

Dharma Talk 2: This Time It's Personal

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Please don't take this personally... because what we consider to be our personality is generally only a gathering of contractions: grasping and clenching and recoiling and refusing the openness of reality. You will often hear Anzan Hoshin roshi, Eihei Dogen zenji, Keizan Jokin zenji and the other Awakened Ancestors speak of "intimacy". Yet students seldom understand what they mean. "Intimacy" seems to be something they experience only very rarely and momentarily, it is something exceptional. And yet the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors speak of it as the ordinary quality of each moment.

Intimacy is not something you are ever denied, it is always available to you and you can choose to open to in any moment. It's not dependent on where you are, or on another person, because it starts with you, with how your attention is arranged. While practising zazen, you can see that there are times when your attention can be quite open and you are able to notice more of the details of experiencing. But at other times it becomes very coarse. Sometimes you're sitting and you just don't care about practising at all and instead will let yourself wander off into storylines that could be about anything: food, sex, work issues, replaying an angry conversation, thinking about something you need to plan out. Or perhaps a flurry of 'creative' thoughts will come up about some project you are working on. When you are sitting and you allow your attention to wander aimlessly you can see how easily it falls into the three klesas of passion, aggression and stupidity - grasping, avoiding, ignoring.

Now, of course this doesn't just happen when you're sitting on the zafu. What you are seeing when you sit is a more detailed glimpse into how your attention is most of the time. You just don't notice it most of the time because.....well....don't take this personally, but for the most part, other than during those brief moments during the day when it might occur to you to practise, you're caught up in passion, aggression and stupidity along with everyone else. Self-image continuously sorts experiencing into what it likes (passion, or grasping), what it doesn't like (aggression, pushing away and struggling), and then everything else, the 99.9% of experiencing that it can't be bothered with (ignorance) because it doesn't fit into the categories of liking and disliking.

What changes during those moments when you remember to practice is that you are practicing this intimacy of which I speak. Instead of just allowing yourself to follow the compulsion of states, you are practising intimacy of hearing, of seeing, of bodily sensation, intimacy with and as the space of experiencing in which everything is arising. And this is very different from viewing oneself and the world as a collection of objects, liked, disliked, or dismissed.

So now we'll go into some of the topics related to intimacy that students often would like to raise in daisan or practice interviews but are hesitant to bring up. I will take the plunge and bring them up for you, beginning with sexual energy, which is probably at the top of the list of uncomfortable topics for students. This is an area of people's lives that generates a lot of confusion and entanglement and can be so contracted that it becomes quite painful for them, so I think we should discuss it.

Lay students spend a considerable amount of time and energy on the play of attraction and repulsion, breeding cycles, having babies and creating their own villages, so to speak. Not that there's anything wrong

with that, if that's what you want to do. In fact, because of social conditioning, all of that is considered "normal" and if we aren't doing things in ways that are easily recognizable to the people around us as 'normal', we are considered 'strange'. From the perspective of a monastic, though, all of THAT is very strange. Once a woman becomes pregnant, the next 20 years of her life are accounted for. There is very little she can do beyond looking after the child and taking care of all of the tasks and responsibilities that go with parenthood. For her mate, the next 20 years are similarly accounted for and during that 20 years, neither of them can really practice intensively. But it's fine if this is what they want to do with their lives as long as there is the recognition that such decisions can have far-reaching consequences.

Monastics of the Northern Mountain Order who live in the monastery and are training as Teachers take a Vow of Celibacy because they have dedicated their lives to the Teaching and practice of Dharma. If one is working closely with students there can be no question of any compromise of either their own practice or the practice of the students they are working with. We all know of the disastrous situations that have come about because teachers have become involved with their students. This is tremendously damaging to everyone concerned and to the entire Sangha. But in addition, the work of Teaching others is much more than a full-time job and so it would be completely unfair to commit oneself to a romantic relationship - one would simply not have time to spend with a partner. Or with one's students. But being celibate is not a matter of suppressing or ignoring sexual energy or of 'diverting' it into yet another obsession. We are taught how to work with it, to practise with it, to open the energy of it so that it becomes just energy. I am not going to go into further explanation about how this is taught because it involves foundations of understanding and realization that take place within the context of monastic training as such.

