

Lankavatara Sutra I : Introduction
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Throughout this weekend we're going to be moving in and out of different states of being. We'll move from the silence of meditation into conversation and into walking around on this beautiful land, and to being alone, and to talking with each other. We also include, obviously, time here and time at home. We will become aware of what it's like to be awake and what it's like to be asleep and dreaming. So we include dreaming as part of our practice this weekend. Just before we part tonight I'll give you some specific suggestions about that. We'll begin every morning with a session in which you're welcome to share anything about the dreaming you did the night before.

One of the thoughts behind consciously moving through different states of consciousness, different ways of being with ourselves and with each other, is that we're interested in the through-line that runs from silence to speech, from sitting to walking, from awake to asleep—all of these different states. What is it that runs through that which remains constant in some way, like the base note in every experience? This is important as we start to move toward what in Buddhism is called the unconditioned, that thing which is not dependent on particular conditions and circumstances in order to exist, but is running underneath any condition or circumstance. It's good to notice our preferences and the moments when it feels creaky to move from one state to another, and to become aware of that and to play with what it would be like to move fluidly, without preference, without creakiness from one state to another, allowing that through-line to pull us.

Tonight, being the end of a long week for most people, the state that you get to settle into is one of simple receptivity, because I'm going to do a lot of talking, which is our custom for the Friday night beginning. Tomorrow we will begin our conversation with the koans. Although the koan tradition is over a thousand years old, the way that we're doing it is, at least in this time and place, quite new and changing all the time,

rapidly evolving. We're learning new things all the time, so it's become our custom that on this Friday night at the beginning of a koan retreat, I start with a little bit of my own thoughts most recently about koans. Afterwards I will welcome any comments or questions you have, and then move into an introduction to the material we'll be spending the weekend with, and hand out the koan booklets.

I want to begin tonight with a quote from a great twentieth-century philosopher of Rinzai Zen named D.T. Suzuki. Although he was an academic teacher and writer, he also had a strong practice and actually had had quite a profound opening experience, a *kensho* or *satori*, when he was a young man. You can tell, reading him, that that was the case. He's not writing *about* something; he's writing *from deep inside* something when he writes about Rinzai Zen and the koan tradition. He taught at Columbia University and spent a lot of time trying to bring this tradition to America.

One of the many things he wrote that I appreciate is where he's tried to explain what a koan is. He said, "*Ko* literally means 'public' and *an* is a document. But a koan, or a public document, has nothing to do with Zen. The Zen document is the one each of us brings along to this world at our birth and tries to decipher before we pass away." That's an incredibly beautiful way of thinking about a koan : the document that each of us brings along to this world at our birth and tries to decipher before we pass away.

He continues : "There is, however, no secrecy to this, as it is all open or public to us, to every one of us." He was pushing against, as we all must do, the idea that koans are riddles or paradoxes, or that they're in some way tricky. No secrecy here; everything is open and public. "If there is any hidden meaning in it at all, it is on our side and not in the document. The koan is within ourselves. When the koan is brought out of the unconscious to the field of consciousness, it is said to have been understood by us."

So he's saying that if there is a hidden meaning at all, the thing that is hidden, the thing that is yet to be revealed, is not in the koan but in us. And what the koan will do is help us to reveal to ourselves that thing which we didn't yet know, that thing which hadn't yet been made clear to us about ourselves. That flips the whole thing on its head. It is the koan's job to reveal something about us—a truth that it doesn't bring to us, a truth that is already there in us, a truth that is already true. It will help us

reveal that, to make it conscious and therefore available to us in our lives—to reveal what is already true but what we’re not yet aware of, and make it accessible so that we can make use of it.

D.T. Suzuki had a contemporary who was a Rinzai Zen teacher and koan master named Shibayama Zenkei. In typical koan style, he said the same thing in about ten words. He said, “Etymologically the term *koan* means the place where the truth is.”

These are suggestions about what a koan might be, and a way to begin thinking about working with them. In contrast, it’s normal, especially at the beginning of our acquaintanceship with koans, to try to figure a koan out, to hold it in our hands and shake it until the truth falls out of it, until it divulges its secret if we just shake it hard enough. That’s the opposite move of the one that Suzuki and Shibayama suggest. It’s as though there’s something rattling around inside the koan, and if we just shake it hard enough it will fall out and become useful to us. That is us trying to solve the koan, as if it were an *intimidating* public document, like a registered letter from Homeland Security.

