the last couple of nights about our relationship to passion and our passions. We're talking about a way in which it is not necessary to domesticate our passions but it is necessary to come into a good relationship with them. One of the ways to do that is to throw them joyfully and willy-nilly at our bodhicitta and let them serve that. The old texts talk about bodhicitta as a desire for awakening, a longing for awakening, cherishing an intense desire for awakening, an aspiration towards awakening.

Does this sound like detachment and equanimity? No! There's a real *urghhh* about this. All of our passion, caring, feeling deeply about things can just pour into that longing for awakening, into cherishing an intense desire for awakening.

The last thing about that *kalpa* fire, that kalpa-ending fire we've been talking about? How does all of this look in the light of that kalpa fire?

As we get to see the full nature of things, what becomes apparent is that everything is already aglow with that fire. That's not in the far distance. It's already here. Things already flicker in its light. It's something you can't turn your back on. If that's the case, if everything is already lit in some way, by the kalpa fire, what do things look like lit by that fire? If you have a bodhisattva's heart, they look poignant, tender, and very ephemeral; and because so very ephemeral, so very precious.

They look brave. They come into existence anyway knowing that the nature of coming into existence is they will fall out of existence. And yet they do it. We do it. Everything does it. There's a bravery and a persistence about manifestation, about life. In the face of annihilation, we keep sprouting. It's as if we so yearn to take form together. Even in these circumstances, even in this wounded, blasted, blighted world, we so yearn to come into form together and to find out what's possible when we have hands, feet, minds, hearts, skin, imagination, and creativity. We yearn to know what might be possible. There's such exuberance once we've come into that form. This riot of ways of bringing manifest in this form world is really something.

In the light of the kalpa fire, I want to suggest that there's no such thing as nihilism or passivity. There's only everything vivid and alive in that fire. Of course there's a koan for that.

Two old friends who have been traveling a lot together are on the road once again on pilgrimage. One of them Shenshan was mending his clothes, mending the tears in his clothes with needle and thread. His buddy Dongshan asked him, "What'cha doing?" and Shenshan said, "Mending," probably knowing it wasn't as simple a question. And so Dongshan asked innocently, "How are you mending?" Shenshan, probably with some trepidation, said, "One stitch is like the next."

Okay, there's a nice view of equanimity, of one foot after another; of living life purposely and mindfully and with great attention, one stitch is like the next. *I can make my stitches even and beautiful because I'm really paying attention.* And Dongshan says, "We've been traveling together for twenty years now and you can still say such a thing? How can this be?" And Shenshan said, "Okay, how do you mend?" Dongshan says, "As if the whole earth were spewing flames."

How do you mend, how do you sleep, how do you eat, how do you walk around, how do you walk around, how do you talk with each other, how do you raise the children, how do you make art, how do you protest injustice — as if the whole earth were spewing flames.

But that light of the kalpa-ending fire isn't the only light in our world. It isn't only light visible to us. There's another kind of light and that is the radiance from that unchanging aspect of things, from that vast empty aspect of things. Again, to use an image we've used in the past, *What are the eyes of the Bodhisattva like?* One eye sees everything in the flickering light of the kalpa-ending fire, and her heart is moved by the poignancy of that. And the other eye sees that everything, before any of this, is lit from within. Everything is already lit from within and the bodhisattva sees that and her heart opens.

Everything we encounter, we ourselves are simultaneously lit from within through an autonomous, wild impersonal (thank heavens) process. And we are visible in the flickering light of the kalpa-ending fire. That's how crazy this way is. Everything we see like that; everything we encounter, every person, every being, every thing, every circumstance, nothing left out. We see with those two lights, shining simultaneously.

