

Nonduality As Flow
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
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Good evening again, bodhisattvas!

The last time I was here we talked about taking a word like nonduality, which is a philosophical term of art, and seeing if we could reimagine it in more poetic language that brought it in a little bit closer. We talked about nonduality as shimmer and flow. We got through shimmer, and tonight we're going to move on to flow, and then talk about how to bring that into the nitty-gritty events and circumstances in our lives — from philosophy to poetry to nitty-gritty.

A word or two about nonduality as shimmer : the fundamental nature of things is such that, in the words of the *Lankavatara Sutra* (my favorite formulation of this idea), “Things are not as they seem; nor are they otherwise.” Things are not as they seem, nor are they other than what they seem. That's the shimmer, which is between those two things, the unreality of everything and the absolute reality of everything. Nonduality is about seeing both of those simultaneously, as not separate. The world is shimmering all the time between things being as they seem and being not as they seem. That is what is meant when we say that life is a dream. That is the nature of the dream : it is both real and unreal at exactly the same moment and in exactly the same space.

Also in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the natural state of things is a unity between the heart-mind and what we call the world. They're not separate; there is a unity between what is inside of us in our heart-minds and what is theoretically outside of us in the world. This unity is the natural state of things.

I find that beautiful and consoling. If we relax, if we rest into it, that's how things are. There is one whole thing of which we are a part. That natural state of things is the Dao, buddha nature, original nature; it has many names that people have given it over time. Basically it's the way things are when we don't mess with it. But we spend a lot of time messing with it! According to the *Lanka* one of the ways we do that is by projecting things out from our heart-minds into the world and thinking they're real. Instead of resting in the natural

unity of our heart-minds and the world, we make a separation by projecting our ideas, our feelings, our opinions, our stories, into the world. Then we see them and say, *Oh, look! It's real!* And then we're in relationship with our projections rather than resting in the natural unity.

Those projections are a big subject. I want to talk about what happens if we are able to experience the unity of inner and outer, and to experience the shimmer of everything inner and outer. Our tradition asks, What's the essence of something? One way to think about the essence of reality is that it's a shimmer. The next question is, What is the function of something? What does it do? The function — what it does, the movement — is flow, so that our natural state is a flowing in and out between what we experience as our heart-minds and what we experience as the world. The world flows into us and we receive that. We flow out and into the world. That flow is the natural movement of the natural state of things.

So here's an important shift in how we hold what we're doing : we can have the idea that awakening is a path *to* something; we're on this path *to* awakening. It is as if we are carrying our encapsulated heart-minds along the yellow brick road to get to the Emerald City. But if we rest in this sense of the natural movement of things being a flow — the world flowing into me, my flowing back out into the world — then suddenly we're not walking along a path toward a goal. We more and more recognize that we ourselves are flowing *through*. Not on the path *to*, but flowing *through* the vast flow of awakening that's already here. It's not some distant goal. We are already in it. It is already flowing all around us. That's what the Dao is, the flow of awakening all around us. We are, more or less, at any given moment, flowing into it, letting it flow into us, and flowing with it. That's a different view; it's a different feeling about what this journey is about.

According to the *Platform Sutra*, a Chinese text, impeding this flow is bondage. In the language of the *Platform Sutra*, if a thought abides anywhere for a moment — if the flow stops and we stick and attach to it and think, *Oh, that's it* — then another moment arises of a thought attaching, and another moment after that. That is bondage : the impeding of that natural flow, the sticking, the stopping, the attaching of thought to things. Therefore, if we think about not stopping and sticking and attaching to things, but rather doing everything we can to allow the flow to flow, then we are neither binding our thoughts nor being bound by them. This is the state of freedom inherent in the flow. We don't bind our thoughts — *Sit there and do that! And keep doing that until I tell you to stop!* — nor are we bound by them. Nor are the thoughts

shouting back at us their bad advice, as Mary Oliver once said. This kind of relationship with our thoughts also becomes our relationship with things. It helps us to develop a relationship of freedom with things, neither binding them nor bound by them, but something else, something that has to do with flow and exchange and even relaxation.

