

## INTIMACY

In his book, *Encouraging Words*, Robert Aitken (1917 - ) tells of responding to a student who asked, “What is the most important matter?” Roshi replied, “Intimacy.” He then tells us that “intimacy is a step closer to the heart of things than Zen Buddhism itself.”

We hear a lot about intimacy in Zen training. What is meant by intimacy both on the cushion and in daily life? In tenth century China, Master Fa-yen Wen-I (Hogen Bun’eki, 885 – 958) as a young monk was wandering the country on pilgrimage. He was caught in a snow storm and took refuge in the monastery of Master Lo-han (Rakan Keijin, 867-928). Lo-han (Rakan) asked Fa-yen (Hogen), “Where are you going?” Fa-yen (Hogen) replied, “I am traveling around on pilgrimage.” Lo-han (Rakan) said, “What is the purpose of pilgrimage?” Fa-yen (Hogen) replied, “I don’t know.” Lo-han (Rakan) then famously said, “Not knowing is most intimate.”

Not knowing is most intimate. This is not the same “not knowing” as when Chao-chou (Joshu, 778 – 897) asked his teacher Nan-ch’uan (Nansen, 748 – 835), “What is the way?” Nanch’uan (Nansen) answered, “Ordinary mind is the way.” Chao-chou (Joshu) asked, “Well, then, shall I seek after it or not?” Nan-ch’uan (Nansen) said, “If you seek after it you will miss it.” Chao-chou (Joshu) then asked, “If I do not seek after it, then how will I know the way?” Nan-ch’uan (Nansen) answered, “The way is not a matter of knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion and not knowing is dullness. When you reach the Way beyond all doubt, you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space. What can that have to do with right or wrong?”

In this instance “not knowing” is opposed to “knowing.” It is a dualistic pairing. Fa-yen’s (Hogen) “not knowing” is just “I don’t know. I am completely in the dark. I am going to set out and trust what occurs.” That “not knowing” is non-dualistic. It is the “not knowing” of just this moment. It is Bodhidharma’s “I don’t know” in response to the emperor’s question.

Fa-yen’s (Hogen) was earnestly seeking. He did not know what or why, but he felt compelled to do so. He felt compelled to settle the Great Matter: What is this? Who am I? How do I live a life that is impermanent? What is truth? These are urgent questions, which we most often avoid through busyness, distraction and acquisitiveness. Fa-yen (Hogen) knew within himself that he had to settle the great matter, but he did not know why. Similarly, for many of us, when we first start to sit zazen, we do not know why, only that we have to. Something has called us. Like Fa-yen (Hogen), something important compels us.

In case 43 of the *Denkoroku* (Transmission of the Light), the forty-second ancestor, Liang-shan (Ryozan, n.d.) was the attendant to the forty-first ancestor, T’ung-an (Doan, n.d.) and as such carried the robe for his teacher. As he was doing so one day, his teacher asked, “What is the business under the robe?” The student had no reply, so the teacher said, “To wear this robe and not understand the Great Matter is the greatest suffering. Now you ask me.” So Liang-shan (Ryozan) asked, “What is the business under the robe?” The teacher then said, “Intimacy. Intimacy.” At this, Liang-shan (Ryozan) had a profound experience and bowed to his teacher in gratitude and with tears flowing. His teacher then said, “Intimacy, yes, and even greater intimacy.”

What is this intimacy? What is this becoming intimate with your practice, intimate with yourself? These stories about encounters of students and teachers of a thousand or more years ago are not just nice tales. They are about us today as well, and their subject matter is equally as urgent. Intimacy means no gap, no conceptual barriers, nothing intervening between subject and object. It is being one, right here, complete, whole, undivided. This is the important work of Zen practice: to know your own original nature intimately from your own direct experience and to be able to live from that experience and express that nature in the world. Kobun Chino Roshi (1938 – 2002) once said, “Zazen is the first formulation of Buddha existing in the world.” Each one of us has the nature of awakening, what Master Bankei (1622 – 1693) called “the Unborn.” How do we become intimate with it and bring it into the world?

Intimacy starts on our cushion or bench. When we begin doing zazen, we begin to see how many fixed ideas and fixed views we have about ourselves and life. We begin to see where in our bodies we carry the tension, the suffering. We see how much judgment and criticism are part of our regular speech and thought. We see how much expectation, how much preconception, how much fear and anger and sadness, we carry with us all the time. Before we can let go of all of these, we have to notice them; otherwise, we are just carrying them unconsciously and allowing them to affect everything we do. However, over time, we begin to recognize how much we cling to these and how really persistent and pernicious they are.