Within our tradition of training, laymonks are permitted to marry, have children, and can live outside of the monastery. Under some circumstances they can train as "practice advisors" and may be authorized to give instruction to others concerning some aspects of the practice, but they are required to work within certain parameters.

And of course, for lay students (associate, general or formal students) there are no prohibitions concerning sexual energy, although the instructions for basic mindfulness and releasing contraction apply just as much to sexual activity as they do anything else one might do. People can get contracted about anything, including what they understand as 'love'.

And that brings me to the point I want to go into - the issue with all of this is not really sexual energy as such, it is the various contractions that can form around it.

There is nothing wrong with sexual energy as such. The whole bodymind is always alive with sensations, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, but basically the bodymind is inherently joyful. For this reason, men can experience an erection simply when walking down the street, feeling the sunlight on their skin. For women, sensuality is very much related to sexual energy and can express itself in a myriad of different ways. Sexual energy, like any other energy of bodymind can be very open, or it can be congealed and people tend to become amazingly fixated about sexual attraction.

By the time you are in your twenties, the bodymind, as it actually is, is losing interest in the 'high excitement' of attraction. You have to work harder at it, in part because it's all become quite familiar, but also because the bodymind is ageing. After you hit 30, when you look in the mirror, you begin to see the traces of your mother or father looking back at you - a gray hair here and there, the laugh lines, just the beginnings of a

little bit of sag or cellulite, so you work a little harder to maintain it all. You go to a cafe for a cup of coffee first thing in the morning and they're playing really loud heavy metal over the sound system, and though you don't like it, you still want to feel as young as the twenty year-old behind the counter and can't quite bring yourself to be the old fuddy-duddy asking them to turn it down either. You begin to realize you're 'in-between' youth and 'not-youth' and that can be quite uncomfortable. When you turn 40, it starts becoming much more difficult to pump up the kind of states you used to experience when you were a teenager. By this time people are usually engaging in a certain amount of fantasizing concerning their romantic relationships. You're really past the time of breeding cycles and the bodymind is feeling the effects of 40 years of gravity. So where at 20 it would have been easy for you to become aroused, you now have to work at it and adding mental imagery and focusing on that is one way of coaxing the bodymind to try to behave as though it were 20. After 50, your mother or father is definitely staring back at you in the mirror; the sag and cellulite aren't co-operating with your attempts to tighten and firm and strange things are happening. Men's ears begin to sprout hair; women sprout mutant hairs that grow to odd lengths in strange places - like out of the side of their neck or on an upper arm, a whisker where there were no whiskers previously; nose hairs develop a plan of their own; your eyebrows turn into wires and you start making funny grunting sounds when you bend down to tie your shoes. But you're still very concerned about how attractive you are — or are not.

What runs as a thread through all of these different stages of one's life is an ongoing anxiety about how we appear to ourselves, and of course, how we appear to others, whether we are attractive or repulsive; whether other people are attractive or repulsive.

I have been a celibate monastic for over 20 years, but I was married before I became a monk. Twice, in fact. So I do know enough about sex to speak about it from the perspective of practice. As I stated previously, there is nothing wrong with sexual energy. It can be very nice. But it is not necessary to focus and fixate attention on a limited range of perceptions while having sex. You can feel whole-bodily; you can still see and hear and you can engage in this activity with open attention. And if you do choose to open attention and practise while you are having sex you will have a better time and so will your partner. There. I've said it. It's not often you'll hear a monastic talk about sex in quite this way I think. But it is true and the thing is, why wouldn't you practise while having sex? Why is it necessary to become so focused that most of your sense bases shut down?

Just as you need to open attention when you are sitting zazen in order to release contraction, you need to open attention when you are doing anything else, including having sex. The alternative is to make a limited range of sensations the only thing that is going on when they're not. To be even more direct about this I will add that when people become very focused on just those sensations, for all they're really interacting with their partner, the other person may as well not even be there. Most of who and what they are is blocked out.

