

Secret Lover, Guest, and Host
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Tonight I want to pick up a few threads from the retreat — things we've talked about here in the hall and things that have come up in work in the room — and also give you a chance to bring up anything you want to talk about.

First is the notion of non-attachment and detachment. There's a stereotype about Zen that the goal or a byproduct of the practice is removal from the world, the ability to not be affected by things, an imperviousness to the world. The nature of the zen response to suffering is to not feel things : life is tough, just don't feel anything.

Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. When we talk about non-attachment, detachment, equanimity, or any of those words in that area in Zen, we are not talking about an uncoupling from the world. In fact, what we're talking about is a clearing away of things that get in the way of our having an intimate, quite real and vivid relationship with the world. Most of the stuff in the way is of our own making, so most of the work is about deconstructing the constructs of thought and feeling and habit and opinion and criticism and judgment that create a scaffolding that distances us from the world. We're talking about a withdrawal of allegiance from that scaffolding so that we can have a more direct relationship with the world.

Just for a moment, imagine the narrative voice in your head — the voice that's always telling you how you ought to feel about things, what you ought to think about things, what things are most important, and what these things ought to mean to you. In everything you encounter, everything that happens, what does it mean to have judgments and opinions? Now imagine that there is a separate person who is like that, who has all those opinions and judgments and voices them all the time. Would you want to be intimate with them? Do you want this person anywhere near you?

Most of us (for some of the time, at least) carry around a version of that person inside ourselves. In some way our most intimate relationship is with that voice, that set of beliefs and opinions. When you think about it like that, it might be easier to imagine not being so attached to her or him. In the koan way there are things we can do to address the problem of this

creature we call the secret lover, this bad affair we're having that we're too ashamed to tell anybody about, too ashamed to take home to meet anybody.

One of the ways we deal with the secret lover is that we try to deconstruct it. We *do* try to *not* take it for granted, to question its opinions and judgments. We say, Do I really know this is true? Does this seem real to me? Do I really feel this way? Am I really afraid in the way the secret lover is telling me I ought to be afraid in this moment? We do that painstaking work of deconstruction. But in this Way, there's something else that has to go along with the deconstruction, because it isn't enough; it's too hard to spend all your time endlessly looking inward and examining how you feel and react to everything. Enough!

Fortunately that isn't all we do. If we persist in the practice and take it up with sincerity and commitment, we begin to spend more and more time in a much larger field than face to face with the secret lover. Things will begin to open up; we'll begin to get that bigger perspective we've been talking about. We will see more and more with the eyes of the vastness — which is to say, with the eyes of reality. We will notice that everything is not just like what's pressed up against our face, but that we and everything else is rising together in a very big field.

The more we practice, the more dedication we give it, the bigger and more open and more spacious that field becomes, so we don't have to deal just with what's wrong; we don't have to endlessly confront the secret lover and ask her to be quiet. Simultaneously we have this experience of the big field in which we and the secret lover arise. The more we have this experience, the easier it becomes to switch our allegiance from this relationship to this experience of the expansive field, which is truer and closer to what's actually going on. What's pressed up against our face might be very compelling, but it's a tiny slice of what's actually going on. When we're doing this it's not only kinder, easier, more beautiful, and more inspiring, it's also truer.

We've discovered that it's important to be cultivating experiences of that larger space at the same time we're doing the painstaking work of deconstruction, because when you have the experience of the larger space it actually becomes difficult to move back into the small room with the constructed self. You don't want to do it anymore. You don't have to kill anything or cut anything off at the knees or repudiate anything; there's a natural movement of allegiance from one to another over time, with dedication and perseverance. That's what we're

talking about in Koan Zen when we talk about non-attachment : decoupling from the secret lover and actually moving more into the world with an open chest, with open hands.

The nature of sorrow is related to that. The promise of Koan Zen isn't that you'll have a magical experience and after that you'll never feel sorrow again. In fact, the promise is that you will feel sorrow more acutely and more vividly than you do now because you've cleared away the obstructions, because you don't have the buffer between you and reality. The curious thing is, you will want to. Because it's realer, it's truer.

Most of us began with a kind of young sorrow, an immature sorrow. That's the sorrow of *I'm not getting what I want. I'm not getting what I need. Or, The world shouldn't be like this.* That's where we begin, with that fundamental existential complaint about what's happening in our lives or about the way things are. So we are in a position of conflict with the way things are because we don't want them to be that way. That's a tough way to live, and it's where most of us spend a lot of our time, at least at the beginning. That young sorrow sees those things as problems that need to be fixed. I want to get what I want or think that I need. I want the world to be different. The world will be better if it were different in the way I think it ought to be.

