

The Touchstone 11: Entering the Space of Maitri

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During the previous Dharma Talk in this series, I spoke a little about the sense of separation that can come up between people, the way in which self-image will set itself at a distance from what is being experienced. That distancing allows us to avoid the directness of experiencing, and in the so-called 'space' between one self and whatever is being experienced, there is lots of room to propagate attitudes and stances about other people or situations.

But allowing oneself to experience the directness of experiencing might seem fraught with difficulty if misunderstood. Self-image is very good at over-simplifying imagined options, making them seem rather cartoon like. Either I "like" this person or this situation and I enter more fully into it because I like it and so I want to grasp as much as I can from it. Or I don't "like" this person or situation so I pull back from it. I distance myself from it. And, all depending on what's going on, liking and disliking might switch around, so that something you like in one moment becomes something you don't like in the next moment.

We have a conversation with someone and we believe that they are someone separate from us; that we are separate from that person. So there is an interiority to how we are. We withdraw and become internalized. From that internalized sense of ourselves, we believe that we have thoughts and feelings that are hidden from the situation. We look out at this person who's speaking to us, this person that we might like in one moment and might dislike in the next.

This is all very harsh, don't you think? It is harsh because when you separate yourself from experiencing by withdrawing and internalizing, the world that is seemingly 'outside' of you seems critical and judgmental and you become critical and judgmental of it.

We can't ever truly meet anyone at all unless we do so with complete intimacy. When we notice we are contracting or internalizing, in that moment of noticing we have the opportunity to make a choice about how we are. And the only choice that is really a choice is to open. Instead of furthering that sense of separation, we can instead choose to allow a quality of "maitri" or "friendliness" to guide our interactions. Maitri is a kind of basic friendliness, a kind of warmth, which the Roshi has often described as a sense of space within which you can allow for however you are to come and go, without pushing or pulling at it. Maitri means recognizing our fears, recognizing our hopes, openly. It means learning to really bring mindfulness and confusion together.

Anzan Hoshin roshi said, in *Maitri Bhavana: The Practice of Compassion* :

Maitri does not mean indulging in our thoughts and feelings. It means seeing the tendency to indulge, to identify, to propagate, and it sees also the tendency to avoid and cover over and reject and suppress. But it trusts the clarity of the moment itself. It trusts the dignity of experience itself. It trusts and knows that the moment itself, our experience itself, is so vast and limitless that a contraction, a lie, a contortion, a clenching, must unfold itself within such vastness when it is recognized. Just as a fist must unfurl into an open hand at some point - you can only keep it closed for so long - so in the same way, Maitri attends to what is arising openly and brings that quality of openness towards what is arising so that what arises

dwells and passes away, so that what comes goes. Effortlessly, painlessly, spontaneously, freely.

It's not about pumping up a feeling of warmth as a feeling tone, or creating some sort of warm, fuzzy state of compassion. It is about actually practising. Because if you really practice, Maitri is an aspect of what your practice opens into. But it can only really come about through the activity of practice.

A practical example of this might be practising with the eye gaze while you are speaking to someone. By "practising with the eye gaze" I just mean to be mindful of how the gaze is. I do not mean to take up a special way of looking at people, a Zen trick to play with the eyes or anything like that. People are often looking for a special tool, or more accurately a kind of "secret weapon" that other people will not have in order to have an advantage. Practising with the eye gaze, or the posture, or the breath, or the whole bodymind in the whole moment is not a matter of playing tricks or playing with weapons but of seeing through and thus not being tricked. We often trick ourselves, or try to trick others, or we fall for or even submit to the tricks of others. Practising is noticing how we are adding these tricky tactics because we are following the strategies of hope and fear of trying to maintain an image of a self instead of allowing the reality of the open body, the open mind, and the open moment.

