

Teachers, Lineage, and Tradition  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas. Tomorrow we have a ceremony for making a new teacher. Tenney, our traditional formulation for such an event is *Congratulations and condolences!*

Tonight I'll speak about teachers, tradition, and lineage. For a lot of people this will be a new subject, or at least new as far as our school is concerned. I'll throw down a few facts and then open it up, first for Andrew [Palmer] if there's anything as a teacher that he wants to say, and anything Tenney [Nathanson], on his last night of freedom, wants to say. Then we'll open it up to the group for conversation and questions.

I want to begin with why we have teachers, at least in our school. I'm only going to be speaking from that perspective, as Buddhism and even Zen are big tents with a lot of different ways of doing things and different attitudes that would take a lot of time to do justice to. I'm going to focus on meanings and intentions within our own koan school, which began in China about 1,300 years ago, flourished there, moved to Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and then eventually to the West—to Australia, Hawaii, North and South America, and Europe.

Teachers are particularly important in a koan school because there's so much of koan practice that happens in the relationship of Work in the Room. Many people have remarked on the difference in coming to a koan school from elsewhere : the relationship between teachers and students is very intimate—'students' meaning koan students perhaps more than students of a particular teacher.

There's a great deal of our tradition that is passed on orally. You can't do koan study from a book by yourself. It would be so wonderful if you could, because it would make this way accessible to so many more people. I'm for it in concept, but it really doesn't work. The reason is that the koan is not just those printed words on a page that you can read and understand; the koan is the experience of living with a koan, everything that happens with that ... not only your experience, but also the experience of everyone who has ever lived with that koan, who has kept company with it. The field of each koan keeps growing and growing as more and more people take it up.

Some of those other experiences we know explicitly, which is why we have things like koan salons where we get together and speak about koans and can hear other people's responses. There's much more that a koan can reveal than any individual heart-mind can imagine. That's why it's important to have the relationships with our fellow pilgrims on the way, so we can hear their experiences and be enriched by them, and why we have relationships with teachers, who have absorbed and are transmitting the cumulative wisdom of a tradition 1,300 years old. A lot of that wisdom gets passed down orally, and you couldn't find it in books if you wanted to, because it's mouth to ear all the way down.

All of that is grounded in one of the deepest and most meaningful understandings of the tradition, which is that awakening happens in relationship. Awakening is not an event that belongs to you, to an individual heart-mind; awakening is an event that belongs to the world. Each of us is part of the world's awakening, from the moment we're born to the moment we die, and probably after that. Without relationship there is no true awakening. There might be insight, there might be understanding, but not awakening. We need each other—and not only each other in terms of the sangha or teachers.

I'll talk in a minute about all the kinds of relationships we now recognize as being part of our sense of lineage, which is no longer a narrow line through history, but a broad field, including many other people and many nonhumans as well.

But the thing that is valuable about our sangha and student-teacher relationships is that they are particularly focused on and organized around that awakening. That's a precious thing in life. Awakening can happen anywhere, and does. Moments of awakening—openings—can happen anywhere in any kind of relationship, but here we have relationships whose *purpose* is awakening, whose focus is opening, and that's not to be minimized.

I also recognize that some of that goes directly against the strong streak of anti-authoritarianism in American culture. The positive side of that anti-authoritarianism is that we don't give ourselves away so easily; we give our faith in something with care and after thought and investigation. Also, we strongly recognize the ways in which we're all teaching each other, all the time. The not-so-good side of the anti-authoritarianism is that we can deny the wisdom and the skills of people who actually have wisdom and skills, based on stances we take or principles we maintain, thereby missing the living truth of the wisdom and skills that could otherwise be available. That kind of anti-authoritarianism-on-principle is a stance. It's an

opinion. It's the opposite of Linji's true persons of no rank. I would say in response to the idealistic anti-authoritarianism-as-principle, If someone knows more about something I care deeply about, why would I not want to learn from them? I say this from my experience as a student, not a teacher. If my allegiance is to that thing I care about above any stances or opinions or viewpoints I might have, why on earth wouldn't I want to learn from someone who knows about something that really matters to me?