If it isn’t mildly threatening or pulse-quickening in that kind of way, maybe it’s just puzzling and opaque. When John Tarrant’s daughter, Seraphina, was a young teenager, she discovered Joan Baez and got very excited. I ran over to the stereo cabinet and pulled out my old Joan Baez LPs and gave them to Seraphina. She took up the first album and held it in her hands and turned it around and upside down and this way and that way, and finally she looked at me and asked, ‘How do you open this?’ I always thought that was a pretty good evocation of what a koan can feel like.

So, if it’s not a registered letter from Homeland Security or an LP a thirteen-year-old has just been handed, what is it? What is the nature of this public document? The koans themselves suggest what I find to be a delightful alternative, and this comes from the *Blue Cliff Record*, the twenty-fourth koan, which we have just recently been working with in our ongoing conversation about koans.

In the *Blue Cliff Record*, a teacher named Xuedou writes a verse about every koan. This is a little excerpt from that koan, which is about a nun named Iron Grinder Liu, who comes to visit a Chan teacher named Guishan. She comes into his cottage to meet him and they have a four-part dialogue, and then it’s over and she’s gone. Xuedou

says this about her entrance into Guishan's cottage : "She rides an iron horse into the fortress, and is met with a proclamation that all the land is at peace." She comes in all her Iron Grinder Liu glory, riding an iron horse into Guishan's fortress, and she's met with this proclamation that all the land is at peace : 'Welcome, come on in. Make yourself at home. All is well.'

Then another Chan teacher comments on Xuedou's verse, which itself is a comment on the koan. You can see the layers that develop. He commented, "A dog carries the amnesty in its mouth." Anybody who's kept company with a dog knows what it means, and Yuanwu is deliberately evoking this homey image. If you can, imagine arriving home at the end of a long day, and feeling that it was a hard day. You're a bit discouraged and tired, and you open the door and there's the dog. The dog's like, 'Hello! How are you? It's sooo good to see you! I've been waiting for you! Come on in!' Suddenly all is forgiven, there are no problems anymore. That's the amnesty that the dog carries in its mouth.

One of the ways I've been thinking about koans lately is following Yuanwu's suggestion that this is what a koan can be : not a registered letter from Homeland Security, but a dog carrying amnesty in its mouth, meeting you at the door and welcoming you in. If we receive the koan in that spirit we're likely to find that it's not so much a matter of our solving the koan, but the koan solving us, healing us in some way, like that dog at the door, by reminding us of something more expansive already in ourselves. It's not giving us something we don't have but reminding us of something that's already true about us. At the end of a long, hard, discouraging, exhausting day, it reminds us that, yes, that's true, but it's not everything that's true. There is also something larger, more expansive, more spacious, more ancient, more peaceful, more alive.

When we have a difficult encounter with a koan, especially at first meeting, it often turns out that what's tricky in that encounter is actually not what the koan is bringing, but what we ourselves are bringing to the table. We're bringing that day residue, we're bringing whatever is on our minds, whatever's weighing heavily on us, and that's the source of the difficulty in our relationship with the koan.

We've talked about how, in the Mahayana tradition, there are different kinds of dreams that happen at different parts of the night, and the dreams that happen early in the night are thought of as dreams of karmic residue. They're the dreams that are created out of the stuff of our lives and the things we're thinking or worrying about, or the things making us happy. Those are the dreams we explore trying to discover meaning for ourselves and our lives. But in a sense it's the same kind of karmic residue we bring to our dreams that we can also bring to the koan, and which can also make things tricky on first meeting. If we can accept that and go ahead with the blind date anyway, then to have revealed what is hidden and not yet known to us can be a wonderful thing, if we let it. It allows us to understand that the resolution of the koan already existed inside of us, and we were just waiting to find that out.

I think that's why there's no recipe for awakening, and why the koans have no game plan or bullet points to offer us on what we ought to do, because it's not as though we're adding something, like an ingredient : if you just do this ... if you just add that ... if you just add this opinion or think this way or do this practice then you'll wake up. For the koans, awakening is a revelation of something that's already true, and so it's much more the work of identifying and transforming any obscurations, anything that gets in the way between us and awakening. It's more of a clearing-away process than an 'adding something' process. Each of us is going to have a unique process of clearing away that we have to do. Each of us has our unique and particular thicket of brambles that we carry around with us that gets in the way between us and the world, and each of us will have to find our own way to transform those brambles into a garden.