So we go along and things are going all right. I'm flowing into things and they're flowing into me, and that's nice. Then sometimes there are perturbations in that; *often* there are perturbations. First, just notice the difference between the sense of being able to receive the world flowing in and flowing out easily into the world, and the sense of being the observer. Often in our meditative practices, we'll get the advice to become the observer. Watch, look, notice, label. Being that observer can be tremendously important at times when we're reactive, when we're getting triggered by something. It's what our mothers told us : just take three breaths before you speak. Step back a little, put a little distance between you and what's going on, and see if you can come into a different relationship with it than the immediate, triggered kind of reaction. In that sense, being able to step back a bit, step into the position of the observer, can be hugely helpful. It's also hugely helpful not to think of that as the end point.

We're not looking to end up as good observers of life. We are recognizing that if the natural state of things is this kind of flowing motion between us and the world, there are going to be moments of ebb tide. There are going to be moments when we need to recede, like the sea pulling back into itself, concentrating itself before the next surge of tide. The momentary or seasonal ebbing — the stepping back into the role of observer — can be tremendously important as long as we don't stop there; we see the big picture in this tidal ebb and flow, over and over again — with maybe a little bit of leaning into the flow side of that, so that the ebb is serving the flow.

Sometimes other things happen. Sometimes we have difficulties; sometimes things feel challenging, painful, or difficult, and not like the natural movement of things at all. Here's where this can still be helpful. If we're in a difficult time, if we're confronting a challenge, it's one thing to say, *Oh, in the story of my life I've hit a really bad chapter. Or, There's something wrong. There's a problem I've got to fix.* We either have to rearrange something in the world or adjust our attitude towards it. If, instead, we notice, *Oh, there's something obstructing the flow,* and we notice that we cannot easily accept and receive the flow of the world, nor can we easily flow back into the world. That's a different way of holding those times that are challenging, those times

that you might even say there's suffering. The way we will tend to work with them, to address them, is different. One of the things you might notice about it is the absence of a focus on what's happening to the self. This is not about how the self is doing : the self is happy, the self is unhappy; it's working, it's not working ... all of that. It's *Oh, there's something obstructing the flow. How can I deal with that?*

As many of you know, I am at a moment like that in my life, in that this will be my last talk here for awhile. I'm going on medical leave for the summer, because I'm experiencing some health challenges that I don't think are going to respond to anything but stepping back for awhile, resting and pursuing some treatment. Since that's the kind of thing many of us face — those kinds of circumstances in our lives and those kinds of decisions — what do we do at times like that? How do we make the choices we need to make? I thought I would use this as a little bit of a test case for what we do when it's not flowing. What do we do when we're aware that there's some kind of obstruction going on? And how can we do that in some other way than along this spectrum of the self that runs from self-indulgence to self-sacrifice, and through a lot of nice things in the middle, like self-care, etc.? Is there another way to address such a time in our lives that's not along that spectrum?

The first thing to notice is that the capacity for flow isn't there. *I don't have the capacity for the flow. What's that about? Why don't I?* And so we begin with an inquiry, and there is no top-spin on the inquiry. There's no judgment about it, there's no *This is right, this is wrong, this has got to change, this will never change*. It's simply, *There's an obstruction, there's a lack of capacity, what's that about?* Make an uncharged, unbiased inquiry into what's happening.

One of the ways I'll begin to think about something like that is to see where it fits in the natural ecology of my life. By that I mean, there's the stuff that's geology : character, karma, cultural circumstance, upbringing, all of that stuff. That's the bedrock that changes very slowly, and that we tend stand on when we look at the circumstances of our lives. One layer of the ecology of oneself is that geology.

If that's the bedrock, the topmost layer is the weather. It's sunny today but it looks like it's going to be stormy tomorrow — the stuff that rises and falls, which we might call mood : things that come and go. They blow in and they blow out. One of our main tasks with weather or mood is not to attach to it, to let it blow in and let it blow out, just to notice it's happening and try not to take it too seriously.

Then in between the bedrock geology and the fluctuating weather-mood, there is a middle zone which I think of as seasons. They still come and go, they still rise and fall, a lot more frequently than geology, but they're a little longer-lasting than moods or weather. They're the passages of our lives. When we think about *the time when ...*, that's a season.

