



TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

LOVE &
RELATIONSHIPS

A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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1

GIVING THROUGH
RELATIONSHIPS

EZRA BAYDA

We often look to relationships as a source of our personal happiness. Our relationships with our partners, friends, and family can certainly be enjoyable, and they enrich many dimensions of living. However, much of our unhappiness in life also comes from relationships; and strangely, even though relationships play a huge role in our lives, we are often very much in the dark when it comes to knowing why so much unhappiness is associated with them. Nor do we have a clear idea what to do about it.

Many books have been written on how to be happy in relationships. They often focus on how to find the right person, communicate better, get our needs met, or fix our problems. Some of these techniques are no doubt helpful, but they are still about striving for personal happiness, where we are at the mercy of external conditions and where we tend to stay caught in the highs and lows of emotion and attachment. And while this may be hard to accept, the personal happiness that we feel periodically through relationships, however enjoyable and meaningful it may be, is usually based in self-centered agendas. This means that we will rarely find the deeper and more genuine happiness that is possible for us.

Conversely, genuine happiness in relationships comes forth naturally when it's no longer blocked by all the conditions that we normally

add—our agendas, our needs, our expectations. When we're more able to refrain from indulging our self-centered motivations, we no longer look at our relationship in terms of what we will get. Instead, as we move toward the generosity of the heart, we naturally want to give. Hemingway got it right when he said that "love is the wanting to do things for." The problem is, this is far from easy; relationships are often so complex and messy, and our behaviors are so deeply rooted in our conditioning, that it takes more than the ideal of giving to get us out of our ruts and allow relationships to serve as a fruitful path to true contentment.

Before we explore what it means to give in relationships, let's first look at what relationships are usually about. We always enter into relationships with expectations of what the relationship will do for us. This is true not only in romantic relationships but also in other areas—family, work, friends, and even casual encounters. More often than not, we're not even aware of our expectations; but when we experience a relationship difficulty or conflict, it's likely that our expectations are not being met. (I'm not referring to difficulties that may involve physical danger but rather the garden-variety things that come up in relationships.)

More specifically, whenever we enter into a relationship—from the most casual to the most intense—we want the other person to be a particular way, such as supportive, appreciative, affectionate, trustworthy, or kind. Or perhaps we want them to be neat or quiet. The point is, we always have our own agenda about how the other should be. Why? The reason we want the other to be a particular way comes down to the crucial fact that we want to feel a particular way; we want to feel safe, secure, appreciated, listened to, in control, and on and on.

When our expectations aren't met, difficulties automatically arise and we may experience disappointment, anger, or fear. Think of a recent conflict in a relationship, and reflect on what expectations you brought

with you. See if you're aware of how you wanted the other to be or how you wanted them to make you feel. A helpful question to ask when it's hard to see our own expectations is: "How is it (or he or she) supposed to be?"

Unfortunately, instead of looking inward to see our own expectations, we usually focus on who we can blame or how we can fix the situation. We'll almost always view our relationship difficulties as problems to be solved, as obstacles to overcome. This may work in the short run, and we may be able to temporarily iron out our conflicts and feel some degree of stability. But this approach will never lead to the deeper equanimity of genuine happiness, because we're missing the pivotal understanding that these difficulties, even though they may feel uncomfortable, are not problems to be solved. Rather, these difficulties are our exact path to freedom, in that they push us to go deeper into our life, to work with the very things that cause us so much unhappiness, namely, our demands that life, and others, be a particular way, and the sense of entitlement we have in thinking that we need to feel a particular way.

Experiencing the disappointment of not getting what we want, of not having our expectations met, often triggers our most painful and unhealed emotions. Whether we feel hurt, angry, or anxious, these very reactions are telling us where we're most stuck; they're also pointing to exactly what we need to work with. So whether we withdraw or attack, whether we blame or mollify, whether we self-justify or self-blame, we're still caught in trying to fix the external situation in order to avoid feeling our emotional pain. We're also missing out on the real healing response, which is to understand and stay with our own experience.

One very helpful tool in both clarifying and working with our relationship difficulties is to return to these three questions: Am I truly happy right now? What blocks happiness? Can I surrender to what is? The

first question helps identify what we're actually feeling (often we don't know). The second question shows us where we're stuck in our conditioning—our expectations, demands, or unhealed pain. Once we see our expectations clearly, and once we work through our surface emotional reactions, we usually reach that uncomfortable place where we begin to feel our deepest fears—such as the fear of being unworthy, the fear of being alone, the fear of being hurt again, the fear of rejection, or the fear of the loss of control or safety. Our fears may not necessarily be logical, but we still believe at our core that they are the truth, and they certainly dictate how we feel and how we live, thus blocking any chance for true contentment.

Finally, the third question leads us directly into the experiential process of coming face to face with our own fears—the fears that are almost always at the root of our unhappiness in relationships. Asking the third question—Can I surrender to what is?—allows us to do the one thing that can help free us from the domination of our fears: that is, to welcome them in and actually feel them. We may think we can't stand to feel our fears, but the truth is we just don't want to, primarily because they feel so uncomfortable. But over time we can develop the courage and confidence to stay present with our fears. We learn again and again that it's awareness that heals; and gradually, the fears, which at one point felt so solid and unapproachable, are now much more workable.

As we become more inwardly free from our conditioning and our fears, the love and connection that are possible in relationships tend to flow through us more naturally. As our defenses are lowered, our heart opens, and there is a natural desire to give from the generosity of the heart. We discover that genuine happiness in relationships is not a product of having our expectations met or getting what we want; rather, it is the consequence of freely giving in order to bring happiness to another.

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Nearly every parent has experienced this at some point—their deepest joy coming from giving unselfishly to their children. Unfortunately, this truth is often forgotten as relationships become more complex, and especially as fear supersedes our innate desire to give from the heart.

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STAY WITH YOUR
BROKEN HEART

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

When anyone asks me how I got involved in Buddhism, I always say it was because I was so angry with my husband. The truth is that he saved my life. When that marriage fell apart, I tried hard—very, very hard—to go back to some kind of comfort, some kind of security, some kind of familiar resting place. Fortunately for me, I could never pull it off. Instinctively I knew that annihilation of my old dependent, clinging self was the only way to go. . . .

Life is a good teacher and a good friend. Things are always in transition, if we could only realize it. Nothing ever sums itself up in the way that we like to dream about. The off-center, in-between state is an ideal situation, a situation in which we don't get caught and we can open our hearts and minds beyond limit. It's a very tender, nonaggressive, open-ended state of affairs.

To stay with that shakiness—to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of hopelessness and wanting to get revenge—that is the path of true awakening. Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic—this is the spiritual path. Getting the knack of catching ourselves, of gently and compassionately catching ourselves, is the path of

the warrior. We catch ourselves one zillion times as once again, whether we like it or not, we harden into resentment, bitterness, righteous indignation—harden in any way, even into a sense of relief, a sense of inspiration.

Every day we could think about the aggression in the world, in New York, Los Angeles, Halifax, Taiwan, Beirut, Kuwait, Somalia, Iraq, everywhere. All over the world, everybody always strikes out at the enemy, and the pain escalates forever. Every day we could reflect on this and ask ourselves, “Am I going to add to the aggression in the world?” Every day, at the moment when things get edgy, we can just ask ourselves, “Am I going to practice peace, or am I going to war?”

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EVERYONE AS A FRIEND

The Buddhist logic of embracing our enemies as our friends

JEFFREY HOPKINS

So how should we view sentient beings? If they have all been in every possible relationship with us from time without beginning (and time has no beginning in Buddhism), should we consider them to be enemies? Everyone has indeed been the enemy—the person who wants me to trip, fall down the stairs, break a leg. My first teacher, Geshe Wangyal, said that one problem with this outlook would be that you'd have to go out and kill everybody.

Difficult to do. Everyone has also been neutral, like the many people we pass on the streets; we may even know some faces, but we don't have any open relationship with them. They are just people working here or there; we may see them often, but there is neither desire nor hatred. Should we consider them to be neutral? Or should we consider these people to be friends?

The answer given by popular early twentieth-century Tibetan lama Pabongka is provocative. It is not an abstract principle, but refers to common experience. To render it in my own words: If your close friend became crazed and attacked you with a knife, you would attempt to relieve him of the knife and get his mind back in its natural state; you would use the appropriate means to take the knife, but you wouldn't then kick

him in the head.

Pabongka himself uses the example of one's own mother: If your mother became crazed and attacked you with a knife, you would relieve her of the knife. You would not then proceed to beat her up. That's his appeal: Once there's a profoundly close relationship, the close relationship predominates. Why is a friend acting so terribly? Why is she turning against you and attacking you? It's due to a counterproductive attitude—a distortion—in the person's mind.

Indeed, if your own best friend went mad and came at you with a knife to kill you, what would you do? You would seek to disarm your friend, but then you would not proceed to beat the person, would you? You would disarm the attacker in whatever way you could—you might even have to hit the person in order to disarm him, but once you had managed to disarm him, you would not go on to hurt him. Why? Because he is close to you. If you felt that everyone in the whole universe was in the same relationship to you as your very best friend, and if you saw anyone who attacked you as your best friend gone mad, you would not respond with hatred. You would respond with behavior that was appropriate, but you would not be seeking to retaliate and harm the person out of hatred.

He would be too dear to you.

