

Embracing Change III
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
Omega Institute ~ Rhinebeck, New York
August 4, 2012

I'd like to begin with a general way of holding change, and then we'll get into the nitty-gritty of not knowing, not being certain, what it's like when we're in the dark, and what it's like to be responsive. We can differentiate kinds of change, because not all change is the same. We can talk about it as geology, season, and weather. Since we're doing the whole-tour-of-the-history-of-the-Universe-in-one-weekend version of this, I'm going to tip you to the important point here : the secret to talking about change in those ways is to give ourselves a bit of distance so that it doesn't feel so personal.

There is stuff that's geology. It's changing, but at a slow rate. That's the stuff that feels like it's perpetual. What are the things in my life that feel like they're there, they've always been there, they're always going to be there, and/or they're moving very, very slowly? That's the bedrock geology stuff.

The other thing about geology that's beautiful is that it's what connects us with other people; it's what we all share in common as human beings. I have a quote over my desk from Eleanor Roosevelt, who said, "Most of the work in the world gets done by people who weren't feeling very well that day." I love that because a lot of my works gets done on days when I'm not feeling very good, but it reminds me that this is not my private sorrow; it's true of a lot of people. This is our common lot. Geology also has that quality : what is the common ground we walk on?

The next layer up is seasons. Seasons are times in our lives that arise and stay awhile and then eventually turn into another season. In some seasons, there's so much creativity going on, so much blossoming. Some seasons can feel like walking through an arid desert that's never going to end. There can be seasons of loss, seasons of falling in love, seasons of illness. They come, they stay awhile, they go.

Lastly there's weather, which we might also call mood. It comes in, it squalls, it goes away, and it happens relatively fast. What the weather's like can change from morning to afternoon to evening, or it can last a week or longer, but it's rising and falling pretty quickly.

If we think about a particular change, which is it? You notice something's happening. You're having a reaction to it. Is this geology? Is this a season? Is this weather? Does that allow you to have just a bit of crucial space between yourself and whatever it is you're experiencing?

When I was younger, I had a friend who had a very eventful life. His mother, who was of an immigrant family and lived in Brooklyn, used to say to him, "The trouble with you, Stevie, is you take your life too personally!" That's a deep dharma point : we take our lives too personally. Seeing things as geology, seasons, and weather helps us take our lives just a bit less personally, lets us have a bit more spaciousness, a bit more ability to ask that question, "How is it now?" – and that *it* is bigger than we are.

Let's bring those into meditation.

What is the geology in your life? What's rising and falling so slowly that it might as well be permanent? What is part of your common humanity?

What season is it in your life right now?

What weather is passing through?

Let's start with weather. How many people curse and scream at the thunderstorms? Does it make a difference to think of mood as weather that comes in and goes out?

Q1 : In addition to helping me deal with my own mood, if I keep this in mind I can see myself being much more accepting and gentle with the moods of those around me.

JIS : So there's how you experience your own mood and there's also how you experience the moods of those around you, which is also weather flowing in and out.

Q2 : It made me think about a woman I work with who's obsessed with the actual weather. She checks it all the time. It's annoying after awhile, because it's the weather, it's going to happen; I don't need to hear about it all the time. It also made me think about how annoying it is to be constantly taking one's own emotional temperature, that you can become obsessed with it in the same way that some people become obsessed with, "Is it going to rain later, should I bring an umbrella?" It's a way of trying to control it.

Q3 : I used to be frightened by my mood changes, which was a direct reaction to a period where I had about a nine month debilitating depression. It came over like a bad weather front that socked in and stayed. After that experience, for a long time when I would have a bad day or even a bad afternoon, I would get very frightened. *Oh, no, am I going down that path again?* Now, many years later, I can recognize the moods as weather fronts, and I've learned to settle in, just feel whatever the bad feeling might be, knowing that it will pass, and it always does, so that's reassuring.