Sometimes people can feel—in the sense of koans being a public document—that public can mean something not personal, and even foreign. A lot of times people bounce off of what they perceive as the foreignness of the koans. They come from a different time and place. They deal with different imagery and ideas and metaphors than we do. They deal with a different kind of life, mostly a monastic life as opposed to the mostly lay lives that we live. They don't address things that are important to us, like jobs, family life, and love. There is the whole question of the very small representation of women's lives in the koans, as well. All of those things are true, and

that's one of the reasons that the tradition is now evolving in response — so that we can have a dialogue with the koans about more of our lives, about things that matter to us, because there's something tremendously valuable about considering and working with those things from a koan perspective.

I also want to suggest that there's a value to the strangeness of the koans. We're living in a time now where we can tailor what we take in as information. We can look at particular websites, receive particular newsletters, and pretty much tailor what we're going to hear about life. Obviously, depending on whether you're looking at Rush Limbaugh's website or The Huffington Post, you're going to have a fairly different view of what the world is. The koans don't cotton to any of that. They're not interested in any of that. They really are strange, and they really do come from a different place, and they're interested in knowing what we do with that very strangeness.

What if it's not just a matter of receiving something and saying, Well, yeah, I always knew the world was like that? What's the difference between that and being surprised, and not knowing, and being knocked a little bit off kilter? How do we respond to the new and the unsuspected about things? The koans can go against the grain in a very useful way, and sometimes, if we're lucky, they can pull the rug right out from under us, and for a moment or two we go into freefall — and that is, from the koans' perspective, a great place to be.

I want to give you another sense of foreignness in the koans. This is a letter from Nakagawa Soen, who was one of our direct ancestors in the koan line in the twentieth century. He is writing to Senzaki Nyogen, a Rinzai teacher, who spent a long time living in Los Angeles. Soen used to go back and forth between Japan and Los Angeles visiting Senzaki, and he wrote this on the Pacific Ocean, on one of those voyages :

I've been studying your dharma talks on *The Gateless Gate* [one of the old Chinese koan collections], one after another. I feel emancipated just seeing the teaching conveyed in Roman letters rather than Japanese ideograms. Zen, which is fundamentally about the emancipation of all beings, is unfortunately sealed in some square box called 'Zen'. In this enclosure the ancient dog in the

koan Zhaozhou's Mu has been suffocating. In English, this dog is so joyfully alive.

So that's another view of foreignness; that's a view of the possibility of difference.

If, however, when you first take up with a koan, you find it's hard to find your place in it—you don't relate anywhere, there's no place that your soul attaches—that experience can lead to liberation. I remember the moment in my own koan study, pretty early on, when there was a koan that I was bouncing off of. Then, just by substituting *she* for *he* I suddenly realized, Duh, this is about me. Then I had a way in. But it didn't stop there, and this is the important move, because it's not just about it being about us, it really isn't. It's so much bigger than that. As soon as we realize that the *he* can be a *she*, we also realize that not only am I that *he*, but also that I am the oak tree in the garden, and the dog in the koan from Zhaozhou, and the donkey, and the well, and the river rushing by. All of these things in the koans—I am all of those things, too. The koans gleefully overturn your sense of self and say, You don't have one, and it's vast.

If we can make light of or accept these kinds of difficulties that are provisional about the koan, that allows us to stare straight in the face of the genuine, great difficulty the koan offers. This was expressed by another twentieth-century koan teacher, Shinichi Hisamatsu. He said, "Nothing will do. What will you do? This is the fundamental koan, the koan that is the common denominator of the thousands of koans." Nothing will do. What will you do? This is the real difficulty that the koan offers, which becomes apparent when we've owned the karmic residue that we've been bringing to the koans, and we've put down our preferences. How do we respond to a koan, or to any situation we find ourselves in, without resorting to our usual reactions and strategies, our usual habits of the heart-mind? Just to have the practice, over and over again, of discovering how we respond without all of that : Nothing I know will do. Now what? Once we answer that question, over and over and over again, we realize that that's plenty of difficulty. We don't need to add anything else, but it's a difficulty that is the gate to richness and play and openness in our lives.

If we find ourselves stuck or frustrated or angry with a koan, if you think about it, that's rarely going to be about the koan itself. What it's going to be about is the

failure of exactly those habitual strategies for dealing with it. I'm frustrated, I'm angry, I'm stuck, I don't get it because nothing about what I ordinarily do, nothing about what I already know, is working, makes a difference, enables me to get into the heart of this koan. It probably won't surprise you to hear that from the perspective of the koans that's a great thing! To recognize that none of the usual strategies are going to work means that you put down all of the tools that are so profoundly *not* suited to this task, and often not suited to any of the other tasks you're undertaking, and you try something else.