How do you block out another person? Well, fantasizing will do that quite effectively and people do like to fantasize to a surprising extent. Focusing on one aspect of the other person, physically or emotionally will also block out most other information about them. When you sit in zazen, it's so easy to see how you can almost completely ignore the fact that you are sitting on a zafu with your hands in the mudra because you become so focused on a thought. So of course, you're quite good at diverting all of your attention into whatever seems important to you. I think that's pretty obvious. But you don't need to do that.

That the eye is drawn to a leg, the shape of a backside, the ripple of a muscle, the curve of a hip or a breast happens not because the seeing dictates it. It happens because this is how attention is moving. The person

being seen is a collection of knowings - heart beating, breath breathing, thoughts and feelings rising and falling. In fact, they are the presencing of Awareness in itself. But we can reduce them to the curve of a hip. Interesting, don't you think?

Now I'm going to speak a little about online porn because it is so easy to see the focusing involved in it because it's so extreme. Fascination with online porn is shared by both men and women, but has more appeal to men, I think. The reason for this is because men tend to view women more as bits and pieces. Through focusing attention, it is possible to leave out most of what is seen, for instance a whole person, and reduce them to breasts or buttocks or whatever bit or piece is of most interest. But the fact of the matter is that what is being seen IS a whole person, not just bits and pieces of an image on a computer monitor. And one of the biggest problems with online porn is that you are not actually interacting with that person as they actually are, you're interacting with a state - your own state - and if a lot of time is spent doing this, it will inevitably affect how you interact with other people in real life. Looking at images and engaging in whatever behavior results from looking at them is not so much the problem. The real issue with this is that during that time, people become very contracted through focusing attention. In fact without this focusing and refusal of openness it all makes no sense to be interested in it.

As part of demonstrating the interaction between focusing, thought and bodily effect, Shikai O-sensei sometimes describes someone thinking about cutting a lemon in half and biting into it. If you focus strongly enough on that thought, you will experience something of the puckering of your mouth and the salivation that would occur if you were to actually do that. Similarly, if you focus on one dimensional images of someone you know nothing about intently enough, certain kinds of physical states will occur in response to the focusing.

For some people this becomes such a problem that they have to enter into addiction counseling to control the amount of time they spend on their carefully bookmarked porn sites. But the question is, is it the images that are the problem? Is the fact that these sites exist that is the problem? No, the problem is that people don't understand the process of focusing and fixating attention

Now I've mentioned that this can have a pronounced effect on how you interact with other people. That is simply true. By engaging in this fabricated form of 'intimacy', which is not intimacy at all, you will make it increasingly difficult to be open to the intimacy of a relationship with another human being who is not a photograph.

That's a fairly extreme example, but if you observe how you are you will find many examples of how you focus and fixate, how you objectify other people, how you sort experiencing into 'self' and 'other'

Now I do want to make it very clear that I am not speaking about any of this to talk you out of anything. What you do is of your own choosing and we, of the Practice Council do not dictate lifestyle. So this is not any about judgment or condemnation of your preferences. What I am pointing out is that anything you do can be done with open attention or with contraction and contraction always leads to further contraction. So it's not that I am so much concerned with what you do as I am with how you do it. If you choose more and more often to open attention in the midst of whatever you do, old patterns of contracted thought and feeling will loosen and drop away of their own accord. And this is part of how you can integrate your practice.

For self-image, sex is never just sex, just as money is never just money. But for the Buddhas and Awakened

Ancestors everything is always just THIS. Just this moment of present experiencing, just this moment of seeing, of hearing, of touching, tasting, feeling. But you can notice how attention will tend to narrow and focus and as the Roshi has said, the recognition of this is an opportunity to notice how the three klesas determine for us the criteria by which someone is worthwhile or not. And to release this into simply being intimate with experience as a whole.

We will continue with the topic of intimacy in the next Dharma Talk in this series.