But I've been thinking a lot about something this weekend. I have two highly emotional daughters. My oldest daughter has frequent meltdowns if she gets overwhelmed. I know this is her way and there's part of me that admires how fully she feels her feelings. She says, "I just have to scream and cry and stomp my feet," and she's 26; she's not a toddler. But this fear comes up because I can't save her from her feelings, and it's okay for me to have bad days but it's not okay for my kids to have bad days, and I want to fix that. So I've been watching my reactions. She thinks I'm intolerant of it, and I back away.

You mentioned not only our own moods, but others' moods, and if we can't impact the people that are close to us in what we think is a positive way, it's a little intimidating. It's very hard for me to just see it as her weather front. And I do get a little impatient. *Ok, enough already. Get through this now. Everything's fine.*

JIS : I think parents are a special case; parents get a worry dispensation because that's part of the job description. In general, in relationships it's common to have a sense of *Oh, you shouldn't be doing that*, or *I want to save you from that*, or *Things would be better if you didn't ...* . One of the inquiries to do there is to locate the anxiety. Is this anxiety about the other person, or

am I anxious because I want this other person to be okay so that it takes care of *my* anxiety?
Is it for them, is it for me, is it most likely some mixture of the two?

Again, we're talking about ways of taking a small step back and seeing that part of what's going on is that I don't want to feel like this. I don't want to feel this anxiety in the face of my daughter's seemingly excessive feeling. Then you can deal with that on your own, because that has nothing to do with her. So make that differentiation : Where is the anxiety coming from? What's it really about?

What about seasons, times in our lives? Anybody have an experience with that?

Q4 : I'm still wishy-washy. I got it down to two out of the four seasons. I feel like I'm in a period with a lot of transition, and so to me that's either spring or fall. Summer is full of light and possibilities and relaxedness. I really like winter, too. So I looked at where I am right now and I thought, *Well, I can narrow it down to two. That's a start.* It seemed like a good way to play with it. I'm going to have to meditate on these questions forever. I'm an Earth Science teacher and I teach meteorology, so this really hit home.

JIS : Narayan and Rinpoche talked about dealing with ourselves with a certain kind of gentleness. I connect gentleness with that bit of spaciousness, that ability to hold something without bullying it or trying to whip it into shape. When I think about the seasons of my life, it helps me to do that. *Oh, this is just the autumn of my transition,* even if it's in August; it doesn't matter. That's just what the season is about, and it has these qualities and characteristics and instabilities and challenges and beauties. Again, it's not quite so personal, but a kind of softness about what's going on in our lives.

Q4 : I actually do spend a lot of time thinking about seasons; I live in New England where there are many seasonal changes. When the snow melts and ski season's over, I have trouble letting go, but what helps me is knowing it will come around again. In the meditation I got a little stuck, because my kids are going off to college, so that's a season that's coming to a close, but that one's not coming back. I was coming and going with the analogy, because to me there's a cyclical piece of seasons.

JIS : Absolutely.

Q4 : And there are parts of your life that aren't necessarily cyclical; I'm not going to have toddlers again. So it works, but it's not a perfect analogy.

JIS : The cycles aren't going to repeat themselves exactly. You're not going to keep having toddlers every year. But seasons of loss are going to repeat. So the nature of the season isn't about toddlers; it's about loss, change, transition. Those are going to keep cycling around – until we don't anymore. So can you bring it down underneath the specific circumstances to the quality of the time? How do I go through an autumn of loss?

Q5 : This exercise did a lot for me; I feel like it changed my whole perspective of my life and change. My twenties were one season and my thirties another, and now I'm coming up on a hard change in my life that I didn't choose. I can see it as just another season, and that's really different than pushing against it.

JIS : Yes. The nature of winter is that leaves get stripped from the trees, things die and go back to the root, and then everything gets covered with snow. Nobody says, "Bad winter – shouldn't happen." We accept that that's the nature of that time. So if this is a winter time in your life, the question is not, *How do I fight with the fact that this is happening?* The question is, *How do I live in winter for now?* And, most importantly, when winter is over, how do I notice that it's over and I've moved on to something else, and I'm not holding onto that?

