

Sitting in the Fire II
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Welcome to those of you who came in.

I'd like to do two things tonight. One is to pick up on what we talked about last night. The other is to introduce the one koan we'll be working with tomorrow night and probably after that.

Last night I talked about how sometimes when we're here at this retreat together, we are sitting in the fire; sitting among the fires; sitting right in it, ourselves. That's a traditional koan view of our human life, that we are lotuses in the fire, which is a switch on the older view of lotuses as arising from the mud and waters to grow into something beautiful. That switch that gets made in the Mahayana and the koan tradition is an important one. An example of the older view of lotuses as being that which is beautiful and pure arising from that which is yukky and muddy is from the *Sutra that Vimilakirti Spoke*.

It's a private buddha, someone focused on their own awakening to the exclusion of everything else, and sees that awakening requires withdrawal from the world. Such a private buddha is praising the buddha, describing the buddha by saying, "Unattached to the world like the lotus flower growing out of the mud, you always enter well into the practice of empty serenity."

But later on in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, we get from Vimalakirti himself this other image of the lotus rising in the fire. Later on the sutra says, "The bodhisattva manifests experiencing the five desires and also manifests the practice of meditation." It's interesting, that language, "The bodhisattva manifests both experiencing the five desires and also manifests the practice of meditation" as though that's the blossom that gets made from the lotus in the fires, this manifestation. Because the bodhisattva does *both* simultaneously, this distresses Mara, who is the devil figure, the tempter, the one who is always trying to pull us away from goodness and into badness. This distresses Mara because he can't take control.

If the bodhisattva is capable of both experiencing desire and practicing meditation, and finding some way to marry those things, to balance them and live them together, this deprives

Mara (the tempter, the devil) of any possibility of control, because where is the hook? What's he going to tempt us with if we're already in relationship with our own emotions and our own desires? If we're already able to balance the fact that we are human beings with feelings, desires, difficulties, impediments, skills, glories, loves, and all of that. If we're in a good relationship with that, what's to tempt? What's the problem?

The *Vimilakirti Sutra* goes on, "For a lotus to be born in the midst of fire can certainly be called rare. To practice meditation within the desires, this is just as rare." You have a situation where the lotus doesn't put out the fires and the fires don't consume the lotus. There's something symbiotic that happens: it's a blossom made from that fire rather than a blossom rising up above the mud. The big difference with these two images is what is being transformed. When the lotus grows up out of the mud, what is being transformed is impurity, the impurity of the muddy environment. When the lotus grows in the fire, what is being transformed is the danger of the fire. So, what does it mean to transform our work from the transformation of impurity to the transformation of danger?

When we talk about impurity as the problem, it kind of feels like game over. It feels like the end of the conversation, because to frame our passions, our desires, our emotions, the very feeling life as impure is so simultaneously self-loathing, for obvious reasons. *You! Yuk! Horrible feelings I have.* But at the same time as self-loathing, also tremendously self-protective. Because then what we're doing is we're always trying to protect ourselves from temptation, impurity, the world, getting hooked. We don't want the inner impurity to hook up with the external impurity, and so you've got simultaneously self-loathing and self-protection. That feels like a really tough way to work.

But when we think instead that what we're doing is working with what is dangerous, things really change. Because then we're saying, *What's dangerous, what's fiery about our feeling lives, about our passions and our desires?* What's dangerous is that they can hurt us and others. This might seem weird but that feels like a tremendously positive shift because it's relational. We're worried about our fires because they can hurt others. Suddenly, there are others that we're worried about, suddenly we're in relationship. Suddenly the whole point of doing the work of transforming ikky stuff into lotuses has to do with not hurting others and not hurting ourselves.

