

Zen Bow

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RELATIONSHIPS

Zen Bow: Relationships

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Andy Stern

Zen Practice as Relationship Work

ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

When 20-year-old Sonja (now Sunya) Kjolhede was working on Mu in 1970, it was the pre-eminent relationship in her life. She was so engaged with Mu that she would sometimes find herself making it stand in for the love object in song lyrics she was hearing. In popular songs on the radio and in department stores she would hear ‘I love you ...,’ ‘I want you ...,’ ‘I long for you ...,’ and in her mind it became directed to Mu. After several 7-day sesshins she consummated her relationship with Mu, and as a Zen teacher for the past twenty years she has been spurring on others to do the same. (Sunya-sensei, one of my sisters, is co-teacher at the Windhorse Zen Community, located near Asheville, NC.)

When we take up a Zen concentration practice, such as the breath or a koan, we enter a relationship. It is a relationship like no other because no ‘other’ is involved. Yet daily meditation will clarify and enrich all our ‘other’ relationships—with spouses, partners of every kind, friends, co-workers, family members, neighbors, and teachers and students. It has this alchemical power because in meditation we are engaging the basic issues at the root of all self/other dynamics. It’s not surprising that the rewards we realize in meditation will be reflected in our other relationships.

The work involved in a breath or koan practice demands above all that we reach unity with

the practice—or rather, that we see that we’ve never been apart from the breath or from the essence of the koan. So it is, too, with our partner in a romantic relationship. Although all relationships require enough harmony for the parties to *relate*, in romantic ones the element of unity is most highlighted. Without a sense of oneness, love can’t get started.

Zen practice is the practice of intimacy itself. Over time we discover that to experience the world unmediated by thoughts is to experience our indissoluble oneness with it. Hakuin cried out, ‘I am the sun and the moon and the stars and the wide, wide earth.’ And it all begins with our work with the breath, with Mu, or with any koan.

Long before finding Zen, we are in the market for intimacy. To be human is to long for connection, even if some of us show the opposite inclination. This reaching for connection is our True Nature seeking to know itself, turning away from the illusion of separateness. Most people, it seems, respond to this call the only way they know—by seeking a partner, or at least conceiving of the ‘other’ as a woman or man. Fortunate are they who recognize that relationships are most likely to thrive when grounded in the self-understanding acquired through meditation. Without this foundation, every partnership sits on the fault line where self-concept and other-concept meet. This face-off then gives rise to projections and false perceptions of every kind.

In working on our particular practice we are really working on ourself, with the self. This is the quintessential relationship, so it’s bound to reflect the dynamics of a loving relationship with another.

It’s rare to initiate a new practice relationship blindly; most of us read about it first, if only on the Internet. We come to practice having already done some window-shopping with the mind-body methods that are out there (a kind of spiritual version of scanning online dating sites). We know that something is missing in our life, and we want relief. We’re ready for an awareness relationship. The test comes with

the transition from hearing about meditation to practicing it—from reading, say, an online profile to making it a face-to-face experience.

Now, how does a seeker know whether the Dharma, in particular, is a good match for him or her? At his introductory workshops, Roshi Kapleau used to tell the story of a young man who went to a rabbi and asked, ‘How do I find the right woman for me?’ The rabbi paused, and then replied, ‘It is more important to *be* the right one than to find the right one.’

If our affinity with the Dharma is ripe, we’ll find it. But then are we ready to engage with this new partner in a way that is more than casual? It depends on how unsatisfied our earlier dalliances have left us. Some people enjoy a variety of partners too much to settle down. They love novelty, sometimes for many years at a stretch. Such dabblers would do well to consider the warning implicit in these words from the Indian tradition: ‘If there is water ten feet below ground, you can drill all the wells you want that are nine feet deep and you’ll never hit water.’

Whether a seeker is exposed to the Dharma at a Zen center or through personal reading, it’s the tenor of the tradition she’s responding to at first. This means the body of forms—the outward structure, the vocabulary—and the style, or ‘wind of the house,’ as the Japanese say. If these ‘relations’ don’t rub us the wrong way, we may take the next step. We’ve met the family, and though the initial practice we’re given by an instructor is not of our choosing, we’re willing to meet with it over coffee a few times. We shake hands with it, and what happens next no one can predict.

It would push the ‘partnership’ metaphor too far to suggest that this new practice could get one’s heart racing the way a budding romantic relationship can. After all, it’s like an opening assignment, the standard first step in Zen. The instructor is a matchmaker of sorts, and what comes of this pairing depends on our ability to focus. The more attention we can bring to the breath, the more interesting this new partner becomes. It’s really all in our hands.

As with any relationship, we come to practice

toting our share of baggage. But unlike in other relationships, our partner in this practice, the breath or koan, brings no baggage of its own to the relationship. The sitter has only his own encumbrances to deal with. Yet how complicated we make this relationship!

Those without experience in meditation may imagine that it lifts us to ‘higher’ states—to the bright, pure realm of the spirit. And it does, eventually, but usually not until we’ve passed through the fear, pride, frustration, and other shadows cast by the self. We bring these habit forces, or karmic patterns, to Zen practice as much as to any relationship. But they tend to be exposed more sharply in working with a koan than with the breath. Since koans are articulated in the form of words, they have a ‘thingness’ to them that the breath does not. As such, a koan highlights the dynamics of a personal relationship more than does the breath practice. For this reason and for the sake of simplicity, I will use the koan Mu to stand for all breakthrough koans and other concentration practices as they relate to romantic relationships.

In the beginning, working on Mu may feel as something of a relief. Rather than trying to track a process—the breath—we have a fixed target to focus on: the word Mu. Now we’ve entered a relationship with a kind of entity. We have an ‘other’ to address. During our earlier, breath-focused practice, we were becoming acquainted with the mind, and now we’ve committed to that mind as Mu.

Mu is but another word for our True Nature. Other words for it are ‘tree,’ ‘shoe,’ ‘wrench,’ ‘cannoli’—every single thing is It. There is nothing outside our True Nature. But to concentrate on most other words as our practice would invite thoughts and concepts. In focusing on Mu instead, we are facing the Mind that is unobscured by learning, unclouded by meaning. We are working with an unknown partner in his or her two aspects: mind and Mind. We sense that this Mu is both self and non-self. This is like no relationship we’ve ever had before, and we may feel mysteriously drawn to this ‘other’ that is not ‘other.’

Soon enough into our work on Mu, we find that it seems to have a mind of its own. We want simply to merge with it, but it remains apart. We mentally grasp at it, thinking that if we just try harder, it will be ours. Still it eludes us. Unable to have our way with Mu, we become frustrated. Why should this be so hard, when we sense that this new partner, as the matchmaker had told us, is essentially our own self?

Koans were devised, in ancient China, as the most direct route to Awakening, and only when we told our teacher that yes, that was what we aspired to, did he match us up with this partner. Is it surprising, then, that at first we see Mu primarily as our ticket to Awakening? As long as we do, however, the heart of Mu will remain closed to us.

It would be like a woman pairing up with a man (or vice-versa) in order to use him as a rung in social climbing. They may have something going between them, but as long as her primary interest is elsewhere, she’ll miss the treasure that is his unique being. Only by pouring our attention into Mu for its own sake will we truly see it. Until then we may think we’re working on Mu, but that work is not whole-hearted—which we realize only later, if we persevere with it.

A basic element of Buddhist doctrine is that of the Five Hindrances: desire, aversion, restlessness, torpor, and doubt. Earnest work on Mu may elicit any of these or all of them. No viable relationship, whether with a koan or a person, is free of these hindrances. If it seems to be so, then either it’s not an authentic relationship or we’re in denial of these impediments. They are as follows:

Desire: We come to this relationship with self-centered expectations—‘What will it do for me?’ We want something from Mu for ourself rather than devoting ourself to it for its own sake. Although this hunger is natural enough, it is ultimately a fetter in our practice. This impurity in motivation is itself an impediment.