Some of you might know the myth of Psyche, who journeys in the underworld. She's given some pretty terrific advice about how to navigate the underworld. One piece is that when you go to the palace of Persephone, the queen of the underworld, whatever you do, don't sit on her throne. Sit on the floor and get out of there as soon as you've done what you came to do. I think that's about doing the underworld journey : you must do it, and there's advice about how to do it in a good way, but don't enthrone yourself as the queen of the underworld. Sit on the floor, stay humble, and when it's time to move on, move. Head back out under the common constellations of our night sky, which is what Psyche does.

When you're in the season, be in the season. When the season begins to change, notice that, change with it, and don't hold on to the identity of that season. Don't become the queen of the underworld for the rest of your life.

Q6 : Right now I'm transitioning from one season to another. I just sold my house of thirty-two years, and I'm moving to a new community, called Seasons! It really is a transition for me, moving to a new season in my life, a community with other people.

JIS : You have a wonderful thing about to happen, which is being alert to the qualities of this new season. *Oh, what's this like?* You get to see a whole new thing.

Q6 : Right, and I chose this community because it has wonderful people. It's something that I feel I'm going to have a lot of positive experiences with, and I'm moving from the loss of my children being home with me to an addition of new people in my life.

Q7 : I'm reminded of a sage administrative assistant, who'd been around the block a few times, and a challenging boss. The admin assistant would call the core team members in the morning, always happy, seemingly, and tell you what the weather was like. That meant what was going on inside the boss' office. It helped prepare you and it helped you make better decisions about how to interact with that person for greater effect. Is that the same thing?

JIS : Oh, so much the same thing! In fact, that's an example of a great carry-around, use-any-time kind of practice : when you have a strong feeling or reaction – *I hate this! ... I wish this weren't happening! ... Ugh, the boss is doing it again!* – say exactly the same thing but without the charge : *The boss is doing it again. I hate this.* Do you see? The charge is the opinion that something is bad and wrong. If you take the charge off, if you take the opinion away, it's just a report. This person does this beautiful report every day about how the weather is. See what you can let go of when you take the charge off. You're not denying what you feel, but you're denying that it has primacy over everything else.

When you have a reaction to something, it's a natural human tendency, apparently, to substitute *the reaction* we're having for what's actually happening. We move from being in relationship with what's going on, to being in relationship to our reaction to what's going on. If we're having a conversation and things are getting difficult and we start to get angry, often what we'll do is let the anger rather than the conversation become the most important thing.

Something all of us are saying in different ways is to notice when your reaction, your opinion, is substituting itself for what's actually happening, and climb back down into what's actually happening. Let the reaction be there, but don't allow it to take over. Don't allow it to become the most important thing; it's one thing among many.

When a reaction arises, if we define the *it* of “How is it now?” as small, pretty much bounded by skull and skin, then if what’s inside the skull and skin is angry, that’s how it is now. *It* is angry. If I’m having a difficult conversation with someone, and define *it* as a bit larger, including that other person as well, when I ask, “How is it now?”, *one* of the things it is angry, but not the *only* thing. Instead of anger rising and filling our vision and everything around us, it becomes one of many things rising in a very big field. And that field is as big as you’ll let it be. That *it* will include as much as you let it include.

When we do that, we don’t have to suppress what’s happening inside us, nor do we have to fix it. We don’t have to think, *Oh, I shouldn’t be feeling that. How unenlightened that I should be angry at this moment. What’s wrong with me? All this meditating, it’s doing nothing!* The reaction is one small thing happening in a very large field, and we can let it rise and let it fall, and pay as much attention to it as we want, rather than allowing it to become the new reality that we’re now living. It’s just a small part of the reality that was already there.

Q8 : My daughter, my only child, is sixteen, and I’m already feeling the dread and pain of the coming season of her leaving home. However, it’s actually not the event itself that I fear and dread; it’s my own reaction to it. Being able to separate those two is a helpful thing. The reaction, of course, remains, and one doesn’t suppress it, but at the same time, you put it in a larger context. It’s helpful for me to realize that I’m actually *not* afraid of her leaving. What I’m afraid of is how I’m going to feel.