There is this movement from a view of, *I'm so yucky. Here I am in the mud* to *I can cause pain*, and that is different. If you go from *I can cause pain* to *and therefore I'm bad*, you've just returned to yucky. You've just made another way saying, 'I'm yucky.' If you stay with *I can cause pain*, there is a funny kind of dignity in that. *I am capable of having an effect* and if I'm capable of having a negative effect, if I'm capable of causing pain, I also must also be capable of causing joy, and I must be capable of healing pain. Suddenly, from being icky we have a kind of dignity and a kind of power, an ability to affect things around us for the better, if we choose.

At the same time we can recognize and move toward the power of the fires that burn inside of us. Rather than moving away from impurity, we can move toward fire because we can see that there is a kind of power in that danger. What if we used the power of the fires that burn inside of us as a danger to what is habitual in us, a danger to what is limiting, self-limiting in us, a danger to those places that in the term of the *Vimilakirti Sutra*, are self-obsessed. What if the fire in us becomes dangerous to our self-obsession? Dangerous to our habitual patterns, dangerous to the way we limit ourselves and the possibilities around us. That's an interesting possibility, no?

If we can imagine coming into that kind of relationship with what is dangerous in us, with what is fiery, then there is a possibility of tempering those dangers, tempering those fires, and being tempered by them — letting them burn us in a good way, so we can actually use them on behalf of ourselves and more importantly on behalf of others.

The other thing that I want to bring up from last night is to keep talking about what we can learn from rocks and stones about fire, what they have to tell us about relationship with fire. One of the ways that the relationship of rocks and stones to the fire, that gets expressed in the koans, is that someone will ask someone else a big question about the fires or about life and death or about the world. The someone being asked will reply, "I am neither for it nor against it."

How do you feel about this world? *I am neither for it nor against it.*

This 'neither for it nor against it' has nothing to do with indifference, and it has everything to do about actually experiencing what's going on. We spend so much of our time experiencing our reaction to things, our opinions about things, being 'for or against' everything including the temperature in this room, the content of this talk, the couple of hours there still are to get through before bed — 'for or against' all the time. [Laughter] To be

‘neither for nor against’ is to be willing to drop all those reactions and opinions to things, and just to experience them directly, to experience the temperature in the room, the tiredness you might be feeling, the droning on of the person at the end of the room near the door.

That’s the opposite of indifference. That’s complete engagement. That’s engagement without hedging your bets. That’s engagement without finding a semi-comfortable place to stand and experience things. In terms of what we can learn from the rocks and stones about fire, what’s it like to be still in that way; to be still in our heart-minds, ‘neither for nor against,’ in the face of the conflagration? What’s it like to be full of the experience of the conflagration rather than full of our ideas and reactions to the conflagration?

I also hear in that ‘neither for nor against,’ a sense of *and so we carry on anyway together. And we are here together, anyway. And we support each other, anyway, and we do our work, anyway. Neither for nor against.* We carry on. That feels important.

From that I want to make a couple of suggestions about your experience here at the retreat. The first is, what would it be like if you were ‘neither for nor against’ anything that happens to you in the next few days? Let that sink in for a second. Whatever happens you are neither for nor against it. More radically, what would happen if for the next few days you were neither for nor against yourself? What would that be like, neither for nor against yourself?

One way we’ve said that in the past is it’s a position of ‘nothing to assert, nothing to defend.’

From the *Vimilakirti Sutra* we might understand that being neither for nor against, having self-regard or self-hatred are not different. They’re both self-obsessions. They’re both a focus on and obsession with the self either positively or negatively. From that perspective, there’s no difference, there’s nothing to choose between them. One is not better than the other. The position of stepping back into ‘neither for nor against’ is the movement that is suggested, not a choosing for or against the self.

Those are a couple more thoughts about some of the implications of what I was talking about last night. Before I present the koan, any questions or comments about that part?

Q1 : It's sort of remedial, I think. Back to self-obsessions and passions. What you were saying was the lotus in the fire can use your passions to quell self-obsessions and habitual individual patterns, is that right?

