The Touchstone 13: Living in the Space of Maitri

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We have passed the time when the calendar says that it is spring. But we know it is not yet anything that we can really call spring. The trees are still bare and their dark branches stand out against the blue of the sky. Sometimes early in the morning or at sunset, the light paints them in shades of gold and brown, but most of the time they appear to be very dark, almost black, starkly contrasting with the blue of the sky which appears between the branches. If you look at them in a particular way, it is as if the sky were caught between their branches. But of course if you widen your view, you can see that the trees are not holding the sky in their branches. The sky opens all around them, in front of them and behind, and they arise in the sky within the whole of the sky. The vastness of the sky extends up and all around, and all the way down to the ground. If you widen your view and your understanding further then you realize that the sky and the branches are not separate. The sky, the branches, the clouds, the buildings, the people, your hands and feet are not separate. They all arise within your seeing, your experiencing.

A shift in perception like that can be quite a strong experience. But even the strongest of experiences can last for only a brief moment. Then they are just forgotten or are just assimilated and become part of the way we understand things, so they no longer stand out. And if you don't remember to practise with such experiences and then continue to practise during the time following them, they will tend to dissipate altogether.

Sometimes students will have moments of a more open understanding in their practice, and they will tell me about these with enthusiasm during daisan. But sometimes only a few weeks or months later, and sometimes even days later, they are seated opposite me, telling me that they can't really remember why they started practising; how their practice hasn't changed and they're not getting anything out of it. Usually when this happens the thing that they fail to notice, the most obvious thing, is how they are when they are speaking about this. They fail to recognize how contracted they are.

The problem with contraction is that it is so habitual that we just don't notice how contracted we are. It's perhaps a bit like not recognizing you have an accent. Everyone else might notice it, but you don't because you always sound the same to you. But the contraction is there and the effects are — well, perhaps one could say — cumulative.

Before you started sitting your thoughts seemed to you to be a kind of continuous streaming that always made sense to you. But when you sit zazen, it is immediately apparent that they are actually a jumble of "stuff". Something can seem a really fantastic thing to think about and a moment later you cannot even remember what it was. And that is what is really fantastic: that we do not remember that! Within a half-hour of sitting, thousands of different strings and fragments of words and images rise and fall.

Self-image binds it all together to create that illusion of it being a continuous streaming by ignoring the fragmentation and contradictions that are actually occurring. You can't help but see this through sitting zazen. But you forget it. And how important that understanding is.

An alcoholic who stops drinking knows he or she cannot drink without disastrous effects, and yet, they can

trick themselves into thinking it's okay to have a drink and then another, and another. Self-image, which is itself contraction, wants to hide. It doesn't want to be exposed for what it is — which is essentially a fabrication, a kind of ghost, made out of fear. It is that thing that derails you when you are trying to do something of benefit for yourself or others, that convinces you that nothing is really worthwhile, that it's really all quite meaningless and there is no point in making an effort. It's a bully that doesn't really care about you or anyone else. It slowly dries you out, dries out heart and mind, and it will have ten thousand ways of justifying why that's the right way to go. It's not. It's the wrong way to go.

If you don't practise really being a human being, you won't be a human being, not in the full sense of the term. And this is why we begin our practice by opening to the details that are most essential to the reality of our existence. We practise opening to the sensations of the breath, as a touchstone, the sensations of the tanden, the rest of bodily sensation; to seeing; to hearing, and we spend a long time just learning to let ourselves be honest about those. But that's just the beginning. Mindfulness is an essential practice, but it is called "basic mindfulness" because it is basic to other aspects of Zen practice that you might eventually do. And in fact everything else, such as the Bodhisattva Precepts, koan practice and study, and all of those other things are a deepening and widening of mindfulness.

An aspect of this deepening is what we call *maitri* or "a quality of friendliness towards self and other". The space of maitri is not a realm or a place. It is every realm, every place. It is living with choice and the only choice that really is a choice is the choice to open. Having an open heart is not trying to do something or be a certain way. It is simply opening to the vastness of our lives, not holding oneself separate from experiencing. An open heart just observes, straightforwardly and honestly. And when this begins to happen, we experience a kind of spaciousness and generosity, a basic quality of friendliness towards ourselves and towards those around us. We realize this is something we can choose to open to, moment-by-moment. This is beginning to live in the space of maitri.