JIS : In this situation of your daughter’s impending departure, what is the call? What is the call from the world, for you?

Q8 : I suppose to understand that ultimately that’s good and beneficial and the way life should unfold, and at the same time, to see that what makes my life valid or joyful is within me and not ultimately affected by that. In what feels like it will be a vacuum in her absence, I must find my inner being that is independent of that.

JIS : I would say that’s more the response to the call. What’s the call?

Q8 : Love? I don’t know. I don’t know quite what that means.

JIS : That’s a pretty good answer! Love. Some deep love is calling and asking for your attention and response. Be a good dad in this. That’s the response. So that quality of *The world calls and I respond* is different from *Something’s wrong and I need to fix it*. Even if that something is

inside of you; you don't have to fix it. You're just navigating with awareness the territory of dad-ness.

Q8 : Even if that territory of dad-ness at a certain season has the quality of emptiness that's inherent in it?

JIS : Yes. Nothing wrong with that. No problem there.

Q8 : If I could only believe that.

JIS : So then, that's the inquiry : Do I really believe that, and if not, why not? And what do I need to deconstruct so that I can be intimate with that? When I asked what the call is, you just said, "Love." There it was, right there. So what's in the way? Is there anything in the way? If you just turn your attention to it you could probably brush it away and stay connected to that love. And then follow that like the roller coaster that it is with children.

Okay. What about geology? Anyone have a strong experience with geology?

Q9 : Yes, about aging. I like to be very active, and gee, I just can't do what I used to do. And it's killing me.

JIS : Okay. Say that same thing with the opinion stripped away. What does it sound like?

Q9 : Hmm! I like to be very active. I can't do the things I used to do. And it *feels* as if it's killing me.

JIS : That's different, isn't it? "I can't do the things I used to do." That's the nature of aging. Is there anything you can do that you didn't used to be able to do? Are you wiser?

Q9 : I think I have gotten wiser. That's true! I think I've become more patient.

JIS : Wiser, patient, those are not insignificant things. Make it larger, include more. Yes, this is what's falling away, but what's rising? What's coming in? Just make the picture bigger, because when you do that, it's truer. If you're focused on what you're losing, that's partial. If you bring in the whole thing, you've got a truer sense of what's actually going on and a better place from which to respond.

Q9 : Yes, that's actually very helpful. One of the things that has happened in my life because of the passage of time is that my kids are growing up. And one of them has gotten to be extraordinarily delightful. So that's a small price to pay.

Q10 : What stayed with me about the things that seem like they're there forever and unmovable was the insistence of my cravings and my habits towards comfort. I think I can be above that and make new, maybe better, habits. Those old, insistent, strong habits are the bedrock that I beat myself up for a lot. *Oh, that again.*

JIS : If you have persistent habits that are not convinced out of existence by happy thoughts – *I'll do better! I could have better habits!* – the problem is that you're trying to replace bad ideas with good ideas, or bad habits with good habits, and that's hard to do. Here's this problem, and how can I fix it? If they won't disappear through positive affirmations and all of that, it's because they're not done. So the question is, *Why aren't they done?* How does this serve me? Why is this still here? The important thing is to avoid beating yourself up about it, because that's not helpful. That's using a self to destroy a self. In Buddhism that's seen as a huge problem. This idea, that we can whip ourselves into shape or bully ourselves into shape, or we can somehow cut parts of ourselves off that we don't like, is painful. And not very effective, as you're discovering.

Q10 : I remember reading somewhere that when the Dalai Lama came to the West, he was flabbergasted by all the stuff he was hearing about self-hate in this culture. He didn't understand it; how he grew up as a monk in Tibet was very different. *How do you hate yourself? How is it even possible?* It's so prevalent here; we think we're going to whip ourselves into perfection and it never works.

