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*Right Relationship as the Ninth Factor of the Path*  
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May the merits of these teachings benefit all beings.

Hello. It's a pleasure to be sharing this virtual space with you, contributing a few drops to the vast ocean of *buddhadharma*: the teachings of liberation, the truth of suffering, and its alleviation. My name is Zusei Goddard. I am a writer, a lay Zen teacher, and the founder and guiding teacher of the Ocean Mind Sangha. This is a mostly virtual community of Zen practitioners all over the world. Before starting Ocean Mind Sangha, I trained for a couple of decades at Zen Mountain Monastery. It's in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York, and I was a monastic for fourteen of those years. I then returned to lay life and eventually began teaching in about 2018.

Today I would like to speak about relationships, and specifically, right relationship as the ninth factor of the noble eightfold path.

### **Shree and Ashwini**

To begin, let me tell you a story. It starts in San Francisco, in the Marin Headlands, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge. A young Indian woman named Ashwini is driving her car. One of her coworkers is sitting next to her, and the two of them are chatting animatedly. At one point, without any warning, Ashwini suddenly veers off the road, stops the car, and says, "You drive." Her coworker, confused, gets out, switches places with Ashwini, and as she starts driving. Ashwini in the passenger seat closes her eyes and keeps them tightly shut until they get into the city proper.

As they're crossing over the bridge, Ashwini explains, I can't see a bridge. She says, sometime back, I made a vow. I promised to not look at the Golden Gate Bridge until I could do it with Shree. And then she tells her coworker their story. Shree and Ashwini had met in Nepal, where they had fallen in love. Ashwini was on a kind of last hurrah trip before an arranged marriage, and Shree was the manager at the hostel where Ashwini was staying. The connection was instantaneous. But while Shree accepted that she was gay, Ashwini did not. This was not without reason. Same sex relationships were illegal in India until 2018, so you could end up in prison for life for loving someone "against nature."

So Ashwini's plan had been to marry a man her family had chosen for her in the hopes that this would somehow make her right, that this would give her the life that was expected of her. But when it was time to leave Nepal, she decided not to get on the plane at the last minute. The decision was rash. It was unreasonable. She had only spent a few days with Shree But soon she would learn it was the best decision she had ever made, because being with Shree was easy. It was right. But living out their love in India was not, so the women decided to move to the United States, where they could be freer with one another.

Ashwini gets a job in San Francisco and plans to travel ahead, but before she leaves, she makes her promise. She will not look at the Golden Gate Bridge until she can see it with Shree because it is the symbol of the life they're building together. They both know it's an outlandish promise: "I will not look at this 80-foot-tall, 4,200-foot-long bridge, the most recognizable, most visible, monument in the United States, or one of the most visible. I vow not to see until I can see it with you." It's a little bit like saying I will not attain enlightenment until I can do it with you. Another outlandish, beautiful vow.

So Ashwini goes ahead, filled with anticipation, and Covid strikes. Three years go by and many complications before Shree can join Ashwini. All of that time, Ashwini does not look at the bridge once. But when she picks up her wife at the San Francisco airport—because the two of them got married in Australia as soon as the world opened up—that's where she took her first. They pulled off at Crissy field. They spread out a picnic blanket. On the left, the pylons of the bridge. On the right, a swath of beach. The Golden Gate straight ahead. Ashwini pulls out a glass and says, "What do you think?" Shree clinks their two glasses together and she says, "It is beautiful." Neither one of them was looking at the bridge.

### **What Is Right Relationship?**

All of life is relationship. We're in a relationship to ourselves, one another, to all manner of beings and things. Our relationship to places, to memories, to our stories, to our dreams—everything is in continuous relationship, constantly interacting with everything else. So the question is not whether we affect one another. We affect one another all the time. The question is how to go about our relationships so that they help and not harm, so that they're able to receive and to offer the love, attention, and care that we all want. This is what right relationship helps us do: to treat everything and everyone right.

But right here, as in, the noble eightfold path, is not the right of right and wrong. It is the rightness of what is skillful, what is helpful, what is loving, what is true.

If we look closely at the path—made up of right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration—we see that undergirding all of it is relationship. All of it is interaction.

### **Our Interbeing**

In this study, right relationship, let's use the image of a house. First we need the foundation, which, in Buddhist terms, is our interbeing. This is the late Thich Nhat Hanh's term for interconnectedness. Interbeing is the recognition that nothing exists by itself, that we need everything in the universe to be what we are, and that this is true of everything.