Therefore, in teaching compassion, Buddhists do not choose a neutral person as the example of all sentient beings; they choose the strongest of all examples, their best friend. Your feeling for that person is the feeling you should ideally have for every sentient being. You cannot go up to the police officer on the corner and hug her. But you can, inwardly, value her, as well as all sentient beings, as your best friend.

So if everyone in the past has been close, then there is good reason that closeness should predominate. And this becomes a reason—in

addition to the similarity between oneself and others—for meditatively cultivating love and compassion, rather than hatred and distance, with respect to everyone. It is not sufficient merely to see that sentient beings are suffering. You must also develop a sense of closeness with them, a sense that they are dear. With that combination—seeing that people suffer and thinking of them as dear—you can develop compassion. So, after meditatively transforming your attitude toward friends, enemies, and neutral persons such that you have gained progress in becoming even-minded toward all of them, the next step is to meditate on everyone as friends, to feel that they have been profoundly close.

In meditation, take individual persons to mind, starting with your friends. Reflect on how close your best friend is—recognize your attitude, for example, when your friend needs your concern, like when she's ill. This is an appeal to common experience—to how we already naturally react to close friends. Then, in meditation, extend this feeling to more beings.

First you need to recognize people as having been friend, enemy, and neutral person countless times over countless lifetimes— or at least you can't say that there isn't anyone who hasn't been a friend, or you can't say there isn't anyone who hasn't been an enemy, or you can't say with surety that there's anyone who hasn't been neutral. Once you recognize this, it's possible to begin to recognize everyone as friends.

To consider ourselves dear we usually do not have to enter into meditation. We cherish ourselves greatly. When we see ourselves suffering, we have no problem in wishing to escape that suffering. The problem lies in not cherishing others. The ability to cherish others has to be cultivated. In meditation:

1. Visualize someone you like very much and then superimpose the

image of someone toward whom you are neutral. Alternate between the two images until you value the person toward whom you are neutral as much as the friend.

2. Then superimpose, in succession, the images of a number of people toward whom you are neutral, until you value each of them as much as the greatest of friends.

3. When you have developed facility with those two steps, it is possible to extend the meditation to enemies.

For me, it's much more disruptive to think about my friends as having been enemies than it is to think about my enemies as having been friends. No matter how difficult it is to think of a hated enemy as having been a close friend in a recent lifetime, it's more disruptive to think of my close friend as having been an enemy. With regard to neutral people, it's shocking, a whole new perspective, to think, "Just two lifetimes ago, we were very close friends, and now by the force of our own actions we don't even know each other, don't even care about each other, we neglect each other, we're indifferent."

Is it convincing to base subsequent practices on this notion of cross-positioning over the course of lives? I think it is, but success in changing attitudes certainly isn't easy to achieve, since it depends on either a belief in rebirth or a willingness to play out the rebirth perspective. Nevertheless, both of these provide a strong foundation, whereas if the appeal were to an abstract principle or because Buddha said so, it would be all right for a day or two but would not be profoundly moving.

The other approach—that doesn't rely on rebirth—is merely that we're all equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. And if it's worthwhile for me to gain happiness, then it's worthwhile for everyone else to gain happiness. Noticing this similarity makes us close. The

late-fourteenth-century yogi-scholar Tsongkhapa says that in order to generate compassion, it is necessary to understand how beings suffer and to have a sense of closeness to them. He says that otherwise, when you understand how they suffer, you'll take delight in it. For example, so-and-so enemy just got liver disease, and you think, "Good riddance. She's getting what she deserves."

Thus, in order to care for other beings, it's not sufficient merely to know that they suffer, because knowledge that a person is suffering this way might make you happy, especially if that person is an enemy. "May this person be run over." We all have such thoughts due to a lack of intimacy. Not only must we know the depths of their suffering, but they must be dear to us.

In short, for compassion to develop toward a wide range of persons, mere knowledge of how beings suffer is not sufficient; there has to be a sense of closeness with regard to every being. That intimacy is established either through merely reflecting that everyone equally wants happiness and doesn't want suffering, or through reflecting on the implications of rebirth, or both, with the one reinforcing the other. Both techniques rely on noticing our own common experience and extending its implications to others.

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4

LOVE STORY

A cautionary tale

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE

There is a vast store of energy which is not centered, which is not ego's energy at all. It is this energy which is the centerless dance of phenomena, the universe interpenetrating and making love to itself. It has two characteristics: a fire quality of warmth and a tendency to flow in a particular pattern, in the same way in which fire contains a spark as well as the air which directs the spark. And this energy is always ongoing, whether or not it is seen through the confused filter of ego. It cannot be destroyed or interrupted at all. It is like the everburning sun. It consumes everything to the point where it allows no room for doubt or manipulation.

But when this heat is filtered through ego, it becomes stagnant, because we ignore the basic ground, refuse to see the vast space in which this energy occurs. Then the energy cannot flow freely in the open space shared with the object of passion. Instead it is solidified, narrowed, and directed by the central headquarters of ego to move outward in order to draw the object of passion into its territory. This captive energy extends out to its object and then returns to be programmed again. We extend our tentacles and try to fix our relationship. This attempt to cling to the situation makes the communication process superficial. We just touch another person's surface and get stuck there, never experiencing

their whole being. We are blinded by our clinging. The object of passion, instead of being bathed in the intense warmth of free passion, feels oppressed by the stifling heat of neurotic passion.

Free passion is radiation without a radiator, a fluid, pervasive warmth that flows effortlessly. It is not destructive because it is a balanced state of being and highly intelligent. Self-consciousness inhibits this intelligent, balanced state of being. By opening, by dropping our self-conscious grasping, we see not only the surface of an object, but we see the whole way through. We appreciate not in terms of sensational qualities alone, but we see in terms of whole qualities, which are pure gold. We are not overwhelmed by the exterior, but seeing the exterior simultaneously puts us through to the interior. So we reach the heart of the situation, and if this is a meeting of two people, the relationship is very inspiring because we do not see the other person purely in terms of physical attraction or habitual patterns, we see the inside as well as the outside.

This whole-way-through communication might produce a problem. Suppose you see right through someone and that person does not want you to see right through and becomes horrified with you and runs away. Then what to do? You have made your communication completely and thoroughly. If that person runs away from you, that is his way of communicating with you. You would not investigate further. If you did pursue and chase him, then sooner or later you would become a demon from that person's point of view. You see right through his body and he has juicy fat and meat that you would like to eat up, so you seem like a vampire to him. And the more you try to pursue the other person, the more you fail. Perhaps you looked through too sharply with your desire, perhaps you were too penetrating. Possessing beautiful keen eyes, penetrating passion, and intelligence, you abused your talent, played with it.

It is quite natural with people, if they possess some particular power or gifted energy, to abuse that quality, to misuse it by trying to penetrate every corner. Something quite obviously is lacking in such an approach—a sense of humor. If you try to push things too far, it means you do not feel the area properly; you only feel your relationship to the area. What is wrong is that you do not see all sides of the situation and therefore miss the humorous and ironical aspect.

Sometimes people run away from you because they want to play a game with you. They do not want a straight, honest, and serious involvement with you, they want to play. But if they have a sense of humor and you do not, you become demonic. This is where *lalita*, the dance, comes in. You dance with reality, dance with apparent phenomena. When you want something very badly you do not extend your eye and hand automatically; you just admire. Instead of impulsively making a move from your side, you allow a move from the other side, which is learning to dance with the situation. You do not have to create the whole situation; you just watch it, work with it, and learn to dance with it. So then it does not become your creation, but rather a mutual dance. No one is self-conscious, because it is a mutual experience.

When there is a fundamental openness in a relationship, being faithful, in the sense of real trust, happens automatically; it is a natural situation. Because the communication is so real and so beautiful and flowing, you cannot communicate in the same way with someone else, so automatically you are drawn together. But if any doubt presents itself, if you begin to feel threatened by some abstract possibility, although your communication is going beautifully at the time, then you are sowing the seed of paranoia and regarding the communication purely as ego entertainment.

If you sow a seed of doubt, it may make you rigid and terrified, afraid

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of losing the communication that is so good and real. And at some stage you will begin to be bewildered as to whether the communication is loving or aggressive. This bewilderment brings a certain loss of distance, and in this way neurosis begins. Once you lose the right perspective, the right distance in the communication process, then love becomes hate. The natural thing with hatred, just as with love, is that you want to make physical communication with the person; that is, you want to kill or injure them. In any relationship in which the ego is involved, a love relationship or any other, there is always the danger of turning against your partner. As long as there is the notion of threat or insecurity of any kind, then a love relationship could turn into its opposite.

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LOVE BECOMES HER

Nicole Daedone thought she wanted a bicycle.
What she really wanted was love.

NICOLE DAEDONE

I grew up an only child in suburban Los Gatos, California. One of my closest friends, Maria, came from a large, warm, rambunctious Chilean family. I envied the love that seemed to surround her. Maria's most cherished possession was her bicycle. She rode it everywhere and took very good care of it. She had such a passion for that bike that she learned everything about how it worked and what it needed, and eventually got a job repairing bikes for other people. The love she felt for her bike made it glow—made it seem like the most desirable object on earth.

I wanted that same feeling. In fact, I wanted to feel even more of it than she did. I figured that if I bought a better bike than hers, my bike would glow even more. So I begged my mom to buy me one that was top-of-the line. But somehow the glow eluded me. I rarely rode it, and its presence in my garage began to feel vaguely reproachful, a thorn in my side. I almost came to hate it. In my mind, this was definitely the bike's fault.

