One Arrangement Becomes Another

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. Feels like fall, right? Feels like we're getting into fall. Makes me happy.

So, part of what I appreciate about Buddhist practice is that so much of it is about just being with our life as it is. Sometimes we can have this idea—like maybe some art styles where there's a mist-shrouded mountain and somebody sitting in a cave trying to get awakened. Maybe they do get awakened, I don't know. But that's not the only thing that practice is about. Of course not. So much of it is about just us here today in modern-day America, practicing with our life such as it is. It's just in the ordinariness of our life.

And this evening I'd like to start us off with a poem that points to this ordinariness but also some of the skill of the poet. Here we can see that there's actually a lot of dharma in this one poem. I'm not going to unpack all of it but just a portion of it.

The poet is Jane Hirshfield[1]. Some of you might know that she's a well-known, celebrated poet. She lives here in the Bay Area, and she's a Zen practitioner who lived at Tassajara[2], which is the big Zen center associated with the San Francisco Zen Center. So she's a practitioner and a poet, and some of her poems I just take delight in. So I'd like to share one with you this evening.

I heard somebody describe Jane Hirshfield's poems as offering pocket-sized dharma gates. Pocket-sized, like you can just put it in your pocket. You can carry it with you. Just a way to go through the gate towards more freedom, more peace, more ease. Pocket-sized dharma gates. Just these domestic scenes.

So, this poem is called *Two Kerosene Lanterns* by Jane Hirshfield. It's a short poem.

The cat walks the narrow shelf beneath the window where many delicate things are arranged. Polished ammonites, a dried starfish, three netsuke[3], a few curls of birch bark, two long unused kerosene lanterns. As if on their own, two hands fly up to cover the person's face, to cover the eyes already closed. The crash, as it must, arrives. The hands lower slowly. The cat sits on the floor in the room's middle, calmly licking a paw. The law of cats is simple. One arrangement becomes another. People are strange.

I just think this is delightful, this little scenario here. And when we look at it, there's a little bit more here than first meets the eye or meets the ear. I think when I first read this, I liked this closing line, "People are strange." [Laughter] I'll say a little bit more about that when we get there. But we'll just kind of look at the scene that Jane Hirshfield paints for us here without

words. Just an ordinary room, and there are these two living beings. There's a person and there's a cat, and they are present for the exact same event: something crashing off of a shelf. But of course, they have very different reactions and different involvements.

We don't want to elevate and say, "Oh, the cat is the enlightened one and people, because they're strange, are not." I don't think that's the message here. At least I'm not interpreting it that way. It's just pointing out that what the cat does highlights what us humans do. Sometimes we just think, "Well, of course I'm closing my face like, oh no, what's the crash that's going to happen?" So, the cat is kind of serving as a foil here because the human has a certain amount of panic, and maybe they're having this certain agony about what used to be on this shelf, this collection of things, and what's about to happen. And maybe they're having in their mind what now can no longer happen if things start falling off of that shelf. Whereas the cat, who is just sitting there in the middle of the debris, maybe has a dusty paw now that it's been up on the shelf and is just grooming itself.

So, we're not here to talk about cats and glass, but I want to talk about the shelves we build in our lives and the inevitable crashes that happen when we put things up on shelves. Humans, we like fragile things and we like to put them on shelves. I'm often buying little figurines that are breakable for my mom. She likes to collect them, so I can kind of relate to this in some way. She has a whole little collection up on a shelf, but she doesn't have a cat though.

If we look at what Jane Hirshfield has put on this shelf, it is these words: "polished ammonites, dried starfish, three netsuke, a few curls of birch bark, and two long unused kerosene lanterns." It's a little bizarre, and I had to look up some of these words to see what they are. I think it's worthwhile saying a little bit about what they are.

An ammonite is a particular type of fossil. It only exists in the fossil record. It is long extinct. It was a marine creature kind of related to a squid, and they lived in shells. Some of the shells are small and some of them are really big. So, this was something that used to swim through the ocean and now it's turned to stone. It's something that used to be alive and dynamic, and now it's a fossil. It's not going anywhere. There's no movement.

And same with the starfish. Starfish kind of hold on to the rocks in the ocean, but now it's dried, stiff. It's also not going anywhere. It also used to have one particular life, and now it's on somebody's shelf. It's dried; it's no longer having contact with the ocean.