Aversion: Unable to bend our partner Mu to our will, we feel frustrated. Mu is not delivering the goods. Anger may arise, as it does for some people only when they’ve reached the trust in



John Kralles

their partner that comes with greater intimacy. These negative reactions are hindrances, but at least there's now a charge to this relationship; it's coming alive. We may also go through some disappointment, but this also signals the erosion of expectations—a sign of progress. Even disillusionment shows we're getting somewhere—sloughing off the illusion of a self in control.

Restlessness: With our partner now having 'failed' us, the honeymoon is over. Sitting becomes harder. We prefer to do anything than hang in there with Mu. When we do get to the mat, we're more willing to use the time there to lay plans, solve problems, even just fantasize. Random thoughts that we had learned to ignore have a new appeal. Impatience sets in.

Torpor: When we were ardently involved with Mu, we had plenty of energy available, but with our attention on it having lapsed, our vitality has waned. Without that interest in our partner, life has gone flat, practice burdensome. Boredom sets in. This relationship requires too much work, it seems, so we take a path of least resistance: TV, web surfing, novels, even sleep.

Doubt: Once our faith in our partner has stalled, we question the value of the whole practice—was this partnership a mistake? We look and notice others who've called it quits, and wonder—is it time to cut our losses and get out?

What saves us from succumbing to these primary threats to our partnership practice is awareness—Manjusri's delusion-cutting sword. If in our grasping, our aversions, our restlessness, our inertia, or our doubts we recognize them as transitory mind-body phenomena, we can avoid identifying with them. Once we notice them as mind states, with no abiding reality to them, we can bring our beacon of attention back to our partner, Mu, and see these vexing states recede and even disappear. No passing phenomena can stand up to single-minded attention focused on that which is beyond phenomena.

If, on the other hand, we allow ourselves to lose heart when bedeviled by these hindrances, our mind's eye may begin wandering—'Maybe I have the wrong koan. Wouldn't _____ be better for me?' Well, it is just possible. Leaving our partner—Mu, spouse, lover—is not always

a mistake. In practice as in love, our needs can change over time, and breaking up can be an adaptive move. But in switching partners we're taking our afflictions with us. A new koan might bring a lift to our practice at first, but what are the odds that once the novelty passes the grass will actually be greener on the other side of the fence?

Running into obstacles is itself the Way. A genuine relationship with our partner Mu is sure to expose our blind spots and attachments. If all is smooth in the relationship, chances are there's not much cultivating going on. Difficulties signal opportunities for insight and development, and to turn elsewhere in response to them suggests avoidance. 'Look directly!' Zen master Bassui urged, and when our partner is Mu that means not looking away when we feel at odds with it.

But the human tendency to flee the throes of relationship work should make a committed partner suspicious of that impulse. Better to give the benefit of the doubt to the partner we wedded instead of looking elsewhere. The great Sufi mystic Rumi might have been channeling Mu when he said, 'When you are with everyone but me, you're with no one. When you are with no one but me, you're with everyone.'

If we can devote ourselves exclusively to our partner Mu (or any koan), without trafficking in thoughts, it will come to reveal itself as utterly complete, and without defects. In order to reach this liberating discovery, we have to stay with it through temptation and every kind of trouble. It requires, in a word, fidelity—faithful devotion to one's obligations or vows. Although partnering with Mu involves no vows as such, it is a relationship founded on commitment.

Faith in our partner Mu is indispensable, but for us to flourish together also requires renewing the relationship with ongoing, conscious attentiveness. If we take our partner for granted, things will get stale—the mu-ing becomes mechanical, the relationship stagnant. This is just co-habiting—a far cry from the vehicle for growth that a healthy relationship can be.

A common bit of advice for nourishing an actual marriage is to give gifts, such as flowers, jewelry, clothes, electronic or sports equipment, and tickets to events. But nothing goes as far as the gift of attention. This means *being present with*—and noticing. In our presence we are watching ... listening ... sensing this 'other' that is not other than ourselves. This is *dana* (giving) at its purest.

Is there anything more important for a healthy relationship than *dana*? Relationships between humans involve negotiations around fairness—'Is one of us giving (doing household tasks, sacrificing) more than we're receiving?' But in partnership with a koan there are no such complications, no room for trading. The only question is: Am I giving everything, or not? By and by we learn that the more attention we pour into Mu, the more rewarding the relationship becomes.

One of the returns we enjoy from lavishing attention on our partner Mu is that it invariably becomes more interesting. Interest grows into curiosity, which invites even more attentiveness on our part—and draws us still closer to our partner. But as we are on the verge of being completely absorbed by Mu (or is it vice-versa?), we face the ultimate test: are we ready to die?

In Zen, to 'die' is to relinquish the self, or rather, our attachment to the mental composite of memories, images, associations, and other thought-forms that we imagine to be the 'self.' Fear of death, then, is really the fear of the self disappearing. This most fundamental of human fears is usually too much to face at first. So as we're about to merge with our partner Mu and see both 'self' and 'other' vanish into what-we-don't-know, in panic we may flee from this dissolution into the 'safe' world we know: thought. We stray again.

In the 1987 movie *Moonstruck*, Olympia Dukakis plays the wife of a philandering husband, and we see her learning of yet another affair her husband has been having. In anguish, she looks skyward and, wringing her hands, cries out, 'Why? Why do men cheat on their wives?'

Then we see the answer come to her as a revelation: 'Because,' she exclaims almost triumphantly, 'they are afraid to die!' On the cusp of dying to Mu, we avert our gaze and clutch at the 'known': the world of other-self. If there is fear of intimacy in our romantic relationships, it will be exposed in our work with Mu—until this Dharma gate, too, dissolves.

The fear of death may present itself in romantic relationships as fear of intimacy. If this is one of our issues, it will also show itself in our work with Mu, when, on the cusp of disappearing into it, we turn away. If we have enough faith in our partner Mu and are truly committed to the relationship, we will have the courage to look directly into and through this primitive fear. Then we can find ourself drawn into Mu more than ever.

This marks a turning point. Now the relationship is pulsating with life, the very opposite of the flat, safe ground of a static marriage. We've ventured beyond the known and familiar: 'What, really, is this Mu that we've been co-existing with for so long? What is this "other" that is so discrete yet ungraspable, so "there" yet "not there"?' We realize that the one we thought we'd known all this time is not the True One. Our partner has slipped the bounds of what can be known.

'Not knowing is the greatest intimacy,' declared tenth-century Chinese Zen master Luohan Guichen. He knew that since there is no unchanging self-identity to anything, 'knowing' is an illusion. For how can we reach any con-

clusions about what is in constant flux? Learning to continually relinquish our fixed notions of our partner may take years of zazen, but doing so rewards us with an ever-new partner (no lack of novelty then!). When a Rinzai roshi and friend of Roshi Kapleau from Japan visited the Zen Center in the early 1970s, we breathlessly asked him, 'How long did you work on Mu?' His staunch reply: 'I'm *still* working on Mu!'

Roshi Kapleau used to quote the words of a sage commenting on the mystery of love: 'In order to understand someone, you need to love [merge with] her. But once you love her, you don't need to understand her.'

When we come to see Mu—or our spouse or child or teacher—in all of its confounding contradictions, we have arrived at the threshold of truly understanding it. From this state of wonder, what do we do next? If our partner Mu is truly perplexing, we will have no choice but to search questioningly, which is the most compelling way of losing ourself—the self—in rapt attention. This giving, or giving *up* what we cling to, is the highest form of love. Surely this is what Rainer Maria Rilke meant when he used the word 'love' in advising a young artist, but it would also well serve anyone working on a koan or in the throes of any search:

The artist's function is to love the enigma.
All art is this:

Love which has been poured out over
enigmas—and all works of art are enigmas
surrounded, adorned, enveloped by love.



