

Vermeer's Peace : A Koan Seminar Introduction
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Springs Mountain Sangha ~ Colorado Springs, CO
April 28, 2006

I'm going to talk for a little bit longer than usual tonight because we have a fair number of people for whom this way of working with koans is either brand new or pretty newish. I'm going to begin with a story that remains the best way I know to try to say something intelligent about koans and how they work.

In the first part of the seventeenth century in Europe was the Thirty Years War. It was pretty much constant warfare, religious persecutions, and refugees. It was a tumultuous and difficult time. Given the lifespan of people at the time, it was what most people knew as life; people didn't have a whole lot else to go by. Around the middle of the century, the wars finally came to their end. People shrugged and sighed, went home, and had the task of figuring out how to rebuild a continent when most of them had only ever known warfare.

Up in the northern parts there was a group of painters, the now most famous of whom was Johannes Vermeer, who took up this interesting question of peace. What does peace look like? What does it feel like? Vermeer painted those paintings many of us have come to love, of a sturdy woman standing in a kitchen illuminated by a shaft of light from a window, very calm, full of light; or two people behind a doorway talking quietly to each other; or a cityscape glistening with rain, the clouds just having parted above it.

It seems to me that what Vermeer was doing in those paintings was not depicting peace, describing peace, portraying it; he was trying to evoke peace into a world that hadn't known it for a very long time. Not just in the world in general but in the specific and particular hearts of the people who looked at those paintings. As though his hope were that the viewer would ask *What is this? This peace, what does it feel like? What can I do to make more of it in the world?*

Lawrence Weschler wrote a wonderful essay called "Vermeer in Bosnia." He talked about meeting with one of the judges at the Yugoslav war crimes trials in The Hague. He asked him how he dealt with the daily diet of horrible things that came across his desk as a war crimes judge. He said, "Every chance I get, I go across the river to a little gallery where there's a

room full of Vermeers and I just sit in that room for my lunch hour.” There’s a sense that 350 years later those paintings are still capable of invoking peace in a troubled heart.

Koans began in China at a time that had many similarities to the Thirty Years War in Europe. It was the eighth century and there was a rebellion that led to famine that led to more civil war. In a period of about ten years in the mid-eighth century two-thirds of the people in China died. This is when koans were born. Koans were born essentially as a response to this time, as a way of taking up a question, which was *We one in three who survive, how do we go on? How do we rebuild a country?*

The move that the koans make is more towards freedom than peace. Koans — many times, maybe foundationally — are trying to invoke freedom in your heart in the same way that Vermeer’s paintings were trying to invoke peace in his viewers’ hearts. If you have difficulty with a koan, if a koan doesn't make sense to you or it feels impermeable, one way in is to ask : What is the freedom here? What is the free move? What kind of freedom is being pointed to? Or, what kind of freedom might be possible in this situation? That's the basis; that's what koans are for.

I'll just say a couple more things about how they work on us and how we work with them. Last night I was talking about the difference between explanations and metaphors, and how metaphors, by their nature, connect things, breaking down barriers and categories and making new connections that send us in surprising directions. Koans work very much like that as well, the body of koans.

There’s no place in this tradition where there’s a bullet list of, for instance, what compassion is. But there are instances of compassion, as Vermeer painted instances of peace. So you have Pang Lingzhao falling down next to her father as an instance of compassion. For those of you who don't know the story :

Layman Pang was carrying a bunch of baskets. Coming down off a bridge, he tripped and fell to the ground. His daughter Lingzhao, seeing this, rushed over and threw herself onto the ground beside him. He asked, “What are you doing?” She said, “I saw you fall, so I'm helping.” Layman Pang said, “Luckily no one is looking.”

That’s an instance of compassion in the koans : *I saw you fall so I'm helping.*

Another one is the koan which asks about the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guanyin, “How does she use all those hands and eyes?” Guanyin is often shown with many hands and eyes

because of her many activities of compassion in the world. The answer in that koan is : “It’s just like someone in the middle of the night, reaching behind her head for the pillow.” Something that natural, something that simple. Something as familiar to us as being half asleep, reaching behind your head for the pillow in the middle of the night. That, too, is compassion.

So you have one instance and another instance, and you lay them next to each other. Then you have another and another and another. That’s how the koans work, by juxtaposition, by the metaphorical connections between things. None of them is the one sole right answer. Compassion is all of those things, and what is made with all of those things. And a further thing too, which is your response to the koans. How you respond becomes part of this growing field of the koan. Koans are not just words on paper; they’re one thing and another thing and another thing added. Then you add your view of them, your understanding of them. It grows and grows and grows. It’s been growing for 1200 years like that. It’s a vast field, the koan field.