This Japanese netsuke is a type of ornament that men used to wear on their clothing in medieval Japan. Again, something that they don't do anymore from long ago.

Birch bark, right? Something from a tree that's no longer alive that's now there on the shelf. You guys are getting the hint here. You're seeing how this collection of things that used to be dynamic, that used to have a certain type of vitality, that used to have some movement and

changing, have now kind of been arrested, like stopped. They've kind of been preserved and probably, in my mind, they're neatly arranged on this shelf to be aesthetically pleasing.

So these things that are relics, that used to be alive but now are relics—we could say this is the subtle art of the ego. This is what people do, mostly not intentionally or maybe even unknowingly. We take something that's dynamic and changing and say, "Oh, I'm this, and I'm going to put it up on the shelf and just keep it there, and hopefully it stays there up on the shelf. Oh, and I'm going to take this other thing here and put that up on the shelf, too." This is so different than just noticing experiences that are coming and going, and things that we've thought or felt or experienced. Instead, it's really taking something and maybe fossilizing it, concretizing it in some way, and putting it up on the shelf. In the Buddhist language, we would use the word upādāna[4]. It's about clinging. It's about this way of grasping or taking this flowing, moving, uncontainable, uncontrollable river of experience and making it be static.

It's fascinating how we do this. How we have this idea, "Well, wait, let me preserve this. This is good, and I'm going to put it on a shelf, and maybe people that come to visit will be able to see this thing about me." And often we like to dust them off or rearrange them or something like this. So there's a way in which we are all curators.

And this is what the Buddhist teaching is pointing to: how so often we are defining ourselves by just holding on to something and saying, "Yeah, that's me. I'm the person who's calm and dependable. Yeah, that's me. I'm the dedicated practitioner. Or I'm the one who holds this family together. Or I'm the one who's been wronged. Or I'm the one that's right. I'm the one that's wounded. I'm the one that's accomplished." There's this way in which we kind of reduce ourselves and limit ourselves because what happens as soon as we put something up on the shelf, there becomes this quiet terror: *What if it falls?* We don't want it to fall, so we make sure that it stays up there on the shelf. So every time the window opens and there's a breeze coming in, or every time there's a cat or whenever there's a child or elbows or whatever it is, there's a quiet terror. We have our own ammonites and starfish and netsuke, these things that we have up on the shelf. They stand for things that we think about ourselves, but maybe they're also opinions, past grievances, or spiritual achievements, or maybe some particular roles that we have in the family, in the profession, in the community, whatever it might be. And then this quiet terror arises because then we have to defend it.

I'm using this word quiet because this is a subtle movement. This isn't something that's obvious. But this is something that the Buddha is pointing to when he's talking about dukkha[5]. It's just this way in which we're trying to have this self-image and we're trying to project that, "Yeah, I got it together. Yeah, I know what I'm doing and you don't have to worry about me. I'm fine." Or we have sometimes the opposite: "Oh, I don't have it together and I'm not fine and I need a lot of help." There are these different ways, and they're both dukkha. They're both dukkha, the way

in which we're putting things up on this shelf, and there's this way in which we are investing into this. So much of our life energy actually goes this direction towards trying to maintain what's on the shelf.

I appreciate that the title of this poem is *Two Kerosene Lanterns*. These are lanterns that usually have flames in them and can light things and show the way. But in the poem, they're called "long unused." For me, I was thinking about what that means. Maybe there's a way in which sometimes we feel like some of our own flame inside, some of what excited us or what made life feel delightful in some way, isn't really present in our life anymore in the way that it was, and instead it's become ornamental. "Oh yeah, I'm the one that used to go kayaking. I'm the one who used to do this or used to do that," and we no longer necessarily feel like we have this flame inside.

And so there's this way in which we are having not only the dukkha of trying to portray ourselves a certain way, but of course what happens when the cat does walk on the shelf? Because it will. Of course it will. But we are so busy convincing ourselves, "No, no, no, this is the way that I am and it's going to be this way. I'm gonna protect it and make sure that it stays that way." But life happens, accidents happen, bodies age, jobs end, weather changes. You don't need me to tell you this, but what happens when the cat jumps on the shelf? There's a way in which we can feel like our sense of self gets destroyed and it can be really disorienting. A diagnosis, for example, when we had mapped out that we were gonna have a particular future, and then now all of a sudden with this diagnosis that future doesn't seem like it's available anymore. There's a way in which we can kind of just collapse. I've seen this, a certain amount of giving up or a certain amount of, "Okay, if I can't have the future that I imagined, then there's no purpose or there's no reason to keep on going on if these things on my shelf aren't the way that I would like them to be."

