

Norman Fischer
When You Greet Me I Bow
Week One: "Relationship"
October 2, 2021



Hi everybody. My name is Norman Fischer, and I'm a Zen Buddhist priest in the Suzuki Roshi line of Soto Zen. I'm also a longtime student of the San Francisco Zen Center, where I lived in residence for many decades and served as abbot from 1995 to 2000. In 2000, I started the Everyday Zen Foundation. I'm also a writer and a poet: I'm a graduate of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and have published many books of poetry.

The title for this series is taken from my recently published book, *When You Greet Me I Bow: Notes and Reflections from a Life in Zen*. The book is a collection of my published essays about various Buddhist topics over a period of 35 or 40 years, and it is divided into four sections: relationship, the emptiness teachings, culture, and engagement. Those are going to be the four topics of this lecture series.

Today, I want to talk about the first topic, relationship. Let me begin by sharing a few of the stories that I begin the title essay of the book with, "When You Greet Me I Bow." These are two traditional Zen stories.

Longtan made rice cakes for a living. But when he met the priest Tianhuang, he left home to follow him.

Tianhuang said, "Be my attendant. From now on, I will teach you the essential dharma gate."

After a year, Longtan said, "When I arrived, you said you would teach me. But so far, nothing has happened."

Tianhuang said, "I've been teaching you all along."

Longtan said, "What have you been teaching me?"

Tianhuang said, "When you greet me, I bow. When I sit, you stand beside me. When you bring tea, I receive it from you."

And the second story:



One day, while Guishan was lying down, Yangshan came to see him. Guishan said, "Let me tell you about my dream." Yangshan leaned forward to listen.

Guishan said simply, "Would you interpret my dream for me? I want to see how you do it."

In response, Yangshan brought a basin of water and a towel. Guishan washed his face and sat up. Then Xiangyan came in. Guishan said, "Yangshan and I have been sharing miracles. This is no small matter."

Xiangyan said, "I was next door and heard you."

Guishan said to him, "Why don't you try?"

Xiangyan made a bowl of tea and brought it to him.

Guishan praised them both, saying, "You two students surpass even Shariputra and Maudgalyayana [intimate and important disciples of the Buddha] with your miraculous activity!"

Who are we really? We're not anyone in particular. Every moment, in response to the conditions in front of us, another person, the sky, the flowers, we are created again. That's who we are: our relationship in this moment, new every moment. Yes, of course, conventionally, we all have identities, commitments, loves, hates, preferences. No one avoids that, and we wouldn't want to avoid that. But that's not all of who we are. And that's the point of Zen practice and, I think, of all spiritual practice: to get in touch with the person that we are beyond the person that we seem to be.

We don't really ever come to that understanding and that realization by ourselves. In Zen practice, it is understood that we enact this wisdom in our connection to one another. It's our dharma relations, renewed moment by moment as we meet each thing and each person, that bring us to the truth and a kind of awakening within and beyond our suffering.

When you think about Zen stories, this is how they work. They're not talks given by wise teachers; they're encounters between people. Every Zen story is the story of a meeting. It's the story of a relationship—and, as we see from these stories, not necessarily conventional notions of



relationship in which we're fulfilling each other's needs, but some more profound sense of our connection to one another.

Zen practice is itself a together practice. We're always sitting together side by side. In a classical Zen *sesshin* [retreat], we sit together, we walk together, we eat together, we work together, we chant together, we bow together until we become one body. As we continue our practice and as we understand more, we realize this. We realize that the separate person we are is a conventional person and that we're also a person beyond that person. That is why our practice is all about compassion, not only in the sense that I am compassionate for you but also I *am* you. My compassion is not me being a nice guy. My compassion is me realizing who I am and knowing that having a heart of love for all creatures, all beings, even a blade of grass, even a stone is true to who and what I am. Michael Jackson sang a long time ago, "We are the world. We are the people." We *are* the world, and we are the people. That's why we love one another: because we are one another, and there's no other way but to love one another.

There's a beautiful Zen story about compassion. Yunyan asks Daowu, "How come the bodhisattva of compassion has so many hands and eyes?" Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, is depicted as having infinite hands and infinite heads with infinite pairs of eyes, and statues of Avalokiteshvara have many arms and many heads piled one on top of another to symbolize infinite hands and eyes.

Daowu says, "It's just like reaching back for your pillow in the night," which we all do. In the night, we somehow feel like the pillow needs to be different, so without calculation, without thinking about it, without even saying to ourselves, "I think I'll reach back for my pillow," we just reach back. It's automatic.

Yunyan says, "Oh, I understand."

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Daowu says, “What do you understand?”

Yunyan says, “There are hands and eyes all over the body.”

Daowu says, “Well, that’s 80 percent.”

Yunyan says, “Well, what do you say, elder brother?”

Daowu says, “The whole body is nothing but hands and eyes.”

Our whole life and all parts of it, every moment of it, and all of existence really is nothing but compassion and love. We don’t need to produce compassion. We already *are* compassion. All we need to do is wake up to who and what we are, and then naturally, we’re going to have a heart of love not only in actions that appear to be compassionate but all the time: picking up an object with compassion, walking from one room to another with compassion, and, of course, caring for one another with love.

What I wanted to tell you today is that, first of all, our separate selves are not all we are. We honor them, but we learn in practice to go beyond them. Second, we always practice together. Even when we’re sitting alone, we’re practicing together. Third, we love this world and we love this life and we’re always trying to help in everything we do.

Thank you very much for listening. My next talk is going to be on the emptiness teachings, which are very important teachings in Mahayana Buddhism and in Zen.