And over time, as we recognize and work at relinquishing our cherished ideas, our gaining ideas, our judgments and criticisms and attitudes, our zazen becomes clearer and more settled. For some zazen is aided by breath counting, for others by just listening, for others by koan training, and for still others by *shikantaza*. *Shikantaza* is usually translated as “just sitting,” but it literally means “nothing but precisely sitting.” In this sense, the body is also brought into practice. The body is important in practice. How we sit, how we stand, how we carry ourself shows our state of mind. Sawaki Kodo Roshi (1880 – 1965) used to say, “The Buddha Way is the faith that zazen posture is Buddha.” He echoes Dogen (1200 – 1253) here with this emphasis on posture as practice and posture as enlightenment. Neither body nor mind should be wobbling or wandering about. When we sit in a stable, clear and settled manner, like a great mountain, like a noble queen or king, forgetting the self, our sensitivity to other creatures and things also increases. This is important for how we maintain intimacy when we rise from bench or cushion. When doing *kinhin* (the word literally means “sutra walking”), there is no break from practice. It is not recreation time. Each step is taken mindfully, but also un-selfconsciously. And when we leave the zendo and go into daily life, the same intimacy and mindfulness must be maintained.

This is not easy. Hakuin Ekaku (1685 – 1769) wrote that practice in daily life is ten thousand times more difficult than practice in the zendo. And Kosho Uchiyama Roshi (1912 – 1998) once said, “If you cannot hear the pots crying out in pain when you bang them in the kitchen, your zazen is not deep enough.” When you bang a pot in the kitchen, do you feel its pain? When you slam a door mindlessly, do you feel its pain? When you walk through the zendo or elsewhere heavily, do you hear the floor crying in pain? If you do not hear these, your zazen is not deep enough. You are not mindfully present to hear it. What is required is presence, attention.

In his fascicle, *Tenzo Kyokun* (Instructions for the Cook), Eihei Dogen (1200 – 1253) says the cook should handle each grain of rice as if handling one’s own eyeballs. This is true intimacy,

handling all things and all beings as if they were oneself, for indeed they are. This is true bodhisattva practice where there is no self and no other. The kanji for intimacy is *shin*, which means both “mind” and “parents.” The implication is that true intimacy has the quality of “parental mind.” In other words, we need to treat everything the way a loving parent treats a child, with the utmost care, always attentive to the child’s welfare. The story is told of Ikko Narasaki Roshi (d.1996), who would always put down his teacup after drinking from it with two hands, always with two hands, gently, as if returning an infant to its cradle. He handled his eating bowls the same way, always with two hands and the utmost care.

Where is the intimacy of daily life, the parental mind, when we mindlessly leave things lying around in disarray? How do you leave your shoes when you take them off? At Eihei-ji, the monastery founded by Dogen in northern Japan, there is a sign outside the zendo which contains a quote from Dogen that the state of one’s mind can be discerned by the way one leaves one’s shoes. Similarly, how do you open and close doors? How do you carry yourself throughout the day? Intimacy is developed by training. We shape ourselves by what we do and how we do it. This is the way of daily practice, translated from the precise rituals of the zendo into the placement of shoes side-by-side, ready to wear again, or into the placement of garden tools, cleaned and in order, ready to be used again or into pots and pans cleaned and returned to their places. If we practice intimacy, treating all beings and things as we treat our own eyes, we shape ourselves into intimate beings, practicing intimately with all beings. In so doing, we dissolve the barriers between self and other.

The story is told of an incident at Tassajara, the training monastery of the San Francisco Zen center, east of Carmel. One day, some time after Suzuki Roshi had died, a huge oak tree fell across the stream with a crash. Everyone in residence came running and gathered around it, discussing its size, weight and age. After a few minutes, Suzuki Roshi’s widow, Mitsu, arrived and said, “We should chant the Heart Sutra for our friend, the tree.” She was intimate with the tree and felt a strong need to have a service for it. We can show such intimacy with a dead animal or bird, or worn out garment, a broken teacup, by putting the hands in *gassho*. We can do likewise when we have slammed a door carelessly, or thrown something down mindlessly. In this way we cultivate intimacy and present with our every act our unborn Buddha-nature.

The great haiku poet, Matsuo Basho (1644 – 1694) addressed the matter of intimacy in his own way with this poem:

A town with no temple bell  
What do people do?

In this poignant haiku, Basho speaks to the sadness of living without a sense of ritual, without a sense of the sacred, without intimacy. The word “ritual” comes from the Latin “*ritualis*,” which means “to observe rites.” To observe rites is to express mythological and archetypal themes symbolically. For centuries, the village temple bell in the Orient and the village church bell in the West and the call to prayer in the Middle East have marked the ritual rhythms of daily life, have reminded people of the sacred throughout the day, reminded people that each hour and every place is sacred.

There is a Zen saying: “no place to spit.” In other words, every square millimeter of the planet is sacred. Everything we do throughout the day is sacred ritual. When you bow to the sangha, when you bow to your bench or cushion, when you greet your spouse or partner or family each morning or evening, are you present? Are you mindful? Do you observe the sacred ritual? In other words, do you show up for your life? Or do you just go through the motions?

Listen to the temple bell in your own mind when bowing, walking, eating, brushing your teeth, answering an e-mail. Is there any place in your life that is not sacred, is not practice? It is all sacred. And it is all empty. Be intimate with all of it.

Such intimacy changes our lives; we see at once that practice and awakening are not just for our small selves. Wherever we turn, each thing shines with its own light, which is also our light. Human and non-human, animate and inanimate are all included. We are one family with the sparrow and the hawk, the stones and the clouds, the wind and the rain, the ocean and the stars – and with each other.

Let us practice together wholeheartedly and maintain this sacred intimacy.

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