JIS : No, I wouldn't say it that way. I would say, you can come to a point where you can have an emotional life, you can have a feeling life, and you can even have passions, desires, and all that stuff *without* being self-obsessed. Once you can do that, it's not a problem anymore. It's like having ten toes. Does that make sense?

Q1 : Yes, because my passions are my self-obsessions and what you're saying is you doesn't have to be — to not hold them so tightly.

JIS : Right. The problem is not with the feeling or the desire or the passion. The problem is when we make *that* the most important thing and put that at the center. One of the things the *Vimilakirti Sutra* says so clearly is, we all choose what we put at the center of our lives. If we put the bodhisattva vow, if we put our bodhicitta, our aspiration towards awakening to benefit all beings, at the center, suddenly all those obsessions, desires, and the cravings that have been at the center aren't there anymore. Therefore they're not problems anymore. They're part of the landscape.

Q2 : What is the sutra?

JIS : It's the *Sutra that Vimilakirti Spoke* and there are a number of translations. My favorite is by Burton Watson. There's one by John McCray and one by Charles Luk. Anything else? Do you have questions about this? Does it make perfect sense to everybody?

Q3 : You might talk about the comfort zone and then picture the balance of neither for nor against. Then there's knowing there's a danger that might bring something else that you don't usually know about so there's a kind of coming out of that zone where you just take a chance and the fire. Is that different than what you're talking about?

JIS : That's exactly what I'm talking about. One of the things we do with what we think is bad about ourselves is we make them so gigantic and important in our resistance to them, and our worry and our fear of them, and our attempts to suppress, control and put them in a small pen and muffle ears. When we're talking about jumping in fires, we aren't talking about wallowing in those parts of ourselves that are wounded. We're talking about confronting them

— coming into a true relationship with them rather than a relationship based on fear and endless strange attraction. What's really there?

Q4 : How do you see discernment in not being for or against? Where's discernment?

JIS : Discernment in what sense?

Q4 : In a good sense. [Laughter]

JIS : Okay, discernment in a good sense. Discernment gets much clearer if it's based on a position of 'neither for nor against,' because then we're actually looking at what is there, and discerning based on a direct experience, an experience unmediated by our opinions, tendencies, and preconceptions. It helps clarify discernment.

Discernment becomes an ongoing process. It's not like you make a discernment and land there and that's it. It's very alive.

Q5 : Can you talk about discernment and walking away from something?

JIS : This is going to sound sort of ridiculous, but it's true, you can be standing there watching an anvil coming toward you out of the sky and decide to move away. Not because you're against the anvil but, because by whatever the process of discernment you decide that it would be a better outcome if you don't get crushed by it. But, that's really not 'neither for or against.' You're not doing it out of revulsion. It's doing it out of the discernment of the greatest good. Or something.

Q11: And that's another talk you gave a while ago where you saysomeone starts talking to you ... and someone starts talking to you and you can think of is getting away as soon as possible.

JIS : It's like the anvil, although you wouldn't take that for granted that ...you'd want to hang out a little bit with the feeling that makes you want to flee or the feeling that makes you want to lean in and see what there is to understand about that.

Q12 : Being 'neither for nor against' isn't about being passive. It's really very active and engaging, so something doesn't get in the way?

JIS : Yeah. If you come in 'for or against' there's so much already determined. It's kind of lazy, you know?

Q10 : It also constructs self. Then all of the sudden *I'm the kind of person who is against such and such*. So it's just building more and more castles in the air.

Q14 : It's really like a prison for be 'for or against' something. You think of people and *I just can't stand people who have those kind of bumper stickers on their car*. And suddenly you have no experience of that person. You're completely jailed off from knowing that person. When you stop being 'for or against', it's surprising what can arise out of those encounters.

JIS : I also wonder about, do we all have so much excess, abundance of time, energy, and attention that we can worry about stuff like that? Are we all walking around with so much energy and so much psychic *oomph* that we can worry about this and that? To have that 'for and against' all the time? Really? If you have that kind of energy I want some of that! It seems like a big expenditure of energy at the service of what I'm not quite sure.