One day, Maria's beloved bike was stolen. She borrowed mine and rode it everywhere. To my amazement, it began to have the same magical glow I had so envied in her old bike. Naturally, I wanted it back. But once I got it, I still didn't really feel like riding it, and it soon resumed its

accusatory sulk in my garage. It refused to glow for me.

A lot of people approach looking for love as I approached bike shopping. We want a top-of-the-line model. We have a list of desirable qualities and imagine that the glow of desire will arise when we find someone who possesses those qualities. If love is absent from our lives, we may believe it is because we have not yet encountered someone sufficiently lovable. We are expecting our love to be activated by the object of desire.

My bike didn't satisfy me because a bike was not what I truly wanted. It was a symbol of what I found so enviable in my friend: the way she was so rich in love that even inanimate objects were animated by it. She had a power to connect to her world that I seemed to lack. I imagined I could attain that inner state by imitating its outward form. A burgeoning spiritual materialism was at play: I tried to make a physical possession the source of my love, rather than finding the source in the love itself.

Our knee-jerk reaction to desire is to focus all our efforts on obtaining whatever it is we think we want. While that is happening, we experience the feeling of desire and the object of desire as inseparable. Had you asked me, "What is the true nature of your desire?" I would have responded, "I want a bike." So long as we are in hot pursuit of the object, it appears as simple as that. Rather than feeling the pure burn of desire, we get caught in what the Buddha called *tanha*, in craving the object of our desire, believing we must have it to be happy. *Tanha* translates roughly to "thirst." We think we are thirsting for an object—for the person or the bike. But what we actually desire is intimacy—the hydration of direct experience saturating our cells.

We believe that love is to be found within another person. But, in truth, love is found in the animating quality of our attention. In Buddhist practice, we discover that mindful attention can reveal a deeper truth in whatever object we are paying attention to. The same is true in

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romantic love. When we use our attention to touch and open the deeper truth in a person, we not only catalyze the experience of love, we become love. The source of love is revealed to be within us; we no longer have to go looking for it somewhere outside.

What made any bike that Maria possessed seem so desirable was the very love she lavished on it. The glow was not in the bike itself, but in her relationship to it. Like bicycles, people become more desirable when we are attentive to them. Their most lovable qualities reveal themselves to us only after we have begun to love them. Loving is the polish. Loving draws out their buddhanature. Anything and anyone we cherish and care for comes alive with the glow of our attention.

Nicole Daedone is the founder of OneTaste, a company that offers training in man-woman intimate relationships. She is the author of *Slow Sex: The Art and Craft of the Female Orgasm*.

6

TAKING A STAND

The importance of healthy boundaries

LORNE LADNER

Boundaries play an interesting and sometimes complicated role in developing compassion. They are like the stake and wires that are used to help keep young trees rooted and growing straight. Early on in our practice or when we're faced with difficult new challenges, a lack of healthy boundaries can lead to our compassion being blown away before it's had a chance to take root. As we develop, though, boundaries held too tightly can stifle our compassion and keep it from reaching maturity. In the process of developing compassion, we need to become skillful at knowing when to apply boundaries and when to relax or release them.

While Buddhist literature doesn't use the word *boundaries*, it addresses this issue. For example, Buddhism praises the value of generosity but warns that you shouldn't give something away if you're likely to be upset later and regret giving it away. Similarly, although it's good to help others, we shouldn't agree to do something for another person if it will likely lead us to feel exhausted, resentful, and angry at the other person. Each of us has to judge our own capacities and set our boundaries accordingly.

Healthy boundaries can be important for maintaining our sense of self-respect. Sometimes out of insecurity, fear, or a wish to avoid getting angry, we don't stand up for ourselves when others treat us badly

or put us down. Setting a boundary can be a way of standing up for yourself without having to get angry. A story of Martin Luther King, Sr., the father of the famous civil rights leader, who was also a pastor, shows clearly how to use boundaries in this way. Driving down a street in segregated Atlanta with his young son beside him in the front seat, the elder Reverend King accidentally drove past a stop sign. A white police officer pulled up to him and said, “All right, boy, pull over and let me see your license.”

Without any hesitation, Reverend King replied, “Let me make it clear to you that you aren’t talking to a boy. If you persist in referring to me as a boy, I will be forced to act as if I don’t hear a word you are saying.” Setting boundaries often requires some bravery. Given the place and time, Reverend King ran the risk of a violent reaction. Brief moments in which we act with bravery and self-respect can have surprising effects on our own character and on those around us. The officer was so surprised that he silently wrote a ticket and drove away as quickly as he could.

This is precisely the way to go about setting healthy boundaries. You begin by correcting the person, telling the other how you wish to be treated, or stating what you are or are not willing to do. It can be difficult in the short run to set a clear boundary with someone you care about, but not doing so often leads to many more difficulties over a much longer period of time.

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OLD RELATIONSHIPS,
NEW POSSIBILITIES

Breaking free of unhealthy relationships allows us to replace dependency and neurosis with compassionate respect.

DZIGAR KONGTRUL

We all have some rough relationships in our lives that seem held together by the stickiness of attachment and expectation. It is true that we have love and care for these people, but, at the same time, it's not so clean; there's plenty of complexity. Inside, we feel an emotional tug when we see or think of them. This is often exaggerated with the people we are close to and with whom we share a strong dynamic, such as our parents, children, close friends, or spouse—all relationships where a lot of expectations tend to arise. There are many unspoken demands. In the midst of our romance, marriage, or parenting, we find ourselves responsible for someone else's loneliness and their emotional or physical pain.

There is a Tibetan term that describes this kind of dynamic: *lenchak*, commonly translated as “karmic debt.” *Len* literally means “time” or “occurrence,” while *chak* refers to “attachment,” “attraction,” or the notion of a karmic pull toward someone, usually in an unhealthy way. So *lenchak* could be understood as the residue that revisits us from the dynamic of a relationship from what some would call a past life, a dynamic

now strengthened by habitual responses. Lenchak is most often used to explain or describe why a particular relationship is how it is.

In the Buddhist texts, we read that in certain hell realms beings experience the negative results of past unwholesome relationships. They hear their name being called out and experience a pull toward the voice of the person they once knew. They travel toward that voice but end up encountering horrendous creatures and experiencing intense physical and mental anguish. This is interesting because, with those with whom we have lenchak, we feel an immediate pull beyond our control or sense of resistance. Our name is called, and we jump at once to serve them. This is not a conscious decision—not a joyous decision—but more like being propelled by a strong wind. Our reaction—whether with anger, jealousy, attachment, or what have you—only serves to reinforce the dynamic. People have done many things “in the name of love.” But if this is love, it’s not a healthy kind of love.

In Tibet they say there is a lake where, during a particular full moon each year, the seal-like creatures who live there gather fish in their mouths and offer them up to hordes of owls who hover in the trees above, waiting to eat. There is no apparent reason for the seals to offer the fish other than the fact that the owls seem to expect it. As the story goes, the seals gain nothing from offering the fish, and the owls are never satisfied. So, they say, since there is no obvious reason for this dynamic to be as it is, “it must be lenchak.”

The lenchak dynamic has two sides: the seal side and the owl side. If we are the seal, we feel an unspoken emotional responsibility for someone else’s mind and well-being. We feel pulled toward this person as if they have a claim on us. It’s a strong visceral experience, and we have a physical reaction to it: the phone rings and we check our caller ID—it’s

“the owl.” We should pick it up, but we are overcome by a strong wave of anxiety and repulsion, as if we are being attacked by our own nervous system. We brace ourselves for a problem or a strong emotional download. As much as we want to detach ourselves from this person, we can’t break loose; it’s as if they have captured us, and there’s no escape—checkmate! Of course, this is not the case. In truth we are held hostage by our own attachment, guilt, and inability to resist the pain that comes from feeling unreasonably responsible for them. On one hand, we can’t bear watching the owl struggle. On the other hand, we can’t let go. This dynamic brings us down; it makes us lose our luster as human beings.

Meanwhile, the owl is never satisfied, no matter how many fish the seal tries to feed it. Of course, when caught in the owl syndrome we don’t see it in this way. We feel neglected, isolated, and weak. The reason for this is that we are depending on someone else in hopes that they will manage our fears. We have so many unspoken demands, although we often express these demands in a meek and needy way. The owl syndrome reduces us to a childlike state. We begin to question whether or not we can do things on our own, and we lose confidence in our ability to face our mind and emotions. Interestingly, the owl—so frail, needy, and insecure—is not necessarily as feeble as it seems to be. In fact, the owl has the upper hand. It’s a little manipulative, if you want to know the truth. The owl just doesn’t want to clean up its own mess. This is a privileged attitude. If the owl couldn’t afford to be weak—if it didn’t have the seal—it would naturally rise to its own challenges.

The irony of this dynamic is that, in most cases, the more fish the seal offers the owl, the more resentful, demanding, and dissatisfied the owl gets. For both the seal and owl, this kind of dependence and expectation gives way to a lot of ugliness. At work we may have to hold our tongues and swallow what our boss has to say, but there is no holding back with our loved ones. We let our guard down and allow ourselves to get ugly, spreading our web of ego anxieties all over the place. It’s true,

the seal may temporarily pacify the owl, but no mutual respect arises from this kind of arrangement. And in truth, isn't it respect that we want most of all? Everyone wants love and care, but, more than these, human beings want respect for who they are. Even an enemy can respect another enemy. There is a sense of human dignity in this.

