The title of today's talk is "Poison and Joy". Please sit comfortably.

In the great work that we do what eventually appears is a great fire or light in us that we realize was always there and touches all things with its joy, but we always begin the work in darkness, I think. Buddha, I'm sure, was not the first to observe that there is something very unsatisfactory about life a lot of the time. He made it the first principle of his teaching saying that you cannot escape from suffering. But then he said, "But there is an end to suffering." So already we are getting into paradox very quickly here. And then there is a method. There is a cause of suffering, and an end to suffering, and a method. What we must do, I think, is to attend so closely to our lives that they start to open. We spend a great deal of time skirting around the edges of anything that's painful. Diligently walking the circumference of our difficulty. And in zen really the way is through. We just go through the middle of it. We don't need to walk around the edges any longer like an ox in an old-fashioned mill grinding corn, walking around and around in circles.

So, the darkness in life appears immediately when we sit down to do zazen because immediately we'll find out that our best intentions to do zazen well don't come off. Usually we don't do zazen quite as well as we want to. And we also find out a curious thing that even when we are very sincere, unbidden thoughts arise, unbidden feelings. Things come
out of nowhere that we had no intention of summoning. And usually we spend some time fighting with these. I certainly did. A lot of time fighting with these. And I think some fighting can be good because we can feel our strength and our sincerity, but in the long run you just feed the demon when you fight it. You give it energy. In the long run what happens is that if we just attend, things settle. In that way, I think, we go into the poison. We darken the darkness.

Tung-shan was asked, "How do we deal with cold in winter and heat in summer when they visit us? How do we deal with them? He said to go where there is neither cold nor heat. And naturally the student said, "Well, where is that?" So he said, "When it is hot, kill yourself with heat. When it is cold, kill yourself with cold."

This is a very famous story and I'm sure everyone here has heard this before, but if you think about doing it, it becomes a great thing. Even though it is well known, it still has enormous power.

So that when you are sleepy, kill yourself with sleepiness. When you are in despair, that despair, too, is something that has appeared. It, too, has Buddha nature. When your knees hurt, kill yourself with pain in the knees.

So when we stop avoiding and holding back from life, then we will find the joy will open. And there is a way in which it opens. I think it only opens when we have been willing to suffer some. Nobody seems to come to meditation without having suffered something. My personal observation. Something that was true for me. But then everybody suffers. We are drawn by the natural course of life to zazen, to seek some simplicity and to find a natural, authentic way. And I think that one of the important things about the difficulty and suffering generally is to allow ourselves to be in it without too much complaint. There is a very strong, sort of addictive longing in humanity. It's very strong in our culture, but it's in others, too, of course, but I think it's just a human thing. Where we have this great longing for life and very little patience in cultivating it. So that we want magic and we want it now. And there is a great, powerful magic in zen, but the strangeness of the magic is after awhile the least interesting thing, I think. So you will get attended by synchronistic events, perhaps. Many people are. You know what people are thinking and things like that, but that's not very interesting. The great magical event of zen is the joy that comes out of the simplest and most natural thing. The joy that comes out of just standing up and sitting down. Everything. "Walking is zen; sitting is zen." Eating, drinking, making love, sleeping, being miserable on your cushion is zen. Having your knees hurt in the long, hot afternoon is zen.

Darkness is a kind of foundation, actually, the darkness that we find arising in us. When Bodhidharma was asked, "What is the first principle of the holy teaching", the emperor asked him, Emperor Wu, he didn't say suffering. He said, "Vast emptiness. Nothing holy." This is what the Heart Sutra says, too. The Heart Sutra says, "Things are founded on emptiness." This means really that things don't truly have a cause. Things have a virtue in themselves beyond anything we can say that causes them. So you have a virtue in yourself beyond anything that brought it about. Any suffering that arises in you because of your history, any gifts you have because of your history, these are strong things, yet they are also just a pure appearance of Buddha nature. Even your suffering and also your joy. I think in some sense we can't take credit for either. We just have to learn to love our lives so deeply that we welcome whatever comes. Zazen teaches us that love.