We need to take care in our lives, and in our interactions with others. It's so easy to contract and when we contract attention narrows and congeals. Because of this we will tend to miss most of the detail of what we are experiencing and this makes it very easy to take the worst possible view of whatever is going on. Which is precisely what people tend to do much of the time. This is when we are at our least human. If there is something going on that we don't like, we will tend to believe it's because it's deliberate. Someone is choosing to make us feel small and victimized. The situation was set up to make us feel this way. They're plotting and they're out to get us.

So much time and energy is consumed by contracting attention into storylines about what other people are doing or might be doing and reacting to those — worrying about how I am or how I should be and how they are and how they should be and on and on and on. And if any of this is acted out, it affects everyone around us. If they are acting it out too, the propagating spreads like wildfire. If you take just a moment to really look at this, there is a question that really does need to be asked: Why would you do this to yourself? Set aside for a moment what other people might really be doing or how they're behaving, or the grappling to uncover "the truth" of the situation — why would you choose to see yourself in that light? And isn't it obvious that if you don't see yourself in that light, then there's no need to struggle to prop yourself up or fight against anything because everything is alright and has been all right all along. If other people are into a tizzy about something, why should you allow that to cause you to feel poverty-stricken?

What if we just stopped all of this pushing and pulling and struggling and flailing about? What if we

recognized that contraction is contraction. It doesn't matter whether it's your contraction or my contraction. It doesn't matter where it started or why or who started it or when. If you are experiencing contraction, it's yours to practise with. What if we decided to just do that – to take responsibility for what is going on and practise with contraction simply because it's there and we recognize it to be contracted and open all around it? This would be practising the first of the paramitas, *dana paramita* .

We really can't discuss maitri (friendliness towards self and others) or karuna (compassion or the activity of wisdom) without looking into the six paramitas, or as they are known in Japanese, the *ropparamitsu* . These are:

Dana Paramita: generosity or recognizing the fundamental richness of experience

Sila Paramita: integrity or living with not-knowing

Ksanti Paramita: patience or the flexibility of not jumping to conclusions

Virya Paramita: energy or the limitless uncontrived exertion of experiences

Dhyana Paramita: the practice of inherent freedom through continuous questioning

Prajna Paramita: perfect knowing or Awake Awareness becoming itself as it is.

I'm not going to go into these in-depth today because there isn't time, but they are essential to maitri and karuna. They're essential to the whole of our practice. And although it might seem that because there are six paramitas spoken of, that these represent some sort of progression, there really isn't a progression from one 'stage' to another 'stage'. Each is an aspect of the whole and all are necessary for complete understanding.

Situations continuously arise in our lives that we need to respond to. But if we do this with the sort of strategies self-image will come up with, we're not really responding. Instead, we're propping up the sense of "self" and "other". We think we have to "deal" with the situation, that it has everything to do with what we already assume it to be. And when we do this we completely miss the process that is going on, the interaction between subject and object. We don't see how judgmental we become — towards others and towards ourselves — or the effect this can have until it becomes glaringly obvious.

To practice living in the space of maitri we first need to recognize the need to open. It doesn't matter what is going on, that comes first. And then we need to apply skillful means. To do that, there are four areas we need to look into: person, place, time and amount. Who is it? Where are they? What sort of situation is it? Is it the right time, is it appropriate now, and how much?

Whatever the topic is, will what you have to say about it be understood, or will it fall on deaf ears? Will it cause offence, thus distorting the point that you would like to make? If so, why bother? If you decide it's worthwhile to say something, then you need to speak clearly and observe how what you are saying is being received. Are you saying too much? Too little? Is this an appropriate setting for this conversation? If you are trying to have a fairly private conversation with someone in the middle of the cash line at the supermarket, that's obviously not going to work too well. How much time do you have for this conversation? How much time does the other person have? Is this too complex a topic to go into in the amount of time available? If so don't go into it until there is enough time. And as to amount – can you say everything you intend to say all at once? Will it be too much for the other person to absorb? Is what you're saying to the point or are you

dragging all kinds of associations into it that might be meaningful to you but mean nothing to the other person? There's a lot to look into with this because, let's face it, the point of communication is to communicate, to make something clear FOR the other person, not to just talk to yourself out loud.

Beginning to take responsibility for contraction – your own and other people's is not a matter of cultivating warm, fuzzy feelings of compassion for the "human condition".

