

A Growing Allegiance to Awakening  
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Good evening, everyone. Welcome, to those of you who have come in to join us tonight. It's great to see you.

I've been feeling the weight of the world a lot lately, and a lot of the people I speak to are also feeling it. I'm going to go against my nature tonight and suggest that one thing that's always true when we are feeling the weight of the world is that it's good to get simple again. It's good to go back to the fundamentals. What's most basic about what we are doing? Why are we doing it? Why are we here and how does it relate to the world? The part that is always true. Going a little bit against my normal inclination is about thinking that maybe there's a way we can look at that, that allows us to take ourselves a little less seriously. Maybe there's a way we could even have some fun with returning to the fundamentals of things. So, are you game?

Usually when we think about why we do a practice like this, what occurs to us are less suffering for ourselves and for others, greater peace of mind, greater peace of heart, a clearer understanding of things, a more flexible mind, a more open heart, the ability to be more helpful in the world ~ those kinds of things. Is there anybody here who is going for more constriction, for greater control, and a sense of rigidity? We're agreed that that's the general way we are looking at things.

Wittgenstein famously said, "Show me how you are looking and I will tell you what you are looking for." All of these things we're talking about – the greater flexibility, openness, helpfulness, kindness, and ease in the world – have as a common denominator a kind of freedom. Maybe that is one of the most essential things about this practice, coming more and more fully into that freedom. Allowing that freedom to more fully enter us.

How do we search for freedom in a free way? This morning when I was talking about the *Guanyin Sutra of Endless Life*, we talked about the line that says, "Thought after thought rises in the mind, thought after thought is the mind." The sense that our heart-mind is made up of the

things that rise in it. Our heart-mind is all of the things that rise up, flow through, come by. Our heart-mind is the things that are arising up in it now. There's the memory of touch from when we were a baby, the plans we have for Sunday afternoon when we leave here, some genetic component, environmental stuff, what we've learned in school and what we've learned outside of school; there's probably electromagnetics and chemistry and the things that happen to our body, our experiences, every dream we've ever dreamed whether we remember it or not, our opinions, what we know, what we don't know, what we don't know that we know. It gets pretty vast pretty quickly.

That's just *your* mind : The person next to you has that same thing in some other configuration. It's vast, complicated, and tangled. Right now our minds are made up of each others' breath. They are made up, in some way, of each others' feelings and thoughts as well.

That is a beautiful and expansive thought, and in some ways also a slightly horrifying thought, to think of our minds as the stuff we are familiar with rising all the time. That's the part of the mind I want to talk about tonight : the commentator, the part that has an opinion about everything. It's only one small part of that vast beautiful network web of things that is a mind, but it's the part that's often right up in the front row and speaking loudly.

When I'm talking about the mind that comments I'm talking about the scribbling in the margins of experience we do. The mind that worries all the time, is afraid, is judging us or others, has a comment and a opinion about everything. I'm not talking about primary experience, when someone we love dies or we lose something precious to us and we feel grief. That is a primary experience, a direct response, an engagement with the world. When we feel delight at something a child does without a thought, that's also a primary experience.

The commentor isn't in primary experience, not down on the playing field but up in the box somewhere giving a commentary. It worries, judges, criticizes, is afraid, negotiates. Just imagine, if you took all those qualities you can readily identify as being part of the commentator and made it a separate person who acts like that all the time. Is this a person you'd want to hang out with? Probably not a whole lot, right?

And yet in some ways this is our most intimate relationship, the thing closest to us, always in conversation with us. It's as if we have this secret lover who we hope nobody else knows

about but with whom we are so intimate, so entwined and so conflicted all the time. Does that resonate? The secret love affair you've had for as long as you can remember.

It's possible that you've tried a number of strategies for dealing with the secret lover. A couple that come to mind for me are trying to shove her in a box and then sit on the lid. How well does that work? Or combing through the archives and collecting all the material for the autobiography of the secret lover : *She's afraid because when she was six ... He's angry because when he was a teenager ...* . Maybe you've tried to reform her : *Less alcohol for you*. Or tried to work with difficulties that arise : *I am really going to work on being less self-critical and if I can't succeed I am going to feel really bad*.

