

Zen Bow Article:

One Love

I took off petal after petal,
as if you were a rose,
in order to see your soul,
and I didn't see it.
However, everything around -
horizons of fields and oceans -
was filled with a perfume,
immense and living.

-Juan Ramon-Jimenez



One of the wonderful discoveries of practice is that even as we see more deeply through the dream of self and other, we find an increasing presence of intimacy and love that feels very personal. The experience of no-self, this one ocean of Reality, paradoxically reveals our capacity to see and love the differences of a unique individual, to see and love *this* person, just as he or she is.

This quality of personal love may also appear in our spiritual practice. Just as we learn to love other people as they are, practice becomes, in part, an unconditional yet very personal relationship of loving the Truth, just as it is, regardless of the form it takes. The challenge is no different.

I imagine that for many of us it is in the sphere of personal love that our practice is most severely tested. In the blink of an eye we fall back to sleep, and self and other seem painfully real. Someone - us or our partner - is flunking who we think they should be. Love for all beings seems much easier than love for the person seated across the breakfast table.

But love for all beings, love for this specific individual, and love of the Truth are not separate. In Zen we say there is just this One Mind. We might also say there is just One Heart, One Lover, One Love. We look at another person with both appreciation for knowing them so intimately, and with the awe that we are looking at an endlessly unfolding mystery.

There can't be one love for the Truth and another for your spouse. We can't reject what is in front of us and hold out for the Absolute. So I thought it might be helpful to relect on this paradox of personal love not bound by personal mind, and some ways that the self keeps reappearing to block it.

As an experiment, remember a time you fell deeply in love. Even if you were young and immature, without judgment remember the first look, the first touch.

All you want is to keep moving closer to her . . . You think about him constantly. You're always paying attention to him . . . You want to know everything about her, and everything about her is fascinating.

It's just so adorable that she's named her cat Frisky . . . It's so amazing to discover that you both love Star Trek . . . The way he snores is so cute you stay awake to listen.

The whole world begins to look beautiful, and you feel inexhaustibly full and generous.

This experience of personal love paradoxically moved you beyond the sense of a separate self. When you love someone or something, the object of your love starts to reveal itself. And the more you see, the less you know. A perfume, immense and living, fills the universe. But when the love stops so does the revelation, and that feels terribly painful.

This same quality can deepen our practice. Relationship to the Truth can become more and more personal, more like being in love. In spiritual practice, as in relationship, it's crucial to develop the ability to keep moving toward what you want most deeply, not being stopped by frustrations. When I love the Truth deeply, to do this is a joy.

In both love and practice we're always paying attention. When I love the Truth, love and attention are the same thing. It's not a discipline. When you're

in love, the obstacles and pains don't really matter, they just show you how strong your love is.

In both love and practice we develop not just faith but a faithfulness that keeps us more and more steadily on the path, not simply visiting the path. When we love something, we want to know it fully, to never be separate from it.

Of course, my love is not unconditional, and I make the same mistakes on the mat as I do at home. As long as there is a self there are conditions. As long as I put conditions on when I'm willing to be intimate, as long as I try to make deals with the Truth, there is pain. My distance from my girlfriend is the same as my attachment to a self.

In my relationship this self reappears most dramatically in moments of hurt and anger. These emotions, more than most, are so powerfully attached to a personal story of who did what to whom, and whose fault it is. For a moment we can experience that the whole universe feels hurt or angry, and then it's over, in a flash. But when we're stuck in the emotions, it's good to see that hurt and anger, too, are not apart from the Truth, and can be explored with loving curiosity. Some personal examples:

I want to talk to my girlfriend about something important. She's reading, and wants to continue reading. I feel really let down, then hurt. This story, these images of the two of us, are swirling through my mind. Letting go of the thoughts and staying with the pure sensations, I feel a pain in my chest. As I continue to explore the pain, it feels like a contraction around my heart. I begin to question what is feeling so hurt: What is this? The pain becomes the feeling of a hole, as if I'd been shot through the heart. I feel an open wound. Staying with each sensation, questioning what is wounded, the empty hole shifts from pain to the feeling that there's nothing in my chest at all. The stories have stopped. And suddenly, with no stories, there is no separation. The painful vulnerability has been transformed into an open intimacy, with no inside or outside. I look at my girlfriend, reading. She looks sweet and tender. I still want to talk to her, but this wanting no longer feels like I'm missing something I need from her. The wanting itself already feels full; full of open space and personal affection. I see again that the real pain is to be separated from this One Heart, my own heart. When I'm able to feel the depth of my disappointment, to see that no thing and no one will fill the hole in my heart, love is present. Regardless of conditions.

Another example, this time about anger. Anger is usually seen as destructive, but it's helpful to distinguish the experience of anger from its expression. The experience can be explored beyond the distortions of the ego - that there's a separate "me" that needs to be defended - to its more fundamental energy. So, my girlfriend is mad at me. I see this as a pattern that has happened over and

over, and I also feel angry. I'm aware of the story - I'm being treated unfairly, she doesn't understand my feelings, I have a right to be mad, on and on. Letting go of the thoughts and questioning the actual experience - what is this? - my body fills with an energy that feels like hate, but now there's no story attached to it, so there's no object of hatred. Just breathing with this black hateful feeling, not knowing, I'm aware of wanting to destroy everything that seems to be in my way, to annihilate everything that seems to frustrate me. I hate what is interfering with my happiness. But what *is* interfering with my happiness? Now it's not about my girlfriend. Then what is this?

I suddenly realize that what I hate is exactly the story I've made up in the first place, the story of "me" and "her," this prison of images that defines and limits both of us.

I feel an enormous energy. I want to kill everything false, to kill every "thing." In the process of questioning, what began as ego-centered anger - the desire to protect one's self-image of being "right" - has revealed its intrinsic wisdom, the energy to separate from what is false, to separate from *all* images. Now, instead of anger, there is an immovable refusal to be pulled into the lies of the mind, a refusal to go for the "bait" of ideas about self and other. And this energy itself is clarity and peace.

I look at my girlfriend. She's no longer "someone who's mad at me." I see the woundedness from which her own anger comes, and much more . . . an undefinable and joyous mystery. What I "know" about her evaporates. I'm in love with this mystery, a mystery so boundless and so personal.

My practice keeps showing me that every object, every "other," is ultimately frustrating. No matter what "I" get, no matter how much someone loves me, it doesn't fill me. There are no consolations. From the point of view of the self, life doesn't "work out." It cannot work out.

I imagined at one time that unconditional love meant that the love I now felt would simply get bigger and happen more and more often. But what I've found is that love is a presence, an inherent quality that is simply there, regardless of conditions. It doesn't include all conditions; it simply has nothing to do with conditions. And every so often I rediscover the boundless personal love and freedom of being no one.

-Allan Whiteman

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