Tom Kowal

Living With Me

ALLEN BROADMAN

You have probably come across ‘mad’ people in the street incessantly talking or muttering to themselves. Well, that’s not much different from what ... ‘normal’ people do, except that you don’t do it out loud.

—Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*

I’ve had my fair share of friendships that burned out, romantic relationships that ended poorly, roommates who were ready to kill me and be killed by me, and other similar troubles. But the difficulties of such relationships have been dwarfed by the problems I’ve had living with myself. There is no doubt, *I* am the most difficult person I’ve ever had to deal with.

‘Living with myself’ is such an unusual phrase. Are there two selves? One who does the *living with* and one who is *being lived with*? That’s weird, but nonetheless it is often how things feel. We try to reason with ourselves, negotiate with ourselves, get angry at ourselves, or please

ourselves or obtain self-satisfaction—we experience all kinds of relationship to our self, whatever that ‘self’ might be.

Maybe things would be easier if there were just a feeling of a single ‘myself’ to deal with, but is there really only one? It often feels to me more like there is a noisy group of selves, competing for attention, trying to be heard, and working to influence the final outcome of deliberations—trying to determine how I eventually speak and act. I must admit that after over 45 years of living with them all, I can’t stand some of these guys.

For example, I have to deal with a self who loves chocolate. Not in an ordinary ‘I’d like a little piece of chocolate’ kind of way, but more like, ‘Let’s stop everything we’re doing right now and scour the internet for the best Swiss milk chocolate on planet Earth.’ In general, I try to live healthfully by eating well and exercising, but this chocolate-self-guy is always messing

things up. He doesn't stop with one little piece of chocolate either, believe me. Who wants to live with a self like that? Who needs all that sugar? You cannot imagine how much chocolate that guy can eat.

In the bigger picture of things, this chocolate-self-guy isn't really a serious problem—he's like a mildly annoying acquaintance. If I only had to contend with him and his chocolate cravings, living with myself would be a cakewalk. But there are some other selves hanging around who can really screw things up for me.

There is the self who wants to control everything—who wants to make every situation turn out 'right' at all costs. That controlling self is bossy, demanding, and never satisfied—what a pleasure he is to have around. And there is the self-critic, who perhaps is a roommate of the controlling-self. The self-critic has something negative to say about everything I do—every decision is a poor one in the eyes of the self-critic, every job should have been done better or faster, and every action falls short of the infinitely high bar for success that he sets. That critic self-guy is an absolute nightmare. Who could live with such a person? Am I really to blame for not wanting to spend time around him?

Over the years, I've tried many things to make dealing with myself easier. I've raised the white flag over and over, in the hopes of finding a lasting truce with these many selves, but usually the best that happens is just a temporary cease fire. And I can't seem to lose these guys—I can run as fast as possible, in any direction, but they keep up the pace and eventually overtake me. I can hide anywhere, but they find me. I can distract myself with all kinds of sights and sounds: with TV or music, or video games, but they always find their way back to me, eager to comment on something I've said or done. They really have no manners at all. If these selves were people, *nobody* would have anything to do with them. These are the kinds of selves that do not get invited back to parties a second time.

In fairness, not every self in the 'myself' mix is so bad. There are some selves who urge me

on when I feel as if I've hit a wall. And there are some that encourage compassion and understanding, and still some others who have a little wisdom to share once in a while. But still, what is a person to do with all these selves, good or bad, for better or for worse, until death do us part? How does one live with a mind crowded to capacity with this self and that self, and that other self over there in the corner? For me, Zen practice has been one effective way to manage this unruly crowd.

When the mind quiets down, all these selves take on a different quality. Their 'selfness' is reduced and they become less of a personality. Rather than cohesive self-entities, they are distinct patterns of thought that persist and repeat. With a sufficiently calm mind, the controlling 'self' is revealed as not truly having its own independent self-reality. It turns out to be a habitual way of thinking in a certain way—a controlling way—and is exposed as quite the one-trick pony. The controlling 'self' turns out to be no self at all—just a particular pattern of thought. Admittedly, it can be a very persistent and stubborn pattern, a pattern that sometimes feels as if it will never, ever go away.

But a pattern of thought is *so* much easier to live with than a controlling self-entity. Dealing with a stubborn pattern of thought is like having a difficult house guest, while a controlling self-entity is more like having a demonic possession. House guests can be managed until they inevitably depart—it just takes hard work and patient endurance. But that's still a lot easier than calling in an exorcist. Really, where could you even *find* a good exorcist nowadays? We can never win a fight against our own selves, whether they are controlling-selves or critic-selves, or whatever. We can't win because from the very beginning the fight is fixed. The self-fight is framed in a way that gives a concrete, self-existence to that which doesn't really have any self-existence—it's like fighting a ghost. But we *can* deal with patterns of thought, and working skillfully with thoughts is exactly one of the great abilities that earnest Zen practice cultivates. Zen prac-

tice helps us reframe the very situation itself. It helps change the nature of our relationship with ourselves, which puts us in a better position to manage this crowd of ‘personalities’ who from the very beginning have been nothing but uninvited house guests—complex arrangements of thoughts and habitual ways of thinking.

Over time, and with a great deal of patience, Zen practice has helped me to live with myself. That’s a good thing because I seem to be constantly hanging around everywhere I go.

But it certainly hasn’t been all bad dealing with me—while living with myself can be very difficult at times, at least there is always some very good Swiss milk chocolate waiting for me in the kitchen.

Allen Broadman and his many selves have been members of the Rochester Zen Center for over 15 years, although they are fortunately only charged for a single annual membership.

Finding Our Way: Marriage and the Precepts

SUSAN RAKOW

There are many different kinds of relationships—friends, siblings, parents, children, colleagues, and co-workers. But the relationship that seems to hold up the most significant mirror to who I am is an intimate relationship with the partner I chose to share my life with and to whom I have a unique commitment. Marriage seems to be a koan to be demonstrated and experienced and investigated thoroughly.

When I first got together with the boy who 18 months later would become my husband, the word ‘relationship’ wasn’t even part of the popular vocabulary. Striding across campus toward our first date in his cape, cowboy boots, and sunglasses, long hair flying out behind him, I thought he was the sexiest, most exciting person I’d ever known. His reality was he had just swallowed a bug that had flown into his mouth and was trying to spit it out! (A then unspoken, unacknowledged demonstration that there are two sides to every relationship experience.) Almost forty-five years, two children and four grandchildren later, what exists between us is deeper and different than what either of us imagined:

As part of our mutual exploration—of each other, of other people, of college, of ‘better liv-

ing through chemistry,’ of yoga—we stumbled upon Roshi Kapleau’s *Three Pillars of Zen* and attended a workshop together in about 1968. We began practicing at the same time, took the precepts and received rakus together, and have been able to continue to support each other’s spiritual paths as we have the other aspects of our individual lives and our marriage. When asked ‘how’ and ‘why’ we have thrived in our relationship, a number of answers emerge. While I am the one writing this *Zen Bow* article, we are continually discussing aspects of our marriage and trying to thoroughly investigate what makes us ‘tick’ together.

Recently, as I am approaching retirement, my husband and I were discussing how we will deal with my presence in the house more during the day. He has worked from home for the last 20+ years. My grown daughter, overhearing part of this conversation, stated that she thought that by now, we’d have ‘worked everything out.’ We laughed and explained that it’s *never* ‘done’—every change, personal or external, is interconnected to and impacts the relationship, requiring discussion and adjustments. Our marriage needs to be an ever-changing responsive con-



Tom Kowal

nection if it is to survive and thrive. It is a model of impermanence. The marriage of 1970 is not the marriage of 2014. Are the two people in it even the same?