In this confusion of lenchak for love, we fear that without the lenchak dynamic our relationships will completely fall apart. What is there beyond all the obligations, all the "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts," and all the fantasies we try to live up to? The distinction between love and lenchak needs to be examined carefully. Love and care toward others warms the heart and makes us generous and giving. Feelings of love and care arise naturally; they are not the product of pressures and demands. Think about the attachment and pain of lenchak. Think of all the insecurities and resentment that come with it. Lenchak makes us feel like we are not up to our own life and its challenges or that we can't handle seeing others in pain. And yet we don't trust that they can handle their own lives, either!

When it's time for a child to start walking, a mother needs to let her child walk. She needs to let the child lose his or her balance, fall down, and then find balance once again. Alone, the child needs to get up and stand on his or her own two feet. Although children need protection, we need to have confidence in their potential to flourish. We don't want to hold them captive by our own fears and doubts—this creates the unhealthy dependence we have been talking about. Letting children immerse themselves in a challenging situation or obstacle for a while gives the child confidence. It gives the mother confidence, too. It's one of the early steps a mother takes in letting the child become a citizen of the world.

When challenges or obstacles arise for us, we don't have to get so in-

timidated; we can say, “Yes, it’s an obstacle, but it is not intrinsically bad; it’s not going to destroy me.” To create a relationship with the obstacle, learn about it, and finally overcome it is going to be a helpful thing to do. It gives us a chance to cultivate wisdom and skillful means. It gives us confidence. We cannot eliminate all of the challenges or obstacles in life—our own or anyone else’s. We can only learn to rise to the occasion and face them. Shantideva suggests that we need to cultivate a “Can do! Why not? No problem!” kind of attitude toward our neuroses and obstacles in order to overcome them. If we have no confidence, we’ll already be defeated, like a dead snake lying on the ground. Around a dead snake, even a sparrow can act like a garuda! (This ancient mythological Indian bird, said to be able to travel from one end of the universe to the other with a single movement of its wings, is also said to hatch from the egg fully developed, and is thus used as a symbol for the awakened state of mind.) In the same way, the smallest fear or neurosis will entirely overpower us.

The great deception of *lenchak* is that it doesn’t even occur to us that our suffering is our own. We automatically expect that others should share in it or take it on themselves. In this way, *lenchak* gets in the way of our owning up to the responsibility of our lives. There are times when we try to pull others in for sympathy. If asked, “How are you?” we will review our full history. It starts off, “I’m okay, but . . .” We feel a need to share everything. At the end of the conversation, others know all our troubles and ailments. We just can’t seem to go through the process on our own with our own strength.

But do we really need to be transparent as glass? Do others really want this kind of honesty? People often can’t handle all the details and confusion in their own lives. It is safe to assume that they have emotional ups and downs and uncomfortable physical sensations like we do. Fur-

thermore, unless they are our doctor, what can they actually do for us?

At the end of my mother's life, when she was quite sick, an old friend came to see her. When he asked how she was feeling, she said, "I'm fine." I later asked her why she said that, and she replied, "What else should I say?" When you ask accomplished teachers how they are, they always say, "Good, good, very good"—always good. Many people say that they feel dishonest saying they are good when in fact they have problems. But what we are talking about here is developing a fundamental sense of strength and well-being. Wouldn't it be better to associate our mind with that rather than with all the fleeting emotions and physical sensations we experience throughout the day? What is the point of being honest about something so fleeting and impossible to pin down? If your well-being is so dependent upon your emotions and physical sensations, you will have little opportunity to say, "I am well." So when people ask how you are, say, "Good!" You may need to pump yourself up a little bit in the beginning, but soon you will start to believe it yourself. You will begin to see that people feel more attracted to you. They won't feel that subtle tug when they see you coming. And they will be less hesitant to ask how you are!

When are we bound by the emotional needs of others, or simply afraid of our own, how can we entertain the idea of engaging a spiritual path? And when our relationships with others are so unclean and confused, how can we expect to extend kindness to others and work for their benefit? Lenchak goes against the most fundamental principles of spiritual practice. We are always seeking something from the outside and forgetting that our fundamental well-being and strength depend on how we relate to our own minds. Falling under the sway of the lenchak dynamic is like losing possession of our very lives. It's like letting others lead us around by the nose ring as if we were a buffalo or a cow. What

could be more detrimental than losing our freedom in this way?

All the great practitioners know the consequences and pitfalls of lenchak, so they fiercely guard their independence. They are savvy when it comes to working with others because they know that whether it concerns their students, parents, family, or whoever, if they fell prey to the lenchak dynamic, it would eat up their time and their peace of mind. Moreover, because it is a dynamic based on neurosis, lenchak leaves no supportive ground on which to serve others. In the end, they would find themselves leading an entirely different life from the spiritual life of practice they envisioned for themselves.

Knowing this, many yogis have steered clear of societal demands and led simple lives, traveling alone without the complications that come with having many sponsors and attendants. The great Nyingma teacher Patrul Rinpoche [1808–1887] had a strong, uncompromising presence and was completely immune to any kind of deception or partiality. There are stories that when important dignitaries would come for an audience—some of them so proud it would have taken a bulldozer to get their heads down—they would shake like prayer flags in his presence. But don't think for a moment that Patrul Rinpoche, even though he was free of entanglements, had even a trace of indifference! He was known as a loyal and kind friend, a compassionate friend, who dedicated his life solely to benefiting others. Because he was able to see the greater potential of the human mind's ability to awaken, he spent his entire life expounding the teachings with great care and tenderness. Through his wisdom and compassion, he was able to preserve his independence and serve others, perfecting his own mind through the jewel of bodhicitta ("enlightened heart"). On the relative level, bodhicitta has two aspects: aspiration bodhicitta, which is the wish to attain enlightenment in order to bring all living beings to liberation; and engaged bodhicitta, which includes such practices as generosity and patience. On the absolute level,

bodhicitta is insight into the nature of all phenomena.

Wisdom and compassion are the two components of bodhicitta. When we begin to discover the mind's natural potential and strength, we are cultivating wisdom. This doesn't mean we become hard-hearted and indifferent. It doesn't mean we have to cut our family ties, quit our job, or live in a cave. It simply means we refuse to give in to lenchak because we see that it doesn't serve us and that it makes it impossible for us to serve others. We recognize lenchak, and we can "just say no"! We can see it as a form of civil disobedience—a nonviolent approach in which we refuse to succumb to our own and others' ignorance. When we can reclaim our nose ring, we are left with no real reason to resent others. With a mind free from lenchak, we have a lot of room to expand the heart through serving others. This is how wisdom can protect us, so that we can be soft and caring. This is the bodhisattva's way.

In the sutras it says that a bodhisattva is like an immaculate lotus that floats on muddy water. The lotus is a metaphor for the bodhisattva, who engages the world of confusion in order to serve beings. But how is it that the bodhisattva stays afloat without sinking into the muddy water of confusion? It is due to the wisdom of knowing the mind—how it can serve us or how, if left unchecked, it can spin in the direction determined by confusion. This kind of clarity may seem a long way off for us, but it all begins with rising to the occasion of our lives and facing our minds. We need to think clearly about this. Since this is our life, we must find some determination to rise to it in a way that supports our aims. Once we taste the freedom that comes with independence, it gets easier. We realize how much we have lost by desperately holding on, and we know how much there is to gain through disengaging from confusion. We can do this while expanding our most precious qualities: our good heart and our compassion for others. Through our innate qualities of wisdom and

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compassion, we can burn the seeds of lenchak once and for all, ensuring benefit for both self and other. This knowledge has been of great personal value to me in my life as a teacher, householder, and friend. I hope that it serves you well, too.

Dzigar Kongtrul is the founder of Mangala Shri Bhuti, a Buddhist teaching organization; he also established a retreat center in the mountains of southern Colorado, where he spends time in retreat and in guiding students in retreat practice. This piece has been excerpted from his new book, *Light Comes Through: Buddhist Teachings on Awakening to Our Natural Intelligence*, © 2008, and is reprinted with permission from Shambhala Publications, shambhala.com.

8

GETTING ALONG

Loving the other without losing yourself

CHRISTOPHER K. GERMER

Over the years I've come to a conclusion: Human beings are basically incompatible. Think about it. We live in different bodies, we've had different childhoods, and at any given moment our thoughts and feelings are likely to differ from anybody else's, even those of our nearest and dearest. Given the disparities in our genetic makeup, conditioning, and life circumstances, it's a miracle we get along at all.

Yet we yearn to feel connected to others. At the deepest level, connectedness is our natural state—what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.” We are inextricably related, yet somehow our day-to-day experience tells us otherwise. We suffer bumps and bruises in relationships. This poses an existential dilemma: “How can I have an authentic voice and still feel close to my friends and loved ones? How can I satisfy my personal needs within the constraints of my family and my culture?”

In my experience as a couples therapist, I've found that most of the suffering in relationships comes from disconnections. A disconnection is a break in the feeling of mutuality; as the psychologist Janet Surrey describes it, “we” becomes “I” and “you.” Some disconnections are obvious, such as the sense of betrayal we feel upon discovering a partner's infidelity. Others may be harder to identify. A subtle disconnection may occur, for example, if a conversation is interrupted by one person answering a

cell phone, or a new haircut goes unnoticed, or when one partner falls asleep in bed first, leaving the other alone in the darkness. It's almost certain that there's been a disconnection when two people find themselves talking endlessly about "the relationship" and how it's going.

