

Relaxing into Retreat : Innocence, Silence & Santoka's Haiku
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Good evening, bodhisattvas! It's a pleasure to be here. It's great to have people from most of our communities here, the gathering of the tribes from all over, because this retreat culminates in a most auspicious and calamitous event, which is Tenney Nathanson's becoming a teacher. I'm particularly happy to have Andrew Palmer here tonight, who had this auspicious and calamitous event fall on his head almost exactly a year ago. Great to have you as an example of someone who's still standing a year later!

I want to sprinkle my talk tonight with some words of the poet Santoka, a late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japanese itinerant monk and haiku poet, who's the perfect patron saint for this particular retreat. He walked all the time. He was like Basho in that he walked and walked and made his money by begging every day, usually getting just enough food and money to last him for the day. It was a life lived very close to the bone and involved a lot of saké, which made it more difficult and more tumultuous for him. He has a lot of stories about not having enough money for an inn that night, or having to sell his flea-bitten little cotton blankets for food. So he's a good patron saint of interesting events and unexpected cold weather, such as we've been experiencing at this retreat.

When we showed up at the airport in Albuquerque this morning, the ticket agent said something that I'm sure you have all heard, 'Oh, you're going to a retreat! Have fun!' Or, 'How relaxing!' We chuckled to ourselves and said, 'Thank you very much.' That is the view, and what I want to suggest is that, yes, there is a kind of relaxation that happens in this retreat. But it's not like a spa. We're not going to go home with pedicures and looser lower back muscles.

There's a different kind of relaxation, a relaxation of the habits of the heart-mind, or of the habitual body, our habitual ways of doing things. This was described thirteen hundred years ago by one of the originators of the kind of Chan and Zen that we still practice all these years later, Shitou Xiqian. He wrote *Taking Part In The Gathering*, which is part of our liturgy; he described this relaxation in a poem called *Song of the Grass Hut* :

Let go of hundreds of years and relax completely.

Open your hands and walk, innocent.

That's my suggestion for this retreat : to let things go, to relax, to open your hands and discover what it means to walk innocent. This kind of relaxation isn't indulgence or indolence or anything similar; I want to suggest some of the things it might be. The kind of relaxation that Shitou wrote about is really a way of sinking in so that we can feel the way the whole world, the whole earth, everything in the great field in which we live, supports us. As we sink into our cushion or walk this beautiful land, this Sonoran Desert, or when we lie down to sleep—whatever we're doing, the whole earth supports us, the whole earth holds us up. We relax into the feeling of that, the felt sense that we are indeed supported and held.

Santoka, our patron saint, quoted Fayán in his journal. Fayán is the Chinese teacher who expressed the koan about the fresh breeze that rises up when the great burden is laid down. In another place he talked about each step as an arrival. That's the sense of relaxing into feeling supported every time we step, every time we breathe, every time we turn over in our sleep. Everything we do is an arrival, over and over again, at that deep home that is at the bottom of relaxation.

Another thing that this relaxation is—and this may be one of the most strenuous aspects of relaxation—is that for a while we agree to not be riled by what usually riles us. That's hard work, but it's good work. We relax underneath all of the things that usually push our buttons or get us going, or bother us, tweak us—however we think about it. We decide we will not be riled by those things that usually do rile us.

Santoka wrote :

The mountain becomes dark

I listen to its voice

Whatever happens, even when things darken, when things sometimes become difficult or cold, we just listen to the voice and see what happens when we do. That listening enables us to hear all the small voices in the world around us and inside ourselves that sometimes we're too gabby and yakky to pay attention to. When we listen in that way, one of the things we can hear is the way that everything is resting around us. In doing that, we meet everything else inside that relaxation. The kind of conversation that happens there is different from the

conversation that happens when things are very bumpy and skittery and on the surface of things.

Santoka wrote a haiku :

After all
It's sad to be alone
The withered grasses

That's one kind of meeting, in a relaxation that has the quality of sadness. Then the very next haiku he wrote is :

After all
It's good to be alone
The wild grasses

All of it true, one moment to the next, one day to the next, one lifetime to the next. This kind of relaxation and innocence that we're talking about is a profound state. It's not something naive or simple, although it is those things, but it's not *only* those things. When we are innocent in this way, we allow everything to be blameless. Sengcan, another of the great Chinese teachers, said an incredible thing : "When my mind doesn't arise, all things are blameless." He was talking about how when the habitual turns of the heart-mind, the habitual ways of reacting, don't arise, all things are blameless. When we can bring this kind of innocence to our meeting with the things of the world and the events of the day, we allow them to be the blameless that they are, and we meet them innocent, blameless ourselves; and they meet us innocent, blameless. It's important to remember that we also allow *ourselves* to be blameless in that kind of meeting.

When we do lay down the great burden and we're paying attention with an open heart-mind, something unafraid, nonjudgmental, and warmly curious about the world happens. That's this innocence : unafraid, nonjudgmental, and warmly curious about things.

Santoka said at another point, "I walk in the wind's brightness and darkness." Whatever the wind does, be it bright or dark, I walk there. Often, when we come to a retreat, we come with a question that we think we'd like to work on, a sense that we'll have a lot of time and space to attend to something. We'll have the opportunity in our meditation to see things in a different way, to consider them in a different way. The idea is that when we bring them into our meditation, that's different from thinking about them as we're driving in the car

in the morning on the way to work. I think that's a fine and a natural thing. We want to bring all of us into the retreat, not leave anything out, including whatever our questions are. I want to make some suggestions about how we can work with a question on the retreat, which might be a bit different from what we imagined.