Q13 : Sometimes it's a kind of connection like *Yeah, I don't like those bumperstickers either*. A kind of false connection.

JIS : Yeah, a false connection at the expense of someone else.

Okay, so, what the causes and conditions of the things that really hurts us, that cause us sorrow. Like the causes and conditions that lead to the fire, whatever the thing is that's really painful at the moment. If we take off on someone's bumper stickers we're completely eliminating the possibility that that might be a place we could connect and work to ameliorate a situation that's painful to both of us. I don't think there's such an excess of good will and energy that we can afford to preemptively cut people out of the possibilities of doing bodhisattva work together.

Q17: In a way all those opinions feel like a kind of filter that keep us from expending energy, they only allow stuff in that you don't need.

JIS : *Oh, I don't have to deal with you. Okay, that's one less thing I have to do today.*

The difference between this 'for and against' that we're talking about and a discernment that something's really harmful and you're going to do everything you can to make it stop — those are not the same things. You can do that, you can discern that something's really harmful and you're going to do everything you can to make it stop, actually, without being against it. That's just extra. If you've already discerned that it's harmful and that you're planning to do anything you can to make it stop, to invest any energy in being against it is extra. You've already done the important thing.

All that energy thinking all the reasons you hate it and it's bad, it shouldn't happen, and it makes you incredibly uncomfortable; all that psychic energy in being against something is energy just thrown away. That energy could be put into working to the end of the nuclear energy experimentation going on at Los Alamos.

I'd like to suggest that if you have questions about this idea of being 'neither for or against,' it's good to talk about it and lay some groundwork, but I want to suggest you to try those two things, being 'neither for nor against' anything that happens during the retreat and being 'neither for nor against' yourself. Spend a few days being 'neither for nor against' yourself and then see what you think about being 'neither for nor against'. See if the experience of that changes how you understand what that might mean.

Q10 : Does that include dessert? [Laughter]

JIS : Yeah, which is different that enjoying dessert.

I would like to introduce the koan for the week. This is called "Dasui's Kalpa-Ending Fire" :

A monastic asked Dasui, "It's clear that the kalpa-ending fire will completely destroy the universe. I'm still not clear whether there's something that won't be destroyed."

Dasui said, "It will be destroyed."

"Will it be gone with the rest?"

"It will," said Dasui.

There's nothing that won't be destroyed.

Then, just to talk about a couple of things in there. A *kalpa* is a tremendously long, inconceivably long period of time in Buddhist and Indian cosmology. There are all kinds of examples for how long a kalpa is. Things like, if you started with a mountain made of pure rock that was sixteen miles by sixteen miles by sixteen miles, which would dwarf Mt. Everest, and you wiped a handkerchief against it once every hundred years, the mountain would disappear before the kalpa ended. [Laughter] So, it's a very long time.

And there are cycles of *mahakalpas*, great kalpas. The universe is continually going through these endless cycles that begin in emptiness. There's the empty kalpa; then there's the kalpa of formation, when things come into existence; the kalpa of existence, when things persist for a while; and the kalpa of destruction. And every cycle at the end of the kalpa of

destruction ends in this kalpa-ending fire where everything is consumed. So the sense of endless giant cycles of emptiness, formation, existence, and destruction in the universe.

The other big question, of course, in the koan is what is this ‘something’ that he’s talking about? What’s he talking about? “Is there something that won’t be destroyed?” What’s he on about? What’s he worried about? What does he hope doesn’t get destroyed in the kalpa fire?

Is there something like buddha nature, spirit, or something like that that is somehow separate from the material world and wouldn’t be destroyed when the material world was destroyed? Is the question something quite personal like *Do I have a soul that will survive, will my consciousness survive, what do you think will survive* — all of those kinds of things. Is there any kind of resonance with any kind of question you have yourself?