We don't have to abandon either the good aspects or the less good aspects of anti-authoritarianism. We can bring them together into a third thing, which is the kind of koan move. You've got *A* and *B*. Start looking for *C* because the koans will never ask you to choose between *A* and *B*. They will invite you to look for the *C* that includes both *A* and *B*. If we take up this question from that perspective, *C* may be not taking a stance, not having a predetermined viewpoint on this, but inquiring deeply. That's how anti-authoritarianism can serve us, to the extent that it fuels an inquiry.

Let me give an example that's been important to me : Any fair-minded person looking at the arc of this tradition would say that for the overwhelming majority of the time there's been a fairly significant gender imbalance in the tradition. What do you do with that? You can repudiate the tradition, you can say, *This is fundamentally corrupt and I want nothing to do with it* and walk away, and a lot of people do that. Or you can use that inquiry to become more intimate with the tradition, to ask the question, *Is this gender imbalance inherent to the tradition, or is it a result of causes and conditions, of circumstance?* Could we say that it's the result of an imperfect understanding of the tradition—which then immediately invites us to help complete an incomplete tradition?

So we've moved from a knee-jerk repudiation of something because it's incomplete to viewing that incompleteness as an invitation to help complete. One of the things we've talked about is *dukkha*. In the First Noble Truth of Buddhism, life is *dukkha*, which might be translated as incompleteness rather than as suffering; that, in some ways, is a more accurate translation. If we think of life as incompleteness, then we are offered the invitation to, first of all, not repudiate anything for being incomplete—because after all that is the nature of life in this world. We'd have to repudiate *everything* if we're starting to repudiate incompletenesses. And then, second, to view it as an invitation to participate, to put our hands in, to help move it

toward completion. We're never going to get there, since the nature of life is incompleteness, but we can take part in the creative process of dreaming something on.

This has been a guiding principle for me as a teacher. When I contemplate a change, I'm never looking to make a change to make the tradition more relevant to the present time. Do you remember when that was the big deal? *It's not relevant.* Always, always, always, the importance is to become more intimate with the true ancient spirit of the tradition as best I can understand it, and then discover what its present expression is. How do we express in these lives—with these hands, these words, the languages we speak, the cultures we share—how do we express the spirit of this ancient thing, much older than Buddhism? Much older than humans, probably.

When I think about the incompleteness of things, including the incompleteness of the tradition, and how wrong we get it—we sure have a lot of examples of how wrong we've gotten it—I remember two things. The first is from my dear friend Stephen Karcher, who is a genius with the *Yijing*, the Chinese *Book of Change*. We were talking about how traditions move and have their own fate, even engineer their own fate. I said I thought the koans did that. He said he thought the *Yijing* did, too, and that it hitched a ride on Richard Wilhelm into the West, where the tradition exploded and took on a whole new life, in the form of his translation of the *Book of Changes*. I find it salutary to remember that I'm really no more than a handy beast of burden for something much larger than I am.

The second thing I remember when sometimes feeling snarky about my ancestors is that I will try to treat them with the same generosity with which I hope my descendants treat me, because heaven knows I'm going to need it.

I want to speak a bit technically about teachers and our school, because there are some things that may not be apparent or known to you. Tenney is becoming a sensei. Andrew became a sensei last year. Sarah Bender is also a sensei in our school—she's in Colorado Springs with Andrew. *Sensei* is a Japanese word meaning firstborn. In a Confucian culture where birth order is important, to call someone firstborn is like calling them Elder Brother or Elder Sister. That beautifully expresses the old Buddhist idea of the *kalyanamitra*, the spiritual friend, the person who is perhaps a little bit further along the path but walking with you, and helping you from that position.

A sensei has received authorization to teach from a roshi. Senseis and roshis are the two kinds of teachers. The word *roshi* means old teacher, which I love, because I feel like a really old teacher. While a sensei has received authorization to teach from a roshi, a roshi has received transmission from another roshi. In the old days, we used to think of transmission as being the passing on of what we call the mind seal of the Buddha from generation to generation, in an unbroken line. I would say today we—those of us who are not as keen on mythologizing—think of transmission as a recognition of a depth of understanding from one teacher to another, and a way of saying, “I entrust the tradition to you.”