Different people had different kinds of difficulty, I think. You will
find various kinds of fragmentation of attention, I think, perhaps that deepest kind of difficulty that we have. You will notice that when you are suffering, your attention suffers, too, and you don't have a lot of it. And that if you are complaining about yourself or others, which is easy to do, if you begin to turn your attention inward, to go against that easy current of complaint, you will then find that your attention has not been very good. And that way you go into the darkness. You begin to attend to your situation. You begin to notice what is going on. This is the great lesson of zazen. Is to do nothing. To stop doing things and then you notice what is going on. And as you begin to notice, you'll find that the suffering transforms and you do not suffer the way you did. Because the suffering is something added to it.

Torei-Zenji with his poem, "Bodhisattva's Vow", talks about the nature of this inner transformation, I think. He talks about the right attitude to have to bring about this inner transformation. I never much liked "Bodhisattva's Vow" for many years. I still think it's kind of over written, but it's very beautiful and powerful, too. I always thought it was kind of sentimental. I came out of a rather fierce political-activist tradition. Wasn't inclined to blame myself when somebody blamed me. But the enormous value of looking at our own part in a difficulty in our lives is so wonderful. Sometimes your own part might be that you're being a wimp and you're not standing up to somebody. So it's not just a matter of a sort of overly sweet compliance with life. You can fight with life, too, if you want. But to look at our own part is so valuable and powerful. He talks about the great virtue of abusive words. Think about that next time you run up against some petty office tyranny or you're jerked around by somebody you trusted and feel betrayed. The virtue of abusive words.

There is a koan in the Book of Serenity, "The Diamond-Cutter Sutra's Revilement", Number 58.

The Diamond-Cutter Sutra says, "If someone is reviled by others, this person has done wicked acts in previous ages and should fall into evil ways (will probably fall into evil ways), but because of the scorn and revilement of people in the present age, the wicked deeds of the past are dissolved."

So, on the face of it this is a fairly simple karmic atonement kind of thing. If you're being reviled, if you're having a difficulty, it's because you were a schmuck in a previous life in some way. You did something, you committed some sort of wrong against the universe and you're just reaping the karma now. And normally because of your bad karma you would fall into evil ways, but because you suffer you do not fall into evil ways. The suffering somehow balances that out and atones for it.

In zen we regard this in a more immediate and less philosophical fashion. But I think there are two ways to hold this. In zen everything that appears we treat as Buddha nature. And it really doesn't matter. Whatever appears has that shocking, profound light of the Buddha nature. So if somebody comes up and gives you a present, that is Buddha nature. The great Lin-chi (Jap. Rinzai) used to yell, "Kaatz!" all the time. Someone would come up and say something very wise to him and he'd go, "Kaatz!" and hit them. Or he'd say something stupid and he'd yell, "Kaatz!" and hit them. And that way he really encouraged people to go deeper and deeper. And the people that stayed around him did get wiser. So when somebody comes up and abuses you, it is Lin-chi saying, "Kaatz!" without an intention of harming you here. The universe is encouraging you, deepening you.

From a personal point of view, there is a way in which when we get
immersed in darkness and life just overwhelms us and overtakes us, we
either go under or we become wise. If you have a solid meditation
practice, you will become wise and you can trust that. So you can trust
yourself in the most extremely difficult situations. And I know zen
students often choose to work in difficult kinds of work. And so again,
I want to reiterate, you can trust the practice to hold you through the
greatest difficulty, and it will.

The I Ching puts it in a more descriptive way. It says, essentially,
the same thing. That what is happening to us in the darkness is that
our character is transforming. We are building the great foundation
which the joy can inhabit. And without that foundation there is nothing
to hold the joy when it comes. And you must know this. Almost
everybody who has come to zen has had some experiences of eternity being
present. When you are a child, children have these experiences. And
suddenly everything is alive and interconnected and you see the
compassion in a leaf, in a hillside, in the ants crawling up the vine
stem. And we lose it because there is nothing to hold it. When we go
into the darkness, one thing that poison in our lives does for us is it
makes our foundation so that the joy can be held.