Sometimes that kind of reform works. *Less alcohol for you* can be lifesaving and necessary. The thing about it is that it still leaves you with the problem of the secret lover. You just have a slightly improved, better version of the secret lover. But it is still the secret lover.

We have been talking for the last several years about having a different relationship with all of our minds, and actually welcoming what arises – even welcoming the secret lover. Not trying to fight against, not trying to fix, but simply staying with, paying attention, listening, inquiring into. *What is this? Why is it like this? What is it like when it's like this?*

I want to move that a little bit further and say that, as we get comfortable with welcoming, as we are not expending energy pushing away or trying to fix but we stay with the discomfort without having to flee, we may find that things begin to shift in a certain way, that our allegiance to the secret lover is actually changing. It's not as strong as it once was, and might even be moving beyond the walls of the prison in which we are locked with the secret lover into the world at large. What might be possible if we weren't in that fatal embrace?

You might sometimes find that when the comments come up, if you check, if you put just the tiniest bit of press on them, you find that you don't necessarily believe them anymore. They aren't even true, they're just habitual, and you're still pretending you think something you don't anymore. How wonderful that is, because something can fall away so quickly as soon as you realize that it's not really alive anymore; it's changed.

Senzaki Nyogen is one of our ancestors who came from Japan to California and elsewhere. When he was in Los Angeles after World War II and before the Sixties happened,

it was unlike these days when Zen teachers are a dime a dozen. He was a fairly rare commodity, and so a lot of people would come and talk to him. They would bring him whatever their thing was, whatever they really cared about, and ask his opinion. They would talk to him about UFOs, pyramids, and all kinds of stuff that he really didn't know very much about. His answer to all of this was "Is that so?" "Is that so?" "Is that so?" It's such a beautiful answer because it doesn't preclude anything. It doesn't close anything down, it doesn't stop any possibility. Nor does it require you to agree with something that, who knows? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. But he left things open. "Is that so?" People would walk away saying, "What a great Zen master. How wise he is."

*Is that so?* is a great response to have to your secret lover when he is trying out all the tricks on you, when he's got all the comments to make. *Is that so? Could be, maybe. I don't know.* And then it's a very short slide from *Could be, I don't know*, to *Does it matter? Does it matter? Does it matter?* When we can move from *Does it really matter to me?* — that's a huge thing. So I offer Senzaki's "Is that so?" as a little bit of method.

I also wanted to talk about what becomes possible when our allegiance begins to shift, when it's not turned so much toward the secret lover but toward life. What would it be like if you didn't have to run everything past the secret lover? What if you could just respond?

Last night we were talking about the koan in which Zhaozhou is asked, "What *are* you?" He says, "North gate, south gate, east gate, west gate." What a beautiful image that is, the self as gates open in every direction. What would it be like if you were gates open in every direction and there was no gatekeeper? What if things moved in and out through the gates : donkeys loaded with strange fruit from Central Asia, things you couldn't possibly imagine? What if you discovered within the gates the ability to do arts and crafts you didn't know you could and you began sending those out? What if the wind blew just like this through the gates, in and out, and no one had a comment about it?

The poet Rainier Maria Rilke was interested in this question : What becomes possible when our allegiance shifts from this strange interior relationship into a relationship with the world?. One of the things that becomes possible is something he called 'in-seeing.' He said :

I love 'in-seeing.' Can you image with me how glorious it is to 'in see' a dog, for example, as you pass it? By 'in-see' I don't mean to look through, which is only

a kind of human gymnastic which lets you immediately come out again on the other side of the dog, regarding it, so to speak, as merely a window upon the human world lying beyond it. Not that. What I mean is to let yourself precisely into the dog's center, the point from which it begins to be a dog, the place in it where God, as it were, would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished in order to watch it during its first embarrassments and inspirations and to nod that it was good, that nothing was lacking. That it couldn't have been better made.

Isn't that a wonderful idea, to meet things in that way?

