

Barriers and Gates
When the Heat Comes Retreat
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Good evening, everyone.

It's wonderful to be back here in Santa Fe for when the heat comes.

We're coming together at a time when the world might seem particularly complicated. That the world is at once extraordinarily beautiful and awesomely painful is vividly apparent right now. So when we come together, anytime, but particularly when we come together at a time like this, when we fast, when we get simple, when we let things fall away, it's not because we are repudiating that world or even turning away from it. We let things fall away. We let habits, ways of doing things, thoughts, feelings, and all of that, as they can, fall away. Not to turn away, but so that we can more vividly be present in the world exactly as it is so that there is less stuff between us and life. So that we are more in life and life is more in us.

One of the themes I want to return to again and again in these days is if what we are doing is becoming more present in life, and life is becoming more present in us — in the same way our awakening, the awakening of each one of us doesn't fall from heaven like a thunderbolt. It doesn't come from some other dimension. It is made of this world. It is made of us in this world and the life we share with the world.

We choose to get simple. We choose to quiet down. We choose to move more slowly, to think a little less. That place is a place of voluntary stopping in some ways.

One of the great, old, Chinese teachers Yunmen would often say as a comment on another koan or story he heard about another teacher, "Barrier."

At first glance [it] is a sort of odd comment to make. But the image was of a city gate that has been closed and that big bar has been dropped down to keep the gate closed, which usually takes about six big guys to put into place. So there is this sense of *You can't move*. The city gate is closed in front of you. The bar is dropped in place. It's in front of you, it's behind you, and it's on either side of you. Stopped.

So what is it to choose that 'stopped'? What is it like to choose to put ourselves in the

position of having barriers on all sides of us, stopping us from wiggling, moving, escaping, and looking in the other directions and averting our eyes, doing all of those things we do all day long, habitually? What it like to put ourselves in a position where we're not going to do that? We are going to stop and we're going to be exactly where we are.

There is an old zen story about being on a path and suddenly realizing that if you take one step forward you will rise up into heaven. And if you take one step backward you'll fall into hell. Neither of those things are particularly things you want to do. But if you stay where you are, doing what you have been doing, doing what it is your habit to do, you'll wither. So what do you do if you can't move forward, you can't move backward, you can't move side to side, and you can't keep doing what you are doing? Because if you do that you'll just wither up and dry.

What is that? Is there another alternative for something else to do when you are stopped, when the barriers are all around you? Is there something else to do besides either leaving or doing what you have been doing for the past twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years? Is there something else?

I will leave that as the first koan of the retreat. What is that something else? Which is a wonderful question to ask, I think. I will give you a little clue.

Another koan which happens to be right next to it in the *Blue Cliff Record*, right next to the koan where Yunmen says "Barrier," someone asks Zhaozhou — another of the great Chinese teachers — "What are you?" *What is Zhaozhou?* And he says this beautiful thing in response. He says, "North gate, south gate, east gate, west gate. That's what I am." *I am a being with a gate in every direction.*

That is interesting. Why are those two koans next to each other? Are they speaking to each other? Are they saying *When you are stopped, what would it be like to feel yourself as having an open gate in every direction, open to life, open to the world?*

We tend to think of other people or experiences as gates. We talk about everything being a dharma gate and we can walk through it. What if we are the gate? Not in the sense of offering opportunities to other people, but what if we're just open gates in every direction? What if we just stop and open and watch what happens, allow it to come in, let it move through us? Would that be a different way of doing it? Then it doesn't matter whether there are barriers

on all sides of you. If you are a person with a gate open in every direction it doesn't matter where you are or what you are doing.

Yunmen, the teacher who said "Barrier," very famously said, "Every day is a good day." When you are an open gate in every direction every day truly is a good day.

Fortunately, life, the great mysterious, takes care of every day being a good day. It's really a lucky thing that, that is not in our control. That's just there, if we remember it. If we stop long enough to let it wash over us.

The Lakotas say, "Today is a good day to die." And the truth is that your death is already here with you. Right here in this room. You may not yet know the sound of it, the smell of it, the taste of it. But it's here. If you can't say today is a good day to die, it might be interesting to wonder why. Because that is in your control. There is something to do with that. If you are an open gate in every direction, if you and awakening are growing together, what could be wrong even if you died?

So, barriers in every direction, how fortunate. Let's take advantage of this stopping. Let's take advantage of this simplicity. Let's take advantage of the chance to open in all directions to life. To open in all directions to the companionship of our deaths. To be exactly, completely, entirely, and without reservation, where we are.

Thank you.