On Relationships

By Jason Polk

This is the opening talk to a Dharma Discussion that Jason led on March 29.

I wanted to have a discussion on intimate relationships. By intimate relationships I mean committed relationships, relationships where there is a spoken or implied message that we are not going anywhere, we are in it for the long run. Relationships where the courtship phase has worn off and we are now face to face with each other “warts and all.”

Intimate relationships can be the most difficult thing in our life. I, for one, have been through a painful divorce after a short marriage. Other people in the Sangha have been divorced, so even with all of our “expensive Zen training,” we still struggle with relationships.

Nevertheless, I feel that the Zen perspective on relationships is the most basic and gets to the heart of our problems. Joko Beck says, “It’s the fact that we want something to work which makes our relationships so unsatisfactory.” Taking this further Ken Sensei said to me (and I am paraphrasing a lot): It is because we don’t accept the person for what they truly are. We project on to them instead of being with what is and that is the problem.

As a result of my divorce and my vocation, I have become very interested in couples’ therapy and I have received training to be a couple’s therapist. Basically, most problems for couples can be boiled down to not knowing your partner’s tendencies and then taking them personally. Or we can say not accepting your partner for who they are, then believing that they are doing those super-irritating things just to piss you off (unless you two are actively fighting... that may be the case). Nevertheless, Stan Tatkin, who wrote Wired for Love and has been doing couples therapy for a long time says, “I have hardly ever seen people do anything purposely that is trying to cause pain or that is trying to get their partner angry or scare their partner.” Partners are simply trying their best, and our tendencies in intimate relationships come from what was given or not given to us by our parents. Basically, the template that we take to intimate relationships is formed when we are younger and rely on our parents. Thus, we need to accept the person for what they truly are, and know that their tendencies are based on their early attachment history and they don’t wake up every morning on a mission just to piss you off.

This is where our Zen practice comes in handy. Can we accept the other person “warts and all,” including their histories and what they learned about relationships from their parents? How much of our “me-first” stake in the relationship can I let go in order to support the relationship? The funny thing is, the more you work out win-win situations in disagreements, instead of I-win situations, the stronger the relationship becomes and the more it ends up benefiting you in the long run.

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The Bodhisattva Vows  
---David Lee

The Great Bodhisattva Vows that we chant every day in and out of sesshin exist in many translations, each with its own flavor. Our resident scholar of Chinese, David Lee, has been researching them and presents us with a translation closer to the literal. It’s well worth considering.—The Editor

Tanto or Ino calls out “Great Vows for All”

We respond: “The many beings are numberless, I vow to save them…”

A long time ago my friend Errol Bracken gave me a copy of “Buddha is the Center of Gravity” within which is the Prajnaparamita and Four Great Vows. Both are scribed in indiographs (hanzi or kanji) with romanization (phonetic) and an English translation. Curious, I wondered what the characters of Four Great Vows say…so, dragging out Chinese dictionaries inherited from Eroll, I began to look up each character to see how what we recite in English compares to the meanings provided by the compilers of the works whose purpose is to convey the essence of each character, and the idioms of combined characters. Many characters have multiple meanings, adding to the challenge.

I do not know when or how we received our translation, but noticed something somewhat different in the translations of the root words. That is where insight and understanding of both the origin language and our own come to play. Both Chinese and Japanese infer adverbs, adjectives, case, tense, et cetera, adding to the challenge of translation…I do not yet have the understanding or insight to look at a piece and say in our tongue, poetically or profoundly, what was conveyed so long ago. I am not letting that stop me though. Based on my own peculiar constitution, I keep looking at these things to see if a more clear articulation of what has been handed down to us can be had, at least for myself. So now it is a habit, looking at whatever I am working with, if there is time, to see if our translations look like what comes from the literal. What nuance can be applied? Translation is not like math…literal, direct. What is the eloquence, the poetic, the esoteric expression behind this and all the other recordings passed on to us? The concise, pointed expression, uncontrived, presumably spontaneous. May never find out, but I will continue. I want to share this with you…perhaps it will be of interest, perhaps not…it is one aspect, if there are aspects, of practice for me. Perhaps I will have to take up Sanscrit or Pali to see what was brought forward from West to East…

What follows are the “Four Great Vows” in ideograph, pinyin, and rudimentary English. You have ready access to our recitations for comparison. Lastly, how it strikes me at the moment.

佛 法 煩 碌 眾 四
道 門 惱 生 弘
無 無 無 無 誓
上 量 盡 邊 願
誓 誓 誓 誓
願 頌 頌 頌
成 學 斷 度

Chinese (pinyin):
Si hong shi yuan
Zhong sheng wu bian shi yuan du
Fan nao wu jin shi yuan duan
Fa men wu liang shi yuan xue
Fo dao wu shang shi yuan cheng

Four Great (Magnificent) Vow(s)
All living beings without boundary
vow of compassion (magnanimous)
Vexations without limit
vow to balance
Dharma gate(s) without measure
vow to learn, study
Buddha way without superior
vow to attain

No separation. Be compassionate
Vexations endlessly rising. Follow the middle path.
Dharma limitless, boundless. Learn, study, know.
Nothing beyond Buddha way…
Entering the Gate

“To enter the gate is to take refuge in Sangha, its wisdom, example and never failing help.”

Two people entered the gate in March--
Lisa McLaws works with Homeless Veterans, and enjoys cooking, baking, yoga and singing
Greg Van works with at risk teenagers, and enjoys hiking, skiing, biking and zen poetry
Gassho and welcome!