For a while you can endure being inside the dog, you just have to be alert and jump out in time before its environment completely encloses you. Since otherwise you would simply remain the dog in the dog and be lost for everything else. Though you may laugh to your confidant, "If I tell you where my very greatest feeling, my world feeling, my earthly bliss was, I must confess to you it was again and again, here and there, in such 'in-seeing.' In the indescribably swift deep timeless moments of this God-like 'in-seeing.'"

You can in-see again and again, from moment to moment.

When he speaks about that place that's precisely in the dog's center, the point from which it begins to be a dog, where God would have sat and watched, it makes me think again of the *Guanyin Sutra* we were talking about this morning which says, "We are born with awakening, we grow with awakening." I think this place he is talking about in the dog, and therefore in everything, is the place where we are born with it. That's the place where God sits. Where the dog begins to be dog. Where we begin to be us. Where everything begins to be what it is, and we can go back to that wonderful place where we'll rise up together, not differentiated yet. And then how wonderful to watch the differentiations, to watch all the things that unfold and to realize that we are unfolding together. That it's all happening in this field we make together.

If we can move into something like that, things can move into us as well. In one of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke talks about eating fruit : "Plump apple, smooth banana, melon, peach, gooseberry. How all this affluence speaks death and life into the mouth ... This comes from far away. What miracle is happening in our mouth? Instead of words, discoveries flow out from the ripe flesh astonished to be free ... "

When you really eat a piece of fruit, when you really do something, the commentator is

nowhere to be found; it steps away so that you can come into a direct and immediate relationship with that thing. “What miracle is happening in your mouth? Instead of words, discoveries flow out from the ripe flesh astonished to be free ...”

There is that sense that things don’t just happen to us, that we happen to things. We bite down on the fruit and “discoveries not words flow out astonished, the fruit is astonished to be eaten”. Again that sense of being entwined, entangled. What moving our allegiance from the secret lover into the world is really about is finding more and more that freedom to be in life. That freedom to get entangled, to love, to make mistakes, to screw up really badly sometimes, but to stay in, to create astonishments. To have astonishments created in us. *We are born with awakening, we grow with awakening. We grow with awakenin,g the way, and our companions.*

Awakening doesn’t come like a thunderbolt from somewhere else. Everything we do grows with that. Every time we get more entangled, every time we love harder, every time we are more directly there and there is less commentary, we are growing with awakening. And awakening is growing with us.

*All beings by nature are Buddha, and without beings, no Buddha.* I’m going to talk about that some tomorrow when we talk about the Hakuin piece. It’s not that we don’t exist without God, it’s not that we don’t exist without the Buddha, but the Buddha is made of all of us and what we do. The Buddha is always changing, awakening is always changing, freedom is always changing, love is always changing, as we move in and out we change and bring what we have to bring and take what we take.

Let me close with a last piece from Rilke, which is about being in the world without knowing and letting the world act on us. This was at a time in his life when he was having what we call writer’s block. When things weren’t coming for him and he was feeling a kind of despair about it. He was lucky to have a friend with a castle who invited him to come stay in the castle and see if he could just get free to write. This is her description of how he began to write the *Duino Elegies*, one of the great poetic works of the twentieth century.

Rilke later told me how these *Elegies* arose. One morning he received a troublesome business letter. He wanted to take care of it quickly and had to deal with numbers and other such tedious matters. Outside a violent north wind was blowing but the sun shone and the water gleamed as if covered with silver. Rilke climbed down to the bastions, which jutting out to the east and

west were connected to the foot of the castle by a narrow path along the cliffs which abruptly drop off for about two hundred feet into the sea. Rilke walked back and forth completely absorbed in the problem of how to answer the letter.

Then all at once in the midst of his thoughts, he stopped. It seemed that from the raging storm a voice had called to him. "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?" [Which is the beginning of the *Duino Elegies*.] He stood listening. "What is that?" he whispered. "What is coming?" Taking out the notebook that he always carried with him he wrote down those words together with a few lines that formed by themselves without his intervention. He knew that the god had spoken. Very calmly he climbed back up to his room, set his notebook aside and answered the difficult letter. By the evening the whole First Elegy had been written.