Or maybe something falls off the shelf and there could be just complete denial, ignoring, avoidance, distraction, not even really meeting the changing nature of experience or the truth of what's happening. This is like confirmation bias in some kind of way. "Okay, I'm just going to pay attention to those things that prop up this sense of self that I've carefully curated here, and I'm just going to ignore all that other stuff." This happened to me quite a few years ago. I've shared this story in a different context, but I remember getting really angry about a particular situation. This was many years ago. And then just being so surprised. I had this idea like, "Oh, I'm a nice calm person." And then I just kind of forgot. "Oh, that was just an anomaly." But then of course this person reminded me, "Remember that time when you got so angry?" I'm like, "Yeah, right." There was this way I just wanted to forget it and pretend like it didn't happen because it didn't fit the view I had of myself. But no, I did. I did get angry. So there's a way in

which sometimes we kind of pretend like things are not there, or we collapse when things fall off the shelf of what we're doing.

So in this poem, Jane Hirshfield talks about this a little bit. She writes that when the cat jumps up onto the shelf, "As if on their own, two hands fly up to cover the person's face, to cover the eyes already closed." So this flinch, like, "Oh no." And this is fascinating, right? Because maybe even before a thought has happened, even before you know anything, there's just this flinch that happens. It's not a carefully thought out response. It's not bringing to mind, "Oh yeah, that's right. There are these three characteristics of things and we know that things change, they're impermanent, and we know there isn't a static self, and we know that there's dukkha, suffering." None of that is available, right? No, it's just not available. Instead, there is this flinch like, "Oh no." And I appreciate how Jane Hirshfield is pointing to how that's often what happens when our sense of self of who we are gets threatened.

We could say that maybe this is what conditioning is, too. This is what happens when Buddhist wisdom, any wisdom, isn't available. On an intellectual level, we recognize and understand that things change. But when the shelf gets bumped and the things come off, there's this flinching. Part of this practice can be recognizing this quiet flinching. I talked about quiet terror and quiet flinching. This is subtle. I'm not talking about the everyday obvious things that happen, but there's often a way we're thinking, "Oh, I hope that things go a certain way," and we're kind of bracing ourselves against life and against what might arise next or what has already arisen. There is this way in which we contract, and the way that we often want to not acknowledge. Like maybe as the kerosene lantern is falling from the shelf and it hasn't crashed yet, maybe there's a way in which we think, "Oh, if I don't look, then maybe it won't happen." There's this way in which we brace ourselves, and this is a subtle thing, but we can start to see it with our meditation practice.

The more we allow the body and the mind to experience some ease and some openness, the more sensitive it becomes to the non-openness. Right? When we experience ease, non-ease becomes more and more apparent. And that's part of the way that meditation practice supports our having more and more freedom: just this increased sensitivity.

And then the poem goes on, and I love this line, "The crash, as it must, arrives." It's just saying it's inevitable. I mean, those of us who know cats, right, we know this. If they're not bumping them, they want to knock them off. But it's just, you know, things change.

And then the poem goes on, "The hands lower slowly." So there's a way that the hands come down and the eyes open up and we actually meet what has happened. We actually meet the broken lantern on the ground, whatever it is. We could say this is the practice, or this is a type of awakening in the sense of no longer pretending that's not there, but instead just meeting the

reality of the moment. It was unexpected. It was not what we wanted. But can we meet it anyway? This is a big part of what practice is about: just to meet what life is offering us as best we can. As best we can. We don't always get it right in terms of meeting it. "Get it right" doesn't feel good to say. We're not always open to whatever is arising. We're not machines. We're humans, right? So of course. But there is this way in which, when we have the resources, when we have the courage in the moment to just meet what's actually here. What's the truth about what's going on in my inner life? What's the truth about what's going on in my environment that's impacting me?