There's a reason that taking the precepts together is part of the marriage commitment ceremony at the Rochester Zen Center. And we have found them to be powerful guidelines to relationship building, to nurturing forgiveness and compassion, and to decision-making in times of distress and conflict. Riding the roller-coaster of marriage through decades, the precepts provide a rudder. Right speech is obvious—no name-calling, no railing against things that happened in the past which we can't change. This precept (as well as the resolution not to indulge in anger) also reminds us to consider the lasting impact words have before we say them. In addition to what not to say, the precept guides us in what does need to be said, making sure to raise problems before they become festered sores and explode. This includes sharing feelings, even when they are irrational, difficult and/or painful—how something frustrated us, hurt our feel-

ings, made us angry. These conversations are not always pretty, but they seem to be necessary to keep 'the dynamic interplay of larger energies' flowing (Welwood).

Neither of us is perfect, so the precepts about others' faults and shortcomings as well as our own provide daily challenges. When my husband has done something that I think is wrong or problematic, how can I confront him in a way that's compassionate and understanding yet honest? Can I see the same flaw in myself just as clearly?

The other side of Right Speech, though, is silence, and knowing when to talk and when to be quiet is only learned through experience, error, and forgiveness, both of one's self and one's partner.

Right action, too, seems obvious and is connected to Right Attention in the sense that when we attend to and nurture the relationship, we take actions to ensure its growth and mutual satisfaction. A.R. Orage states that in conscious love we 'will the good of the other and act in behalf of the full unfolding of the beloved, re-

ardless of the consequences to oneself' (cited in Welwood). This is more than the two of us achieve on a daily basis, since it describes the Bodhisattva more than the two of us, but we try. One of the most romantic and appreciated actions Larry ever took was to commit to doing the dishes every night regardless of who cooked. This is a chore I have never liked and so he just took it over. It has been years since I have regularly washed and dried the dishes and every morning when I (as the first one awake every day) walk into the kitchen, I am grateful to see it clean.

The third precept on sexuality reminds us to be 'caring and responsible.' Physical needs and wants have varied between us at different points in our individual lives and in the relationship. When is snuggling enough to show *caring* and when does being *responsible* mean that we need to respond to the need of our partner for something more? In a somewhat pop-psychology book called *The 5 Love Languages*, author Gary Chapman suggests that each person has one of five primary 'languages' that say 'I love you' to them: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service and physical touch. When our partner's language and ours are different, we may not feel the love he or she thinks they are clearly demonstrating. This has been true for us in regards to sexuality because 'touch' has meant something different to each of us at different times, like when I was pregnant and when Larry was preoccupied with starting a new business. When we were first together, we differed on what level of affection could or should be shown in public. To me, if you didn't hold my hand when we were out, it was a clear sign you didn't love me, but I didn't want to force something that wasn't genuine.

This leads to the second precept, 'not to take what is not given, but to respect the things of others.' It was very hard for me to realize that marriage didn't mean that everything that was my husband's was mine (money, time, body, possessions) and that everything that was mine was also his. I nearly lost my mind (and not in a good way) and definitely lost my temper the day

he 'cleaned up and organized' my computer desk top as 'a favor'! I couldn't find some documents and folders for days. I think he felt the same way when I discarded some of his favorite, but ragged, t-shirts.

The challenge seems to be to balance all the aspects of us as separate but interconnected. The same balancing/juggling act is true with family and work. Who needs what when ... and what does that mean for me and us? Flexibility and forgiveness, responsiveness and respect. We try to figure this out on a daily moment-by-moment. If ultimately there is no self, then who feels taken advantage of? Neglected? Unheard? How do we love without attachment, knowing we and everyone and everything else are ever-changing?

Our relationship has survived boredom, temptation, and all the poisons of greed, anger, and delusion, sometimes emerging battered and bruised, but not defeated or abandoned. Some karmic connection holds us together and precepts practice is the rudder of our relationship.

Since our original marriage was in a civil ceremony in a judge's chambers, we renewed our vows on our 25th anniversary in a private ceremony at home and took the precepts together. We're hoping to do this more publicly at our 50th! Who knows what two people will show up?

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A Real and Intimate Relationship

DALE GOLDSTEIN

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

—Rumi

As a practitioner of meditation and inquiry for four decades, one of the things I have found challenging in my spiritual understanding has been how to be in a healthy relationship; that is, how to share in a deep loving connection with another human being. Of course, I am not alone in this. From my experience, this is one of the most difficult challenges of our lives as human beings.

I think of myself as a ‘curable romantic.’ I believe relationships are our best opportunity to experience ‘heaven on earth.’ So I’d like to do a little inquiry here into what gets in the way of having a truly loving relationship, and also what it takes to have one.

In my experience, the largest obstacle to intimacy is ego. The identities, self-images, and beliefs I cherish and feel I need to protect and promote at all costs create a barrier between myself and others, and this barrier functions as an expression of the delusion of self and other. In order to free myself of this illusion, I try to be aware of who I am assuming myself and the other person to be—what my self-image is and who I imagine the other person to be—in order to go beyond one image relating to another image, which is, needless to say, not an intimate relationship between two real individuals!

Roshi Kapleau used to call our freeing ourselves from these images and identities a process of ‘dis-illusionment.’ This process, though painful, is absolutely necessary for dissolving perhaps the most significant barrier to true intimacy. I have found that the best way to deal with the inevitable and necessary dis-illusionments that

bring about maturity is to be more committed to the truth than to any prized self-image. Looking deeply into any image reveals its illusory nature, which allows for clear seeing of who/what is really here. In my experience, this is a practice that requires ongoing vigilance. It is so easy for me to believe I know who that other person is—an attempt to perpetuate my beliefs. I find it helpful to continually ask, ‘Who are you, really?’ in my relationships, so that I don’t get stuck on any image of you, and so I can see increasingly deeply and broadly the entirety of your being. Likewise with myself, I need to ask, ‘Who am I taking myself to be?’ and ‘Who am I, really?’ This kind of ongoing inquiry, knowing that who we really are is not an image, but rather a miraculous mystery of ever-unfolding ‘beingness,’ actually contributes to the possibility of the experience of the truth of ‘no self.’

Everyone suffers pain in relationships, and we all carry some fear of suffering pain again. This is a natural part of being human, of being alive. If this fear is not made conscious and dealt with, it will sabotage a relationship. It is a strange law of relationship that in order for there to be real intimacy, we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, even when one of our strongest needs is to be invulnerable.

But the only way to be truly *invulnerable* is to be *totally vulnerable*. We have to be willing to be open to being hurt, otherwise we can’t be open to love. Being vulnerable means being open to feeling not only pain, but also fear, anger, sadness, joy (even, joy!), desire, need, etc. Like most of us, I was taught to deny these feelings, and, until I learned to open to these deepest feelings, I was incapable of having a truly intimate emotional connection. I didn’t even realize I had this incapacity, and so I had to learn how to allow my feelings over a period of many years. Look-



Danne Eriksson

ing back, I can see that, in my case, I was afraid that if I felt deeply, I would become an emotional mess.

Of course, there are other kinds of fears that people may have that prevent them from experiencing their feelings. I used to never allow myself to experience anger. I would suppress it immediately and refer to it as a ‘mild irritation.’ Then I married a very passionate woman, and it took her five years to get me to be angry. Once I allowed the anger to be experienced, we had raging fights for two years. Eventually, it got to a point where, when either of us began to get angry, we would both crack up laughing hysterically at the ridiculousness of the situation. Over time I learned to experience anger as an energy, without needing to express it at all. This opened a strength I had not known previously and an ability to separate myself from parts of my life I no longer needed to be attached to.

Another feeling that I had suppressed was having needs, the suppression of which created a

kind of neediness. I had learned early on that it was unacceptable to be needy. However, I found that suppressing this feeling prevented me from being in touch with my actual needs, and that, in turn, precluded the possibility of love being received. Without allowing myself to need to be loved, I prevented my partner from giving love to me. Receiving is actually a form of generosity, or giving.

One of the barriers to my being in touch with or allowing my neediness is the sometimes unconscious fear that my needs will not be met. On the other hand, if I can’t get what I feel I need from my partner, then I can simply *be with* the need.