The Chinese called this 'exhausting'. This is where you've exhausted all of your ideas about what to do. When we say 'exhausting' this way, we mean something like I've exhausted all my options, and there's a sense of hopelessness that there's nothing else to do, and it's time to walk away from it. But in the Chinese, the word that is translated as 'to exhaust' also means 'to complete', and that's important, because in the Chinese there's a sense of, 'Please, by all means, exhaust everything you think you know about how to deal with this koan. Complete that process. Go all the way through.' That's a good thing, and once you've completed that process, once you have exhausted everything you know about the koans, then stand in that place. Stand in that place where all of that has been completed, and there's nothing but you on the bare ground. Then, from the Chinese perspective, the question becomes, 'What is possible there? What becomes possible when everything else has been exhausted?' Their sense of it is not, 'I've exhausted all my options and there's nothing else I can do,' but, 'Fortunately I don't have to do that anymore. And now what?' Always, *and now what?* What can happen now? Koans are a way of moving from open field to another open field, always asking, what's possible here?

I'll close with an eighteenth-century koan teacher named Hakuin, who said, "Zen is the unfinished koan." When Hakuin talked about Zen, what he meant was life. He's saying life is the unfinished koan. We look back to D.T. Suzuki's Zen document that each of us brings along to this world at our birth and tries to decipher before we pass away; that is the unfinished koan. That is the way we move from question to question to question, throughout our lives, and how we keep clearing the ground, so

we can land in a more open place, to ask a new question, and follow it to the next new ground.

This way of thinking about life as a series of questionings, of wonderings, life as an engagement, was expressed by Stephen Batchelor, a contemporary Buddhist philosopher, who said, “*What is it* [which is the basic koan inquiry] simply expresses reality more adequately than such terms as impermanence, emptiness, buddha nature, and so on. To the extent that we can express it in words, the mystery of life is best expressed as a question.” So if that feels somehow right, if it feels like something true — that the mystery of life is much better expressed as a question like “What is it?” than given a fancy term like dharmakaya or buddha nature or emptiness — then the koans explicitly offer a method, a way, an art, to accompany us in life as we ask question after question after question, because that brings us closest to the way things actually are. We have an experience of the nature of reality as this endlessly unfolding question, and the koans as a way of keeping company with that.

Those are some of my recent thoughts about koans, and I welcome any comments or suggestions you might have.

Q1 : One of my habitual thoughts has been to feel inadequateness with a koan. It’s really interesting to look at it differently than that, that I’m not inadequate, that I don’t have to bring something from myself to that koan. I don’t have to add intelligence, wit, or anything special to it. I just have to be more receptive and step back, and not feel that inadequacy. Let that inadequacy just be.

JS : Good. That’s great. It’s just karmic residue and, yes, how nice to be able to feel that sense of receptivity instead.

Q2 : The aspect of exhaustion really speaks to me, because exhaustion has been in my life a lot. I’ve definitely labeled it as bad. So, to look at it as completion is fascinating for me and very inspiring, and I’m looking forward to experimenting with that, feeling what that could mean.

JS : When things are exhausted, when they're emptied out, when they're completed, what's that next space like? What's that next bare ground like? If we think of exhaustion as just depletion or a failure in some way, then there's a sense of what's missing, what's lacking, what's been lost. But if we think of it as the completion of something and the clearing out of something, then the question becomes, what's there? What's been gained? What's possible now, in this different state, rather than what's been lost?

Q2 : The old sense of exhaustion has the sense of emptiness as a shocking reality, or a frightening reality. I would have never thought, 'What's next?' Because the exhaustion is a frightening ghost and I stop and tremble, and try to punch it, or whatever. But the idea that there could be something after that is totally exciting. It's like a fairy tale. It evokes a whole different feeling.

JS : Maybe the most famous first koan that people get is Zhaozhou's *No* : A pilgrim of the Way asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?" Zhaozhou replied, "No." All of what we're talking about is encapsulated in that koan, because often people will go through a process of trying to figure out how they feel about dogs and buddha nature and sentient beings, and what buddha nature is. Do dogs have it? And how could you even ask that question, of course they do, etc., etc. There's a whole process that gets gone through that's exhausting the conceptual relationship to the koan part.

