

True Intimacy

IT HAS taken me years to begin to understand the depths of zazen.

Buddha sat in meditation until he saw through his conditioned mind, and what he transmitted was the inspiration to follow his example, to sit until we understand the patterns and distortions of our own consciousness. Like Buddha's successor Mahakashyapa, who "pounded his bones and crushed his body thousands of times" until "his face was no longer his own," we sit until our face is no longer our own.

True intimacy occurs when we directly experience reality for ourselves. Transmission, or true understanding, does not come from someone else; nor can we transmit to someone. We transmit to ourselves. Each one must find intimacy directly, not through our thinking mind, but from immediate direct experience prior to the mind's mediation.

During a recent sesshin I was offering a stick of incense at the altar. While doing so, the ash from the burning incense met the ash in the dish intimately—there was no resistance, nothing to push against. The experience left no trace.

In our usual morning service, the attendant offers me the incense, and we bow together. That moment of the stick being passed from hand to hand is most intimate. We can notice such intimate moments. Each morning the meeting happens for the first time. We notice when attention wanders. This moment is especially profound in the stillness of the zendo.

Meeting other people or other things is meeting ourselves. Because I may not understand the intensity of my feelings when I am with you, for instance, I may not dare do more than just touch you briefly with a glance. When do we feel safe to truly meet the other with our eye, our heart and mind? Is it when we trust no more may be required of us than we are prepared to give?

Sometimes intimacy arises in unexpected ways. An oak tree at Tassajara caught my attention during one sesshin. As I passed, I was dimly aware that I was feeling something from the tree. I looked away, then looked back, and realized I was receiving compassion from the tree. Communing with trees is not an everyday event for me. What was going on?

I saw, I felt, the suffering of the tree. The tree was silent, upright; it stood regardless of rain or snow or the deep heat of the summer. It was uncomplaining. It was just there. It supported the zendo, it supported our practice life together, and now it was directly supporting me.

My mind formed the words: "It's OK to be me." This was a realization deeper than words. Katagiri Roshi said, "Zen practice is about the complete opening of the heart." In case you thought it was something else, let me say again: Zen is a complete opening of the heart.

In this culture, we don't know how to open our heart to

ourselves. The more we do zazen, the more we realize we don't do zazen. In the same way we realize we don't open our heart; it opens of itself. Are we willing to be exactly the being we are without distortion or fabrication? Am I willing to be an irritated fearful person? An anxious person? Not do I simply endure difficult feelings and wait for them to pass, but am I truly willing to be a person who has such feelings?

Our alienation from unacknowledged, rejected parts of ourselves is addressed in a ceremony called the ceremony of nourishing the hungry ghosts. In Buddhist cosmology, a hungry ghost is described as the state of mind of lost, wandering beings absorbed by endless desire. When we are in this state of mind, we look outside ourselves to be satisfied or confirmed. In this ceremony we invite all these hungry ghost parts of ourselves to come forth and be nourished. The enactment of the ceremony makes vividly real the turning to the dark, rejected parts of ourselves, as well as to the rejected parts of society, and helps open our hearts, inviting those parts into our consciousness.

We have to return to earlier states of innocence to do this practice of inviting forth the despised parts of ourselves. But it can be done. We never know when our practice will touch our own innocent heart.