In opening to my neediness, which prevented me from being in touch with my actual needs, I discovered that perhaps all the conflicts in my relationships were due to my failure to acknowledge and express my needs. So I discovered a way to work with this. It is very simple, but not necessarily easy: First, I ask myself, ‘What am I

feeling?’ When I know what I’m feeling, I ask, ‘What does this feeling tell me I need?’ Then, if it is possible for the other person to meet this need, I ask for what I need. Finally, I’m left to deal with the consequences of having asked for what I need. This often takes me back up to step number one. Sometimes, getting what we really want or need is more difficult to deal with than not getting what we asked for because of our deeply held belief that we don’t deserve to be loved.

One of the good things about working with needs in this way is that it can be used even after a real breakdown in the relationship. My partner and I can then go back and look together at the situation *from the same side*. Being able to do this together is an important key to having a successful relationship. Of course, for this process to work, each person in the relationship must be impeccably honest. Honesty means knowing what you’re thinking and feeling, and not withholding from your partner any truth that would create distance between the two of you. Without honesty, there is no trust. And without trust, one cannot have true intimacy.

Honesty and love can sometimes be uncomfortable bedfellows. As Richard Needham says, ‘People who are brutally honest get more satisfaction out of the brutality than out of the honesty.’ Impeccable honesty requires that the person sharing his or her truth be willing to *feel with* the other person—in other words, to have compassion for what may be his or her feelings of fear, hurt, disappointment, and so forth. When I am willing to feel the other person’s feelings *with* him or her, it is possible to share any truth with another.

For most people, ‘trust’ means, ‘I trust that you won’t hurt me.’ For my own part, I trusted blindly until I was in my late thirties, wanting only to see the good that was in people. When I finally realized that I couldn’t trust people, by the above definition, I was devastated. I went to my teacher at the time, Toni Packer, hoping she would give me the secret to trusting fully. Instead, she said, simply and clearly, ‘Well, why should you? The ego is not to be trusted!’

Talk about dis-illusionment! So, then I was in an even bigger quandary: How could I be in relationship with people when I couldn’t trust them? After struggling with this dilemma for quite a while, I came to the following conclusion, which serves me to this day. First, I accept the fact that what I *can* trust is that everyone is going to try to hurt me sooner or later. And the closer I get to them, the sooner it will be. I now try to see people with both eyes open: one eye seeing the good in them, and the other seeing their unresolved pain, knowing that they will, at some point, give that pain to me. So when they give me their pain, I’m not surprised.

The corollary to this is the fact that, while nobody is trustworthy all the time, most people are trustworthy most of the time. It is my responsibility to perceive clearly when someone is or isn’t trustworthy, and to trust them when they are. It is also vitally important, of course, to be aware of when I am being trustworthy and when I’m not.

There are people who, when I tell them that what they said or did hurt me, say something like, ‘Grow up!’ or ‘Get a life!’ or ‘No one can really hurt you!’ I have chosen not to have close relationships with these people because I know that they will likely continue to be hurtful to me. Then, there are people who, when I tell them that what they said or did hurt me, say, ‘I am truly sorry. I’m going to look into my actions to see where that came from, so I won’t hurt you again.’ These are the people I choose to be intimate with. When someone says something accusatory to me, I stop, look, and ask myself, ‘Is that true?’ If it is, I apologize if I was in the wrong; if not, I try to see where the other person is coming from—what’s going on with him or her. The key here, again, is that I’m more committed to seeing the truth than protecting some identity.

Then there is my part in it: when someone hurts me, there is a ‘me’ getting hurt. This gives me the opportunity to see the identity that I am taking myself to be. And here’s the funny thing: it’s always a case of mistaken identity. In this regard, I have noticed that I can only be hurt

by someone if I need something from them—to be loved, accepted, admired, respected, etc. It's when I don't get what I believe I need from them that I feel hurt. It's a razor's edge: allowing myself to need connection, yet not to need connection in order to feel complete.

My final point is that I can only be as intimate with another as I am with myself. On the emotional level, this means being intimate with my feelings. On the spiritual level, this means seeing the other not as another, but rather as part of the greater self, of which 'I' am. We are all mirrors to each other, and so anything I feel other than love and compassion towards another is my issue—something I have not yet fully embraced in myself.

I remember Roshi Kapleau quoting Hui Neng: 'When others are at fault, I, too am to blame. When I am at fault, I alone am to blame.' As I see it, relationships are not a 50/50 deal, but a 100/100 deal. That is, my partner and I are both 100% responsible for creating the relationship we have. If either of us stops creating the relationship we have, that mode of relating comes to an end, and this invites myself and the other person to look at what we are doing.

For many years, I entered relationships unconsciously trying to make myself complete through the other person. I have learned that

relationships are a matter of multiplication, not addition. That is, two half people trying to make themselves whole through the relationship create a quarter relationship. Only two whole people can create a whole relationship. As the great poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, said, 'I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people: that each should stand guard over the solitude of the other.' We are each on our own journey, traveling this leg of it together.

The journey of relationship moves from dependence to independence to interdependence—the maturation of the human being. One could say that the maturational process is one of ongoing dis-illusionment—'one mistake after another,' as Dogen said. A real relationship gives me the greatest opportunity to see and work through the illusions that prevent me from a thoroughgoing understanding of who and what I am.

Dale Goldstein, LCSW-R practiced at the RZC from 1971 to 1981, serving on staff for two of those years. He currently has a private psychotherapy practice in Rochester and facilitates personal and spiritual growth retreats internationally through the Heartwork Institute, Inc. (www.awakentheheart.org).

Countless Good Deeds.

If you're thinking about financial planning, estate planning, or both, please remember that there are myriad ways you can help the Rochester Zen Center through planned giving. The right kind of plan can help you reduce your taxes significantly while providing for a larger, longer-lasting gift to the Zen Center. Because there is a wide array of bequests, annuities, trusts, and other financial vehicles to consider, you'll want to work with your financial advisor to decide what's best for you. Long-time Zen Center member David Kernan, an attorney who concentrates his practice in tax law, has generously offered to help point you in the right direction at no charge. For more information about planned giving and David's offer, please contact the Center's receptionist.



John Kralles

Parting Ways

JANE XHILONE

On our wedding day, Doc and I stood before all our family and friends, gazed into each other's eyes, and recited our vows. Out of all the vows, the one that stood out to me throughout our marriage was our promise to support each other in all our endeavors. When Doc went after his dream to become a music professor, I supported him throughout the long years of his coursework, research, and dissertation until he finally got his doctoral degree in Music Theory. When I decided that I wanted to be an English teacher, he supported me as I slowly earned my master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language.

Spiritual exploration played a significant role from the very start of our relationship. Although Doc had grown up in a conservative Christian environment, he was an open-minded artist who loved pondering the meaning of life and exploring the many faces of God. I, on the other hand, was a girl who really hadn't been brought up with any religion at all. I was therefore embarking on this spiritual journey for the first time, and I thought of Doc as a kind of guide.

Doc discovered meditation while we were still in college. I remember him saying, 'Hey, let's try out meditation. I hear it can help people relax.' My gut reaction was, 'What?! Why on earth

would I ever meditate? Sounds super boring and like a huge waste of time.' After checking out a book on meditation from our college library and reading parts of it to me, Doc finally convinced me to try meditation. 'Fine,' I told him, 'but I'm only doing it for five minutes.' After just two minutes of meditating side by side, I looked over and saw Doc fast asleep. 'Ha!' I exclaimed. 'I told you this was a waste of time! You didn't even last five whole minutes!'