At a certain point, you hit a dead end with it. That's it. I've got nothing else! Then, what becomes possible is to hear that *No!* that Zhaozhou yells, as the sound of the open place on the other side of the exhaustion of conceptual thought. In the process of working with the koan, you move from that very necessary, good process of figuring out what you think about dogs and buddha nature, and at a certain point you realize, Oh, I've just refined an opinion! As dearly held as this opinion might be for me, that's really all I've done, I've refined my understanding of my own opinion on this question. That feels as though it reaches a dead end, a completion. There's not much more to do with that. Then Zhaozhou's *No!* comes roaring in like the sound the

universe makes once cognition, once intellection, is exhausted. And we're standing on that open, exhausted space that's been cleared by that.

Q3 : So then, in that situation, the dog and buddha nature drop away? And it was only a tool?

JS : It was only a tool to wear your intellect out.

Q4 : So the *No* does not address that apparent question.

JS : Not at all. It addresses it in the deepest way. It doesn't address it in a cognitive way. It drops the question down into another level altogether.

Q5 : It's almost as if the *No* is the relaxation where it can actually come in. But the effort part is essential for us humans to get there.

JS : Yes. We do have to do the exhausting. We really do. It's almost as if we won't believe it if we haven't gone all the way through the intellectual process. Then we can surrender to the possibility of something beyond what we can already think of. That's what we're talking about. We're talking about receiving something that's beyond what we can already think of, but that doesn't mean that it comes from the clear blue sky. It means it comes from someplace deep inside ourselves, and we become aware of it.

Q6 : How would the koans respond to the question of love? Would the koans concur that one goes to the same place one would go simply by love?

JS : If you're talking about something like *bhakti* I would say it's not necessarily the same place. But what does happen is that you don't have to go through that exhausting process of exhaustion every time. At a certain point you develop the ability to jump-shift from here to there. You can do that immediately, but the quality of that is very much love and devotion. If you meet the koan with love and devotion, if you meet the

whole way itself, if you meet the way you're living and the way you're doing all of this with that kind of love and devotion, that's a tremendous fuel for the jump-shift to the open ground. One of the things I hope happens naturally over time is that you do develop a tremendous sense of love and affection, and appreciation and respect and curiosity and interest in the koans, and that's an engine for getting us across faster.

Q8 : If I'm leading a life of exhaustion, then going through that process doesn't seem like a virtue; it seems like the opposite, that the process is like clouds of obfuscation. I want to be free of that, and just face the *No*.

JS : But the obscurations are there. It's not as though you're inventing them or creating them in order to do battle with them. They're there, and they're in the way. The idea is exactly to transform them into something else so they're no longer in the way. But you have to do that work, because there is a veil between us and that reality that *No* represents, and it is our human task to transform it, not to ignore it or suppress it, because that doesn't work.

Q9 : I'm thinking about repeating the same action or thought as being different than trying this or trying this or trying this—all the things I can think of, moving through them until I get to that place where there's nothing left, versus doing the same thing over and over and over again, even though it doesn't work or isn't the answer. It seems to me that that's a big problem.

JS : Yes! Those are habits of the heart-mind, and they can be challenges. Most people will describe that as a constricted place, when things close down. The koans will also give you moments of unconstriction, moments when you're not closed down in that little habit room with the same old damn wallpaper. They'll show you what it's like outside the room, in the open field. And then they'll say, Okay, choose. Pick. Which do you want? It becomes the process of being able to face the existential question: now that I've had this experience of what it's like without the habit, do I really want to give up the habit? That whole process needs to go on, but then it will give you a way,

because it's not just a matter of saying, Bad habit, go away, stop. It's a matter of a shift in allegiance. Our allegiance naturally shifts from the constricted room to the open field, and it becomes much easier to make that change in ourselves, because our heart is moved in this other direction.

Q10 : I feel similarly—that I've been frightened of exhaustion. I'll do a lot to avoid that. I can tell you all the things I think might happen : I won't get going again, or I won't be able to respond when I'm needed or I won't be able to respond in a way that I'm loved, etc. What came to me was your opening picture of the koan looking at us in that space on the other side and how different that would be—that would be very exciting. The thought of it looking at me, like the donkey and the well, is wonderful.

JS : Thank you, you just helped me make the connection that, if it's looking at us, maybe it's looking at us like the dog with the amnesty in its mouth. So we have to exhaust all of our ideas about *dog* and *buddha nature* to even see it, to have the experience of the actual dog with the actual amnesty.

Q11 : Is the dog a symbol?

JS : There are no symbols in the koans. It's a dog. There is a necessity of coming into a relationship with the actual dog, not the conceptual dog. In our koan line it was spoken of as the 'true fact' of the koan. What is the true fact of the koan? In Zhaozhou's *No*, the true fact of that koan is the dog. But that's very different from an idea about dogs and buddha nature. A dog as a true fact is a different thing.