And then the poem continues, and Jane Hirshfield writes, "The cat sits on the floor in the room's middle, calmly licking one paw. The law of cats is simple. One arrangement becomes another." It's just the next thing. One arrangement becomes another. I like this word "arrangement" because we could say this is a little bit what we're doing with this sense of self: it's an arrangement. Not only have we captured things and fossilized them and made them static in some way, but we've arranged them in a particular way. So, one arrangement becomes another. Of course, we have roles and histories and patterns and ways of understanding ourselves, but they're always changing and they're always arranging themselves. That's just what happens. The conditions change. One arrangement becomes another.

Then Jane Hirshfield has this last line which I just think is so great: "People are strange." What's interesting here is what she's not saying. She's not saying people are foolish. People are silly. They're bad. She's not saying any of this kind of stuff. Instead, for me it reads like a little bit of tenderness there. This way in which she's recognizing, if we have this cat as the foil, "Oh yeah, us humans, we tangle ourselves up unnecessarily." Maybe she has a certain tenderness there. So I would say that the point when she's saying that we're strange is not to scold us for maybe loving the lanterns and feeling disappointed and hurt and sad when the lantern falls off. When something falls off the shelf and shatters, she's not saying that we have to have a complete absence of feeling. We can just recognize, "Yeah, it hurts." Loss, grief, and that could be part of how the arrangement changes. Maybe that's something else that gets added.

So, the practice isn't just about eliminating this flinch when we're going to see something falling off the shelf, but maybe the practice is about lowering the hands from the eyes and just seeing what's actually here. The new arrangement. The new arrangement. And maybe that highlights something that we had been trying so hard to preserve. Maybe it highlights this way in which things that we had identified with, which we didn't even recognize we were taking as being an integral part of ourselves. Just one arrangement becoming another.

So I'll end by reading this poem again. *Two Kerosene Lanterns* by Jane Hirshfield.

The cat walks the narrow shelf beneath the window where many delicate things are arranged. Polished ammonites, a dried starfish, three netsuke, a few curls of birch bark, two long unused kerosene lanterns. As if on their own, two hands fly up to cover the person's face, to cover the eyes already closed. The crash, as it must, arrives. The hands lower slowly. The cat sits on the floor in the room's middle, calmly licking one paw. The law of cats is simple. One arrangement becomes another. People are strange.

Maybe on that note, I'll end. [Laughter] Thank you. And I'll open it up to see if there are some questions or comments.

Q&A

Yogi: I really appreciate the way you carefully illuminated the aspects of the poem that flew by me on the first reading. I think what you had to say was really insightful, and the directions that you took it were also very insightful, and I feel like I learned something. So, thank you.

Diana Clark: You're welcome. Thank you. Someone else?

Yogi: You know, one thing I kept thinking about was looking at the line, "one arrangement becomes another," because life can be so chaotic and confusing. Chaotic is the word. And so the cat thinking of this as "one arrangement becomes another," that's sort of the Buddhist teaching at work in a way. That it was random before and it's random whatever it evolves into.

Diana Clark: That's exactly right. Yeah. Right. And it is chaotic, I would say, because chaotic implies that it's out of control. We don't control it. We want to, but we don't control it.

Yogi: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.

Yogi: Hi. Thank you so much. There's just so much food for thought in what you were sharing today with that poem. And I was thinking about all that stuff that was sitting on the shelf, like it wasn't really even being enjoyed, right? It was just sitting there, and you know, humans are like that. We have all these things that we try to preserve, as you said, and there are so many things like the treasures that were on the shelf, like we don't need that. Our treasures are within. So maybe I was thinking about the kerosene lamps, and I was kind of thinking like, well, maybe not used because there was no light shed on the soul within and the life within. That was one thought I had. And then thinking about the cat, right? Cats are so in the moment, right? And we would be wise to model being more like cats or dogs. The cat is not tripping about what happened five minutes ago. They're not worried about what's going to happen 10 minutes from now either, right? So, thank you for that reminder.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Great. Thank you. You're welcome.

Yogi: So, being such a mortal that I am, I mean, I love the poem and I'm also left with the feeling of like, "But there's a whole bunch of broken glass and kerosene can burn and it's dangerous." So, I'm just left with that anxiety also.

Diana Clark: But the next arrangement could be a broom and a dustpan.