The Buddha prescribed equanimity in the face of suffering. In relationships, this means accepting the inevitability of painful disconnections and using them as an opportunity to work through difficult emotions. We instinctively avoid unpleasantness, often without our awareness. When we touch something unlovely in ourselves—fear, anger, jealousy, shame, disgust—we tend to withdraw emotionally and direct our attention elsewhere. But denying how we feel, or projecting our fears and faults onto others, only drives a wedge between us and the people we yearn to be close to.

Mindfulness practice—a profound method for engaging life's unpleasant moments—is a powerful tool for removing obstacles and rediscovering happiness in relationships. Mindfulness involves both awareness and acceptance of present experience. Some psychologists, among them Tara Brach and Marsha Linehan, talk about radical acceptance—radical meaning "root"—to emphasize our deep, innate capacity to embrace both negative and positive emotions. Acceptance in this context does not mean tolerating or condoning abusive behavior. Rather, acceptance often means fully acknowledging just how much pain we may be feeling at a given moment, which inevitably leads to greater empowerment and creative change.

One of the trickiest challenges for a psychotherapist, and for a mindfulness-oriented therapist in particular, is to impress on clients the need to turn toward their emotional discomfort and address it directly instead of looking for ways to avoid it. If we move into pain mindfully and compassionately, the pain will shift naturally. Consider what hap-

pened to one couple I worked with in couple therapy.

Suzanne and Michael were living in “cold hell.” Cold-hell couples are partners who are deeply resentful and suspicious of each other and communicate in chilly, carefully modulated tones. Some couples can go on like this for years, frozen on the brink of divorce.

After five months of unsuccessful therapy, meeting every other week, Suzanne decided it was time to file for divorce. It seemed obvious to her that Michael would never change—that he would not work less than sixty-five hours a week or take care of himself (he was fifty pounds overweight and smoked). Even more distressing to Suzanne was the fact that Michael was making no effort to enjoy their marriage; they seldom went out and had not taken a vacation in two and a half years. Suzanne felt lonely and rejected. Michael felt unappreciated for working so hard to take care of his family.

Suzanne’s move toward divorce was the turning point—it gave them “the gift of desperation.” For the first time, Michael seemed willing to explore just how painful his life had become. During one session, when they were discussing a heavy snowstorm in the Denver area, Michael mentioned that his sixty-four-year-old father had just missed his first day of work in twenty years. I asked Michael what that meant to him. His eyes welling up with tears, Michael said he wished his father had enjoyed his life more. I wondered aloud if Michael had ever wished the same thing for himself. “I’m scared,” he replied. “I’m scared of what would happen if I stopped working all the time. I’m even scared to stop worrying about the business—scared that I might be overlooking something important that would make my whole business crumble before my eyes.”

With that, a light went on for Suzanne. “Is that why you ignore me and the kids, and even ignore your own body?” she asked him. Michael

just nodded, his tears flowing freely now. “Oh my God,” Suzanne said, “I thought it was me—that I wasn’t good enough, that I’m just too much trouble for you. We’re both anxious—just in different ways. You’re scared about your business and I’m scared about our marriage.” The painful feeling of disconnection that separated Michael and Suzanne for years had begun to dissolve.

From the beginning of our sessions, Michael had been aware of his workaholism. He even realized that he was ignoring his family just as he had been ignored by his own father. But Michael felt helpless to reverse the intergenerational transmission of suffering. That began to change when he felt the pain of the impending divorce. Michael accepted how unhappy his life had become, and he experienced a spark of compassion, first for his father and then for himself.

Suzanne often complained that Michael paid insufficient attention to their two kids. But behind her complaints was a wish—not unfamiliar to mothers of young children—that Michael would pay attention to her first when he came home from work, and later play with the kids. Suzanne was ashamed of this desire: she thought it was selfish and indicated that she was a bad mother. But when she could see it as a natural expression of her wish to connect with her husband, she was able to make her request openly and confidently. Michael readily responded.

A little self-acceptance and self-compassion allowed both Suzanne and Michael to transform their negative emotions. In relationships, behind strong feelings like shame and anger is often a big “I MISS YOU!” It simply feels unnatural and painful not to share a common ground of being with our loved ones.

We all have personal sensitivities—“hot buttons”—that are evoked in close relationships. Mindfulness practice helps us to identify them and disengage from our habitual reactions, so that we can reconnect

with our partners. We can mindfully address recurring problems with a simple four-step technique: (1) Feel the emotional pain of disconnection, (2) Accept that the pain is a natural and healthy sign of disconnection and the need to make a change, (3) Compassionately explore the personal issues or beliefs being evoked within yourself, (4) Trust that a skillful response will arise at the right moment.

Mindfulness can transform all our personal relationships—but only if we are willing to feel the inevitable pain that relationships entail. When we turn away from our distress, we inevitably abandon our loved ones as well as ourselves. But when we mindfully and compassionately incline toward whatever is arising within us, we can be truly present and alive for ourselves and others.

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9

WHAT'S THE OPPOSITE
OF JEALOUSY?

Questioning the Buddhist allegiance to monogamy

JORGE N. FERRER

Buddhist tradition speaks of four “divine abodes,” or qualities of an awakened mind to be cultivated and put into practice. Also called the “four immeasurables,” these states—lovingkindness (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksha*)—are to be aroused and radiated outward by the practitioner, without limit or exclusion. Of these, *mudita* is for many Westerners the least familiar, at least as a term. It refers to the capacity to participate in the joy of others, to take happiness in the happiness of others. Though practice aims ultimately to develop sympathetic joy for all beings, intimate relationships offer everyone—whether Buddhist or not—a precious opportunity to taste its experiential flavor. When we are in love, the joy of our beloved becomes extremely contagious.

This innate capacity for sympathetic joy in intimate relationships often reaches its peak in deeply shared emotional experiences, sensual exchange, and, quintessentially, in lovemaking. But what if our partner’s sensuous or emotional joy were to arise in relation not to us but to someone else? For the vast majority of people, the immediate reaction would likely be not openness and love but rather fear, anger, and perhaps

even violent rage. The change of a single variable has rapidly turned the selfless contentment of sympathetic joy into Shakespeare's "green-eyed monster" of jealousy.

Why should this be so? Findings in the fields of evolutionary psychology, anthropology, and zoology shed considerable light on the matter. Jealousy, it seems, likely emerged as an adaptive response in our hominid ancestors some 3.5 million years ago. In the ancestral savanna, it was imperative for males to make sure they were not investing their time and resources in another male's progeny and for females to secure a steady partner to provide food and protection. Jealousy and the desire for sexual exclusivity developed hand in hand as mechanisms for assuring the passing on of one's DNA. As evolutionary psychologist David Buss noted in his acclaimed book, *The Evolution of Desire*, most human mating mechanisms and responses are actually "living fossils" shaped by the genetic pressures of our evolutionary history. The problem, of course, is that patterns that were adaptive millions of years ago might be anything but that today.

What does this mean for us spiritually? Based on tradition, it might be hard to say. While Buddhism has addressed in great detail the transformation of other deeply conditioned emotions—greed and hatred, for example—it has, so far as I know, not much to say about jealousy, specifically about sexual jealousy. But it seems to me that Buddhist principles can be, and should be, extended to the realm of intimate relationships.

I suggest that the transformation of jealousy through the cultivation of sympathetic joy bolsters the awakening of the enlightened heart. As jealousy dissolves, universal compassion and unconditional love become more easily available to the individual. Although to love without conditions is generally easier in the case of brotherly and spiritual love, as we heal the historical split between spiritual love (agape) and sensuous

love (eros), the extension of sympathetic joy to more embodied forms of love becomes, it seems to me, a natural development. And when embodied love is emancipated from possessiveness, a richer range of spiritually legitimate relationship options organically emerges. As people become more whole and are freed from certain basic fears (of abandonment, of unworthiness, of engulfment), new possibilities may open up for the expression of embodied love, and what was once perceived as undesirable, threatening, or even morally questionable might well feel natural, safe, and wholesome. This would, I believe, include forms of sexual expression that extend beyond the constraints of conventional monogamy. In short, once jealousy loosens its grip on the self, human love can attain a wider dimension of embodiment in our lives that may naturally lead to the mindful cultivation of more inclusive intimate connections.

Historically, Buddhism never strictly defined the rules of marriage for laypeople and accepted the relationship styles customary in the countries through which it spread. One wonders whether this chameleonic character of Buddhism to adapt itself to culturally predominant relationship customs may be at the root of the common prescription of monogamy by Buddhist teachers in the West. Consider, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh's reading of the Buddhist precept of "refraining from sexual misconduct." Originally, this precept meant, for monastics, to avoid engaging in any sexual act whatsoever and, for laypeople, to not engage in a list of "inappropriate" sexual behaviors having to do with specific body parts, times, and places. In *For a Future to Be Possible*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that the monks of his order follow the traditional celibate vow in order to use sexual energy as a catalyst for spiritual breakthrough. For lay practitioners, he interprets the precept to mean avoiding all sexual contact unless it takes place in the context of a "long-term commitment between two people," because there is an assumed incompatibility be-

tween love and “casual sex.” In this reading, the precept is a prescription for long-term monogamy, one that excludes the possibility that other forms of intimate encounter might be spiritually edifying. In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama also assumes a monogamous structure as the container for appropriate sex in intimate relationships. Since reproduction is the biological purpose of sexual relations, he tells us, long-term commitment and sexual exclusivity are desirable for the wholesomeness of love relationships.