Obviously those aren't pure things. You're going to get eruptions of geology into a season. Or during the season the weather's going to change. I was thinking recently about a time in my illness when I hit the rawest, least resilient place that I got to, when a couple of times someone said something to me and I got very upset. I thought, *Oh, that's interesting*. That's a little bit of eruption of weather into a season, the season being the illness. I checked it out and I thought, I wouldn't have done that three months ago, so it's not geology. It's related to this time and place, and I can see it's weather. It's already shifting. I'm already not that raw anymore. So they're not pure states. They're always moving in and out of each other, but I check, because a season has its own customs and needs that are different from either geology or weather.

About some of the customs of seasons, the first is approaching them with an attitude of sitting deeply in not knowing : not coming to them with a lot of stories, not landing prematurely on meaning. Rather, *I don't know what this is yet*. I couldn't possibly know, because I'm still in the middle of it. It's not going to help me to come to a premature conclusion about the story of this time; that's only going to distract me from watching for other possibilities, from being surprised, from having my mind changed about what's going on. Not even thinking about what happened the last time I was sick. That was last time, and this is this time.

If it's uncomfortable to hold the not knowing, being willing to bear that discomfort. At this point in my life it's not too difficult to hold the not knowing, but if it were, it would be okay to live with that discomfort. Then ask, *What is the nature of the season?* Not to make the season bad, or to try to get back to the season before, or to try to create a new season that will be the season after, but to really see, What is this season? What are its qualities?

In the beautiful summer mornings before it gets hot, when everything's in bloom, an open field is a good place to be. But if a thunderstorm comes in, an open field is not such a good place to be if there's lightning all around. So notice the nature of the season. It's not a good season for hanging out in open fields, for example. That doesn't mean that thunderstorms are

bad; it just means that they're not of this time and place. Not of this season. What does the season require? What does it ask for?

The second bit, along with not knowing, is to welcome both the season and the events that are occurring within it as Noble Guests. Not just tolerating them, bearing them, accepting them, but actually welcoming them. *Come in, sit down, what do you have to say?* Listen with a kind of hospitality and attention to the guest, willingness, impartiality. Sometimes when we talk about things like equanimity, it can sound like we're saying, *You should feel the same about everything that happens, no matter what happens.* That's not actually what equanimity means. It means that you will welcome everything equally. Then you will feel whatever you feel about it, but you will open your heart equally to every event, to every inflow from the world, to every outflow from yourself. You're not going to feel the same about everything, obviously, nor should you try. But you can listen with impartiality; you can open your heart equally to whatever happens.

We're talking about listening carefully, and I've been listening to my dreams, which have been shouting at me. So far what I can get from their volume is that there's a certain press on my psyche right now. There's a certain press on my body, and it's showing up in my dreams. That's not always easy. We might wake up and feel encouraged by a dream, or we might wake up feeling discouraged. That's fine. The point is that we listen with equal attention to the discouragement and the encouragement, and in doing that we're right there with the shimmer of things. We're not picking and choosing. We're allowing all of it to be present, listening in as unbiased a way as we can.

This kind of season seems to require certain discernments and certain kinds of choices. The most important thing, if we're aware of the flow that is the natural state of things, is to try to make those discernments and decisions with the largest sense of what the self is. It's not simply about what *I* need, what *I* want — what has to happen here in this local neighborhood — but how far can I extend that out? What can I include as the self that is making this decision? How can I discern what is best for that? And that can change, because one of the things that often happens in something like illness or grief is that we start out close to home and then we're slowly able to expand and have a larger and larger sense of self. So maybe the most important thing at the beginning is to realize that this is not a season for making decisions. Not yet. Part of the nature and culture of this season is not to make any decisions.

Just wait. Even if that's uncomfortable, don't make any decisions because it's not the right time.

As you keep your attention on the thought of making a decision at some point, you're not looking at *What do I need to decide?* You're looking at *When is it right to make a decision?* When is the decision itself ripe? That is held by something larger than the needs of your self. That is held by the needs of your self and the surroundings, however much is involved in the decision; all of that ripens. Our job is not to decide it prematurely, or decide it because that's what the self needs, but to watch for that ripening, and see when it becomes time to make a decision. We may not feel — locally, at the level of the self — like it's time to make a decision, but the decision's ripe, so ... there you are. Do it. This is an example of taking it off the axis of the self — off the axis from self-indulgence to self-sacrifice — and looking for what is becoming ripe in the situation, and at what moment it's clearly ripe and time for the fruit to fall off the tree, off one side or the other of the decision.