JIS : This question of the self is so huge, complicated, and in a lot of ways misunderstood. Some currents of the mainstream culture in the United States of America are obsessed with the apotheosis of self-concern. Read those magazines or turn on the Bravo channel, and it's such an intensity of self-concern, self-promotion. Everything is about the self in the most painful, shallow, and vulgar ways. I'm not saying that's what American culture is like, but there's that aspect in some parts of American culture. Then, on the other side of the spectrum, amongst some spiritual traditions you go to the opposite extreme, thinking the self is the problem. If I could just get rid of the self, if I could just make the self small enough, I would be fine, because it's the self that wants, that worries, that has opinions, that gets angry, that has cravings, the self that's attached. It would be so much easier if I could just get rid of it.

You have a polarization between the ultimate self-indulgence and the ultimate self-denial happening at the same time in the same space. This is such an interesting time to be alive, to

be a North American. What they share in common is utter self-centeredness, utter self-absorption. Whether you're trying to indulge the self's every whim or to destroy the self, you're focused entirely on the self. You've either made the self the deity to be worshipped or the demon that must be destroyed, but it's still all about the self.

Fortunately there is an alternative. We can look at what the self is for, what the self is about, from the perspective of neurobiology, philosophy, cultural anthropology, and so on. We are human organisms; at a certain point in our evolution we developed a form of consciousness. I'm obviously speaking lightly here, but there was a kind of poll taken among the parts of consciousness, which concluded that it's really helpful if there's someone who's tracking, for example, respiration and proprioception, which is where you're located in space, and how your relationships are with your friends and neighbors and what the threats are as you walk on the forest path in primordial times. It would be helpful to have something in charge of paying attention to everything that is about keeping the organism alive.

And the self said, "I'll be glad to do that!" Its original intention was noble: "I will keep you aware of where you are located in space. I will keep you aware of what's happening around you. I'll keep you aware of your relationship with objects and other people, and that will get the organism through the day."

Then things develop a bit more and we begin to find that it's helpful to have a pattern of who we are that's consistent, that we can recognize. You wake up in the morning, you look in the mirror, and you know who that person is; you recognize her or him from yesterday. That pattern is helpful and saves a lot of time. You don't have to wake up every morning and ask, *What's a floor for? What's a toothbrush for? What's a person for? What am I for?* The self took on that job, too, and it's a good one.

When we have a conversation with our spouse or partner about who's going to pick the kids up, we don't first have to decide what's a 'you,' what's a 'me,' what's a 'car,' what's a 'kid,' and what's a 'school.' All of that is already given and we can go from there. So far, *great*. The self is our friend. The self makes life safer, easier, more consistent and creative, because it takes care of all this stuff.

The self enters the constellation that is a human being as a statesman. *I'll take care of that! I'll make sure that the organism survives and the pattern remains consistent.* But then a strange thing happens, and the self that enters like a statesman becomes a politician who's constantly trying

to get re-elected. It's always trying to convince us that the self ought to be in charge. In some ways we're living in this endless re-election cycle where everywhere we look there are giant posters of our self. *Re-elect! I'll keep it going!*

It's become what a colleague of mine calls the out-of-control employee. It takes over things that it has no business doing and causes so many of the problems people are talking about today : worry and anxiety and fear and how to deal with change. The self is doing the wrong job; it shouldn't be in control of that stuff. It's not good at it, because the self is always going to say, *Whoa, hold on! Be careful! This could be dangerous.* That's its basic motto : let's protect the status quo, the body, our emotions, our opinions, how we see the world.

That makes life more difficult, but the answer is not to assassinate the politician; the answer is to retire the politician and return it to the job it's good at, which is the sense of pattern, continuity, and survival. Let what had become a dictatorship become a democracy that includes mind, heart, body, spirit, intuition, and all of the parts of a human being working together in a collaboration, of which the self is a valued and minor member. We don't have to scold it, beat it up, or tell it how it's wrong all the time; we just have to help it remember what its best role is. And we have to allow all the other parts of ourselves to emerge and come into that new governing coalition of a human life.

Q11 : That's incredibly sane. I'll carry that with me. It occurred to me, when you were talking about the self killing off the self and the relationship of the statesman becoming politician, we hear everybody talking today about boundaries with other people, but we don't really talk about boundaries with ourself.