If we persist in practice and we're dedicated, it's not that we lose the sorrow but that it's transformed. It moves to a mature sorrow whose nature, I believe, is something like this : here is this world, and there is so much that is achingly beautiful about it and so much that is achingly sorrowful about it. All at the same time, it is gorgeous and it is horrifying. Sometimes it's boring, tedious, frustrating. Sometimes it's beyond anything we can describe. It's the most ordinary thing, the most extraordinary thing. In other words, it's not one thing. It's a whole bunch of things all at the same time, all mixed together. The more we can experience all of that simultaneously without sorting it into piles of good and bad, or things I want to experience and things I don't want to experience — the more we can just take place with it and let it in — something begins to happen where the sorrow of things is right next to the beauty of things. Not so distant anymore.

I was working with someone a number of years ago who was a very forceful personality and not one to necessarily notice details. He came to me one night and said he'd become aware of a most extraordinary thing : he noticed that everybody's chest was rising and falling as they breathed, and it was the most tender thing he had ever seen in his life. It was

miraculous to him. He had been very depressed and when he said that I knew he was going to be okay. Not because he was depressed and then not depressed, but because his depression had become tenderness. He had seen the poignancy of things and it was *exactly* the depression, the willingness to suffer, that opened him to the ability to see that tenderness.

Mature sorrow is the recognition of that poignancy. It's so hard, being alive, and we go on doing it. Every morning the sun sweeps across the planet and in a wave following the sun, people and animals and plants get up and say, *One more time*. That's the tenderness of life, the poignancy that includes sorrow as well as beauty. Our *this isn't right, it's got to change, I've got to fix it* kind of sorrow changes to how poignant life on this planet is, and we can feel that and bear it — and we want to feel and bear it, because that's the truest thing, and we are no different and it is no different from us.

We move from a stance of wanting to fix things to wanting to care for them. When we have that mature sorrow it's no longer a matter of making things right but of caring for them. Again, it's not detachment; it's not turning one's back on the world. It's actually a deeper desire to care for what is real, rather than to fix our idea of what is wrong.

Q : What about turning toward it always? Caring is part of it, but what about being present to it and staying with it rather than pulling back?

JIS : I think that's part of caring. Sometimes the most caring thing we can do is to not turn away. At that moment, if that's as far as we can get, that's okay. Because what we care for is the whole situation, including ourselves, we will begin to walk on the road of caring by not turning away, and should the time come when we can take another step, we will do that. That's our commitment.

The last thing I want to talk about is Linji's koan, "Wherever you are, take the place of host, because that place is a true place." I understand that you have worked with it as a group here in Tucson, and from what I've heard it had a lot of power. Linji used this a lot. It comes from an idea in Chan about the Host and the Guest. There are a lot of different levels to look at Host and Guest; maybe the easiest way to enter is to think about Host and Guest as the two roles people can take in a relationship. The Host is the one who welcomes, who provides, who is in the position of being able to give something. The Guest is the one who arrives and asks

and is in the position of receiving something. The Chan thought is that we can exchange those roles all the time, and the liveliest relationship, the one that has the most juice in it, is the one in which the Guest and Host are always trading places. People are moving fluidly from the position of giver to the position of receiver.

There are also times when the relationship moves into Host meeting Host. When Host meets Host you've got a true meeting of heart-minds and we can say they are truly looking into each other's eyes. The koans would say that your eyebrows are entangled. In those moments you're truly looking eye to eye, there's a perfect meeting, and there's just Host and Host. You're going back and forth on one level.

Then there's also the meeting of Guest and Guest, when both are avowing, *I am not certain*. What's going on is unfinished and alive and maybe clumsy, but something really juicy is happening, and they are looking for something together.

Those are the human relationships meant by Host and Guest. Right behind that is another sense : in the biggest picture, the universe, emptiness, the vastness is the ultimate Host; everything that manifests, all phenomena, are the Guests. From the quantum foam through subatomic particles through you to the Milky Way and everything that in some way manifests out of that universe, we're all the Guests. It's quite a powerful thing to imagine we are the Guests to this vast Host of the universe. If that is so, the thinking goes, it would be important to learn how to be a good Guest, since it is so fundamental to who we are. I want to talk about what it is to be a good Guest to the Host of the universe.

