

Golden Wind Dharma Talk

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Good morning.

This day feels like a gift.

When the tree withers and the leaves fall—what’s that?

The golden wind reveals itself.

Autumn feels vivid now. The trees let go. I sweep over and over as the leaves turn gold and red. From my office window, I can see this one tree so clearly that I’ve become intimately aware of every season it has. It tends to turn a little more yellow-brown and drops its leaves a little later. It’s really something—to become so intimate with a single tree.

The light slants lower now. It’s kind of magical—the way it looks and reveals the edges of things differently. It feels like a hush comes over everything after the manic moments of Halloween. Things slow down. There’s something in the air—crisp and bracing, but also filled with a sense of completion, or maybe even of loss.

So, when the tree withers and the leaves fall—what’s that?

It’s such a beautiful question—so human and poignant. It holds within it the ache of endings: the difficulty when the body changes and grows old, when the world changes, when the people we love change, and sometimes it all feels unrecognizable. What is this? What’s happening to the world, to my body, to the people I love?

The great old master replies:

“The golden wind reveals itself.”

The mind is an artist—ceaselessly creating. It paints the moment over with stories: who I am, what this means, what should come next. Even in practice, we notice how easy it is to step out of the moment and into narrative. The breath becomes *my* breath. A falling leaf becomes *my* loss. A moment of stillness becomes *my* peace.

But the old Taoists used to say, *Don’t make a plan. This is the Way.*

Let the dance dance you. Remove the barriers to life—even your own ideas of what it should be. Exclude nothing. Whatever arises belongs.

Perhaps this is what Yúnmén is showing us: that when the tree withers and the leaves fall—when the forms we love come and go—the stories thin out, become lighter, looser. The mind’s artistic brush begins to paint more in watercolor than in oil.

What's that?

The golden wind reveals itself.

Yúnmén's reply doesn't offer comfort or doctrine or theory. It's just *this*—just this golden wind. The kōan doesn't point toward future awakening or hidden truth. It points to this very moment: when the tree is bare, when what we cherish falls away, when what we thought we could rely on is no longer sturdy. There's not much left to hold on to.

When the tree withers and the leaves fall—it's not a mistake. It's not a tragedy. It's the world showing us its true face: transience, change, radiance, release.

When Yúnmén says *the golden wind reveals itself*, he isn't pointing to what is lost, but to what is revealed when loss has done its work. When everything unnecessary—and maybe even some things we thought were necessary—has dropped away, what remains is vast and unchanging. And we can build an allegiance with what remains.

(Pause.)

Michelle is coming in—let's pause. Michelle coming in feels like one of those leaves going back under the tree.

I was once in Yosemite in autumn, lying beneath a tree as the leaves were falling one by one. I was in a contemplative mood, watching them drift down, when suddenly one flew back up and landed on the branch again. It was a butterfly.

Thank you for being the butterfly.

So our kōan today, Michelle, is:

When the tree withers and the leaves fall, what's that?

The golden wind reveals itself.

Is it the butterfly?

Yes—right.

The golden wind isn't something separate from loss or decay—it moves through it all. You can feel it in the breath that comes after a long cry, or in that moment of clarity that follows grief—the strange brightness revealed when something is lost. This is the kind of revelation Yúnmén is pointing to. It's not a transcendent vision; it's an intimacy with the way things are—which are always changing.

The golden wind moves through our lives when we finally stop resisting change. And boy, do we resist change. It's human nature. But the golden wind is the feeling of being carried by something we didn't make, can't control, and that's always here—tender and immense.

So today, in this bright, crisp autumn day, we sit among fallen leaves and within our own withering and letting go. Perhaps something in your life is ending—a stage of work, a relationship, a version of yourself you've outgrown, or a vision of the future you thought you

might have. Sometimes loss is subtle, like the shortening of days or the quiet turning of your own body through time. And sometimes change is breathtakingly sharp, like the sudden loss of someone vital—or even just the surprise of this morning’s hour.

I remember when my father was dying—it was autumn. He was at home, in hospice. I sat with him on his last day, in a light that came through high windows—thin and golden, like autumn light often is. His breath was shallow, jagged, the way people breathe when they are nearing the end. I had worked in hospice, so I knew this was it. I could feel that boundary between life and death dissolving.