Yogi: Fair enough.

Diana Clark: Or fire. Or fire. [Laughter] No, it could be fire also. It could be, right? We don't know. We don't know. But it said "kerosene lanterns long unused."

Yogi: Right. Yeah. So maybe there's no more. So that was my assumption that there wasn't any in there. But I think the point of the poem is that cats shouldn't be trusted.

Diana Clark: Cats shouldn't be trusted. [Laughter]

Yogi: But also you mentioned, I think you alluded to this, but I think it's important that we give ourselves some grace and room to grieve, you know, when there's some loss and shock also, right? So that's all I wanted to say.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Right. Thank you for highlighting that. Yeah. Right. We are human. Of course, we're going to have emotions when things that are important to us break. Okay. Maybe we'll come back here.

Yogi: I liked the reference to the flinching and that it's automatic to have that reaction and that's okay. It's noticing that you're doing it. And I think that's kind of the practice of meditation. When your mind wanders, you notice that and you come back. And when you flinch, you notice that and you try to appreciate the new arrangement or whatnot.

Diana Clark: Yeah. And in the poem, one thing that I appreciate is opening the eyes afterwards, then like, "Oh, okay. What's actually here?"

Yogi: Yeah. I really like that.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Me, too.

Yogi: I must say that I did not appreciate or like the statement "people are strange." [Laughter] Because in so many ways it's really, the reaction of covering the eyes is a deep safety. And it is such a part of our design. In other words, our nervous system will startle. And there is a powerful protective quality to that. And so perhaps what the "people are strange" is a little bit of a protest to that which we are designed for. Covering the eyes when something breaks, right, is a really protective inborn design that is undeniable.

Diana Clark: Yeah, I would agree. Right. It's a reflex. It's a little bit of protesting compared to cats perhaps, and it's quite understandable. It's very understandable to think people are strange. We

are. And perhaps what it's really talking about is, people are strange because they are wanting to hold on to things that inevitably will change.

Yogi: Yeah. That's perhaps what is strange, but yet we are designed for that. We have memory and we build bonds as a way to survive, and so I think what I want to highlight is the deep humanity in that, even the design that we have to protect ourselves.

Diana Clark: When we might not actually be able to construct that. Yeah.

Yogi: For me, I was thinking about "people are strange." In my mind, it was the preceding line that says, "The law of cats is simple. One arrangement becomes another. People are strange." So, it wasn't about the flinching is what's making the people strange. It's that people are surprised that one arrangement becomes another. That people don't want arrangements to become another, but they do.

Diana Clark: Yeah. But it's such a part of being human. Yeah, it is just this suchness of being human. It's in our design. And yeah, there are many other ways in which, yeah, perhaps part of the ego can be... and yet it's so protective and is so human. I would say though that the Buddha is pointing to there doesn't have to be this clinging.

Yogi: Um, well, but there needs to be the startle. Yeah, it's part of our humanness.

Diana Clark: Yeah, that's right. Reflex. Of course. Of course. Nice. Thank you.

Yogi: Love the poem. I'm a cat owner and I used to be a kerosene lamp owner. I want to speak on behalf of the flinch because glass flew. But to me, as a cat owner, that last line, "people are strange." To me that's totally the cat looking at the situation and the person going, "people are strange." [Laughter] You know my cats all the time look around and go, "What?" [Laughter]

Diana Clark: That's so cute. I love it. But I do think like...

Yogi: To the cat, it looks strange. But the cat is commenting on the richness of the human experience which has positive and negative.

Diana Clark: Okay. There we go. It's the cat, the last line is for the cat. Okay. Very nice. In the graphic novel of this poem that you're going to create for us, [Laughter] it's in the thought balloon. Oh, the last frame. Very nice. Challenge accepted! Okay. Very nice. Fantastic. Okay. Well, wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening. Safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Jane Hirshfield:** American poet, essayist, and translator, known for her Zen Buddhist-inspired works. ↩
2. **Tassajara:** Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, a Soto Zen practice center in California. ↩

3. **Netsuke:** Miniature sculptures invented in 17th-century Japan to serve a practical function on traditional garments. ↩
4. **Upādāna:** A Pali and Sanskrit word meaning "clinging," "attachment," or "grasping." ↩
5. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." ↩

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