Despite the great respect I feel for these and other Buddhist teachers who speak in similar fashion, I must confess my perplexity. These assessments of appropriate sexual expression, which have become influential guidelines for many contemporary Western Buddhists, are often offered by celibate individuals whose sexual experience is likely to be limited, if not nonexistent. If there is anything we have learned from developmental psychology, it is that an individual needs to perform a number of “developmental tasks” to gain competence (and wisdom) in various arenas: cognitive, emotional, sexual, and so forth. Even when offered with the best of intentions, advice about aspects of life in which one has not achieved developmental competence through direct experience may be both questionable and misleading. When this advice is given by figures culturally venerated as spiritual authorities, the situation can become even more problematic. What is more, in the context of spiritual praxis, these assertions can arguably be seen as incongruent with the emphasis on direct knowledge characteristic of Buddhism.

The culturally prevalent belief—supported by many contemporary Buddhist leaders—that the only spiritually correct sexual options are either celibacy or monogamy is a myth that may be causing unnecessary suffering and that needs, therefore, to be laid to rest. It may be perfectly plausible to hold simultaneously more than one loving or sexual bond in

a context of mindfulness, ethical integrity, and spiritual growth. Indeed, while working toward the transformation of jealousy into sympathetic joy and the integration of sensuous and spiritual love, for some it might even be expeditious.

I believe that, ultimately, the greatest expression of spiritual freedom in intimate relationships does not lie in strictly sticking to any particular relationship style—whether monogamous or polyamorous—but rather in a radical openness to the dynamic unfolding of life that eludes any fixed or predetermined structure of relationships. From the Buddhist perspective of skillful means (*upaya*) and of the soteriological nature of Buddhist ethics, it also follows that the key factor in evaluating the appropriateness of any intimate connection may not be its form but rather its power to eradicate the suffering of self and others. It should be obvious, for example, that one can follow a specific relationship style for reasons that are wholesome (that is, tending toward liberation) or unwholesome; that all relationship styles can become equally limiting spiritual ideologies; and that different internal and external conditions may rightfully call us to engage in different relationship styles at various junctures of our lives. It is in this open space catalyzed by the movement beyond monogamy and polyamory, I believe, that an existential stance deeply attuned to the promptings of our awakened nature can truly emerge.

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10

NO GAIN

Relationships won't solve our problems, but they can help us grow.

BARRY MAGID

My teacher Charlotte Joko Beck pretty much sums up her attitude toward relationships when she says, "Relationships don't work." Rather than talk about everything we normally think that we gain from relationships, like love, companionship, security, and family life, she looks at relationships from the perspective of no gain. She focuses on all the ways relationships go awry when people enter into them with particular sorts of gaining ideas and expect relationships to function as an antidote to their problems. Antidotes are all versions of "If only..." If only she were more understanding; if only he were more interested in sex; if only she would stop drinking. For Joko, that kind of thinking about relationships means always externalizing the problem, always assuming that the one thing that's going to change your life is outside yourself and in the other person. If only the other person would get his or her act together, then my life would go the way I want it to.

Joko tries to bring people back to their own fears and insecurities. These problems are ours to practice with, and we can't ask anyone else, including a teacher, to do that work for us. To be in a real relationship, a loving relationship, is simply to be willing to respond and be there for the other person without always calculating what we are going to get out of it.

Many people come to me and say, “I’ve been in *lots* of relationships where I give and give and give.” But for them it wasn’t enlightenment; it was masochism! What they are missing from Joko’s original account is a description of what relationships are actually for—what the good part is. In addition to being aware of the pitfalls that Joko warns us about, we should also look at all the ways in which relationships provide the enabling conditions for our growth and development. That’s particularly obvious with children. We would all agree that children need a certain kind of care and love in order to grow and develop. Nobody would say to a five-year-old, “What do you need Mommy for? Deal with your fear on your own!” The thing is that most of us are still struggling with remnants of that child’s neediness and fear in the midst of a seemingly adult life. Relationships aren’t just crutches that allow us to avoid those fears; they also provide conditions that enable us to develop our capacities so we can handle them in a more mature way.

It’s not just a parent-child relationship or a relationship with a partner that does that. The relationship of a student with a teacher, between members of a sangha, between friends, and among community members—all help us to develop in ways we couldn’t on our own. Some aspects of ourselves don’t develop except under the right circumstances.

Aristotle stressed the importance of community and friendship as necessary ingredients for character development and happiness. He is the real origin of the idea that “it takes a village” to raise a child. However, you don’t find much in Aristotle about the necessity of romantic love in order to develop. His emphasis was on friendship.

Aristotle said that in order for people to become virtuous, we need role models—others who have developed their capacities for courage, self-control, wisdom, and justice. We may emphasize different sets of virtues or ideas about what makes a proper role model, but Buddhism

also asserts that, as we are all connected and interdependent, none of us can do it all on our own.

Acknowledging this dependency is the first step of real emotional work within relationships. Our ambivalence about our own needs and dependency gets stirred up in all kinds of relationships. We cannot escape our feelings and needs and desires if we are going to be in relationships with others. To be in relationships is to feel our vulnerability in relation to other people who are unpredictable, and in circumstances that are intrinsically uncontrollable and unreliable.

We bump up against the fact of change and impermanence as soon as we acknowledge our feelings or needs for others. Basically, we all tend to go in one of two directions as a strategy for coping with that vulnerability. We either go in the direction of control or of autonomy. If we go for control, we may be saying: “If only I can get the other person or my friends or family to treat me the way I want, then I’ll be able to feel safe and secure. If only I had a guarantee that they’ll give me what I need, then I wouldn’t have to face uncertainty.” With this strategy, we get invested in the control and manipulation of others and in trying to use people as antidotes to our own anxiety.

With the strategy (or curative fantasy) of autonomy, we go in the opposite direction and try to imagine that we don’t need anyone. But that strategy inevitably entails repression or dissociation, a denial of feeling. We may imagine that through spiritual practice we will get to a place where we won’t feel need, sexuality, anger, or dependency. Then, we imagine, we won’t be so tied into the vicissitudes of relationships. We try to squelch our feelings in order not to be vulnerable anymore, and we rationalize that dissociation under the lofty and spiritual-sounding word “detachment,” which ends up carrying a great deal of unacknowledged emotional baggage alongside its original, simpler meaning as the

acceptance of impermanence.

We have to get to know and be honest about our particular strategies for dealing with vulnerability, and learn to use our practice to allow ourselves to experience more of that vulnerability rather than less of it. To open yourself up to need, longing, dependency, and reliance on others means opening yourself to the truth that none of us can do this on our own. We really do need each other, just as we need parents and teachers. We need all those people in our lives who make us feel so uncertain. Our practice is not about finally getting to a place where we are going to escape all that but about creating a container that allows us to be more and more human, to feel more and more.

If we let ourselves feel more and more, paradoxically, we get less controlling and less reactive. As long as we think we shouldn't feel something, as long as we are afraid of feeling vulnerable, our defenses will kick in to try to get life under control, to manipulate ourselves or other people. But instead of either controlling or sequestering our feelings, we can learn to both contain and feel them fully. That containment allows us to feel vulnerable or hurt without immediately erupting into anger; it allows us to feel neediness without clinging to the other person. We acknowledge our dependency.

We learn to keep our relationships and support systems in good repair because we admit to ourselves how much we need them. We take care of others for our own sake as well as theirs. We begin to see that all our relationships are part of a broad spectrum of interconnectedness, and we respect not only the most intimate or most longed-for of our relationships but also all the relationships we have—from the most personal to the most public—which together are always defining who we are and what we need in order to become fully ourselves.

Relationships work to open us up to ourselves. But first we have

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to admit how much we don't want that to happen, because that means opening ourselves to vulnerability. Only then will we begin the true practice of letting ourselves experience all those feelings of vulnerability that we first came to practice to escape.

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11

FIFTEEN WEEKS OF
DHARMA DATING

Going undercover in the Buddhist
branch of the online dating world

ANNE CUSHMAN

The idea comes first up as a joke between me and my *Tricycle* editor: As a newly single Buddhist mom, why don't I post my profile on a couple of the new online "dharma dating" sites, and write about my experiences?

I find the notion both intriguing and horrifying. For years I've mocked the idea of shopping for a mate the way you'd shop for a book on Amazon.com ("Add This Man to My Cart!"). Once, while browsing for a used couch on Craigslist, I popped over to the Men Seeking Women section for a look, and the ads all ran together in my mind: *6-foot divorced sofa, 45, brown hair/blue eyes, overstuffed cushions, slightly cat-clawed, wants to spank you. . . .*

But lately, several of my friends have met partners online; several others have had fun just going out for dinners, movies, and hikes with people they'd never have met without the Internet. According to *Business Week Online*, almost 5 percent of the U.S. population is now listed on Match.com. Arranging dates through Buddhist sites promises something novel: a wide assortment of potential friends, all of them single and interested in connection, and all sharing a primary interest in spiri-

tual practice. And as a mating strategy, it probably beats cruising a Vipassana retreat.

The only problem is, I've never really *dated*.