The I Ching has a wonderful hexagram called jen (sp??) or obstruction
which is No. 39. It says, as it often does, "perseverance brings good
fortune." Well, there are some situations in which perseverance
doesn't, and you just need to stop everything. You broke your leg and
walking on it really won't help. You need to stop. So when we're
obstructed, when we're in darkness and difficulty, perseverance does
help. The image is, "Water on the mountain. The image of obstruction.
Thus the superior person turns her attention to herself and molds her
character." So that when you are blocked in the outer world, you need
"an unswerving inner purpose to bring good fortune in the end," it says.
"An obstruction that lasts for a time is useful for self-development.
This is the value of adversity. Difficulties and obstructions throw a
person back on herself. While inferior people seek to put the blame on
others, bewailing their fate; the superior people seek the error within
themselves and through this introspection the external obstacle becomes
an occasion for inner enrichment and education."

Well this is the deepest kind of inner transformation that is going on
here. And what kind of introspection do you have. I don't think
there's much point in those kind of listing of faults that some
spiritual traditions do. Maybe we can learn something from it. I'm not
sure. I think the greatest kind of introspection is when we just stop,
and we look, and we notice what is. If you're working with a koan, if
you put the koan at the center of the whole universe, then you'll find
that everything becomes the koan. And when you notice the koan, you
notice what is. You are the koan and you notice what is. And we stop
having so many opinions about what is. We are so full of those opinions
about what is. And then we notice that those, too, the opinions, too,
are just something else that rises in the mind. There is no need to
feed them.

When we surrender to the truth that we can't control everything, we need
to allow what is within us and without us to arise, there is a kind of
relief and you'll find that your practice can become rather comfortable
even in the darkness, even though it is full of mystery and you don't
know what on earth you are doing. It can still be rather sweet at that
time. This is one of the deeper levels of the imagery of Kuan Yin as
the Bodhisattva of Compassion and Healing. The figure who hears the
sounds of the world, hears the suffering of the world. And in hearing
that darkness and allowing that darkness in, there is a kind of grace
that appears, that is symbolized by the form of Kuan Yin. There is a
cabalistic legend that the shekinah (sp??), who is the feminine, Kuan
Yin aspect of god, follows us in our exile from god, our exile from the divine. We are warmed by that feminine divine force. I think we do experience this when we are willing to just let go and be in our meditation no matter how difficult it is. But sometimes that's a minute by minute thing. When some people walk in in such pain or it interacts with me in some way, I realize well I have to take this session minute by minute. And just walk through each minute, each second, really. And other times I don't need that attentional discipline, but it's good to have it. And when you have that force of attention there is a kind of warmth that will come attend you. I don't think it's a great fruit of the practice or anything, but you will notice it then.

So while this is going on character is something that is being built, really unconsciously in the darkness. It's like the temple is being built when we are not attending to building the temple. We're just attending to what is. We're just washing the dishes and getting through the next hour sitting quietly loving the world, really.

So it's a kind of initiation, I think, our difficulty in zen. And initiations always come with an ordeal. You know some tribal people have very severe initiations where their bodies are mutilated in various ways. What the ordeal part of an initiation does, I think, is it overwhelms our previous ideas about the world. When you find that you haven't sat a sesshin for awhile or you've gotten far away from the practice and you've come back to the practice, you'll often find that the first day of sesshin can be kind of hard or you'll have a really hard day there in a retreat. This is just the ordeal part of the initiation. It's a kind of purifying going on, but also we don't let go of those ideas and the way we see the world easily. And so it's sort of extracted from us with dental equipment. And sometimes it's painful. The great trust and truth of the practice is that it really is worth it. That if you endure that, and if you don't give up just before the joy comes, the joy really will come. The grace and the light will be all about you and you'll see it in the faces of your companions. You'll see it in the gardens. You will see it all around you and you'll find it in your own heart. And it is the great reason, really, that we sit. And it is the source of all that is creative in us. All that we do that heals and helps each other. It is that great fire in life that appears when we just attend to what is.

So this is why a retreat as well as being difficult can also be rather simple and sweet and joyful. And I encourage you to relax into it. To truly be simple and relaxed actually requires more discipline in some ways than struggling. So please enjoy the rest of this retreat. Taste each moment. Don't sit there waiting for it to pass. If you are just willing to taste each moment, then the sun will rise all on its own without the help of human hands.

Thank you very much.

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end of record
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