It’s an awesome thing to sit with someone who is dying. Outside, the leaves were letting go of their branches, and sometimes one would drift by. Inside, I felt the same movement. Everything was exhaling—the world, me, him—life itself letting go, and yet radiantly gold. There was grief, of course, and other complicated emotions, but also an extraordinary stillness.

It’s hard to describe how one person can feel so many things at once. It almost felt transcendent, as if life were revealing its patterns—the way things ripen and fall away in their own time. There was the naturalness of it, and the grief, and the awe. I remember feeling like nothing was actually wrong, even though everything was wrong. The beauty and the heartbreak were braided together—one tapestry.

It’s so vivid still, not just as memory, but in my very cells.

Just as the light began to dim, he took his last breath. There was something complete about it. The golden wind, perhaps, moved through the room—through his breath and mine together. I was breathing with him, just breathing together.

Perhaps this is the same wind Yúnmén spoke of—the one that moves when there’s nothing left to hold on to. The one that carries us along without promises or destinations. In that light, everything is both transient and luminous at once.

In our practice, we don’t try to make the leaves go back up the tree—unless they happen to be butterflies. We don’t try to restore what’s falling. We just listen. We breathe. We allow and accompany, as the tree does, as the leaf does.

In all the pain and poignancy, the golden wind reveals itself. When we stop clutching what’s fading, something luminous moves through the space. Yúnmén doesn’t say *the golden wind appears*—he says *it reveals itself*. That means it’s been here all along, perhaps hidden by our grasping, by our need for permanence, by the fullness of life itself. It’s only when things fall away that we can feel its true touch—and perhaps receive its blessing.

It’s not the easiest blessing, but it’s real.

Sometimes this revelation is gentle—a cool breeze brushing your cheek. Other times it’s fierce, blowing through the center of your being and carrying everything away. Either way, the wind is a kind of love—an elemental love that takes and gives.

In autumn, the world practices with us—practicing loss, change, transition, a deep exhale. The hills exhale, the grasses bow down, the air grows transparent. We're less alone in our letting go, because all of life is doing it with us. Every exhale is a release—and a manifestation of the golden wind.

The golden wind is not outside of you. It's the movement of awakening revealed in the midst of change and letting go. It's what remains when there's nothing left to explain—when we set down the paintbrushes of the mind and hear only the subtle sound of the leaves touching the ground, and the trembling ache of the heart.

Within that ache, if we don't rush to fix or name it, the golden wind begins to move. It's the place beyond narratives and striving—the clear, immediate world before us.

The ancient Taoists had a word for this: *ziran*—the self-so-ness of things, the way everything expresses itself naturally and spontaneously when we stop trying to control it. When we live from this place, we let life create itself through us, moment by moment. Life becomes the center of things—not our stories or opinions.

There's an old saying that your very heart is the mind of the Buddha—not the judging or planning mind, but the intimate mind that grieves, feels, and hears the wind.

We sometimes imagine awakening as a grand unveiling, but it's actually simpler. Awakening is removing the barriers between ourselves and our lives. We don't have to add anything—we just stop excluding what's already here.

So, can we open ourselves to the golden wind—to change, to loss, to the luminosity it brings? Every moment we turn toward, rather than away, the golden wind reveals itself.

You can feel it now—in the air on your skin, in the small movements of your breath, in the stillness of the room. It's all alive. It's all golden wind.

Yes, the mind is an artist, and that's not a mistake. But sometimes that art becomes a veil instead of a window. The stories we paint can obscure the sky. To “exclude nothing,” as the old teacher said, means not to stand outside your life editing and judging it, but to let the mess, the heartbreak, and the ordinary all be part of the dance. Let go of the story that it should be otherwise.

The golden wind doesn't only blow through perfect moments. It reveals itself most clearly when things fall apart—when the story collapses, when what you thought you had drifts away, when the mind shines through the gaps in the story.

So as we sit together on this autumn day, let's feel for the presence of the golden wind. Notice how everything is shining—green, gold, brown branches, the cooling air. The golden wind can show itself in so many ways. And in that moment, you can feel for yourself that what is leaving and what is being revealed are not two separate things.

Thank you.