In my mid-thirties, I married my college sweetheart, with whom I'd been best friends and off-and-on partners since I was seventeen. In my twenties and early thirties, during the long periods when he and I weren't a couple, I had explored a series of relationships with some wonderfully offbeat men: A Brazilian massage therapist who was paying for his master's in somatic psychology by programming computers for a 900-line in Las Vegas. A French Zen student who baked a *tarte aux pommes* for my birthday and offered me bouquets of homegrown chard. A yogi who invited me to a clothing-optional "love and intimacy" workshop at his Santa Cruz home that culminated in a talent show where a seventy-three-year-old woman belly-danced wearing nothing but a denim apron.

None of the connections, however, involved anything that you might call *dating*. We met while adjusting each other in Downward Dog, or squabbling over unwashed dishes in the kitchen of a collective house. We migrated easily back and forth across the boundary between friendship and romance. I'm still good friends with virtually everyone I've paired up with in the past twenty years.

After my marriage went down in flames, romance was initially the last thing on my mind. (Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that I was still wearing nursing bras.) And at this point, I've been around long enough to know that a romantic partner is not a guaranteed ticket to a dukkha-free life. Love, it seems to me, is a combination of serendipity and hard work. Wouldn't I be better off using my time and energy rooting out the cause of suffering—craving—at its source? Instead of dating, shouldn't I volunteer at a soup kitchen? Shouldn't I focus on con-

templating emptiness and interdependence to the point where I'd get just as much joy from an evening alone sorting socks as from a night making passionate love in front of a fire to Indian sitar music?

Oh, who am I kidding? "Sure," I tell my editor. "I'll check it out."

Week 1 I get paralyzed in huge, bargain-basement stores. Given fifteen aisles of shoes to choose from, I'm likely to give up on the whole project and go home barefoot. So I pass on the New Age megasites like eHarmony and just sign up for the two that sound explicitly Buddhist: dharmaMatch.com and DharmaDate.com.

Despite its name, dharmaMatch turns out to be a fairly general site, aimed at singles of all religious persuasions "who hold their beliefs, values, and spirituality as an important part of their life." Its homepage features a lovely young couple locked in an embrace, surrounded by giant soap bubbles—as if to remind us of the impermanent nature of romantic love, even as we pursue it.

DharmaDate is more narrowly targeted toward Buddhists: "We want it to be an informal sangha meeting place where you can be yourself. Or be your *non-self*." The sign-up process includes a series of in-depth questions about practice and beliefs that are explicitly designed to screen out non-Buddhists (who, presumably, would otherwise be flocking there in droves, drawn by the legendary licentiousness and raw animal magnetism of dharma practitioners). The first thing I must do, on both sites, is choose a screen name. I try for Yogini, but it has already been taken. Dakini? Same deal. I rule out Bikini as unwise, and settle instead on Tahini, which also happens to be the name of my cat.

Although photos are not required, they're strongly encouraged, as the bait on the hook in the online sea. So I scramble through my files, trying to find a recent picture that doesn't lop off my head to focus on my five-year-old son. Sign-up questionnaires ask me to evaluate every aspect

of myself: physical appearance, lifestyle, personality, dietary preferences. And, of course, spirituality—to a depth I imagine not normally addressed by the average dating site (“What happens after the body dies?” is a question I’ve never seen before in a multiple-choice format).

In the last few weeks, I’ve been contemplating putting my house on the market. The analogies to the dating process are unavoidable: clearly, before holding any open houses I should consider some major renovations—and perhaps a professional stager—to increase my curb appeal.

But within hours of posting my profile, an email arrives in my inbox. “*Great news!*” it crows. “*You’ve received a Smile on dharmaMatch.com from Siddharthe Gotama!*” Hmm. . . . Is the not-yet-enlightened prince who will eventually become the Buddha really the sort of guy I want to be flirting with this time around? True, he was handsome, well educated, and rich. But didn’t he run out on his wife and child to wander around with a bunch of celibate homeless people?

I click “Send a Smile back” nonetheless . . . and now I am officially a dharma dater.

Week 2-3 As the introductory Smiles continue to arrive—“*. . . from ManlyMeditator!*” “*. . . from DharmaDude!*”—the first thing I discover is this: There are apparently a lot of thoughtful, attractive, spiritual singles out there. Sure, there are some scary ones: The guy who rants that he likes trees better than people. The guy who suggests in his opening email that we live together on a ranch in Wyoming, where we will castrate our own goats. But for the most part, the Smiles are linked to intriguing profiles: An Argentinean jazz musician in New York City who studies Tibetan Buddhism and hatha yoga and has a nine-year-old son. A burly poet in Ohio who shares custody of an eleven-year-old daughter. A Zen priest in southern California whose online photo features his shaved head and black robes.

Wait a minute . . . a *Zen priest*? Shouldn't he be beyond all this? I picture him chanting in the zendo: *Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to end them—right after I check dharmaMatch for any new hotties. . . .*

It just goes to show: as human beings, we're hardwired for connection. Of course, our practice helps us dissolve the illusion of a separate self and know that we are supported in every breath by the whole universe. But at the same time, it's also good to feel supported by a real live person who actually cares that we had a bad day, that the kids were brats, that the boss was a tyrant, that the computer kept crashing, that we failed to solve our koan.

Forty percent of the US population is single, according to the *New York Times*, up from 28 percent in 1970. And an increasing percentage of those singles are forty years and older. Many of the profiles I read, like mine, have ghosts hovering in the margins: ex-lovers, ex-spouses, shared children. Sifting through them, I envision us all bobbing around in the ocean after a great cultural shipwreck. We tighten our life preservers, clutch our bits of driftwood, and wave at one another across the water.

I begin exchanging emails with the people who have contacted me (sending them through the sites' somewhat cumbersome online mailboxes, which guarantee continued anonymity until you're ready to share your identity and contact info). The jazz musician sends flirtatious messages at midnight, signing his name with a sprinkling of kiss emoticons. The poet sends poems he has written and photos of his cabin and sailboat on a silver lake. The getting-to-know-you questions pelt me through the ether: "What's the most fun thing you've done this week?" "What spiritual teacher has influenced you the most?" "What do you think true freedom is?" A resident of a Tibetan retreat center in Canada writes, "I smiled at you but I have no idea what a smile means. Does this mean we're engaged?"

As a writer, I already spend a good portion of my days staring at my computer screen; I quickly discover that I don't want to conduct my social life there. The dharma-dating emails drown in the flood of messages from my real-world life: article submissions, work appointments, family sagas, baby announcements, friends inviting me to potluck suppers. Untethered to the world of blood and bones, the candidates for my affection drift out of my mind like balloons on a windy day. I forget what I've said to the Zen priest and what to the jazz musician. I forget whether the photographer in Massachusetts has grown-up kids, or whether that's the software designer in Palo Alto. I repeatedly forget my dating-site password. I'm tempted to copy and paste from one of my answers into another, just to save time—but surely that's tacky? Increasingly, I don't get around to returning the emails.

This, of course, has its own pitfalls. When I inadvertently fail to return a Smile, I receive my first flame: “Is this the way enlightened people behave? Well, if it is I might just as well go to the local bar and become an alcoholic, smoke cigarettes, and associate with big furry women who grunt when they talk. And what do you think might be the karmic consequences of being responsible for my demise?”

I decide to perform some geographical triage. I will politely decline correspondence with anyone who doesn't live within easy driving distance of me. Those who live nearby I will steer as quickly as possible toward face-to-face meetings.

Weeks 4-5 I consult *Online Dating for Dummies*, which recommends that the first meetings be brief, for coffee or tea, and that they be held in a busy public place. So I meet my first date at a bookstore café that's bustling enough to feel anonymous. I wonder how many of the couples I see at the tables around me are meeting for the first time, exchanging chitchat while surreptitiously checking each other out to see if

they can imagine spending the rest of their lives together.

My date, whose screen name refers to a legendary Scottish warrior, is a small, serious man with a British accent and a longtime Vipassana practice. We look at each other awkwardly, clutching our mugs of herbal tea. I break the ice with what seems like an innocuous question: “So what do you do?” He gazes at me as if this is the weirdest question anyone has ever asked him and repeats, incredulously, “Do???”

I decide to do more prescreening next time. After a few intriguing email exchanges, I chat on the phone with a yoga practitioner who teaches world religions at a prep school near San José. We converse easily about our children (he has two preschool-age sons), our spiritual practice (we’ve studied with some of the same teachers), our academic interests.

When I arrive at the bookstore café, he’s not there yet. I browse through the paperbacks, discreetly eyeing each arriving customer. Across the aisle, a stocky, dark-haired man is doing the same thing. We exchange glances, then look away—clearly, we are not the people we’re waiting for. It takes a good ten minutes before we approach each other and discover that we are.

We order tea and begin to talk, trying to get used to each other’s nonvirtual presence. Although I hadn’t been aware of having any clear expectations, I feel slightly let down. This guy is every bit as thoughtful and pleasant as our conversation had led me to believe. But the man I had imagined was taller, with a commanding physical presence due to his twenty years of intensive Iyengar yoga. I find myself glancing toward the door, still waiting for him to show up. I imagine that my date is probably waiting for a different version of me, as well—perhaps one in retouched black-and-white, like my publicity photo.

Stirring my tea, I realize that this is one of the many strange things about online dating. Normally, when you meet someone, you encounter

him or her first in the flesh, so whatever story you begin to spin in your mind centers around a character who vaguely resembles who that person actually is. But when you meet someone online, the mind—in a textbook illustration of what Buddhism calls *papancha*, or “proliferation of thoughts”—fleshes out an entire image based on a tiny photo and a few lines of text, and then begins generating plots in which this imaginary figure plays a leading role. When you actually meet the person, he bears no resemblance to the person you’d imagined—how could he?—so you feel a wave of disappointment. It’s like seeing a movie based on a favorite novel: *That’s not Rhett Butler!* (Although in that case, at least, Rhett is played by Clark Gable.)