That’s how we work with the koans; we take our cue from how they themselves work : If they work by juxtaposition, if they work by metaphor, if they say *It’s like this, and like this, and like this*, that’s what we’ll do. We’ll add our voices saying *It’s like this, and like this, and like this*. Slowly, together, we will build a sense of what each koan is. This night in this place. Another night, another place, it would be something different. Another time in your life it would be something different to you.

That’s a little bit of how they work on us. A word or two about how we work with them in these koan seminars : The first thing is that there are no answers to these koans, there are only responses. That’s tremendously important. Don’t worry that you have to come up with *the* answer, a brilliant or a dazzling answer. Take a risk. Be willing to be foolish. Sometimes the most beautiful mistakes come out when somebody takes a risk and is willing to be foolish. Don’t worry about an answer; there’s only a field of response.

The other thing, which I hinted at before, is that if a koan feels difficult to you or impermeable in some way, look for the freedom and see if that’s a way in. Look for the invitation to freedom somewhere in the koan.

Sometimes koans are impenetrable, frustrating, and off-putting. [Laughter] If you have a reaction of fear, frustration, boredom, irritation, or whatever it is, that’s your first response to

the koan. Okay? That right there. You're already in relationship with that koan. Don't throw that away. That's as valuable as anything else, if you stay with it. *Oh, that's interesting. I hate this.* [Laughter] *Why? Why do I hate this? What does it feel like in my body? What does it bring up for me?* Allow yourself as fearlessly as possible to follow that line of inquiry and see where it goes.

Back to Linji's "There is nothing I dislike" : Turn that "nothing I dislike" to your own responses to the koan. I'm not saying leave it there; if your first reaction is *Oh, yuck*, do some inquiry. See if that moves anywhere. And if it doesn't, then that's your response to the koan this night in this place. It might be different another time.

That's what I wanted to say to begin. Any questions or any comments that evokes from anybody?

Q1 : The freedom thing, that's an interesting key you've not talked about before.

JIS : Yeah. Look for the invitation to freedom.

Q2 : I want to understand why in the period of instability the answer is more freedom.

JIS : That's a great question. During that time the country was kind of shell-shocked. Everybody was in a state of shock by what had happened. A lot of people were fleeing to the monasteries to find a way out, a way *not* to experience what was happening. Sometimes even just as a way to get a reliable meal. Great Master Ma, who is the first teacher whose dialogues with his students became koans, really was saying *No escape hatch here. There's no spiritual la-la-land I'm gonna offer you. We have to cope with this.*

Ma's style was so direct. He's the first teacher who is known for hitting his students, shouting at them, and doing all that stuff that later became a stereotype in Zen. But in the context of the time I find that quite moving, actually, because anytime someone would take the stance of a student with him, he would whack 'em. He would mow them over. He was basically saying, though he never said it in words but in actions, *We cannot afford for you not to know your self-nature. We cannot afford for you to take the stance of the student. You have to get clear right now about who you are, what it means to be alive and what you're going to do to help.* So that was his ferocity. Ma was a man who walked through that horrible time of death and destruction. For twenty years he was on the road while all that was going on. He saw it firsthand.

Q2 : I have a story to add to that.

JIS : Does that answer your question?

Q2 : Yeah. It makes sense to me because Suzuki, Roshi, who was a very gentle person, was teaching during the period of the Vietnam War. A student was very upset about the war and he said, “Why don’t we go out and protest? Why are we sitting in here?” Suzuki, Roshi ducked down, grabbed him, and shook him. Which no one actually explained very well to me, but there’s a good explanation right there.

JIS : *No time. You have to know.* Yeah.

Q3 : You also said compassion. How does that relate? I’ve never heard the koans described as compassionate acts and freedom. How do those connect? Do you believe that in every koan there is a key to compassion or striving for it like freedom?

JIS : Another great question. I don’t think all koans do the same thing. Koans are an extremely differentiated technology; they’re very subtle, and they light up different aspects of the field of human life. Having said that, in general, the invitation is to freedom. Because the deep trust of the koans is that the freer you are the more compassionate you will be : When we strip away those things which obscure our freedom, what will be left will look an awful lot like compassion. That looks pretty much like the ground on which we stand. Does that make sense? That’s the relationship between freedom and compassion.

Anything else?

Let’s do it. Have you all had a chance to read the koans?

[Recording turned off for the koan seminar]