After that incident, Doc stopped trying to pursue meditation, but we continued on our spiritual journey together. Over the next couple years we explored Wicca, Hinduism, and various Native American spiritual traditions. Even though we found all of them to be interesting, none of them quite 'clicked.' One day at a local book store, Doc became intrigued with a little book on how to meditate. He bought it, stuck it on our bookshelf, and there it sat untouched for several months. It was just such a cute book with a little green leaf on the cover. It was honestly my attraction to the look of the book itself that prompted me (at least on a conscious level) to crack it open one day while I was dusting the bookshelf. After a few short pages, I was hooked.

I carried this book with me on a trip to Portland, Oregon where I was hoping to land a teaching job. During my job search, I stayed with a friend from college. She had been attending meditation sittings at a local Zen center for several months, and one evening she invited me to come along. Going to the sitting that evening was a life-altering experience for me. I can't really explain it, but when I walked into the zendo, I felt this all-enveloping sense of being completely and utterly at home. When I got back to my friend's house that night, I couldn't wait to call Doc. I had finally found what I believed we had been looking for in a spiritual tradition. When I got Doc on the phone, I said, 'You will *never* guess what happened to me tonight! I went to a Buddhist sitting, and it was amazing!' But to my surprise, I heard nothing on the other end. Then came this eerie sense of dread in my heart. I thought, 'Oh my God. He's not gonna

want to do this with me.' Finally, in a strained voice, he said, 'Oh. That's interesting.' A part of me was devastated, but another part of me held out hope that he would give Zen meditation a chance.

Once we got settled in Portland, I brought Doc to the Zen center that my friend had introduced me to. Although Doc was open to trying meditation, it was clear that I was more gung-ho about it than he was. I couldn't understand it—hadn't he been the one pressuring me to try meditation just a few years ago? And hadn't he been the one who had bought the cute little leaf book on meditation? I soon stopped trying to figure out the rhyme or reason behind his overall disinterest in Zen. I had found a spiritual tradition that spoke to me like no religion had, and now that I had found it, I couldn't let it out of my sight.

About a year later, Doc and I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where Doc began his doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin. It didn't take me long to find the Madison Zen Center (MZC) and begin sitting with this wonderful and devoted Sangha. As my interest in Zen intensified, Sangha-related activities began taking up more of my free time. Sadly, all the time I spent at the MZC was without Doc. He told me, 'I support your practice; I'm just not really interested in Zen.' I respected his feelings, but at the same time, I began to feel the tension of two people heading down two different paths while staying tethered to each other.

After a couple years of practice at the MZC, I realized that I really wanted to spend a year in training at the Rochester Zen Center. Believing us to be an invincible couple, I naively thought that living apart would be no problem, that Doc would support me whole-heartedly, and that our relationship would survive the year unscathed. Doc did support me, but it killed him inside to think that I wanted to be apart from him for a whole year doing a spiritual practice that he, quite frankly, really couldn't connect with on any level.

My year at the RZC was an amazing experience, and yet it did not come without significant

costs. Each time I came home to visit Doc during my year away, it was sort of like picking up a bunch of pieces and trying to glue our relationship back together again. Doc had developed a life without me, and when I came home, it took a little while to incorporate me back into his daily routine. I also noticed that Doc had begun to rediscover Christianity. When I asked him how he was doing without me, he said, 'Even though I'm lonely, I'm not alone. I am with God.' I had a very hard time accepting that Doc was finding his own spiritual path in Christianity, but I knew I had no place telling him what to believe. I was committed to our vow of supporting each other's endeavors, and if I wanted him to support my spiritual practice, for sure I needed to support his.

When I completed my year in Rochester and returned to Madison, Doc had established his own spiritual roots at a local Mennonite church. It was at this point that it finally started to dawn on me that our relationship was falling apart. We began making attempts to bring our spiritual paths together. We had 'spiritual Sundays' where Doc came with me to the mzc's Sunday sitting, and I went with him to the Mennonite Sunday service. We began reading books about the parallels between Buddhism and Christianity. And we started going to couples therapy.

Despite these attempts to bring our paths together, I still felt worlds apart from Doc. So many other aspects of our relationship carried on just as strong as ever, but because spirituality had become such a central part of both our lives, I felt like we were becoming less and less able to relate to each other. Not only this, but I also began feeling an urgent need to return to Rochester and continue training on staff. I told Doc I would understand if he wanted to break up, but that I desperately needed to return to the rzc. 'I'll be sad without you here,' he told me, 'but I will never break up with you. I would rather be alone for ten years than lose you forever.'

Even though I was relieved to return to Rochester and continue Zen training, at the

same time, I was worried I was jeopardizing our relationship even further. A couple months after returning to Rochester, I called Doc to say goodbye before heading into sesshin. He said, 'I would wish you a good sesshin, but I can't since I don't support what you are doing.' I asked him what he meant. Doc clarified that, as a Christian, he couldn't support a spiritual practice that didn't look to Jesus for enlightenment. It was the first time in our relationship that one of us said that we didn't support the other one. At that moment, something shattered inside of me. I don't know what it was—maybe the feeling that our vow had been broken.

After that conversation, I knew that our relationship was dying. The next several months were extremely difficult. My mind went around and around, not knowing what to do. I finally broke down and told Doc I didn't think we could continue down these two paths, that it was affecting the well-being of our whole relationship. Doc agreed, but refused to give up on us. 'We made a commitment before God, and I'm going to stick with it.' A few days later, I received a letter from Doc. It said that, looking into our future, he could imagine two possible scenarios. In one, we would split up and continue down separate spiritual paths. In the other, I would begin to see the beauty of Christianity and become more open to its possibilities. The letter deeply offended me, as I interpreted it as saying the only way we could save our relationship was if I converted to Christianity. Strangely, there was no third option of Doc converting to Buddhism!

After reading the letter, I went into the zendō and began sitting. I think it was at this moment that the penny finally dropped. I realized that we each needed to follow our own paths and not stand in the way of each other. This was the most humane and compassionate way to proceed. Immediately after coming to this realization, I felt this sense of 'Ah ha! That's it!' I had probably thought these things before, but this time it just all made sense. It felt like a gal-

lon of cool, refreshing water had been dumped over my head.

Doc and I have been divorced now for several years. And although the death of a marriage is sad, this story really does have a happy ending. After our divorce, we both wanted to continue our friendship. So, our relationship has not ended; it has simply transformed into a friendship in which we can respect our differences and allow each other to freely pursue our spiritual

paths. To me, Doc will always embody the bodhisattva qualities of selfless giving, patience, and compassion. I am grateful for knowing him, grateful he is still in my life, and grateful for his being such a tremendous influence in helping me along my spiritual path.

Jane Xhilone lives in Rochester and has been a member of the RZC since 2004.

Relationship: A Losing Proposition

ALLAN WHITEMAN

It was Sunday morning breakfast, the day after the close of my second seven-day sesshin. I struck up a conversation with a woman, the ‘what drew you to Zen’ conversation. She’d been coming to sesshin for a few years, and said she got involved after seeing her husband change as a result of his own practice.

Change? I was all ears. I wanted changes in my life; big changes. I wanted all the changes I figured enlightenment would bring—more peace, more love, more ease, more *something*.

I asked eagerly, ‘What did you see? How did you see him changing?’

She was silent for a long moment.

Then she said—very simply, and thoughtfully, and appreciatively—‘Well ... he was just less of an asshole.’

Oh. Right. I was wanting more. He was becoming less. I wanted to gain something. He was losing. It would never have occurred to me. I didn’t realize at that time that Zen is a practice for losers. Or that relationship might be the playing field for losing more than I could have imagined.

Everything is relationship. There is no such thing as ‘one person.’ We grow inside another

person. We are born into a network of relationships. Even recluses are in relationship to *something*. It is how we understand the meaning of ‘relationship’ that is crucial.

So let’s explore this complex subject a little bit. And let’s have fun with it. Relationships are challenging enough without making the work grim in our minds. It is a huge turn in our spiritual life to begin to be *interested* when our delusions are busted, interested in having our shortcomings exposed—interested because we know it is serving a deeper knowing of the Truth.