It might surprise those of you who don’t know it, that my only responsibility as a roshi, the only thing I absolutely have to do, is pass the tradition on to another generation. Everything else—every act of teaching, all this talking tonight and every other night, all of that Work in the Room—is extra from the position of the tradition.

That brings us to the question of lineage. The mythology of Zen is that there is an unbroken lineage that begins at Shakyamuni and comes down through all the generations for 2,500 years into this room in this form, at this moment. When you receive transmission and become a roshi, you make what’s called a *kechimiyaku*, a bloodline, which is a chart that begins with a circle representing the vastness, emptiness, at the top. The first name on the chart is Shakyamuni Buddha. Then you have the names of all the teachers in a snake pattern down the chart, all the way to your teacher’s name. Then your teacher adds your name at the bottom of it. Once you’ve written everybody’s name out, which is in and of itself a wonderful exercise, you use red (in my case a brush full of red ink) and make a line through all the names. That’s the bloodline that’s continuous, from the vastness through Shakyamuni through the teachers of India, the teachers of China, the teachers of Japan, and now the teachers of the West.

There’s something very beautiful and pure about that, and it’s also completely a fiction. That’s important, too. It’s a beautiful myth, it’s an inspiring myth, and it ain’t true. I stopped feeling quite as warmly toward lineage when I learned that the Chan masters of the Song Dynasty deliberately wrote out all of the women teachers of the Tang Dynasty from the lineage. They went through and erased all the women’s names. At that point I thought, this is *something*, but it’s not history, and I’m not even sure it’s my lineage anymore.

So the question becomes, if it’s not a true historical record, does it matter? I would still answer that yes, it matters, tremendously. One of the ways it matters is that, on knowing that

someone is part of a lineage, I know they didn't just make it up last week. That may or may not be important to you, but it's important to me. I like the sense that there is something that has been not only transmitted through generations, but digested through generations, that has worked in generations, that has been refined and understood more deeply through the generations.

What is that something? If it's not the mind seal of the Buddha that's transmitted, and it's not this perfect, unbroken lineage that's transmitted, what is it that gets transmitted? Writer and critic Leon Wieseltier said my favorite thing on this question: "Tradition is not reproduced. It is thrown and it is caught. It lives a long time in the air." Each of those pieces is so important. Tradition can't be reproduced, because this moment is not that moment—as simple as that. If what we're talking about is a sense of living a life vivid in each moment as it arises, we cannot reproduce tradition. That was *that* time and place, that was *those* circumstances. *This* is something different, and we have to discover what the tradition is here. Fortunately that's easy to do because it is still alive. It's alive right now, in this moment, and what we have to do is discover it.

I was speaking last night about what a koan does. It does not *add* something to you, hand you something, but allows you to discover something already true inside yourself that hasn't yet been visible. It's the same thing with tradition. It is already here. When the light travels across continents and seas and mountain ranges and deserts and lands in a room like this, it lands in a room already full of light. Our task, in this room, is to find, again, the radiant expression in this time and this place of that ancient spirit.

There was a great Japanese teacher, Muso Soseki, in the medieval period, the time when Chan was being transmitted to Japan and becoming Zen. He absolutely forbade his Japanese students to go to China, saying quite simply, "If Zen is not here, it is nowhere. So find it here." I find in myself—although I went to Japan—a great affinity with Muso's take on that.

So then, "It spends a long time in the air". One of my great joys is to feel that I have lived through the time when Chan and Zen were spending a long time in the air, and it looks like I'm going to live long enough to see them land. As a tradition moves through the air, things get added and things fall away.