There’s some implications in Dasui’s response that indeed there is nothing that wouldn’t be destroyed in the kalpa-ending fire? One of them was expressed by Hakuin, a great koan teacher of the 18th century in Japan. He said of Dasui’s “It will be destroyed”, “This is a terrifying statement. The ancients appreciated that, too.” So there’s a sense that there’s something that is *arhbbbbb* about this. It’s not meant to be simple or light, it’s meant to call something that has awe, and perhaps fear in it. Dasui is saying there is no eternal principle underlying the universe. There is no something eternal and unchanging and separate. There is no soul. There is no persistent consciousness.

So then the story, out of which this koan comes, continues.

Not accepting the teacher’s response, the monastic left and went to the teacher Touzi, to whom he recounted this conversation. Touzi turned to his altar, lit incense, bowed to the Buddha, and said, “The ancient Buddha of Zizhou has appeared [referring to Dasui].” He turned to the monastic and said, “You should go back there as fast as you can and make amends for your mistake.”

The monastic hurried back to Dasui, but he was already dead. He returned to Touzi but Touzi too had died.

I find this also sort of awesome. Really moving, this story.

Then there’s a couple of notes, one about the kalpa. And it’s just something I threw in because I love it so much. In a curious way, Dasui was the fire-keeper when he was a young monastic at Guishan’s monastery. So all these years later he’s still the fire-keeper. Xuedou wrote a verse about this koan. He said :

Caught between destroyed and not destroyed, the monastic asks his question in the light of the kalpa fire.

Isn't that great? The monastic asks his question in the light of that very kalpa fire he's asking about. We do everything we do in the light of that kalpa fire. Touchingly, it's because of a single phrase, "It will be destroyed," that he travels back and forth for 10,000 miles, alone.

So I want to say just a little something about the two teachers, Dasui and Touzi, both of whom were sort of eccentric. They lived in the 10th Century. Dasui lived for more than 10 years in the hollow of a large tree behind an old, decrepit temple on Mt. Dasui, which is where he got his name. Touzi is someone I actually like a lot although there isn't a lot we know about him. He remained a hermit for thirty years, didn't get famous and didn't do a lot of stuff. It was the great Zhaozhou who went, sought him out, found him and brought him to our attention. If you notice, there's a kind of blessing on the door. A monastic asks, "One dharma refreshes all being everywhere. What dharma is that?" It was Touzi who answered, "The falling rain."

I wanted to read one more thing that was characteristic of his style and so important.

One day Touzi entered the hall and said to his assembly, "All of you come here searching for some new words and phrases, collecting brilliant things which you intend to stick in your own mouth and repeat. But my energy is failing and my lips and tongue blunder about. I don't have any casual talk to offer you. I'll answer you directly if you ask me something, but there's no mystery that can compare to you, yourself

I won't teach you some method to collect wisdom. I'll never say that anywhere in heaven and earth there's a Buddha, a dharma; something ordinary versus something sacred, or that you will find it by sitting with your legs crossed. You all manifest a thousand things. The understandings that arise from your own life is what you must carry into the future, reaping what you sow."

So, he says :

"There's no mystery that can compare to you, yourself. You all manifest a thousand things. The understandings that arise from your own life is what you must carry into the future, reaping what you sow. I have nothing to give you either externally or internally. All I can do is speak to you like this. If you have doubts, question me." (Poor Touzi)

A monk asks, "When it is not received internally or externally, then what?"

Touzi asks, "Are you trying to collect wisdom?" and left.

So, in the rest of the story, in the first phrase, "Not accepting Dasui's response, the monastic left," here's an example possibly of something to think about. The difference

between being 'for or against'. He's against what Dasui has to say, because it's not for him because it's not what he wants to hear. That's one possibility. So what about that being 'for or against' versus the situation that we're all familiar with many times in our lives of making a discernment *this isn't right* or *this isn't the place for me*, or *this isn't the teaching for me*, *this isn't the situation for me*. How do we know? How do we know in that moment?