I will own that this is not easy. But, I will also suggest that it's kind of worth it. There is a quality of irrevocability about it. I was thinking about that old buddhist idea of the 'non-returner'. You get to a certain point in your practice and the promise is you won't come back, you won't be reborn again — you're just off the wheel. I was thinking that our way puts a different spin on the non-returner. It's not a matter of getting off the wheel and getting out of *samsara*, but there comes a point if we are crazy enough to persist, if we allow ourselves to care enough to persist, if we allow our deepest yearning and our longing to be felt, to be worked with and to manifest; if we do all of that, then we can't return either. We can't return to the way things were. We can't return to the old life. We're sunk. We're doomed. There's a threshold you go across after which, *Oh well*, there's only one way and that's to keep going forward.

We talk among ourselves about those moments when we try to step briefly back over the threshold and deal with an uncomfortable situation or exhaustion in some of the old ways and it just doesn't work anymore. Our old obsessions, our old coping mechanisms, our old strategies just don't work anymore, and we can't turn off the view of the kalpa-ending firelight and the light within everything. Maybe you could turn it off but it would be really, really,

painful, and you'd have to exercise a lot of denial or drink a lot of alcohol or something to turn that back off once it's been turned on.

The last thing I want to say is that when we talk about this kalpa-ending fire, we can't know what the future is going to be. That's part of that well we can't see to the bottom of in the center of things. So, what this way brings us back to over and over again is : What's true now? What can we do now? What do we know now? What can we experience now? It keeps bringing us right back into this moment because this is the moment we have. This is the vivid, alive moment that we have and *this* is where we need to be pouring passion, pouring our energy, pouring our love. And if we do that, the future will take care of itself. After a while of doing that, I believe you'll discover that that's enough, that you don't need to know any more than that. You don't need to be doing any more than that. That makes a full and a complete life with nothing left out.

So, a part of this that's so important is the deepening of our relationship with each other. It's so important that I want to save it for tomorrow night so we can really dive into it. I will stop here and ask how it seems to you, this way that I'm describing. How do you relate to it? What do you have to add? What would you say about it?

Excerpts from Q and A :

Q1 : I think you said that bodhicitta and the well, that we can't see to the bottom of, are two faces of the same thing. Can you say more about that?

JIS : So we're getting into metaphysics here and this is nothing more than my bit of doggerel. But, what connects them is that they're two aspects of the truest way things actually are. That things are fundamentally a mystery that we can never control, that we can never fully understand. And the most natural response to deeply experience that mystery is to wish for the awakening of all beings. So somehow they are both aspects of the fullest way that things are.

Bodhicitta, in the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit it literally means your heart raised to awakening — not raising the idea of awakening in your heart — your heart raised to awakening, so that you can be of benefit to everyone else.

Oh helping and being helpful :

It might seem like a small difference, but I think it's actually a really large one — between helping people and being helpful. I don't think those are the same things. Helping people implies all of the pathology that you're talking about. *I'm now going to give you the gift of my help. And life is going to be better for you, right?*

One of the old Chan teachers Huangbo said, "Mercy is really thinking there's no one who needs to be helped." That's hugely important, but mercy is really saying that there's no one who needs to be helped. So we abandon the idea of 'helping people' that you're pointing out as problematic, but that doesn't mean we abandon the idea of being helpful. And a quick diagnostic about whether something is helpful or not is, Does it improve the circumstances that will allow people to find their own awakening? By that, I don't just mean handing out spiritual tracts. I mean moving landmines and making sure that the water is clean because all of that is essential to awakening as well.

On the bodhisattva vow :

We chose 'wake' rather than 'save' to translate that verb which can mean either, because it felt to us at the time that 'save' had become really dead. Everybody was reciting all the time how they were going to 'save' all the beings of the world and it didn't have any life anymore. So we put in 'wake' as a kind of wake up to us, who are saying vows. *What's that, what does that mean?* But the idea is that we take an impossible vow over and over again and, we take it knowing that it's impossible. And what's it like to live in that fundamental paradox of vowing with all our hearts to doing something we can't possibly ever do? What's it like to live with that?