There's a koan that ends, "Fortunately I'm here to do it." Person A says to person B, "Work, work, work, all you do is work. What's up with that?" Person B says, "I do it for another." This Another, or Other, is an important character in the koans. In this context, the Other is the Host, the Universe itself, the Dao, dharmakaya, God — whatever you want to call it. Then, "Why do you do it for that other?" The reply is, "Because it has no hands."

This is one of the most important things in Chan. Our job is to be the hands of the universe. That Other, that perfection, that radiance, that eternal now is already perfected, complete, done. It can't act, can't move, can't change by its nature. We are the ones who can move, act, change, fix, care for, love, get it wrong, get it right, do all of that. We are the hands. We are the eyes. We are the hearts and the minds of that Host. That's our job as Guests.

In another koan someone asks a teacher the question that we all ask at some time. “Okay, you got there where it’s perfect and shining and radiant and eternal. Why didn’t you stay there?” And Lianhua Feng responds, “Because it has no power for the Way.”

To stay in emptiness, to stay in that perfection, doesn’t feed the children, doesn’t bring relief to Haiti, doesn’t do any of the things that need doing in the world. It doesn’t have the power of the Way. It’s our job to have power for the Way; we bring skill and care, and we bring the warmth. The perfect world is perfect, and it’s a little cool. We bring the warmth, and that’s not a small job to have. It’s a pretty gorgeous job, when you think about it.

One way to be a good Guest is to have the power of the Way : to be the hands, to be willing to do the job that needs doing in that aspect of the world that is *not* yet perfected or complete, that is by its nature constantly changing and impermanent. That’s the arena where we can make a difference. Another way we can be a good Guest is to enjoy; a good Guest is a joyful Guest. I’m going to tell this all through the koans, to give you a flavor for how the koans hold and embody these ideas.

There was a Chinese teacher named Fayan; on his journey to awakening he worked in a mill shed in one of the monasteries. They had huge millstones, eight feet, ten feet in diameter to grind the grain. He was in the shed and the millstone was going around and one of the other people working with him said to him, “So, does the millstone turn by supernatural power, or does it turn naturally?”

It was an invitation to a philosophical debate. Fayan hitched up his robes to his waist, put his hand on the millstone, and walked around with it as it was turned; he circumambulated the millstone. Supernatural, natural? I read that as Fayan demonstrating the essential fact : the stone is turning, and he will turn with it. Part of being a good Guest is being willing to turn. If the stone is turning, turn with it. You take delight in the way things are and you join in. You participate. There are two parts essential to being good Guests : first, feel the poignancy, have empathy, do what you can, and second, just plain love it and enjoy it.

The paradox is that if the universe, which is made up of everything in the universe, is the Host, that means we’re also the Host, because we’re part of the universe. We are the Guest but we are also simultaneously the Host. So how can we be good Hosts? How can we represent well? One way is to hold a big view. Pull the camera back. See the larger field, do as

much as we can to get out of the too small, too constricted, too local, too restricted view and bring in that larger view which is the view of the Host.

We can actively look for ways to welcome and include and offer in large and small ways. We can take the role of Host wherever we are, as Linji suggests. We can allow our allegiance to be pulled from the secret lover to the larger field, which is a way to become a Host.

We can gladly, or as gladly as is possible, take on the roles of both Host and Guest simultaneously, and when we look at each other see each other as Host and Guest, and see the possibilities of that. In relationships, how can we keep changing positions? How do we move Host to Host and Guest to Guest? How do we let the rest of it go at least sometimes, and concentrate in our relationships — with each other, with other things and beings of the world, with events — on letting go of our habitual ways of relating and come each time with the question, *Host? Guest?*

Koans ask over and over, “Which phrase is the Host? Which phrase is the Guest?” How might we dance with that? It seems to me good practice to consciously try to do that rather than slip into the habitual ways of dealing with other people, situations and events. When we do that we are strengthening our allegiance with the big field, with the vastness, with the Host inside and outside ourselves. We are saying, *This is where my fidelity is. This is where my commitment is. This is what I want to make more of in the world.* That is not an insignificant thing, but a way to bring what we gain on the cushion, in our practices, and give it away immediately into the world, we hope, for the benefit of all. That movement is essential because our practice isn’t complete until we do that. It doesn’t matter what kind of experiences you have on the cushion or walking around outside looking at the mountains. It makes no difference at all if you don’t somehow find power for the Way — if you don’t throw that out of your hands and into the world.

Host and Guest. Inside you. Outside you. Everywhere greeting each other with, “I am not certain.” Any comments or questions?

