

Embracing Change I : Welcome
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Good evening, everyone, and thank you for coming. Tonight we thought it would be important to bring in a question or two for all of you. This will help us create the field in which this weekend takes place, and it's good to have your voices as well as ours included in that.

The first question has to do with intention : What brought you here? Why did you decide to come this weekend? What are you looking for?

The second companion question is : What happens once you're here? What lights up for you in the talks we give, in the conversations that we will have together, and in the times when you're walking around on your own? What do you notice that comes to fetch you from this weekend, particularly if it's unexpected, if it surprises you? It might be something that feels like a new understanding, a kind of epiphany. It might be something that disturbs you; that's important, too. The poet Yehuda Amichai has a line in one of his poems about how it's doubts and loves that dig up the world, like a mole or a plow. So, doubts and loves digging up the world, stirring things up — that's good.

It also might be something you don't understand yet but are interested in. Freud has a throwaway footnote in his great work on dreams where he says that in every dream there is a part that is fuzzy, that you can't quite see, that has something obscure about it. In that cloudy, obscure place is the dream portal, where you can step through the dream into something even larger. So what is uncertain is important as well.

Those are the two questions : what brought you here, and what comes to get you once you're here? Keep checking in with those questions. Notice if anything is changing as the weekend goes on. Do they inform each other? Do they stain and dye each other? Do they begin to change? Does what happens and your careful noticing of it change your assumptions about why you came, and are there times when why you came gets clarified by things that happen? Do you discover that something is walking towards you, something is coming to

meet you, and if you walk out to meet it you find yourself walking in a different direction than you expected when you arrived? What's that like?

In the tradition there's a term of art for that first question, "What brought you here?" That technical term is 'karma': the momentum, the tendencies, the direction things are moving. It's the causes and conditions that led to you deciding that this is what you're going to do this weekend. That's what karma is — those momentums, those ways that things are moving.

The second question has to do with paying attention to what's actually happening, staying with what you notice about things, especially when you're surprised by and interested in them. The technical term for that is 'awakening.' As we do that, we're waking up.

When we put those two things together, that's a practice. A practice is trying to understand the karmic momentums that bring us into a particular moment, the network of causes and conditions that lead to something; and it's also noticing what happens if you feel a sense of warmth and curiosity about things, listening and paying attention without too much self agenda. Those two things together are a pretty good practice.

We'll come back to look at those questions from a nitty-gritty perspective : what that's like on Tuesday morning at the breakfast table. But for a few minutes tonight I'd like to pull the camera back and put the questions in the context in which we look at the question of change, or any other question in our lives. The way you approach change is much like the way you're going to approach anything : it's a way of approaching being alive.

When we pull the camera back a bit, we notice that there are great forces at work; there's tremendous change going on all the time. I laughed when we first talked about this subject of embracing change, because what's the alternative? Do you embrace gravity? You might decide you're not going to believe in gravity, but if you tip over you're probably going to fall to the ground anyway, whether you believe in it or not. Change is like that. There are things that are just *so*, the great forces that we stand at the intersection of. What is so alive is knowing that we're standing at the intersection and working with those forces like change.

Here's what I mean by that. Dennis Overbye, the science writer for *The New York Times*, wrote about the finding of the Higgs boson particle at the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland : "The finding [of the Higgs boson] affirms a grand view of a universe described by simple and elegant and symmetrical laws ..." (That's one axis of the intersection we're

talking about : a grand universe that is simple, elegant, symmetrical, eternal, perfect, and unchanging just the way it is.) Overbye continues : “ ... but one in which everything interesting, like ourselves, results from flaws or breaks in that symmetry. ... Without the Higgs field or something like it, all elementary forms of matter would zoom around at the speed of light, flowing through our hands like moonlight. There would be neither atoms nor life.”