In the Dharma Talk, *Compassion is the Activity of Wisdom* , Anzan Hoshin roshi says,

To practice compassion we must have a tender heart, an open heart. We must have removed many layers of armour, but also of skin. We must have peeled ourselves away so thoroughly that we are not only transparent to our experience and to each other, but we are completely intimate. So that when *Zhang drinks sake, Lee gets drunk; when Lee drinks sake, Zhang gets drunk*.

A compassion that does not spring forth from insight, from wisdom, is unfortunately usually an attempt to try to manipulate oneself and manipulate others so that one can arrange one's world in a way that consoles one. Either for the love that one feels that one always deserved but never had or for the sake of the power of it, the power of having people love you and depend upon you and be grateful to you. This is very scary, very frightening.

Compassion must be manifest in the most simple actions: Listening to someone; reaching out and taking a hand; slowing your steps to keep pace with someone. All of these simple actions, moment after moment, day after day, are compassion.

But sometimes being compassionate might also require that you speak firmly to someone and they may not necessarily thank you for it. They might not like it at all. Taking a sharp knife away from a child, even though that may make them cry, is an act of compassion. But there should be no anger in what you're saying and the reasons for saying it, It's not a matter of just going along with whatever other people say or do. If someone is doing something that you can see is harmful to them, it may be better to explain to them how that activity is harmful and explain why it is in their best interest to change that rather than hold their hand while they do it. It depends on the situation. Person, place, time and amount.

You can always choose to open, no matter what is going on. The alternative is to fold down, to fall into strategies, to follow the contractions of self-image. You don't have to do that. You can feel contraction, physically, in the tightening of muscles, in the clenching of attention. You can clearly notice reactions, such as the impulse to defend yourself against perceived insult, or replay interactions over and over again in your mind as though trying to see it in minute detail so that you can figure out what you should have said or should have done.

You don't need to do that. Most of the strange and weird and unpleasant conversations you have with other people are about topics that really don't matter in the first place. And frequently there is no resolving them. They don't need to be resolved. The less entanglement you fall into, the more clearly you can see what is actually going on and how to respond to it appropriately. But if you do feel the need to respond, open first. Drop the defensiveness and anger. Come back to the breath and the sensations of the tanden, whole bodily sensation, seeing and hearing. Open to peripheral vision so that you can see the space between you and the person you're speaking to that extends all around them. Be generous. You can afford to be generous.

Practise the simplicity and honesty of opening attention to things just as they are. Release the strategies self-image entangles you in by coming back to the touchstone of the breath. Maitri must be grounded in mindfulness practice, or it can devolve into feeling-tones, strategies and stances about being “open” or “compassionate” or “caring” and that is NOT what we are talking about.

When you are speaking with someone, especially if you’re in a state, bear in mind that words are not what experiences are. They can be useful in that they can point to experiences. But no matter how long you talk for or how descriptive you try to be, you can never, ever convey fully to anyone exactly how you feel about something; or what you think about it; or what it was like for you. And neither can they. Anything we experienced in the past, even if just five minutes ago, is gone. All that remains are fragments of memory. If we don’t recognize that, we will tend to beat our heads against a metaphorical brick wall trying to “share” experiences with other people, trying to get them to see our side of it.

The same is true even if you’re just reading a news article about something that has happened. You might react to it this way or that, shake your head in disapproval, feel sad about it, feel indignant about it. But whatever the article says is going to leave out almost as many of the facts as it puts in and most likely many many more. Your impressions of the people or the situation the article is pointing to are not whatever that situation is. Your impressions of it are really quite a lot like cartoons about it. If, for example, you read something about Boko Haram kidnapping 500 people, however you represent that understanding to yourself is NOT what that situation is and never could be. And if you could somehow download your thoughts and feelings about it and send them to the people involved, they probably wouldn’t recognize themselves at all from the descriptions you’ve conjured up in your mind.

Everything is like that. Even if you are speaking to your wife or your husband or your children, your friends, other family members, even teachers and practice advisors, you can only use words to point to experiences. No one can ever fully and completely understand what you have experienced. And that’s fine because no experience you have had or ever will have could ever be the ultimate truth about experiencing. Experiencing is always coming and going, shifting and changing.

And that’s why it really doesn’t really matter what’s happened in the past. Most people spend an amazing amount of time dwelling on past events which is a complete waste of time and energy. None of it has the solidity you try to attribute to it. What matters is what you do now. And the most important thing you can do is open. And then open further.