How do we take up questions in a way that goes with how a retreat is, rather than allowing a question to withdraw us from the retreat? You know that feeling when you sit with a question a lot, and you're not really here? You're with the question somewhere else, and you're going around and around over it. My suggestion is that you don't have to give up the question, but maybe there's a different kind of relationship to have that you can *only* have in retreat. So how can you ride the particular circumstances that happen during a retreat that are quite rare, and how can you hold that question as you ride it? How do we fully make use of these special circumstances?

First of all, there's an opportunity for us to not do the things we usually do. We're going to get fed and have a place to sleep and something to do all day, and we don't have to make any decisions about that. All those decisions have already been made; all we have to do is show up. We have an extraordinary container or field. The bells will tell you what time it is, so you don't have to worry about that. You can imagine time in a completely different way, since the bells will get you here and get you gone when you need to be. That means time can become something different, and the answer to the question, *What time is it?* is no longer 7:50. It's something else entirely. One of the things we can do in a retreat is explore, over and over again, *What time is it now? What time is it now?* ... in that deeper, longer-arc, walking-on-the-earth kind of way.

All of the small questions are answered by the form. Just do the form; it doesn't have to be a big deal. You can allow every small question about *What do I do now and how do I do it?* to be answered by these ancient forms we step into. How wonderful that the constant decisions we have to make all the time, which become a habit of self-creation, are not necessary. Coffee or tea? Nap or run? Sleep now or sleep later? This movie or that movie? Chocolate or vanilla? The endless decisions we make are quite wonderful and are also endlessly self-creating. They're reinforcing the idea that there's someone who's choosing. So one of the beauties of the fasting that we do in a retreat that Tenney talked about is that we're not in this mode of self-creating decisions all the time. We do whatever the next thing is and allow the

self to get relaxed as well. We allow the self to feel the true contours of its relationship with the world instead of the endless thoughts and decisions and judgments that keep us separated from the rest of the world.

We have the opportunity of silence. It's not just that we're not distracting ourselves or other people, but when we are silent, we can hear the silence of the world and we can experience that way in which the silence we are keeping inside ourselves is continuous with the silence of the world. And we relax into that. Silence meets silence. Silence becomes one continuous thing. We relax into that silence, and that, in the kinds of lives that most of us lead, is a rare and precious opportunity. There's something about connecting with that silence, becoming one with that silence, and falling through it all the way to the bottom of things and then through the bottom of the bottom, and keeping going ... The silence is the royal road to that freefall into the place where the silence roars.

When we're silent, when we have that meeting with the silence of the world, another thing we're withdrawing from is the sense of a self asserting itself in the landscape, in the environment. We aren't the self asserting *I want this and I want that ... Let's talk about this ... I'm thinking about that*. All of that assertion can fall away. What's left when we're not constantly asserting ourselves as against the landscape? That seems like a rich exploration.

As we know, when we sit we're sitting in a long tradition, and we're sitting with everyone else who's ever sat, every time we take these postures. The reason we sit a certain way, the altar is a certain way, we use incense and chants, etc., is because it's a way of connecting us with that ancestral stream. It's a way of our doing what people have been doing for a very long time, and relaxing into that and allowing that to hold us up in the same way we allow the world to hold us up. To use the language of a koan we've been looking at lately, it's as though we're slipping into an ancient groove. All you have to do is find the groove. Remember that from your youth? Just find the groove! Slip into that ancient groove and let it carry you.

Another way to think about it is that there is a long pilgrimage that we are taking our place in, but it's a pilgrimage already in progress. We don't have to make it up. We don't have to start from scratch. It's going right by and all we have to do is step into it and take our place inside it. In the same way that the ancestors accompany us, we accompany each other, those of us on this retreat, and we help make the path in our walking on that pilgrimage together. One

of the things I find most extraordinary about a retreat is how we all agree to support and sustain each other's practice with no sense of transaction. We don't do this *because*. We just do this. And here we are offering the deepest kind of support for the deepest kind of work, without any sense that there is a transaction or *quid pro quo*. We do it because we do it, and we know that everybody else will be doing it on our behalf as well. What a great thing that is to experience for five days in a row. Of course there are all the other companions of this landscape : this incredible sky tonight, the goat outside. Santoka said :

All together we pick the persimmons

We eat the persimmons

Because we deliberately limit the field, the input, sensory perception, distraction—we don't listen to the podcast or turn on the radio or check our email—one of the results is that small difficulties can loom large, just because there's so much that's fallen away that can take a lot of space in the field. Sometimes in a retreat we can obsess on small slights, frustrations, aversions, or a sense of our failure at one thing or another. The trick is to include all of that—not to turn it away, but also not to let it constrict our experience here. How can they be part of what's happening but not entirely what's happening, so that they don't pull us out of the experience of being here?

Sitting is one of the most intimate relationships you can have with yourself. And no one is looking. So one of the things you might ask if you notice yourself getting caught in a sense of aversion or failure or frustration or dissatisfaction is : What are you doing there? Are you fighting? Are you fleeing? Are you in some way dissatisfied with what's going on? Or are you taking the opportunity to find that tree older than the forest it stands in, and lean against that? Are you taking the opportunity to walk on the empty sky? If you find yourself in a kind of conflicted place in your own meditation, explore this question. Here, where no one is looking, this is what I'm choosing to do. What's up with that? What are the other possibilities that I could be doing here in this place? Santoka said, "My begging bowl accepts the falling leaves."

I want to invite everybody here this week to let go of hundreds of years and relax completely, to open our hands and to walk innocent, together. Begin doing that right here right now, tonight, and continue doing it all through the week. If you find yourself in

difficulty, ask yourself, What would it be like right now if I open my hands? What would it be like right now if I were innocent in this situation? What would it be like if I allowed things to be blameless?

Have a wonderful week.