

Sitting in the Fire IV
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
Sangre de Cristo Center ~ Chupadero, NM
July 8, 2011

Good evening, bodhisattvas. One of the ways we talk about things is that we are all falling together through this universe, and for the time being, for these decades, we are falling together, in this world in particular. We may have started the fall at different times, but we've joined up now to fall together for a while. One by one each of us will fall out of the bottom of this world into whatever the next thing is.

Within that long arc of falling together there are segments, and one of the segments of the arc is when we fall through the bottom of our ordinary lives and relationships and into *this* world, the world of retreat, where we fall into something that's quite rare in life : being completely alone, to a depth that is otherwise uncommon, in the presence of others. And then, at a certain point — sometime tomorrow, I reckon — we will fall out of the bottom of that aloneness in the presence of others, back into our regular lives, the rest of our lives and our relationships.

Sometimes that transition can be bumpy, so to help us not feel as though we're hitting a canopy over a window at every floor as we go down, I thought maybe we would let the poets bring us home tonight in making that transition.

The first poet I'd like to bring in is Rainer Maria Rilke, whom we know from our afternoon readings, who is the great poet of a particular kind of aloneness known to us in meditation. He said about it, "What you really need is simply this, aloneness, great inner solitude, to go within and for hours not to meet anyone. That is what one needs to attain." Then he said that if you do this, "The individual person who senses her aloneness, and only she, is like a thing subject to the deep laws, the cosmic laws." If we can go in and be truly alone in this deep inner solitude, what we meet there are the deep laws, the cosmic laws, what we might call the Dao, and we can come into a direct relationship with that Dao unconditioned by circumstances.

There's a Polish poet named Anna Swir, whose poem was last night's ancestor words, the one about carrying light and silence. She has a deceptively simple style and is often writing

about large things like carrying light and silence. This is another of her poems like that, which has the quality of what happens when we are down there in that deep inner solitude, and finding ourselves coming into relationship with the Dao.

An empty day without events.
[Theoretically a day in retreat is like that.]
And that is why
it grew immense
as space. And suddenly
the happiness of being
entered me.
I heard
in my heartbeat
the birth of time
and each instant of life
one after another
came rushing in
like priceless gifts.

The way that time can slow down : We can feel the rhythms of the world in each heartbeat, and when time slows down and the moments return to us, moment by moment, we are aware of each one as a particular gift.

Rilke talked about this way we are alone together, the way we are in profoundly deep solitude in the presence of each other. He said that one of the greatest things we can do for each other is to be guardians of each other's solitude. That certainly seems to me to be one of the best descriptions of what we do together in retreat : We agree to be the guardians of each other's solitude. Do you remember those old-fashioned diving suits with the big round helmets, sort of like spacesuits, and the diver would go down connected to a line for breathing. There'd be a group of people at the surface doing something that made the oxygen go down. Like that, what we do for each other. We might say, in the language we're developing together as we develop a culture, that we accompany each other in the way we understand that : We are willing to take the risk to simply walk next each other and to be there no matter what happens.

The image that I think of there is from the Greek and Roman world. There was a mystery religion that had a ceremony every year at Eleusis in Greece. The ceremony went on for over a thousand years, and pilgrims came from all over the Mediterranean world, which meant Europe and Palestine and North Africa, Asia beyond that. Sometimes it would take months for them to walk to wherever they would join the pilgrimage. It was as if there were rivulets of

people walking from wherever they were from all over Asia and North Africa, and they would join these larger streams, and finally into a river walking to Greece toward the mysteries of Demeter and Eleusis. Although the mystery went on for a thousand years, the participants were sworn to secrecy and no one ever told what happened inside. Sophocles called Eleusis “the sheltered plain where all are welcome.” That’s another way I think about what we do : We come together from our individual European nations, North African countries, and Central Asian kingdoms and walk together. There’s no enforced orthodoxy in what we do, but we walk together to Eleusis.

Here’s the last image for this ‘alone together’. I got interested, for probably obvious reasons, in the hermits in China in the periods we’re talking about in the koans. I wanted to know what their lives were like, because in so many of the koans we talk about someone going off into the mountains and becoming a hermit for a while. What was the texture of that life? I was made to laugh, and delighted to discover, that if these people were hermits, they became hermits in very lively neighborhoods. It turned out that there were mountains all over China that were famous for hermits. You might have five hundred or a thousand hermits on a particular mountain at any time. They met and talked and got together for wine and moon-viewing and leaf appreciation and whatever else they did. I thought, that’s my idea of the hermits’ life. Give me a life like that on a beautiful mountain with five hundred or a thousand other people as crazy as I am. How wonderful!

It also made me think of another thing that made me laugh, which is the great Christian mystic of England, Julian of Norwich, who when she went into her solitude, into her hermitage, took her housekeeper and her dog with her.