We can become more interested in seeing what’s true than in protecting our scared little separate self. Separate selves are always scared.



Ejaku asked Enen ‘What is your name?’ Enen said, ‘Ejaku.’ Ejaku said, ‘Ejaku is my name.’ Enen said, ‘My name is Enen.’ Ejaku roared with laughter.

—*Blue Cliff Record*, No. 68

This koan clues us in to the two fundamental errors we can make in any relationship—believing we’re fundamentally separate, isolated



Tom Kowal

beings, and believing that Oneness means the eradication of our differences.

Egoically, a relationship is between two separate people. Having set up this separation, we have no choice but to either: (1) try to get closer to the ‘other’ that we feel painfully separated from, or (2) try to pull away from the ‘other’ who feels uncomfortably close to us.

This ‘other’ of self-and-other can be a person, a teaching, an ideal, an authority ... as long as we think we’re an entity, everything else is also an entity. Even if it’s a great big mysterious entity, like ... Enlightenment.

Most couples talk about ‘finding a balance’—a balance between spending time together and time apart, between feeling close and feeling separate. Egoically, this is the best we can do. Egos can’t feel completely close and completely autonomous at the same moment. These seem contradictory.

Egoically, closeness and separation are based, first, on physical distance. We tend to feel more autonomous when we can physically separate—go into another room and close the door. (Has anyone ever felt, ‘I just want to be alone, so I can be myself’?)

And egoically it’s often easier to feel intimate when we’re physically near one another. (Sometimes it’s the opposite—we feel close to someone in our minds—until we’re actually in their presence, and then we want to get away!).

Second, our experience of closeness and distance tends to run parallel to our feeling of similarity and difference. We tend to feel that our similarities are what bring us closer together, and that our differences are what creates emotional distance.

From the realized perspective, relationship is One appearing as two. We can see distinctions, but the distinctions, the myriad forms, don’t make us separated objects.



I love humanity; it’s people I can’t stand.

—Linus, Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts*

As far as I can tell, traditional Buddhism of any stream has little to say about personal love, which tends to be associated with attachment. It focuses instead on compassion—loving-kindness. Other traditions may focus on the univer-

sal form of love—loving all beings equally, without discrimination.

But personal love—the quality of liking and appreciating *this* particular person, enjoying being around *this* individual—makes the stakes higher and the difficulties greater. And the majority of us want to be in some kind of relationship. Therefore, we'll have to deal with our needs for and our reactions to those we're in a relationship with. Without this, having any stability in our realization will be impossible. As someone once said, 'The distance between you and your partner is the distance between you and Truth.'

It's much easier to 'wake up' than to be an awake human being in intimate contact with human life. Even the clearest recognition of Oneness, without a human heart, becomes dry and lifeless. To fully enter the world of discrimination, and see it as none other than the myriad expressions of Oneness is no small challenge.

In Zen we say there is only One Mind. We could also say there is only One Heart.

It's not so difficult to love all beings. But what happens if you suddenly discover that the person you're feeling one with is a Tea Party Republican (or ultra-liberal Democrat, take your pick)? Does our oneness depend on being similar? How much differentness can we allow before those separating boundaries come roaring back, and difference becomes distance? We can become interested in and awake to this process.

What are the limits of our love? Do we think that loving someone means always being accommodating and agreeable? Or being afraid to upset them? Or that being independent means 'You can't tell me what to do'?

Do we think of love as an emotion? Do we think love is something that exists in some places but not others, with some people but not others, in some circumstances but not others? This is another expression of the delusion of separation. Love doesn't mean we *like* everyone, much less agree with them. But if we realize the fundamental nature of Reality, we can't help but love them.



We may have heard spiritual rumors that everything is One, that self and other are illusions, and that there is no separation. Welcome to an intimate relationship, which has the power to keep exposing our fundamental conviction that physical form defines what we are, and that the perception of separate forms is ultimate truth. A relationship, more than any other circumstance I know, challenges this perception of ultimate separateness. Let's test this in our own experience.

Have you ever noticed that no matter how much you may try to pull away, withdraw, or assert your separateness from your partner, you remain affected by what they do and say?

I'm sure many of us have had the experience of coming home to our partner and being able to feel whether they're in a bad mood before they've said a single word. We might sense this even if they're in another room.

We don't even need to be in an intimate relationship. You can tell, even in a roomful of strangers, who is open to talking to you and who isn't, who already has judgments about you before they've even met you. And we can see the same judgments in ourselves. Our level of sensitivity is breathtaking.

We can show up and be awake to that. Not attacking ourselves for flunking spiritual practice, but understanding that we come to more intimacy with others—and with the Truth, there's no difference—by seeing as honestly as we can what blocks us.

We can discover that our egoic sensitivity—all the ways we can feel hurt, petty, selfish, afraid, vindictive—is just a distorted expression of the intrinsic sensitivity and responsiveness of our fundamental nature. We're actually so affectable, so touchable, that we don't know what to do with it, and we try to protect ourselves. If we're separate beings, our sensitivity can be literally unbearable.

We might also see how we tend to give ourselves away, ignore our own needs, being so fo-

cused on the other that we lose ourselves. We'll see both our disconnection from our partner, and our disconnection from ourselves. These are just two sides of one coin—the coin of believing we are a separate self.



Husband to wife: 'Since we're both so tired, why don't we just reheat last night's argument.'

—Michael Maslin, *New Yorker* cartoon

When it comes down to it, difference is what really gets our reactivity going. When differences get too great, people—and nations—either fight or withdraw. Whether it's going into the other room and slamming the door, or saying, 'We're taking our ambassador and severing diplomatic relations.' Whether it's a screaming fight between two people, or a war—difference has become distance.

Here, again, we have two basic ego-choices: (1) trying to minimize the differences (by trying to change the other or ourselves), or (2) trying to emphasize the differences (the better to stay antagonistic and thus separate and protected). How can we acknowledge the undeniable differences between us, without turning that difference into distance?

The only way we can know if we like and want to be with our partner is when we're not trying to change either them or ourselves. This doesn't mean we don't look at our own shortcomings; it means we're willing to see what is true at this moment.

When we have an agenda to change ourselves or change our partner, we're rejecting being present with what's actually here, and learning from it.

The conventional wisdom is, 'it takes two to change a relationship.' It seems to make sense, doesn't it? I'm sure many of us have felt, at one point or another, 'I'm doing my part, but he/she isn't.'

But in truth, it takes only one to change a relationship. It takes two to keep it the same.

The very fact of the presence of another person can challenge our entire egoic orientation.

There they are, right next to us, even if we'd rather they weren't. Or there they aren't, even if we wish they were.

And their moods, their reactions, how they see us or fail to see us, how their circumstances affect us, our helplessness to reach a partner in pain, our resentment at not getting enough of their time or attention—all confront us constantly with the myriad ways reality does not conform to our wishes. And therefore offers us the possibility to question our beliefs and assumptions rather than attacking reality for being wrong. The truth of non-separation pushes up against every division in our consciousness, challenging us to see the truth more clearly.