There’s a juxtaposition of everything streaming through the universe like moonlight, with all the flaws or breaks in that symmetry – which is where stuff arises, where life happens, where we have matter, humans, and all of the other elements of creation. There is something so beautiful about that sense of light flowing through the universe from one end to the other, and simultaneously there’s something so compelling about the breaks and flaws : the skin of a peach or the way a dog greets you at the end of whatever kind of day you’ve had, or even finding yourself suddenly immersed in deep grief for someone you love.

One of the fundamental teachings of the Dharma is that those two things are simultaneous. That dog who greets you at the door is simultaneously made of light from before the beginning of the world and is also the very particular shedy and barky creature that it is. Those two aspects are simultaneous *and* inseparable. (My koan tradition talks with great pleasure about someone arriving like a dog bringing amnesty in its mouth – the idea of being met by someone who’s glad to see you no matter what your day was like.)

When you bring in both aspects of reality, it’s what it feels like, for example, when you’re driving home from a tough day at work, when something difficult is happening, and then the dog greets you with amnesty in its mouth. The very same circumstances get spacious and happy. Stuff falls away and there’s a sense that all of this is happening in a very large field, and you can rest in that field even when things are difficult. That’s the intersection when we’re aware of both things together. We can feel the particularities of the moment and also feel the largeness and the spaciousness of the moment at the same time.

The koan tradition uses two other technical terms to describe these, which are ‘mysterious’ and ‘wondrous.’ (You’ve got to love a tradition whose technical terms are mysterious and wondrous.) Mysterious is the quality of everything that is eternal, full of light, and unchanging. That it should be so, that everything should be vast and empty of self-nature,

is mysterious. That everything is particular, manifest, and real is wondrous. That those two things should happen simultaneously is both mysterious and wondrous.

You may have heard of the terms ‘form’ and ‘emptiness,’ which are a different way to say the same thing. The tradition also talks about the terms ‘bent’ and ‘straight.’ There are all kinds of contrasts and there’s no sense that one is better than the other, or one is more real than the other, or that they are separate worlds, but that they are true about everything simultaneously.

There’s a koan that says, “The Buddha’s teachings are straight. Why did the ancestors sing such a crooked tune?” You might start out trying to figure out what happened that we went from straight to crooked, assuming that that must be some kind of devolution, some kind of loss. But if you do that you’ve taken the bait of dualism, of thinking you have to choose one over the other, and the koans always want you *not* to take the bait; they want you to look at both as absolutely essential, completely necessary, and working together to make a whole. They want you to become interested in the qualities of the straight and the qualities of the crooked : how they speak with each other; how they work with each other and enlarge each other.

If everything is simultaneously form and emptiness, bent and crooked, and all the rest, that means that everything is already shimmering so fast that mostly we can’t see it, but we can feel it. There is the shimmer of the particular and the eternal, the bent and the straight, the wondrous and the mysterious. Stuff is already in motion. We’re already standing – always, whatever we’re doing – at the intersection of those things.

So when you take up a question like change, or something in your life that you’re wondering about, the circumstances are shimmering. The ways you address it, the ways you work with it, are shimmering, too. *You* are shimmering. That’s the nature of things. Any work we do takes place in this spacious, vast, shimmering, particular place. Much of our work is about finding a way to come more into alignment with that truth. Every time we take up a problem, a change, anything as particular as having a headache or a difficult conversation, we’re in the middle of that shimmer.

Everything is real and unreal at the same time. As the *Lankavatara Sutra* puts it, “Things are not as they appear, nor are they otherwise.” Things are dreamlike and also, as people say today, serious as a heart attack. How do we acknowledge that? How do we bring that in?

When we bring in the mysterious, the unknowable, what we don't yet understand or see, we also bring in that spaciousness and large perspective.

To the extent that we can, let's sink into that large, spacious, and shimmering place, and see if we can allow it to stain and dye us as we move forward together; allow our awareness of it to be present in everything we do, listen to, and encounter, and see what happens. See what happens to our questions about why we are here, what our intention is, and what happens here, what comes to fetch us, and especially what surprises us. We'll take that up again tomorrow in this shimmering room.

Thank you.