One of the things that marked those hermits in China was this : If you chose that life, all of the distinctions that were so powerful in the rest of Confucian society — distinctions of gender and class and education — disappeared; they just didn’t exist. What bound people together, connected them, brought them together in relationship, was entirely different, something like that desire to, in the presence of each other, touch the deep laws of the universe.

In this inner solitude, in this walking for hours and meeting no one, we have talked this week about how part of that is a process of purification. Some of you have mentioned to me that you’ve felt a kind of purifying process going on this week, particularly in the light of the

fires. If you sit long enough, if you spend enough time in that great inner solitude, you're going to be revealed to yourself. You can't not be revealed to yourself. That's part of the purification, that utter encounter with one's self.

We talked about purification as having two aspects. One is the clearing-out aspect : the deconstruction, the sweeping away of whatever it is that gets in the way between us and a genuine relationship with the world and the vastness. Here's a poem about that kind of purification, by a twelfth-century teacher of Daoism, a woman called Sun Bu-er, and some of you will be happy to know that her Daoist name, Bu-er, means NOT TWO!

This is called "Cut Brambles Long Enough," by Not-Two, in Jane Hirshfield's lucid translation :

Cut brambles long enough,
Sprout after sprout,
And the lotus will bloom
Of its own accord:

Already waiting in the clearing,
The single image of light.
The day you see this,
That day you will become it.

Another way we've talked about purification is as making whole, bringing in what has been exiled, cast into the shadows, or turned away from. When we really see ourselves, we see all of ourselves, and we bring that in. That making whole of what has been denied is also a kind of purification. In Japan in the eleventh century, when Zen was first coming there, a woman named Izumi Shikibu wrote,

Watching the moon
at dawn,
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely:
no part left out.

An important part of this process of purification and coming to see all of ourselves is compassion, really because compassion is essential to our integrity. It is the gift we make to ourselves that we can then take back into the world. Our integrity comes, in part, out of our compassion. I say that because if we have compassion for ourselves as we walk in this inner solitude and do this work of purification, then we're not going to hesitate to include anything,

and that means our integrity is all the stronger and greater because we don't have to leave anything out. If there is a warm heart in our process, if there is a warm regard for the work we're doing and a sense of tenderness toward even the most painful parts of ourselves, we will more easily include them, and that will make us stronger with a more complete integrity. We develop a deep knowing of the self, where we shine and where we're shadowed.

The other gift of compassion is when it can give this serious work a light quality, even a humorous quality. This is a poem about how self-knowledge can turn into a kind of affectionate humor. Wislawa Szymborska is another poet also from Anna Swir's great generation of Polish poets. You'll want to check them out. This is a poem called

"Could Have."

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck—there was a forest.
You were in luck—there were no trees.
You were in luck—a rake, a hook, a beam,
A jamb, a turn, a quarter inch, an instant.
You were in luck—just then a straw went floating by.

As a result, because, although, despite.
What would have happened if a hand, a foot,
within an inch, a hairsbreadth from
an unfortunate coincidence.

So you're here? Still dizzy from another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me.

I love the way she evokes the stories. Isn't that so much what it's like? You're saved because you were first. You were saved because you were last. You were in luck, there was a forest. You were in luck, there were no trees. As a result, because, although, despite. The way Szyborska ends her poem — "Listen, how your heart pounds inside me" — will bring us to where we begin to fall out of that solitude and back into relationship, a new kind of relationship. The moment when we turn from that inward exploration of self back to the world. This is a bit of a poem called "Prism" by Louise Glück, and it's about that moment of turn.

List the implications of 'crossroads.'
Answer: a story that will have a moral.
Give a counter example:
The self ended and the world began.
They were of equal size,
commensurate,
one mirrored the other.

As we step back from that inner solitude into the world, we find that we are still accompanied, with any luck, by the people who have witnessed our solitude. How are we to go on with each other? What comes next? There's a beautiful Sanskrit word in the buddhist tradition, *kalyanamitra*, and it means a spiritual friend. It seems to be one of the best ways to talk about how things evolve as we step back into the world and we can be *kalyanamitra*, spiritual friends, for each other. This idea of friendship includes both companionship and guidance, so that, in our way of speaking, we can switch back and forth in our relationships between host and guest. That's what *kalyanamitra* do. One plays host, one plays guest, and then it switches and each is taking the other's role, and on and on and on it goes. On and on it goes. One of my favorite zen definitions of *kalyanamitra* is "good friends, kindly disposed." May we remain good friends, kindly disposed to each other.

