

## INTIMACY OF RELATIVE AND ABSOLUTE

I NTIMACY IS ONE OF THE BASIC THEMES expressed in the poem *Identity of Relative and Absolute* written by Master Sekito Kisen, a Zen master in eighth-century China. The poem begins:

*The mind of the Great Sage of India  
Is intimately conveyed West and East.  
Among human beings are wise ones and fools;  
In the Way there is no teacher of North and South.*

The implication of *identity* is not just that two things are one thing, but that there is the activity of being one. The two interact, and yet they are one. Being one is the activity of intimacy.

The first line is, “The mind of the Great Sage of India is intimately conveyed West and East.” We use the word *conveyed*, but the word in Japanese is *mitsu*, or “intimacy.” The mind of the Great Sage is intimate, not conveyed; it is here! Being intimate is this vivid, vital life itself. Be intimate with yourself! Buddha realized this intimacy and handed it down generation after generation, ancestor to ancestor, to us.

What is the relative and absolute? Master Sekito Kisen writes:

*The relative fits the absolute as a box and its lid.  
The absolute meets the relative  
Like two arrows meeting in midair.*

What is ordinary and what is absolute? Our ordinary life is the phenomenal or relative part; the fundamental, so-called essential nature, which is somewhat invisible to our physical eyes, is the absolute. Sometimes absolute, or *ri*, is translated as “principle, the primary point, or essential nature.”

In the original Japanese version, this line literally means that when the relative exists, the box and its lid fit together. When the absolute responds to it, it is like two arrows meeting in midair. When the relative exists, the absolute responds to it like a box and its lid. It is like two arrows meeting in midair. Everyday life and essential nature—Buddha nature—are not separate.

Intimacy is also expressed in two arrows meeting in midair. How can two arrows meet in midair? It is almost impossible. And yet this is a very practical analogy.

The story of two arrows meeting in midair was originally expressed in *Reshi*, a book written more than two thousand years ago. There were two archery adepts, a teacher, Hiei, and a student, Kisho. Kisho was becoming more and more skillful and eventually he believed himself the best. Without his teacher Hiei, Kisho believed he would be the best in the world. One day, he tried to kill his teacher.

Kisho and Hiei happened to meet in a field when no one else was around. Kisho shot an arrow and his teacher, responding, shot back. The two arrows met in the air and fell to the ground. Kisho shot a second arrow and a third one. The same thing happened each time. But Hiei had only three arrows, and Kisho had four. He shot the fourth arrow, and the teacher automatically picked a branch with thorns from a bush and stopped that arrow with the thorn. You may think such a thing is impossible, yet at the same time, can you take it as an analogy for your life?

Our essential nature, our Buddha nature, and all the different manifestations of our world are not two. Subject and object are altogether as one. As an individual, your so-called true self and your so-called apparent self are not separate. Our true life and our daily life are not separate. All our surroundings and this self are not separate. The point is how do we see it? Do we see it as one?

Just seeing this is not enough. We must ask how our daily life *functions* as the life of everything. How are these two arrows meeting? If we say it is impossible for two arrows to meet in midair, we can say that it is also impossible for each one of us to meet all external phenomena as one, right here, right now. So how do they meet? Or rather, how to live so that this life and all externals are together intimate as your own life? You cannot do this by any intellectual efforts or schemes, for when you do you encounter this *I, my, me*.

Intimacy is nothing but realizing the fact that already you are *as you are*. Your essential nature is nothing but you as you are. See that these two arrows already meeting is your own life. You are no longer whatever you think you are, you yourself are the life of the dharma, the life of Buddha. Realizing this fact is the moment of transmission. Transmission from whom to whom? There is nothing to be transmitted from anybody else to you, not even your true Self. This is intimacy. How do you appreciate it?

There is a koan in the *Transmission of the Light*<sup>1</sup> about being intimate. The forty-second patriarch Ryozan Enkan was attending his teacher Doan Zenji. The patriarch Doan asked him, "What is that beneath your robe?" In other words, "Who are you?" Ryozan had no answer. Doan Zenji said, "It is the most painful thing when one who studies the Buddha Way hasn't yet reached that stage. Now you ask me." So Ryozan asked, "What is that beneath your robe?" The patriarch Doan replied, "Intimacy." Ryozan was greatly awakened.

Taking refuge in the Three Treasures is also intimacy. I am not talking about anything special. Be one with the Buddha. Be one with the Dharma. Be one with the Sangha. The Sangha meets when the Buddha arrow and the Dharma arrow meet. Where do they meet? Right here, now, as our life, as my life! This very moment is midair! The Buddha, the unsurpassable Way, is absolute. So if we call it darkness, it is dark; if we say it is a subtle source, it is a subtle source. All appearances as light and dark, clear, muddy, messy, transparent, appearing and disappearing, and so on, are all the dharma.

Really be intimate with no division between yourself and others. Then everything becomes nothing but you. Nothing could be more

intimate than this. This is the buddhas' teaching, your original self. You cannot separate your life from Buddha.

Of course, the two arrows meeting in midair is an analogy, and analogies never cover every aspect. This analogy simply indicates the fact of truly being one. So in daily life, please accept yourself as you are—as absolute, as the source—and accept your life as it is, as male or female, young or old, smart or dull. Given this fact of absolute and relative, we are all the same and we are all different, each having our own unique function and position. Whether you see these two arrows meeting in midair as difficult or easy, see it as the ease and difficulty of your own life.

Trust yourself as you truly are; you are already the Buddha Way itself. Be intimate with it. Do not make yourself separate with your opinions, your judgments, your ideas, with whatever you think your life is. When you do that, the two arrows miss each other. If there is any difficulty, it is simply the difficulty of how to be intimate with yourself.

The two arrows meeting is the mind of the sage and the ordinary mind. Our ordinary life is intimate to begin with, but unfortunately we experience our everyday life as a split life, as if the enlightened life is separate from it. So this identity is of oneself and Oneself and of Oneself and others. Others are not necessarily just human beings. How to be intimate with Oneself and the phenomenal world? This fact has been transmitted down to us. How you take care of it is your responsibility.

In your daily life, please accept yourself as you are and appreciate your life as it is. Be intimate with yourself. Taking good care of yourself is always the best way to take care of everything. Then your life, I am sure, will go all right. I want you to be a truly intimate being. Beneath your robe is the same as outside your robe. Inside and outside the robe are one. There is no division. Please take good care of this life. Enjoy yourself!

1. The following koan is adapted from Francis H. Cook, trans., *The Record of Transmitting the Light: Zen Master Keizan's Denkoroku*

(Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1991), 190.