
Ando Feeds Her Hungry Spirit

*Calling all the hungry hearts
Everywhere through endless time.
Your joy and your sorrow
I make it mine.⁶⁹*

KOAN

One day Ando received a notice of a rent increase. The notice triggered painful memories of her being abandoned on a New York street at age nine with a bag of clothes. Reading the notice, she was overcome by the hungry spirit of abandonment, with its wrenching emotional turmoil. After a few days, she went out to a nearby eatery for lunch. She saw a homeless man in line—dirty, smelly, and incoherent—scrounging in his pockets for money to pay for his food. Everyone was ignoring him, and the young cashier was doing her best to be kind. Spontaneously, Ando told the cashier, “I’ll pay for his lunch.” Ando suddenly felt a shift.

REFLECTION

How do you feed a hungry spirit? The hungry spirit is not some other person, but rather the insatiable part of yourself. In the ceremony of Feeding the Hungry Spirits as practiced by the Zen Peacemakers, inviting in the hungry spirit is a first step in changing your relationship to it. Although the hunger is already a part of you, you have likely expended a lot of energy keeping it at bay. Thus you must intentionally invite it in. This invitation is the beginning of changing your relationship to it.

Ando was so besieged by the hungry spirit of abandonment that her usual strategies of coping—meditating, staying present to her feelings and physical sensations, and talking to friends and family—did not bring her relief. What do you do when emotional pain paralyzes you? Do you instinctively reach for your favorite comfort food, drugs, or alcoholic beverage? When you feel enclosed in an emotional echo-chamber, do you become a couch-potato lost in mindless television shows or escape into shopping, sleep, or sex? How do you meet the turmoil of entangling thoughts and feelings?

As a longtime meditator, Ando instinctively bore witness to the sensations triggered within her body-mind by the rent increase notice. She recognized her habitual reflexes of clinging to the feelings and stories and also of wanting to push them away. She chose to remain face to face with her suffering. Whenever you choose to return to your breath in meditation, you strengthen the spiritual muscles needed for not clinging to or identifying with a particular storyline. You develop the capacity to be aware in the midst of even extreme discomfort. The very posture of meditation is one of stability and openness. Self-grasping, story-spinning, and difficult

THE BOOK OF HOUSEHOLDER KOANS

sensations continue to arise, but you are able to remain naked and open in the midst of it. Attention strengthens, awareness sharpens, and acceptance of what is takes root.

So it was for Ando. When it comes to childhood trauma, healing is a lifelong journey. You cannot control what will trigger painful emotional memories, but you can develop the skillful means to respond to them. After several stressful days of abiding naked and open in this desolate inner landscape, Ando went for lunch at the Burger Lounge. There she saw a homeless man—dirty and smelly, incoherent, scrounging in his pockets for money to pay for his meal—who reflected the inner terror of homelessness and abandonment that she had felt during the past days. Without hesitation, Ando said quietly to the cashier, “I’ll pay for his lunch.” Through this simple, spontaneous, and anonymous act, Ando felt inner peace returning for the first time in days and the sense of abandonment dissipated.

What shifted for Ando?

What opens for you when your own suffering meets the suffering of another person?

There is a line in the liturgy for feeding the hungry spirits: “Sharing your distress, I offer you this food, hoping to resolve your thirsts and hungers.” The fire of the past days had forged in Ando a heart acutely receptive to the suffering of the homeless man and illuminated their shared distress and shared humanity. There were many people in the restaurant, but Ando alone responded without hesitation to the suffering right before her. In feeding the homeless man, Ando herself was fed. Your hunger and my hunger are not one, not two. Whatever you are feeling, someone else is feeling it, too.

So now, show me, how do you feed your hungry spirit?

*What is the insatiable part of yourself? Can you invite it in?
Paying for the homeless man's lunch was not a mere act of charity.
Why not?*