Gassho Corner

Thanks to all who pitched in this winter!
--With January Zen Seminar: George Mathews, Darren Christensen, Sara Bauer, Chris Chase, Bill Wright, Connie Lane (soup)
--With the Intro Class: George Mathews
--With the snow: Darren Christensen, Bob Knott, Peggy Sensei, Clark Dollard

Upcoming Stuff

Introduction to Zen Classes
Mondays April 6, 13, 20, 27
Help is always appreciated, especially for the Apr. 20th class. Email the office if you can lend a hand.

Samu April 11
A morning of work practice that includes a tea ceremony and an orioki meal.

Workday April 26
An morning of informal sangha practice together.

Weekend Sesshin and Zazenkai--May 1 - 3
Conducted by Karin Ryuku Sensei.

Spring Potluck Brunch May 17
Zen people make the greatest food between heaven and earth.

Sangha Meeting May 31
We need a quorum for this meeting. If you can’t make it, give your proxy to another member.

Samu June 14
Blue Mountain Sesshin June 23 - June 28
A 5-day sesshin in a beautiful mountain setting above Carter Lake. You must have been to at least one sesshin at the Center in order to attend.
They are not ghosts that hover, they are whatever pulses through the ethers. The boy and the girl drew Cherry Coke through drugstore straws. The syrup was dark, the glass shapely, the straws were paper. And still they are drawn to each other, sucking the practically nothing that remains. This morning he sends an e-mail about his family’s school in Africa, with photos of his wife who came to our class reunion, regal her tie-dyed headdress, and he, both handsome and boyish, wearing a misfit jacket from an earlier decade. And there’s a one-line email from another one, the teenage boy who petted with me in the backseat, all lips and hands. In those sweet days he would leave, for me to find later, a morning note in our own abbreviated language, folded inside our book on the high school library shelf marked Fiction. Now he complains in a loving way about the swarm of grandchildren he just drives to all their events. He writes in the subject line that he has a random q. How can he find out what happened to a nun from grade school he’s been thinking about recently? He wonders what we all wonder: What remains? My calico cat finally died in November. I raked her animal ashes into the soil with the remaining leafy vegetables of the season. So when my two-year old granddaughter asked me, But where is she now? Where is her body? I could place in her palm a flake of the cat she used to know. She is nowhere now, the child says to the nothing in her hand. Then she looks around the garden and up at the sky. Years ago, holding hands with my first granddaughter, when she was about the same age that as this one is now, we walked into a suburban park surrounded by pastel-painted houses with pitched roofs, big green soccer field, slides and swings. The park was empty, except for the two of us and a dozen geese pulling blades of grass one by one up out of the ground. It had all been abandoned to the eerie Colorado twilight. It was so quiet. She asked Are we in a story? It felt like we were entering a set, walking onto a stage. She wanted to know if it is all made up. I feel a kind of tenderness for everyone and everything when I step through the garden gate or open my e-mail at my desk in the morning. Which one will it be this time? The Coca-Cola boy or the headmaster? The backseat boy or the grandfather only half-wanting to be left alone? And who opens the e-mail, anyway? The Catholic girl in the navy blue uniform with the unbuttoned white blouse? Or the one sitting on her front steps, knowing his bike is coming down the sidewalk, hearing the squeak of the breaks, the slide of the skid, pretending not to be waiting? Or is it the grandmother, making it all up, petting the cat?

--Jackie St. Joan
Sunrise On Haleakala Crater

Enshrouded in clouds, the old volcano shivers... then bursts into flames!

--John Steele

The Spring Season

Desert Blooming

G. Keeton
VEGAN MAC & CHEESE
Melanie Ritter
This recipe is geared to a small crockpot, 1.5 quart

Morning ingredients:
1 1/2 cup cubed butternut squash
1/2 cup chopped tomato (one large roma)
2 cloves minced garlic (I use 3, but I love garlic)
3 3” sprigs fresh thyme or 1 1/2 teaspoons dried thyme (I used fresh)
1 2” sprig fresh rosemary or 1/2 teaspoons dried (again, I used fresh. I freeze fresh rosemary, works well)
1/2 teaspoon of salt (I added this. Not a salt freak, but this was REALLY needed)
1 1/2 cups of water
Cook on low for 7 - 9 hrs, or on high for 3 1/2 hrs.

Evening ingredients:
1/4 cup nutritional yeast
1/2 cup to 1 cup unsweetened nondairy milk (I used 1/2 cup cream, just what I had in the house)
1 1/2 cup uncooked macaroni (I used fusilli, like the twirly shape)

30 to 45 minutes prior to serving: Puree the contents of crockpot in a blender with the nutritional yeast and 1/2 cup of nondairy milk. (I use a hand-held blender). Add mixture back into the crockpot and turn it to high. Stir in the macaroni, cover and cook for 20 minutes.

Stir well, add more milk if the sauce is getting too thick. (I never had to add milk and I used cream.) Cook for 15 to 25 minutes more or until the pasta is al dente. (I usually am finished by 20 minutes). Add salt and pepper to taste.

Check on pasta every 10 minutes or so, each cooker is a bit different.

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Relationships are the most fertile grounds for practice. Stan Tatkin says, “There is nothing more difficult on planet earth than another person.” Even with all my literally “expensive couples therapy training,” the key to relationships can be boiled down to the Zen perspective: accepting the person for what they truly are. And of course, accepting yourself helps too... Relationships can be the source of immense joy and support, making life fuller and more enjoyable. Or they can be the source of immense suffering and discord, creating emotional and eventually even physical health problems.