JIS : Say more. Keep going.

Q11 : So, is it a boundary issue?

JIS : I would prefer to think of it as a proper role issue. Everybody's doing their proper role and things work well when that's happening.

Q11 : Like bringing all the other pieces into it : intuition, heart ...

JIS : Yes. That's also giving them their proper role, because when the self has become the autocrat, the other pieces are suppressed and inhibited in some way. So you're releasing the limitations on them and allowing *them* to find their proper role.

You begin to get familiar with when the self is giving the stump speech, and you might experience that as part of your geology. *Oh, yeah. Right, this again.* What's my default reaction? Where do I go over and over again, even when it doesn't make me happy? When we can identify the parts of the self's stump speech, we can begin to question them. Who's speaking, and what's the purpose of this, and do I need it anymore? Does this still serve the whole of me? Can I coax, cajole, encourage, convince the self to take its proper place and its proper role and leave the rest to the rest? Which is very different from feeling that I shouldn't be feeling or doing something this way.

Q12 : Who is saying the "Are you serving the whole me?" Is that another self?

JIS : That's a great question. It's a chorus that comes out of all those pieces acting together. One of the ways the self tricks us is by making us think that there's one single voice that's you and one single voice that's me – which is *it's* voice, of course. But actually, what we are is this chorus of different things, singing all at the same time. Sometimes it is harmonious and beautiful, and sometimes it sounds like a bloody mess. But the important thing is that all the voices are there. And the important thing is that we allow all of the voices to find their own way to sing together. Buddhism figured out 2,500 years ago and neuroscience figured out about 2,500 minutes ago that there is no self at the center. There is no one thing; there is a chorus, singing all the time.

Q13 : Where do mindfulness and compassion fit into the self? Are they part of the self? Are they just part of the chorus?

JIS : They're practices that reach their fullest potential when the whole chorus is engaged in their practice. Let me give an example of that. Mindfulness is obviously an indisputable good. I mean, what could be wrong with being more present, more aware, more attentive? But if mindfulness is introduced into a system where the self is the tyrant, sometimes it can tend toward : *Here I am being mindful. I'm so mindful. This is me doing mindfulness.*

It becomes another self-reinforcing practice, and a distancing practice, because I'm not in relationship to what I'm doing anymore; I'm in relationship to my own mindfulness. I want to be really clear, I'm not saying that's what mindfulness is, but a danger of mindfulness is when

it's engaged only by the self. If mindfulness is being engaged by the whole chorus, then it's much richer and doesn't have that same kind of danger.

Exact same thing with compassion : if compassion is an activity of the tyrant, it's going to be completely self-concerned : *Here I am being compassionate*. Or it's become a thing, a commodity that we deliver to the world : *I'm going to grace you with my compassion*. Because the self can only think in terms of the self.

When the whole chorus is involved, compassion is a natural thing that flows through us. It's flowing everywhere in the world. It's in the currents of the air itself. Our job is to let it come through us. We don't have to manufacture it or convince ourselves that we're feeling it. We just have to allow it.

That doesn't happen so well when that tyrannical self is in charge, because it runs it through that filter of *Here I am being compassionate*. Instead, when compassion runs through the chorus, it's something like, *Here is compassion*. And maybe *Here is compassion* with a particular flavor or spin that only this chorus can put on it. That's the beautiful thing : to discover what song of compassion *this* chorus sings. What song of compassion does *that* chorus sing? Rather than trying to align ourselves with an ideal, taking on a template of compassion, we are, from the ground up, discovering what the particular compassion that gets expressed by each of us actually is.

Q14 : Are you using the words self and ego interchangeably here?

JIS : They're not exact but they're pretty close. What I'm doing now is contrasting the self as one small part of things to the chorus which is the union of the whole.

