

Relationship as an Opportunity for Personal and Spiritual Growth

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“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 that I believe we all find challenging in developing our spiritual understanding has been how to be in a healthy personal relationship; that is, how to share in a deep loving connection with another human being as part of our journey towards spiritual wholeness. From my experience, this is one of the most difficult challenges of our lives as human beings. And yet, if we accept this challenge, we are rewarded not only with happier personal relationships with others, but also with a clearer and more fulfilling relationship with ourselves.

In terms of my particular temperament, I think of myself as a “curable romantic.” I believe relationships are our best opportunity to experience “heaven on earth.” So, as an illustration for readers of how inquiry can work, 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. Working through these obstacles opens us to possibilities for greater intimacy with ourselves, others, and all of life.

Who are you, really?

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 are the expression of the confusion of self and other. This confusion is really based on a kind of illusion or projection I place on the other.

So, in order to free myself of this illusion, I try to be aware of who I am taking myself and the other person to be. What is my image of myself? Whom do I imagine the other person to be, so that I can’t see them clearly for who they are in-the-moment? Without the ability to see the other clearly, it’s not really possible for two real individuals to have an intimate relationship!

One of my spiritual teachers, Roshi Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, 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, and allows for clear seeing of who and what is really there.

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, in 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 him or her, and so I can see increasingly deeply and broadly the entirety of that person’s being.

Focusing on the other is not enough. I also need to ask myself, “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 the whole self – a Self which incorporates one’s personal self, the other, and all life.

How do we ever become separated from this unity? When we are born, we are whole and complete, sensing a harmony between inner and outer which we may here call unconditional love. But, as we grow up, things happen to us that are too painful or too frightening for our little beings to process. So we create a wall around our hearts to attempt to keep this pain out.

Unfortunately, the wall is only semi-permeable - it lets pain in, but doesn’t let the pain out. When we fall “in love,” this wall melts, allowing some love in again. It reminds us of that original all-encompassing love. But, as the wall dissolves, the pain that has been locked inside seeps out. Most of us do not understand what is happening to us. Seemingly, all of a sudden, our unconditional love has become conditional. We start to find faults with our previously perfect partner. We don’t see that it is our own pain that is coming into consciousness, and we blame our partner for creating it. The honeymoon period has now officially ended!

How we deal with this time is crucial to the future of our relationship. I have a friend who is friends with an airline pilot who flies the jumbo jets. He told her, “What’s important in landing one of those planes is not the touch down, but how one handles the bounce up.”

We have all suffered 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 our relationship.

Intimacy and Vulnerability

It is a strange law of relationship, therefore, that for there to be real intimacy, we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, when one of our strongest needs appears to be preserving our invulnerability. But I have learned through years of professional practice and personal growth that 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.

The only way to be truly invulnerable is to be totally vulnerable. The problem with this – and the main reason why most people choose not to take this path – is that to get from where one is to becoming 100% vulnerable, one has to go through 80%, 90%,

95%, 99%, 99.5%, 99.9%.... With each increased degree of vulnerability, one feels that increased degree of pain. And we don't really like pain!

Being vulnerable means being open to feeling not only pain, but also fear, anger, sadness, desire, need, and joy (even joy)! Like most of us, I was taught to deny these feelings, and, until I learned to open to them, I was incapable of having a truly intimate emotional connection, and I didn't even realize it. I had to learn to allow my feelings over a period of many years.

Looking back, I can see that, in my case, I was afraid that if I felt deeply, I would become an emotional mess. There are, of course, other kinds of fears that people may have that prevent them from experiencing their feelings: fear of rejection, of abandonment, of ridicule, of being overwhelmed, of helplessness, of death...the list goes on.

In my case, in opening up to my feeling nature, I had to learn to go from suppression to expression to what I call *impression* – simply being with intense emotions without expressing them in any way. In this way, I found the feeling could be assimilated and metabolized, which opened the possibility for deep compassion and understanding.

Anger is a particular feeling I used to never allow myself to experience. 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. Eventually, 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 observe from a distance parts of my life I no longer needed to be attached to.

Another of the things that I had suppressed was having needs, which then created another kind of neediness. I had learned early on that it was unacceptable to be needy, so I became afraid of it. 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.

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. Another thing I have learned in the course of personal growth and professional practice is that if I can't get what I feel I need from my partner, then I can simply *be with* the need. This is another form of impression. It is harder to do than it sounds, and also very deeply rewarding.

Through my work, I have discovered a way to work with this issue that is very simple, but not necessarily easy. I call it “THE Relationship Formula.” It goes like this:

1. 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?”
2. Then, if it is possible for the other person to meet this need, I ask for what I need.
3. 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.

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, *from the same side* at what went wrong.

Being able to do this together is an important key to having a successful relationship. There is no win-lose in a true relationship: all disagreements end either in a win-win or a lose-lose. So, it behooves couples to find a way to work out their differences amicably.

I tell couples I work with that they should not sweep anything under the rug, because everything they sweep under the rug makes the rug a little higher in-between them. Eventually, the rug gets so high they can no longer see each other on the other side of the rug. This is often when affairs and divorces happen.

Impeccable Honesty

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.

Unfortunately, honesty and love can sometimes be uncomfortable bedfellows. What Richard Needham says is often true: "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 truth be willing to *feel with* the person with whom he's being honest – in other words, to have compassion for what may be their feelings of fear, hurt, disappointment, and so forth.

At the same time, it's important to recognize whose feelings those are: one's own, or the other's? When I am willing to feel the other person's feelings *with* him or her, without having to take them on, it becomes possible to share any truth with another. Then I am sharing a truth with compassion. Then the deeper truth of a loving relationship becomes more important than "winning" an argument.

Without honesty, there is no trust. And without trust, one cannot have true intimacy.

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 30's, 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 understanding, which serves me to this day.

Who Can I Trust?

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 try to give me their pain, I'm prepared.

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. Fortunately, I have more of these people in my life than I have time to be friends 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.

Who's Getting Hurt?

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.

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. This goes back to what I said earlier: if I can't get what I feel I need from the other, then I can simply *be with* the need. Why does this work?

Creating Relationship

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 see relationship as an opportunity to work through my unresolved childhood issues that I brought with me into my relationship, so I am grateful to my partner for

giving me the opportunity to become conscious of my psychological blocks to sharing intimacy.

I remember Roshi Kapleau quoting Hui Neng, an ancient Buddhist patriarch: *“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. By taking full responsibility for our part in creating the relationship we have, one cannot ever feel like a victim – a major source of the inability to work out difficulties in relationships.

Ultimately, it all comes down to this one thing: I ask myself, in any given moment, if I am creating the relationship I really want.

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 through ongoing *dis-illusionment*. 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.

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Note: A slightly different version of this article appeared in [Zen Bow, Volume xxxvi, number 4, 2013-14](#), a publication of the Rochester Zen Center.