He was in a difficult place; he was stuck. It's the barrier we've been talking about, when you can't go forward and you can't go backwards and you can't keep doing what you're doing or you'll die. Then what? What becomes possible in that moment? To answer that question is to keep moving into freedom. To keep finding the answer to *What do you do when there is nothing to do?* Is to keep moving towards freedom.

When a difficult business letter came Rilke allowed himself to be completely absorbed in it, to not think it was unimportant. In that absorption in the most mundane of things suddenly the *Duino Elegies* begin to come to him and he listened, he paid attention. He allowed the world to come get him; he allowed himself to be pulled in. He started to write the *Elegies* down, and then suddenly the unblocking of the poem allowed him to quite simply answer the business letter, which he does before he continues with the poem.

A great feedback happens between what we think of as the simple, mundane parts of our lives and the most creative, rich, and moving parts of our lives. They are not different; they move in and out of each other. It might be a mistake to choose one at the expense of the other, because we never know how they are going to affect each other. Rilke was stuck for nine months and it was a business letter that opened it up for him. So don't make judgments about how it might come. Don't think *This isn't important. This doesn't deserve my attention. I must put myself to greater things.* I must pay attention to the really important stuff. You don't know. You don't know what the really important thing is. All we can do is try to be as open as we can to everything, try to be available for the troublesome business letter as well as the voice that

comes in the sound of the crashing surf.

It's a willingness to say that there is more than just me going on — *Thank God there is more than just me going on!* — that we are entangled in this world and that if we put ourselves in the way of chance and fate things might happen that we could never have manufactured ourselves. Things might come in through the gates that we could never have engineered, that we never could have created. And yet they might make all the difference.

Let me leave it there for now and I'd love to hear any comments you may have or questions.

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Q1 : Why is that if we welcome the commentator that withers away instead of getting stronger?

JIS : That's really interesting. I think it's the shadow and the cave wall effect. The things we don't look at, the things we keep turning away or pushing away end up throwing these gigantic shadows on the wall. They become so much bigger or different than they are. Coming into relationship with them allows us to really see them for what they are, which then allows a relationship to develop, which then allows for things to change. It gets so complicated. We're dealing with our fantasies about the commentator sometimes rather than the commentator itself, so we are in a secondary experience of our secondary experience. It keeps ramifying like that endlessly. If we can keep crawling back toward primary experience, somehow it seems it's always easier to deal closer to primary experience than further out. Maybe it's because it's realer and simpler there. Does that make sense?

Q1 : And therefore it withers rather than grows stronger?

JIS : Yeah, because I think we invest the commentator with a lot more power and interest than it actually has. When you really get intimate with it, lean on it, sweat on it, and hear what it has to say, it seems that naturally and often, it just becomes less interesting, less compelling. It's smaller than this other feeling we can have about life, which maybe becomes more compelling.

More excerpts from the questions and answers :

The job of the commentator is to make things small and manageable. Someone said the entire job of that part of the mind is to make us feel that we are nice and in control. But as soon as you break out of the desire to always be nice and in control, the power of the commentator drops precipitously, because it's not so important to us anymore.

As much as this practice takes apart the stuff that gets in our way, it is equally a shifting of allegiance towards life, into the world, and we allow that to pull us, in some ways, past that which is obstructing us. Those two things work together. So let yourself be pulled out. Let yourself be amazed. Let yourself be astonished.

Pain is a part of life and this is the life we have. This is life as it is. Maybe this strange human project is about being as intimate with all of it as we can. Not picking and choosing, in the old Zen phrase. Not picking and choosing the life we are going to get intimate with but continuing to show up for the life that appears to us. There is some great beauty in that even when it's painful.

There is the vastness, which is the field of fields, everything perfect, shining, eternal, just as it is, complete and whole. There is the world of form, the phenomenal world which is the world of bodies and cause and effect. There is a third aspect of everything which is a realm in which everything does interpenetrate each other and the kinds of distinctions we make in the world of forms between things that are visible and things that are not, don't exist. It's a world made up of both matter and energy, where there isn't such a strong distinction between matter and energy. It's a world of possibility, a world where more things are possible than in the world of form because things are less determined. It's art, creativity, dream, koans, business letters, and poetry.

We are these extraordinary creatures with one eye on the world and one eye on the vastness.