There's one more piece I want to speak about. If it's really walking toward you, and if you really want to walk toward it, it won't go away. It's very robust. If it's got you, it's got you, and you're doomed, so don't worry about that. You don't have to *yet* figure out what you're going to do with all of this, which brings me to the last piece I want to talk about, and that's not knowing, which is one of the primary values in the koan tradition. Not knowing is nothing passive or blank, or an abdication of responsibility, or anything like that. It is so engaged, so risky, and so big.

There's a famous koan about a monk who's on pilgrimage. It was the custom, then as now, for people to go from spiritual center to spiritual center, checking out this teacher and that, this practice and that. A monk was on such a pilgrimage, and one of the teachers he visited asked him, "Where do you go from here?"

He replied, "I'm on pilgrimage."

The teacher asked, "Well, what sort of thing is pilgrimage?"

The monk said, "I don't know." In other words, whatever I set out thinking this was going to be about, it's not what this is about. All of my assumptions have dropped away, and I don't know anymore what this is like.

The teacher says, "Not knowing is most intimate." Right there is the essence of the koan tradition : not knowing is most intimate.

When you don't come with the apparatus of your opinions, preconceptions, assumptions, and ideas about the way things are, when you come *willing* to take the risk of not knowing, *that* is when it's most intimate. You've done the work of deconstruction, and there's as little as possible between you and the situation.

If you think about how we carry the apparatus of our judgments and assumptions, and our senses of responsibility, and about how much of that apparatus is actually defensive, how much we put between ourselves and the world as a protection, and you think about *willingly* removing that, you begin to get a sense for how risky not knowing is : *I'm going to go in without my defaults, without all of my worldview, without everything I'm certain about, and I'm going to see what happens.*

This goes back to the question *How is it now?* There's a wonderful Theravadan definition of mindfulness : allowing things to speak for themselves without first interrupting. That's what not knowing is, allowing things to speak for themselves without interrupting with our opinions, assumptions, preconceived ideas, responsibilities, anxieties, and all the rest of it. It is a profound listening and patience and alertness — being *alert* to what's happening, being *alert* to what's changing and working with that.

In the beginnings of the koan tradition, when the practitioners would meet each other, after they said some version of hello, they would say, "I am not certain." That's a *very* different place to start. They would say it mutually, "Neither of us is certain." Now what do we do?

The *Daodejing* (a classic of Daoism, of which there's a lot in the koan tradition) says, "In the dark, darken further." When you don't know yet, when it's not clear, when you're in a new situation, when you've seen that word that you don't recognize, don't turn on the klieg lights right away. Don't try to drag it into consciousness. Actually, go the opposite direction : settle into the not knowing, into the darkness. Find out what becomes possible there.

Our practice is not only about bringing things into consciousness so we can understand them. It's partly about making conscious what has been unconscious and then being able to work with it because now it's conscious; it's also about honoring that there's a lot going on underground that we're not aware of yet, that we can't see, and trusting that. When we're trusting our lives, we're also trusting the unconscious, underground processes — the things that are not in our control. We're not anxious that they're not in our control, and we're not trying to drag them into the light of consciousness. We're trying to darken further, to sink down and include that dimension of things as well, and to acknowledge that we can't know how things are going to turn out.

We can't know what's going to happen, and because we can't, every single thing each of us will ever do in our lives is a mistake. We cannot *possibly* get it right, because we don't know what 'right' means; we don't know the ramifications something's going to have. The question is never, *How do I get this right?* because that's a futile question, impossible to answer. The question becomes something like, *What's the most beautiful mistake I can make?* That's a different relationship to what's happening. My job is to roll up my sleeves and participate as fully as I can, and in the wonderful words of Samuel Beckett, "just fail better."

I hope there's something liberating about that. Again, it's not passivity. It's a *profound* engagement in a different way, in a way that is riskier because there's no recipe. We have to figure out what to do based on what's actually happening, and that's a much harder thing to do than coming in with our laminated cards that tell us what to do in every possible situation. That's what not knowing is — an amazing stroll down the balance beam, when the balance beam is as wide as the world.

I have to end there. Thank you all so much for your good attention and your wonderful remarks. It's been a delight to spend this time with you.