Weeks 6-10 I don’t take the prep school teacher up on his offer to meet again—I’m moving to a new home, which will be a three-hour drive from where he lives. Distracted by the details of packing, I take a break from the dating assignment. In the move my Internet connection goes down for a couple of weeks; I get back online to find a backlog of dharma-date emails in my inbox, along with a pile of tasks that need attending to. Dharma dating feels like just one more assignment on which I’m falling behind.

I begin declining all correspondence, saying truthfully that I’m just too busy right now. But I keep glancing at the profiles with idle curiosity, the way I sometimes stop in at garage sales. I’m fascinated to observe how quickly my mind rules people out—and on how little evidence. “The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences,” wrote Seng Tsan, the third Zen Patriarch. The same might be said for dharma dating. Free of the counterbalancing weight of actual human contact, I eliminate suitors for random, insignificant reasons: Too short. Too tall. Too old. Too young. Too little hair. Too *much* hair. Spelling *vipassana* with the wrong number of *p*’s or *s*’s or *n*’s. Claiming to be enlightened.

Weeks 11-13 With a nudge from my editor, I decide to plunge back into the dating sea again. I meet up for dinner with a former devotee of the tantric guru Osho who now runs a car-rental business. I have tea with a music producer and Vipassana student from L.A., who regularly visits the Bay Area to record with a local musician. A professor of East Asian philosophy invites me to an “ecstatic trance dance” held at a Middle Eastern belly-dancing restaurant. A psychologist and mountain climber offers me a tour of his co-housing community.

What is the spark—chemistry? karma? neurosis?—that leads us to want to spend time with one person more than with another? Whatever it is, I don’t feel it with any of my dates, although they are all likeable people. The very activity of dating feels fluffy and insubstantial compared with the weight and texture of my daily life, filled as it is with the countless domestic details of child-rearing, work, and friendships. Romance seemed easier to stumble into in the old days, when I didn’t have so many . . . *appendages*. But of course, these appendages are what make my life worth living.

I tell myself that I should probably persist past a first date. After all, haven’t some of my best connections been with people I didn’t immediately feel attracted to? But my life is already full of friends I don’t have enough time to see. I resist the idea of carving out time for relative strangers. Driving home from my co-housing tour, I reflect that this whole experience can perhaps be viewed as a kind of meditation practice. When you sit down to meditate, you never know what’s going to come up. Some days you’re hammered by relentless trivia; other days you’re caught in storms of anger or grief or fear. What’s important is just to keep coming back to the cushion, to keep opening the door to the

possibility of peace and insight.

Perhaps dating is just a way to practice keeping the door of my heart open to intimacy—without attachment to results. In the process, I can notice the habits of contraction that keep me feeling separate from other people: judgments, expectations, fears, busyness, guilt, chronic feelings of insecurity or superiority.

Or is this theory just an attempt to spiritualize an essentially absurd activity, one riddled with consumerism and steeped in the double delusion that love is out there somewhere—and that with persistence and a fast Internet connection we can track it down?

Week 14-15 I go out to dinner with a computer programmer who used to be a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal. Over Thai food, we talk for three hours, although I'd told the babysitter I'd be home in two. He tells me about the Tibetan teachers he's studied with and about the tantric sex workshops he used to attend.

Over the next two weeks, he floods me with long, chatty emails. He tells me about books he's read, movies he's seen. He muses on artificial intelligence, the history of Supreme Court justices, his relationship with his nieces and nephew and sisters. I tell him that, as a writer, I don't enjoy socializing by email. He responds with a five-paragraph essay about a recent interview with Terry Gross on NPR.

I lose patience, and send him a plea: "Ack! No! Stop! Send smoke signals! Beat on a talking drum! Skywrite messages in the blue! Throw tomatoes at my window! But no more emails!"

I'm not cut out for cyber-dating, I decide.

It seems I am an anachronism. I'm just not interested in "getting to know someone" by typing words into a box on a screen. For me, connections unfold slowly, through repeated encounters in natural settings. I like to observe animals in the wild, not in the zoo. Instead of exchanging

pleasantries with strangers online, I'd rather go deeper into my life as it already is, and celebrate the intimacy—with friends, family, and community—that is already nourishing me.

I've never been someone who spots love instantly. Overcoming my innate reserve usually takes days, weeks, even months spent sweating side by side on yoga mats, or scrambling eggs in the kitchen of a shared house. At this stage of my life, I'm starting to believe, nothing will break through my busyness and melt my defenses but the rhythm of a project or activity shared over time; and that activity must be more meaningful than the shared project of looking for a date.

Postscript I'm seeing someone again.

He's a wise, loving, and funny friend I met the old-fashioned way, years ago, when he dropped by my magazine office to do some work. We've been in and out of each other's lives ever since. Maybe it took a dip into cyberspace to open my eyes to the depth of our real-life connection.

Like everything else, I know that this relationship is subject to the laws of impermanence—so I don't want to jinx things by writing any more about it.

But I will tell you this: He doesn't have email.

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12

MOVING TARGET

ERIC HANSEN

As a meditator, have you ever practiced eating mindfully—let’s say a salad or a baked potato? Perhaps, then, as you tried to stay in touch with each bite, each chew, each subtle flavor of potato, butter, salt, pepper, and chives, you found yourself struggling through a haze of memories, fantasies, and scenarios trying to really be there for the experience of eating.

Now extrapolate from this experience and think: If it’s this hard to stay in touch with a baked potato, how much more difficult must it be to clearly perceive the person I love? After all, my relationship to a potato is fairly straightforward, whereas my perceptions of my wife, for example, are overlaid with all kinds of control issues, power struggles, sexual bonding, primordial needs, and so on. Complicating matters is the fact that, although these forces are as real as gravity, bending my perceptions the way a black hole bends light, they are invisible. Most of the time, I don’t even know they’re there. Zen practice suggests there are many degrees to being present. Just because my eyes are open doesn’t mean I’m awake. It’s possible to look right at someone and still not truly see them. I certainly make every effort to make contact with my wife, Shannon, whom I adore, but I’ve come to realize that I’m almost always peering at her through the invisible haze of my own mind.

Take Sunday. Since I’m a writer, it’s important that I read widely and often, so as I pull a chair into the afternoon shade and open an Elmore

Leonard novel, it's with a clear conscience. Unfortunately, my enjoyment is soon undermined by muffled sounds coming from the basement—Shannon cleaning and reorganizing. *She expects me to help her*, I realize with a twinge of annoyance. More sounds emanate. Boxes shifting. Sweeping. "It's always on her schedule," I grumble, no longer seeing the words on the page. Finally, she appears in the doorway, broom in hand, and stares at me. *Oh, all right, all right!* I put the book down and stomp to my feet, thinking, *She just doesn't value what I do.*

But as I sweep last Sunday's wood scraps from where I left them on the floor, I realize *Shannon's been stepping over these all week.* Wow. Maybe everything's not "always on her schedule." Maybe her perceptions, her trajectory through life, are just as valid as mine. "She doesn't value what I do." At the time, it sounded almost reasonable. That's what the mind does. It makes statements and then believes them. "No one loves me." "He's a dumb brute." "You're the worst kids in the world." As my Zen teacher would say, it "conceptually ornaments" our experience, adding labels, concepts and judgments to create a story of self and other. Practice is what we do with these thoughts. Do we believe them or let them go? Do we build ever larger conceptual edifices around our loved ones, or do we work to pull them down? How clearly do you see *your* loved ones?

In the basement, Shannon decides to reposition her work tables, so we take half an hour experimenting with different configurations. As we push the tables this way and that, something interesting happens. I start to feel fonder toward her. This low, cool space is where she spends much of her time, making art, and it's suddenly become more real to me. I'm taking care of her. I'm a good guy. I spend some time with a couple of her new pieces, appreciating them. Seeing them. You know, she's not just an inhabitant of my mind; she's here, in the world, living her separate,

parallel life.

I believe we could spend our whole lives together living like bears in a cave, grunting over salmon, sleeping in our nest, and enjoy a deep and intimate bond—but would we have made contact? I want to see past the haze, past my conceptual ornamentations, past this Shannon who's so familiar I sometimes believe she's "me" or "mine." I want to see the real her. But how can I break through?

Talking is a start. "Hey, hon. How about some iced tea?" We go outside. I bring her a tall, beaded glass of tea, again feeling that subtle pleasure of taking care. Just putting the glass in her hand helps me to feel loving. "So, Shan. Do you think you see me clearly?" I ask. She sips her tea, considering. "It's not something I worry about," she answers. Oh. "Well, take a moment," I persist. "How do you think you perceive me?" "Lots of different ways...that all have to do with me. Does that sound selfish?"

You see? I didn't know what she'd say. I never do. She's a moving target, constantly changing, frequently surprising me. The truth is, when I pay attention, I find beneath my conventional knowing of her a vast and profound *unknowing*. It's an openness that inspires curiosity and leads to contact. So, we sit together, my mind enjoying the not-knowing, on a beautiful late Sunday afternoon. For a moment I see her without ornament.

And, for the record, she in no way resembles a baked potato.

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