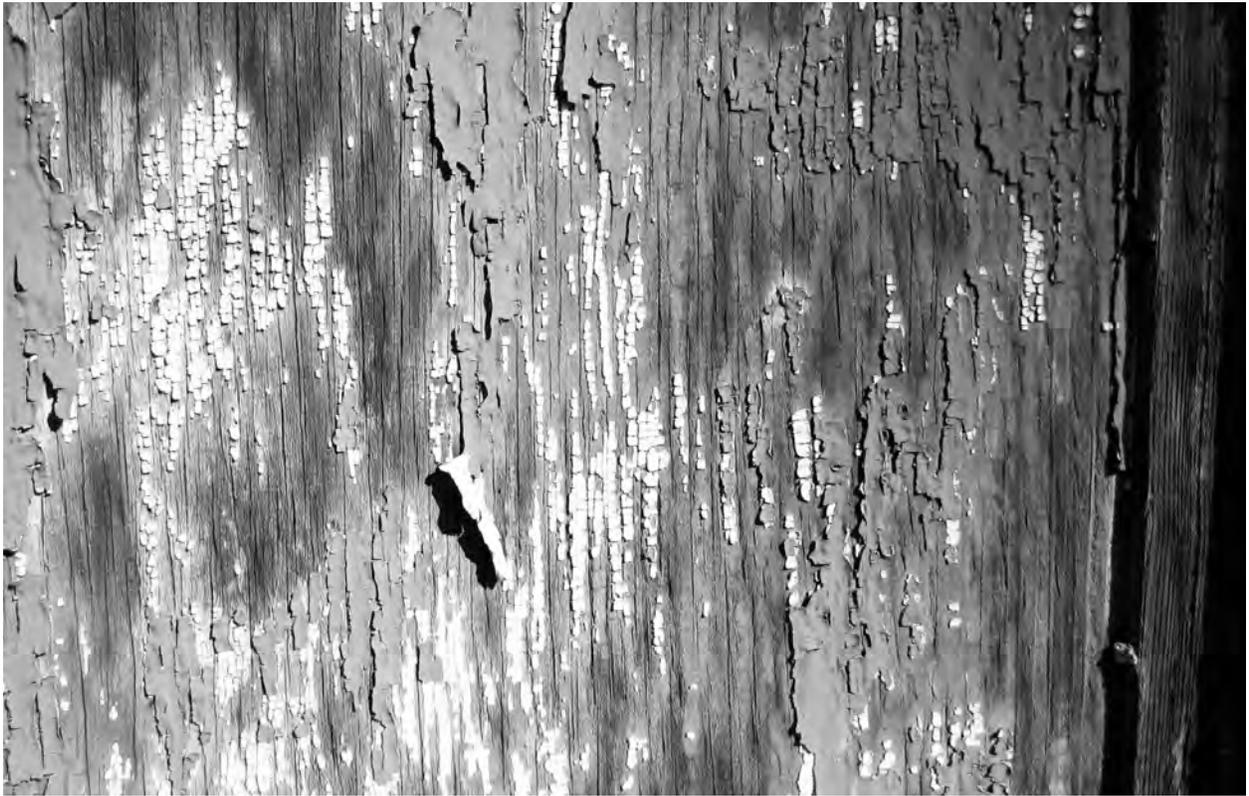
Relationships also challenge our convictions about what closeness is. When my wife and I were choosing a wedding date, I said—before I understood what I meant—'I want to keep falling off the edge of whatever 'love' meant yesterday.'

The meanings of 'love' and 'closeness' will change. As with ourselves, we can make 'my relationship' into a separate entity, and want more closeness or more distance from it. But relationship is dynamic, and its evolution is toward greater depth, greater openness, greater realness. If we resist this, and try to hold on to what we've thought of as 'my relationship,' we're fighting against the whole thrust of the dynamism that is our very nature. Freezing a relationship, keeping it the same, is a way of denying that dynamism, the fact that everything is in relationship to everything else, and that nothing is static.

So we can actually kill our relationship not by leaving it, but by *not* leaving it. It's not simply impermanence, not just letting go of the past. It's the willingness to lose whatever we think we have, to trust Reality that much—'I don't know what will happen next, but whatever it is, let's find out.'

This willingness to lose keeps landing us in the unknown, and our relationship keeps being recreated in new forms.





Tom Kowal

It is extraordinarily painful to make ourselves and others into an object, however positively we may feel about this object. To protect ourselves from being deeply, intimately touched by another's presence, to think we're looking for some ultimate truth that is separate from the person right in front of us, causes tremendous pain. We're afraid that if we let ourselves be that open, that touchable, that intimate, our neediness will come up, our hatefulness and pettiness will show, our insecurities will wreck the confident image we're trying to project. And we're right; our worst fears are true! Because whatever is false will be revealed.

Or we might get more spiritual about it, and fear that being so open will lead to being more attached. Of course it will! Or rather, our attachments will also be revealed. Good! Let's see them and learn about them.

Or we might think that if we let ourselves be fully touched by another, we'll be stuck there with them, and not free to be ourselves. Good!

Let's see whatever's in the way of realizing our intrinsic freedom.

Either side of the dilemma—the side of needing and wanting to hold on, or the side of wanting to push away and leave—are just the normal expressions of a separate self. Egos cannot feel close without holding on to another, separate self, nor can they feel free without pushing away another, separate self.

But love is not needy, intimacy is not the same as attachment, and refusing to be affected is not freedom.

We can develop the courage and the curiosity to show up right in the midst of our contracted states and see right then and there what we're believing, what kind of separate entity we're taking ourselves to be. True faith manifests in our willingness to be exactly where we are. If we're rejecting where we are right this moment, and holding out for the Absolute, we betray our lack of faith. And 'the Absolute' just becomes another separate entity.

There is nothing we can do to be ourselves, to be what we already are. And nothing we can do to let the other be themselves. And this is precisely the difficulty we have with it. The level of simplicity is beyond anything our minds can imagine. What has to be lost in order to encounter the freedom we intrinsically are is beyond what the mind can imagine. To stop our separation-making machine even for five seconds is an extraordinary thing. And we can't stop it by our own efforts; it stops by seeing it for what it is. We tend to treat reality—with which we have a relationship!—as if something has gone wrong when our plans are upset, rather than being interested in seeing into the one that thinks it can make “separate” plans. We try to hide our hurt, our lostness, our loss of control, our ignorance.

Our self-improvement programs, our desires to have more, are not resolved by attaining anything, but by losing—losing the habit of comparative judgment, losing our arguments with Reality just as it is, being greatly humbled by our utter defeat. We become losers, and the more we lose, the more everything is there, just as it is.

But only Everything is there. No separate things are there—because there aren't any.

Intimate relationship invites us to discover an actual individual other, in all their absolute particularity, who is at the same time no other than ourselves. Our willingness to be completely ourselves, losing what we know, allowing the

unknown to keep manifesting, is the invitation for our partner to do the same.



When others are in the wrong, I am also in the wrong. When I am in the wrong, I alone am to blame.

—Hui Neng, Sixth Patriarch

The pain and ignorance of the world (and of our partners) hurt us. It hurts because whether we know it or not, we are the fundamental goodness and wholeness of Reality.

In a relationship we can feel at our most vulnerable to losing this sense of wholeness, and we tend to either blame ourselves or the other. Someone is failing, someone is guilty. But this very process keeps us from feeling directly—without our judgments and interpretations, without blame or commentary—the simple fact of the pain of our loss, without preconceptions about what should be happening.

It is impossible to understand from our usual perspective, but when we are the totality of Reality, there's no one to blame. And we never reach the end of discovering what relationship is.

Allan Whiteman lives in New York City with his wife, to whom he is infinitely grateful. He has been a member of the Center since 1983.

From Indra's Net



Earth Vigil

On April 22, the Rochester Zen Center and Earth Vigil co-sponsored 'Earth Day, Earth Vigil,' a silent demonstration on the pedestrian bridge overlooking the High Falls of the Genesee River. Approximately 40 people participated in the event, which was intended to raise public awareness of the polluted condition of the river.

Buddha's Birthday Celebration



Our annual weekend-long celebration of the Buddha's Birthday included stories from the Sleeping Sage, a potluck picnic, and an elephant parade.

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Upholding the Precepts

The Ten Cardinal Precepts offer us a guide to living in harmony with others and with compassion toward all sentient beings. Together, they articulate the conduct and character we can realize through Zen practice. Although the precepts are subject to different interpretations, upholding them helps us to continually acknowledge our transgressions, seek reconciliation, and renew our commitment to the Dharma.

Readers are invited to submit articles and images to the editors, Donna Kowal and Brenda Reeb, at zenbow@rzc.org.

Submission deadline: June 27, 2014

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