Many people will maintain a tight eye contact with others, almost as if they feel like potential prey in the presence of a predator. This is because the sense of separation is already quite strong and is being generated by self-image, which itself is fear. Instead of propagating this, practise opening and relaxing your eye gaze while speaking to other people. Open to the sensations of the touchstone of the breath, feel into the sensations of the diaphragm and tanden and the whole bodymind in whatever posture it is in. Open to hearing and open to peripheral vision so that you can see the space around them - to the left and right and up and down all at the same time. Release the focusing of attention by seeing the details within the space, and also seeing the space between you and they, the same space that opens up all around and behind them. In doing this, you are literally 'giving them space'. And although they won't know what it is that you're doing, they will likely experience a feeling of friendliness from you because you're giving them space. You're not using a spotlight - you're using soft lighting and this is much less harsh than the usual focusing of attention. That kind of focusing is harsh because it's way too much. When you focus on someone like that, you're making them the most important thing in the world and they're not. They're just part of what's going on. They and the room you're standing in, the colours and forms and sounds and sensations you're experiencing arise together with them within the whole of experiencing. For you the visual field will be softer, less 'aimed and directed', which will allow the bodymind to relax more. It's really quite alarming for the bodymind when attention congeals into patterns of anxious focusing.

So as you can see from this example, maitri is not a feeling or an attitude. It is a friendliness towards oneself and others that comes about through actually doing the practice in the midst of interactions. But maitri can be applied to much more than just eye gaze. I simply used that as an example because it's quite easy to talk about.

But even when there is no one else there, when you are telling yourself stories about yourself or stories about other people, these are times when maitri is needed. And just as you can release the focusing of the eyes to practice this when speaking with another person, you can release the focus of attention on yourself when you notice you are talking to yourself. The same narrowing is going on and needs to be released.

Now I'll read a brief passage from the Roshi's *Commentaries on the The Xinxin Ming* , which so clearly describes the distortion that occurs through contraction.

The Roshi says:

Your presumptions about yourselves as selves cloud your eyes like cataracts and so you see things that are just not there. Sometimes they might indeed be beautiful like flowers. But more often they are much more threatening: like flesh eating flowers looming around you and images of scowling faces and fear of plots and rejections, feeling unloved and unlovable, and loving someone for what you want them to be and hating someone for not being what you want them to be and on and on. Self-image clouds the eyes, dims the ears, numbs the body and dreams its nightmares of hope and fear throughout the day and night. What we hope for is an hallucination that eludes and tortures us, what we fear is a phantasm that can take any form from a telephone call to a telephone that doesn't ring to saying the wrong thing to a wordless gasp that we wake up in the morning with.

As attention narrows and fixates, discursive storylines that fit the edges of that narrowing squirm into place and fill what is experienced with meanings that seem certain because they fit so well. Anything can seem to be true if the information that would contradict it is simply ignored. When we practise opening fixation we find that many if not yet most of our presumptions begin to fall away because without that narrowness there is nothing to hold them in place. It can even seem to make sense to shove our heads back into the mouth of the flesh eating flower of our fantasy because, well, we grew up with it. The bite of the acids is so familiar it seems like the smell of mom's home cooking. We are so addicted to grasping after and pushing away the fleurs du mal of our delusions that we don't know what to do with our hands without them.

So Sengcan says, "What are you? Crazy? Stop that. Put your hands in the mudra. Sit up straight.

Coming back to the touchstone of the breath, we see again and again, how we trick ourselves by indulging in states, by propagating storylines. In a moment of feeling into the touchstone of the breath, attention releases fixation on usual patterns of thought and feeling. The beginnings of a kind of spaciousness, of equanimity can be felt, a quality that is very different from the usual configurations of attention. It's so profoundly simple: feel the breath; feel into the sensations of the bodymind; open to seeing and hearing. In contrast to the usual narrow concerns of self-image, it is rather like opening all of the windows in a closed, airless room. All of a sudden and all at once, it's so easy to simply enjoy the intimacy of breathing this breath within the vast, open space of experiencing.

With this breath, enter into the space of maitri.