While we're working with the nature and the customs of a season like this, if we keep touching in with the shimmer of things — with the vast, beautiful, terrifying, wonderful, poignant, heartbreaking dream that we are part of, that is always flowing into us and we're always flowing into, that is carrying us along in some way and yet that we are helping to shape — if we can keep reminding ourselves of it and allow it to support everything, including the difficult times, including those moments when we have to make decisions, it becomes a bigger and more spacious place. It's a place we can learn to actually rest, no matter what is going on. It's a place where we don't have to rely on what we've been calling the apparatus that we stand behind and manipulate to make things go well. We can let that go and actually lie back on the flow. Then it's not all dependent on this very little, tight, local neighborhood to figure everything out. It's on the whole dream to figure it out, and really all we have to do is pay attention.

Thank you.

Q1 : It seems like there should be a space between geology and seasons for biology and chemistry.

JIS : What would that be like?

Q1 : Well, I'm thinking more of a moment to moment, day to day kind of thing. Maybe chemistry in the sense of interaction with the world, on a moment-to-moment basis.

JIS : I like that. Zoology!

Q2 : I really appreciate the talk. I suffered with Lyme's Disease for several years and when it came on I was running two businesses with thirty employees, and taking care of my mother. That was a period of time that allowed me to pull back and learn to meditate, which I'd always wanted to do, and it completely changed my life. But it was really hard to be in the not knowing. I wasn't trying to be in the not knowing, I was trying to know and figure out and solve, and the prognosis of Lyme's Disease is uncertain. It's been seven years now. It changed my life in deep, positive ways, although it was hard to wrench myself away; it was a kind of forced change. Now that I'm through it I'm so thankful for the experience, although I hope not to go through it again.

JIS : Thank you. And I'm glad you're better. That's good.

Q3 : You said not knowing, not being able to see the exact nature of the season and why you're in it, but also inquiring into that. Can you say a little bit more about that?

JIS : About that seeming paradox? We're trying to do as unbiased an inquiry as possible, a real listening to what's happening. We're trying, to the extent that we can, not to bring our preconceived ideas, our stories of the way we think things ought to happen. For example, with a story like yours (to Q2) you might have thought at the beginning that the best thing you can do is find the right antibiotic, get over this, and get on with life. But if we come with that idea, it's going to affect our inquiry into what's happening, right? So we can drop all of that and say, "I don't know what this is. I don't know what this means. But I want to learn more. I want to listen." That's the combination of the not knowing and the inquiry.

Q4 : I'm reminded of a talk you gave quite awhile ago, where you spoke about acting through surrender. It seems very similar to all of this flow, but I've never been able to re-articulate it for myself. So often surrender is thought of as passive, but in fact it is something active. It's actually making the choice to be with this flow, and in this case, being with the not knowing.

JIS : You said it well! It's not a passive surrender. It's a willingness to participate, and that's a different thing. I'm not going to stand on the bank and watch it go by. I'm going to get in and I'm going to participate.

Q5 : I was in the airport yesterday, missing the koan salon because my flight was cancelled, and I wanted to be mad at everyone. I stood at the news stand and looked at the cover of the *Harvard Business Review*. It was a ball of wire, a completely chaotic mess of a ball, and the headline was 'Managing Uncertainty.' And, I thought, this is impossible! If that's the image that the world is continuing to operate by, it's so powerful. I thought, terrific! I don't want to underestimate what we have here and what we can be in this very different order of things that we're talking about. I hope that this summer we can hold what we have in some different ways when you're gone. That's part of the season right now, too.

Q6 : In Native American thought, time is cyclical, and time is by the seasons. Winter's the time when you're at rest. Spring is renewal and summer is growth, and the fall is a celebration. So maybe this summer, we can take that time to be more connected in nature, and really understand that whole life cycle, and celebrate in the fall.

JIS : Thank you.