

Sitting in the Fire I, Introduction  
Fresh Breeze Retreat  
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Sangre de Christo Center ~ Tesuque, NM  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

On behalf of those who prepared this place and made it all possible, we welcome all of you, the gathering of the tribes. The Front Range and the Sonoran Desert and the Great Sequoia Forests of the California Coast. Welcome to the High Desert.

Our beautiful High Desert is on fire. I don't think it's a random thing that we sit here, this week, between the fires. We sit in the fire. I don't think it's a random thing for us as a group and for each of us as individuals.

I want to bring that in tonight and touch in on it as the week progresses. What is it like to sit in the fire? So what is it, as a group, that more than a year ago we decided to convene, and it turns out it means being here in this place, in this time, sitting in the fire?

I was thinking about what survives the ferocity of the kinds of fires that are burning here. The first thing that came to my mind was rocks and stones. So what can learn we learn from rocks and stones about fire?

First, they refuse nothing. They don't pull an eyelid down to protect themselves or crawl into a shell or jump into a pond. They can do none of those things. They just sit still and they survive. After they have survived, and the fire has swept through and taken almost everything younger than stones and rocks, they do this amazing thing. The ancient bones of the earth offer themselves as places where there are cracks and hollows; where the soil that gets blown in on the wind can catch and gather; and the rain that falls, we hope, someday from the sky can pool and meet that soil; and the seeds that the birds shit out as they fly overhead can fall into the soil; and the water and the land can begin to grow again from the rocks and stones, from the bones of the earth. How unlikely is that? How beautiful is that? What can we learn from the rocks and the stones? What can we learn from the bones of the earth?

As we consider that, there is the collective question of what we're doing here together; as we begin, only a question. There's also the question of how each of us sits in the fire as an individual. We cannot redeem the fire by finding personal meaning in it. All of those creatures

will still die. All of those plant and animal creatures; all of those sacred sites will be threatened. All of those people will be made homeless and whether we find meaning is meaningless in the face of that.

We can't look at an event like this and think that we can somehow make it better because it means something to us. But, if we can't redeem the fire by finding meaning, we can be redeemed by the fire if we don't refuse the invitation the fire offers; if we are willing to sit here this week in the fire and not turn away; if we are willing to explore what that means for each of us as individuals. What is the fire you're sitting in? What is your reaction to the fire? What do we need to work with? What does the fire bring up in us? What is the fire that rises in us to meet the fire? Do we feel anger, sorrow, fear, panic? What is it? Are you willing to sit here and confront that? Are you willing to not be burned by your own emotions but to come into some other kind of relationship with them?

What do you think about purification? Do you think it's real? Is it scary? Is it attractive? Do you long to burn but are afraid to?

Can you think of a million things you'd like to throw in the fire but are afraid you'll get singed in the process?

Are you just dying to throw a million things into the fire and can't wait to get down to it? What's that like for you?

One of the things we're learning here in New Mexico that we learned in California when I was there, was that if you suppress fire in the fire-dependent ecologies, you get holocausts. So what is that like in our own lives?

What are the fires we suppress because they're tough to deal, inconvenient, or painful; and what happens when you suppress them year in and year out? And then they burst forth? How can we have a better relationship with the fires that burn in us?

There are so many human images of the beauty and the warmth of the contained fire; the fire held in those stones that we're learning from. One of my favorite lines in the koan is about acknowledging everybody's desire to leave the eternal flux — the way things change, don't stay put, keep coming and going, and the way we suffer as a result. Everyone longs to leave that but even more than that, they long to come back, to return, to sit by the fire. In another place it says that around that fire there's no such thing as guest or host. Around that fire, with people sitting around that fire, that's all. The fire makes us a one thing, without rank.

How do we regain that good relationship with the fires outside us and the fires inside us? How do we let burn what needs to be burned, burn, and protect what shouldn't be burned? There are lots and lots of ways to think about this and I want to invite each of you to sit as still as a stone in the face of conflagration to see what there is to learn in that place. Be that Fierce. Meet the ferocity of fire with your own ferocity. Meet the ferocity of fire with your own healing balm. How can you do both? Be fierce and be healing at the same time? And what does it mean to be fierce in the face of the conflagration? What is the healing balm? What is your particular healing balm that only you can offer? Only you have the recipe for it, the bottle to hold it, to give it shape, and the hand to pour it out. What is that for you? Are you willing to be redeemed by the fire? Through sitting still. Through being fierce. Through looking for the healing balm. We don't get these chances so very often in our lives. It's not so often that we come together to spend a week in silence between two fires. Please make the most of it.

One of the ancestors once said, "The great thing has arrived and there's no way I can escape it." Fortunately there is no way we can escape it. Let us practice not escaping it. Let us practice being right here, right now. Let it work on us. Open to it. Open to it with the support of everyone else who is here, who you can trust because they're opening to it too. We can trust each other because we do this deep work together. That too is a rare and a precious thing. Warm yourself by that fire. Take a risk. Stay with it. Don't do the usual thing. The usual thing awaits you on Sunday afternoon. It's just sitting there, licking its lips waiting for you. Rest assured, if that's what you want to pick up, it'll be there for you to pick up.

Between now and then, how about let's not do the usual thing? Let's do something fierce, crazy, healing, and insanely beautiful, because when you're sitting in the fire, *What on earth else is there to do?*

Thank you.