I think someone would suggest that we don't know, we can't know. So, how do we make as sure as we can that we are discerning clearly and not making a 'for or against'? And how do we know when it's time to move; when it's time to take a stand; when it's time to walk away? That's one of the questions I hear echoing in the rest of the story.

Also, this thing about death. Here he is focused on the great death, the death of everything in the universe, the annihilation of everything and in doing that he misses what's right in front of him, which are the people — Dasui and Touzi. They die. Not because he's focused somewhere else but while he's focused elsewhere, he misses that possibility of connection with them.

In Xuedou's poem, that sense that he's asking the question in the light of that kalpa-ending fire, that fire is already burning which is something we've begun to talk about this week. Tenney [sensei] talked last night about what will happen is already happening, and so what is it like to come into relationship with it here and now? If what will happen is already happening, does that mean that nothing matters? Or that everything matters very much? Where do you go when you think about everything being consumed in the great kalpa fire? Does that mean nothing matters? Does it mean everything is very precious because it will rise and fall? Is there something that has to persist, like a soul or a consciousness, to make it worthwhile, to make it all meaningful?

At the end of Xuedou's poem, how many times have you journeyed alone on account of a question? How many times have you gone 10,000 miles back and forth because of something you needed to find some kind of resolution to?

Zhaozhou, who found Touzi after thirty years of obscurity, wrote some turning words that speak to this. He wrote :

The buddha made of wood won't pass through the fire —
If it does, it will surely burn.
The buddha made of clay won't pass through water —

If it does, it will surely drown.
The buddha made of metal won't pass through a furnace --
If it does, it will surely melt.
The true buddha is sitting in the house.

So, what's that? What is that true buddha sitting in the house?

And what is it about the wooden buddha that has to burn; the metal buddha that has to melt? Is there something wrong with that?

Q4 : The house will burn.

Q5 : The human buddha will rot.

JIS : The buddha made of flesh won't pass through the world? It will surely rot. Yeah, just so. Is there a way to imagine turning that from a sense of loss and destruction to one of *It is the wooden buddha's nature to burn in a fire. It is a clay buddha's nature to dissolve in the water. That is our human nature.* That's throwing ourselves into the fire. That is 'neither for nor against'. That is doing what is our nature. That is 'neither for nor against'. That is doing what is our nature.

Q9 : Then we have these eternal firefighters inside of us. They, too, are going to be burned. If you take that part out, then you can really go in.

JIS : There's a quality of trying to cut a separate deal for yourself. *My soul will survive, my consciousness will survive.*

Q10 : Buddha nature will survive as if buddha nature is some holy spirit that stays confident and runs through all beings and is eternal.

Q7 : Are the teachers 10,000 miles away? Is that what it refers to?

JIS : It's metaphorical. They aren't really 10,000 miles away. They are at a great distance.

Yeah, I think this koan and the story around it is so rich and contains so many possibilities that you're all touching on. That's why I wanted to introduce it tonight so you have some time to spend with it, and I can give you some background because I think there is a lot here and a lot we can do. Before we do that tomorrow night, any question that it would help you to be responded to tonight?

So here in this retreat where nothing too terrible is likely to happen and everybody's intentions are pretty good and we're all here trying to do something together as well as individually; in this kind of perfect environment and this lovely place where your meals get served to you three times a day and everything is available that you need, practice *here*. Try

here being 'neither for nor against' anything that happens and notice how hard it is to do even in a sort of special and easy ... *What, you say, Easy? Are you crazy?* — but non-threatening except in all the best senses, dangerous in good ways, not dangerous in harmful ways. Notice how hard it is here to be 'neither for nor against'. See if that can help you develop an understanding of the power of that practice, and 'neither for nor against' yourself. Notice how many times a minute you are 'for or against' yourself. What would it be like to have nothing to assert, nothing to be for, nothing to defend, nothing to be against?

Thank you.