I want to keep talking a bit about that idea of the *kechimiyaku*, the bloodline that used to be the single, pure line that ran through the ancestors. As that idea falls away, something else takes its place : we begin to see the lineage not as a single line of one ancestor and one descendant and then another descendant, which leaves out so much; we begin to see it as a field, a constantly growing and changing field through time. That means that we can add people to the lineage. We can add Pang Lingzhao, who, when she sees her father trip, throws herself down next to him and says, “I saw you fall, so I’m helping.” If the lineage is a *field*, she’s part of our field for sure. Tenney gets to add his poet ancestors, who he’s going to give us a beautiful taste of tomorrow night. We get to include Keats and Stevens and Dickinson and Whitman as part of our lineage field, and that’s a beautiful thing.

We get to remember that in the very origin story of our tradition, the story of Shakyamuni under that tree 2,500 years ago, he is not the Grand Central Bodhisattva, where everything started. Do you remember what happened? The morning star arose, and when it shone into his eye, the star in *his* eye woke up. From the very origin story of our tradition, we are also including in our lineage the non-human, those things like that morning star that are constantly waking us up.

We have the story about Lingyun, who was wandering through the mountains, probably on the way toward being open, because he’s kind of gormless and kind of wandery, and not really paying too much attention. He comes around a bend in the road, looks across the valley, and sees a peach tree in full blossom. BOOM! That’s tathagata, right? The story says that the peach tree was completely unaware of its color, but it freed Lingyun from all his doubts. A later Japanese teacher (Lingyun was Chinese) asked a great question, “If Lingyun was awakened by peach blossoms, why is he not a successor to peach blossoms?” We would say that indeed he is. And if we have this sense of the lineage as a field, we include the peach blossoms as well as the morning star, as well as Pang Lingzhao, as well as Dickinson.

The last thing I want to touch on is that part of the quote that says, “It is thrown and it is caught.” As a teacher, when I read that I had a sense of playing deep center field. There’s a crack off the bat, the second baseman turns around and says, “Yours!” *Me?* And I put my mitt up and whomp!, the ball is in the mitt. It’s mine, and now I have to figure out what to do about it. It has the quality of *Really? Me? Mine? And now what? And now what? And now what?* That is the endless question.

That's true not only of teachers. In some ways each of us is thrown our practice, and each of us decides whether to catch it or not. We talked last night about D.T. Suzuki saying that Zen is a document we receive at birth and spend our lifetimes trying to understand. In the same way, our practice is something that is tossed to us, but in a million different ways : by teachers, by our sangha members, by peach blossoms and morning stars. It is our choice whether to catch it or not. We make that choice over and over again. Sometimes, even having caught it, we let it fall for a while; we drop it.

How is it that we catch it? How is it that we drop it sometimes? What does it mean to pick it up again? We have been tossed this remarkable gift by very generous ancestors. I hope that each of us feels a living relationship with that, and a desire to keep catching, over and over again, what is tossed to us. And to keep discovering not only what it means to hold it, but also what it means to throw it on ourselves, because we all do that. We all catch ... and we all throw.

Maybe teachers are just people who stand in the field along with everyone else but have agreed to make sure that the ball gets tossed, and the ball gets caught, and the ball gets thrown on. If we can look kindly on that role and that decision, I think that's a good thing for all of us.

Andrew, do you have anything you want to add to that?

Andrew Palmer : The first month after my ceremony last year I spoke at a Unitarian Church, and there were people there who weren't practicing Zen but were studying a variety of religions. I explained the kinds of things we do, and what our practice is. A young woman said, "So you're a teacher." I said yes. "So, what do you teach?" After everything I'd said I didn't get the disconnect. I explained again : we sit down, we look at these things together— this and that ...And she said, "Okay, but, *what do you teach?*" It wasn't until afterwards that I realized what she was asking.

I don't know what I teach. I don't teach anything. I am curious about something, and I look into it and discover some stuff and then I share it with others, and invite them to be curious along with me. *What do you think about this?* I think that's all I'm ever doing, sharing my curiosity and inviting, encouraging your own curiosity in it.