We have that relationship with each other, and we also bring out of the inner solitude (with any luck) an ongoing relationship with the ancestors. So here's a quick koan or story from the ancestors, about the ancestors :

Nanquan said to his assembly, "Tomorrow we will pay homage to Great Ancestor Ma. [It's the tradition to honor the founder of a temple on the anniversary of their death.] Do you think he will return or not?"

When nobody else spoke, young Dongshan said, “He will come as soon as he has a companion.”

Part our task is to be that companion who lets the ancestors come back and accompany us.

We talked about bodhichitta last night, about the passionate desire to awaken in order to create the circumstances in which all beings can awaken. Another way to talk about the arising of bodhichitta is as the beginning of the awakening of a bodhisattva : A bodhisattva begins to be born as soon as bodhichitta arises. That part of it is a solitary event, something between you and you. Or, you and whatever you want to make it between. We do that one by one by one. We decide to put bodhichitta at the center of our lives one by one. We begin that birth of the bodhisattva, but then that birth is midwifed by our family, our friends, our loved ones, our community, our co-workers, and our sangha. It’s another way in which we do something very deep in the presence of each other, and we can accompany each other as we do that.

I wanted to say something briefly and kind of parenthetically because it has come up today in my conversations with you, about if we do put bodhichitta at the center of our lives, how much are we signing up for a life of tireless, selfless service? Maybe we have an idea from some of the ways it has evolved in the West that this is a kind of self-abnegation. There’s a kind of destruction of self or a complete annihilation of self in the service of others. Everybody says *Uh-huh, I’m not sure I’m ready to sign up for that*. I want to suggest that in the context of bodhichitta and the bodhisattva vow, we’re not talking about self-less service; we’re talking about service in which the self is not at the center. That’s what it means.

Since we’re talking about living lives in which the self is not the center, the service that grows out of that is a natural growth out of living the life that we’re choosing to live anyway. It doesn’t mean that we pay no mind of the needs of the particular organism given into our care (this one called Joan, that one called Margo) — just that those needs are not always the first mouth fed. They’re in the chorus but they’re not singing a solo. When we think about acting compassionately or acting in service , what we’re doing is acting compassionately towards the whole situation, which includes ourselves. We are part of the situation we are serving.

The promise of living a life that is attentive to others in that way is beautifully expressed in this poem by one of our deep ancestors, Michael McClure. If we are willing to live listening to the world, with attention to the other beings of the world, it might be something like this :

EACH
MAMMAL
does
a
small perfect
thing
like
to be himself
or herself
and to hold a new creation
on a shining platter
as he
(or she)
steps toward
the waiting car.

So that's all well and good, my girl, you might say. What about the bump of returning to the world? How about when it's not so easy? How do we deal that? How do we avoid thinking of the world as something lying in wait to trap us over there on Sunday afternoon, but rather something that is awaiting our awakening? Whether we bring it on a silver platter like Michael McClure's mammals, or we bring that ongoing unfolding awakening back into the world from this place. What would it be like if we saw the world like that, as awaiting our awakening? This is a traditional Inuit song.

And I thought over again
My small adventures
As with a shore wind I drifted out
In my kayak
And thought I was in danger.

My fears
These small ones
That I thought so big
For all the vital things
I had to get and reach

And yet there is only
One great thing
The only thing

To live to see in huts and in journeys
The great day that dawns
And the light that fills the world.

If you remain unconvinced and you're still worried about what awaits, I invite you to soak in everything you can these next hours. Tonight, overnight, tomorrow morning, tomorrow afternoon. Soak in everything. The stillness, the silence, the presence of your companions, your breath. And remember that it is our custom to sit up late tonight. You can sit up all night, soaking up the air in this room, the thick presence of all this deep inner solitude; all this sincere work; all of the openness and the beauty; all the pain faced and gone through that sits in this room. Let these moments that are left completely soak into you and stain and dye you all the way through, so that the jostling of the world can't rub it off.

When we're so completely stained by the vastness, when it goes all the way through and there's no way to rub it off anymore, then the world can stain us too and we can be glad of it.

Emily Dickinson wrote to a friend : "Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house — still I feel the red in my mind." We can let the world stain our minds with its colors if we've been stained so thoroughly by the vastness that nothing can rub it off.

Last, as a kind of prayer for the way all of us reenter the world, this is a bit from Leonard Cohen's "Beautiful Losers," which he wrote in 1966. He was talking about what it means to be a saint, which we would call a bodhisattva.

What is a saint? Saints don't dissolve the chaos [of existence]; if they did the world would have changed long ago. I don't think that saints dissolve the chaos even for themselves, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of someone setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is the saints' glory. Something in them so loves the world that they give themselves to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with angels, they trace with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. Their houses are dangerous and finite, but they are at home in the world. They can love the shape of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such people, such balancing monsters of love.

May we all be, as much as we can, alone and together, balancing monsters of love. Thank you.