Q1 : Last night you were talking about the koan “Thankfully I am here to do it”; in a sense that’s a situation of being simultaneously Host and Guest. In a way you are Host because you’re getting that *for* them; and in a way you’re Guest because they’re giving you the opportunity to experience that as well.

JIS : When we have that idea of another as being the Big Host, it reminds us that we're in the position of receiving the miraculous, constant outpouring of life. Life is just pouring out of that Host all the time without stop.

Once after a retreat I went home and took a nap. I lived in a little house at the end of the road, the last house before the ocean, seven miles away. I woke up suddenly thinking *Ah, the light shines everywhere all the time*. It never wavers. It never blinks. It never forgets or flickers. Nothing ever falls outside of it. I was overwhelmed by the miraculousness of that. That's the gift of the Host to us, that life continues in this unbelievable universe-large rushing. So, make a cup of tea? It seems little enough to do in the face of what that other is offering.

Q2 : I'm curious about hosting, being a Host, when it is something that is done versus when it is something that is *allowed* to happen. I can think of times when I may take on Host, going in with graciousness and readiness to offer, because I think If I can hold this, then I can provide something. However, in those moments, that person being served may really need me to be a Guest. If I *allow* Hosting, switching can happen.

JIS : I think about Abraham's Tent in the Bible, a strong symbol for that kind of hospitality and generosity. He makes the tent and it is open and abundant, having everything everyone needs. Not Abraham—the Tent. There's the provision of the field in which generosity can happen.

Q3 : I think sometimes of my wife doing something nice for me, and I feel that that's really great, but I haven't done anything for her, and by the way, I drank the last of the milk! But with this way, there's none of that.

JIS: Think of the last line of the Layman Pang koan when he trips and his daughter throws herself down next to him and he asks, "What are you doing?" and she says, "I saw you fall so I'm helping." The last line is Pang saying, "Luckily, no one is looking." What you're talking about is no one looking, no one keeping score. It's just happening.

Q4 : The way I read the koan, we can be there, throwing ourselves down, practicing, and in some weird way we get to see what no one sees. We are that one who is looking. When I read the koan, I get the sense of the vastness and the sense that I have the opportunity to look

on where no one is looking on. If you can be the one to throw yourself down then you can see the big field that's holding all of it. And vice versa : if you can see the big field holding all of it, then you can throw yourself down. It's important to me that you can't just be the one who is looking.

JIS : Now I'll confess what I hear when I read this koan. This is Layman Pang, one of the most completely radiant people in the whole tradition. He knows when he says, "No one is looking," that *everything* is looking. By saying no one is looking, he's evoking that *everything* is looking.

In the koan salon we're talking about Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness. There is a moment in the koan when Bodhidharma is speaking to an emperor and the emperor asks "What is the first principle of the holy teaching?" Bodhidharma answers, "Vast Emptiness. Nothing holy." That can feel like the palace walls just fell down : the roof just fell off; you're open to vast space. I hear "Luckily no one is looking" like "Vast Emptiness, nothing holy". By saying that, you've become aware of everything that is and how it's connected to everything else.

Q5 : This is my first retreat. I have a question : When you're working with a koan and you leave the retreat, what does that look like? Who do I talk to?

JIS : Congratulations. This is where we tell the Keith Johnston story about the clowns with the balloon bats. A guy walks around the corner and four clowns beat him with balloon bats. In the next scene, another guy walks around the corner and now there are five clowns.

If a koan has come to get you like that, what you have to do is pay attention and it will tell you what to do. Keep company with it as much as you can. At the moment that won't be hard, but keep going with it once you're gone. Carry it with you during non-cushion time. Let it have its way with you. Make yourself available for it. It's good to be able to talk about it, that's an important part of it. Talk with Tenney when he's available. Stay with it. Let it fill things up for as long as it's alive.

Q6 : In my own practice I felt I was creating space for myself in the world and I wanted to talk about that. Then as I progressed, I felt that the need to talk was a stage I was going through. Everyone goes through the same process I realize. One of the things that is

important for me is to just settle down and become completely quiet so that I can open myself up and bring the world into me.

JIS : It makes perfect sense. There's a kind of stillness that is underneath both activity and silence, noise and silence. Sometimes in practice we mistake stillness for quiet. Stillness isn't dependent on quiet. It can be there as much in chaos as in silence. It's necessary sometimes to withdraw a bit to be able to touch that stillness. Once you have, it's not dependent on any kind of circumstances. You don't have to keep things in a particular way for it to be there because it's underneath everything, including the most riotous situations.