Likewise, the great gift of being a teacher I've found is everybody else's curiosity. They come to me with a question thinking I can answer it! But I can't. All I can do is join them in their curiosity. I get to learn more because of that. I think that's the great thing, that's the relationship aspect. We don't do this alone. It's not something that someone has and gives to another. It's, *How can we all have those eyes?* Can we share those eyes to look, those heart-minds that are curious and inquisitive, and walk together, forward? That's really been a treasure of this teaching.

The last thing I'd say about ancestors and lineage is that it's always been a strong calling to me, our ancestors. I think in the beginning, reading those books, it was because they sounded pretty cool, and they had wild things to say that seemed quite mysterious ... but not so mysterious that I was put off. I wanted a taste of it. What I've found, and what I keep finding, the more I take up studying ancestors, looking at their lives, is how much we have in common—how much they are just like me. They were humans just like me, living their life with the same curiosities and struggles. Completely different culture, different time, different particulars, but underneath it there's this bond we share. So it's the same kind of walking forward together that I experience with all of you, people living today, that I experienced with the ancestors in that great field you spoke of. It's not going there to get something; it's *Let's join hands and walk down this path*. I think we have something we can teach them, too. The ancestors learn from us as we carry it forward.

JIS : Have you noticed how they get wiser and wiser the more time we spend with them?  
[Laughs]

AP : Yes! I think that's all I'll say.

JIS : Thank you; that was well-said. Tenney?

Tenney Nathanson : What Andrew said about the ancestors is certainly true. In working with koans there are a lot of moments where you think, that was a really different world, or I don't know that reference or what that image is. If I can compare it to reading twelfth-century scholastic philosophy, there's something so immediate about it. I have a sense that much of it is

contemporary, and you don't have to work your way back through a series of decoder rings; it was really designed to activate the same experience that occurred to the person in that conversation. It happens all the time. I'll learn to do that, but how they did that is quite remarkable.

I can't imagine being in a version of this tradition that wouldn't invite innovation. Whenever I can, if I want to do something weird in Tucson, I try to email Joan and ask, can I really do this? And she always says *Yes*. About a week before the winter retreat in Taos, I wanted to bring in two things from Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird". The first one is :

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

The second one is :

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat in the cedar-limbs.

Usually we have nine or ten people at our sit. I think there were only five of us, and two people got there late so at first we thought there might be only three of us. We brought our cushions in close together. It was really sweet to sit so close together. People had a lot to say about the poem, and it was a beautiful sit. They turned out to be deep koans, for me certainly, and I think also for other people. That's such a joy, to be able to add a little bit or enrich the field a little bit. And also for all the differences that are participating. It's not trying to be relevant, as you were saying. There's something deep in the tradition that speaks to us and is fulfilled in us.

I was talking to Joan a little while after that, and there was thick snow in Taos, and our people got stuck on the road. You [Joan] gave that beautiful talk about the snow and Guanyin's cloak. Within it is the main fact about the koan in our tradition : if you can't figure out what else to do with the koan, just let it be the peach blossoms or just the dog and so on. It's pretty clear those images in the koans have a metaphorical quality. Snow in a silver bowl,

for example. The experience of all of us sitting in the room with Wallace Stevens was so much in the other direction. It was so great to sit with snow for an hour.

You've talked about the storehouse consciousness [*alaya vijnana*] and that thing that is free of story. The way you talk about it, it's almost a sense record. So awakening would be different if we were in a world where there's no snow. Or our souls would be different if we lived in a place where there's no trees. I think, without giving up anything else, we can just sit with the snow. We can just sit with the rocks. We can just sit with the trees. I feel that's a very deep part of the practice.

JIS : Here's another contemporary koan event to add to Tenney's wonderful story : Michael [Wilding] was keeping company with a koan, a quote from Paul Eluard, "There is another world, and it is inside this one." Michael went to Italy for the holidays, and I got a message from him on my iPhone. I turned it on and heard the sound of church bells in Rome on Christmas morning. That was his response to this koan, "There is another world, and it is inside this one." That's a complete koan experience.

Questions, comments, objections?

Q1 : Before I got involved in this practice, I never gave any thought to a long lineage of ancestors. I think there's a great gift in that. One of the things I appreciate is that we get to experience the very things that they did, so many of the things in common with their lives : the trees and the morning star, etc. That's part of the connection, it's the same things—the same rocks, and all of it. It's a neat awareness.

JIS : I'm glad to hear that; thank you. You know, the thing about the ancestors is that sometimes people can feel the weight of them, so they resist the idea of ancestors. But, really, in a tradition like ours, the ancestors only persist in their desire that we wake up. All that's left of them is that warm desire that we wake up, and their offering of help for us to do that. That's a hard gift to refuse.

Q2 : You said at the beginning we could ask *I always wondered* kind of questions. So I've always wondered about the further training that Tenney will go through, and also you. Do you have a teacher?

JIS : Sure, yeah. My teacher, John Tarrant, made me a teacher. We consider ourselves colleagues now. I would say the living teacher for me now is my work with people in koan practice. That's where I'm learning all the time. It's magnificent. I learn from the people I work with. Tenney, do you want to respond to the part about you?

TN : I was thinking about it today. The Linji koans about host and guest seems really important, a place where I am and want and need to be. Those things are always shifting. Sometimes, if I'm doing koan work with you, I'll be the host. The place where that relationship starts is that you're the host and I'm the guest. But that shifts all the time. I'm in the heart of the heart of my zen practice with Joan, so I don't feel I can check that one off!

JIS : And I think from here, the training takes the shape of the koan curriculum. But then there's all this terrifying oral information. I can remember Tenney coming up for a long weekend so we could work on this. I would watch his eyes get bigger and bigger and bigger. There's that oral component about it, as well.

After one becomes a teacher, a new teacher brings the experiences they're having teaching to the old teacher and talks about it. It's on-the-job learning, and it's completely experiential, and it's so alive with what's actually happening. You talk that through until, at a certain point, there doesn't seem to be a need to do that anymore. [To Tenney] Do you think that's fair?

TN : Yes. You think of the mythological version : you're teaching and you know the secret. That has so much *not* to do with it. It is being curious about what presents itself as it comes up, how to learn from that, and feeling one's way into being more skillful with particular circumstances. I'm sure it will always feel like a work in progress.

JIS : If it ever stops being a work in progress, retire immediately! Seriously.

Q3 : This is a question from the student end of things. P. and I were talking the other day about the idea of *shoken*, which we're unfamiliar with but I'm about to do. Can you speak a little bit about that, the path of the student : refuge, *shoken*?

JIS : *Shoken* is the ceremony of formalizing the student-teacher relationship between two people. We being a largely promiscuous tradition let people do *shoken* with more than one teacher if they want to. Someone such as yourself comes to feel that this is the relationship you want to have at the heart of what you're doing, and this is the teacher you want to enter into an agreement with, that you will have a relationship whose sole purpose is your awakening. That's the nature of that relationship, and that's what it is all about : the awakening of the person who asks for *shoken* ... and choosing the person they want to accompany them in that process. It's a deep karmic connection. It's right up there with marriage. It's really strong.

Q 4 : For those of us who were in the first round of Refuge with you, that was so apparent to us, to have just fallen off the cliff with you. That's why I was asking, because there was no separation for me at that point, or I think for most of us who fell off that cliff a couple of years ago.

JIS : So Refuge functioned in that way.

Q 4: How does that fit with that next step? I feel like we've been fortunate enough to have this incredible momentum out of that Refuge.

JS : That's true.

Q 4 : So what is the next step? What's the expression of commitment, the expression of being-with that continues, and how? I don't think Refuge necessarily operates that way for everybody.

JIS : I think you're right, it did for that group. Usually you think of refuge as choosing a path. Saying, *This is my path*. And then *shoken* is saying, *This is my companion on my path*. I think you're right that something happened in that Refuge where people evolved together.

TN : Part of that was that you hadn't done a refuge ceremony in a long time. We were all at the gate together, an incredibly big group. We got to go through together, and it was like a re-creation of sangha because of that, too. We were all in it together, at the same moment. There was a critical mass there.

JIS : Okay, anything that must be said before we close? Thank you all very much.