Take this apple, for example. Let's say that this particular apple traveled from a farm in Yakima, Washington. This is one of the places that Pink Lady apples are grown. On a fall day in October,

it was carefully handpicked by a woman named Adele. Adele is a native Washingtonian, and she lives in Yakima with her husband and her two kids. On the morning that Adele picked my apple, she was wearing denim overalls and a red and white plaid shirt. She bought these at a secondhand thrift store on Main Street that donates part of their proceeds to an organization protecting women against domestic violence.

Violet, the owner, is a survivor of domestic violence herself, or, as she likes to say, a thriver after. She always sources her clothes very carefully, but still, most of them are originally made in Cambodia, Vietnam, or Honduras. The shirt that Adele is wearing was made by a young woman in Tegucigalpa. Fabiola, who is the youngest of five kids, has worked at a clothes factory since she was about 15, and on that same morning, when Adele was at the farm, Fabiola was thinking it was time to look for better work. She goes over to her neighbor Neon's house on her way to work, and, chatting, she tells him as much.

Neon has always had a soft spot for Fabiola, because she reminds him of his late daughter, and so, at night, as he is lying in bed with his wife, Carmen, he says to her that he too thinks Fabiola can do more than make clothes. Carmen, for her part, is only half listening. She kind of nods in the dark because she's only half listening because her mind is on the surprise party she's going to give her son, Felipe, who's 28 and is coming home in a couple of months from Colombia, where he's been working construction. At the birthday party, Carmen introduces Fabiola to Felipe, and the rest, as they say, will be history.

Now, on the day that Adele brings her creative apples into the barn, a young man named Adam is packing the crates. He's wearing a pair of deer skin gloves made in Canada by a Quebecois named Albertine, who has a fondness for whiskey and a limp. Adam will carefully pack my apple in a crate that will be trucked in a refrigerated container to Auckland and then onto a ship on its way to Panama. But on the way, my apple will touch the lives of hundreds, thousand, millions of people: the drivers, custom officials, their wives, their children, the food that those children will eat, and the people who grew that food, and the clothes they're wearing, the people who made those clothes, on and on and on. A net spreading outward from Yakima to the rest of the universe and beyond, infinitely, with my Apple as its central node.

Finally, on a warm November day, I'll go to the grocery store after my morning run, I'll pick a few apples, and I'll bring them home to enjoy this afternoon after recording this talk. I will cut up a few pieces of my apple and share them with Lucas, my French Bulldog, which I brought from Mexico to Panama, who will happily chew the apple, and then he'll lie down on the balcony's cool tiles. I'll go to my desk and begin to write, bits of apple in my body, and in his as well, as bits of life, thousands of lives, millions of lives, indistinguishable from mine and his, as they always were. Interwoven. That's the foundation.

The frame of the house is a deep kind of care, what I like to call regard. To relate well to anyone or anything, we have to care about it. This may seem obvious, but how many interactions do we have in a day that are painfully lacking of care?

We just have to look at our ailing Earth. It's a clear example of that—our fragmented society, our perpetual conflict, our violence. We're even uncaring toward ourselves. Think of what you do with those aspects that you don't care to look at, those aspects of yourself that you feel ashamed about, that you don't like. Chances are, you ignore them, you avoid them, you pretend they're not part of who you are.

So regard is the willingness to turn toward, instead of away from. To want to see and to understand ourselves, one another, and the world. It's the right kind of want, the best kind of want.

Recently, I was reading a book that illustrated in a number of ways that plants show deep regard for one another. They somehow know who's a stranger and who's kin, and they help each other thrive. They make room so other plants can get light. They send nutrients through the roots. We know that trees do this too. Warnings when predators are near. If plants can care, so can we.

### **Appropriate Attention**

Over the foundation and the frame of the house, we can build the walls. In right relationship, this is really attention, specifically what the Buddha called appropriate attention. I think of it as having three main qualities: respect, reflection and focus.

Respect comes straight out of that regard—that is, respect for me, respect for you, that comes out of that recognition that we deserve attention. We all do simply because we are. There's nothing else we need to do. Nothing else we need to prove. Others deserve my respect. I deserve my respect simply because I am, because they are, because we inter-are.

The second is reflection. As we relate to another, a person, a thing, to reflect on whether that interaction is causing them or us suffering, and then reflecting what it is that we can do to stop the harm, reflecting on whether we can increase the good. This includes checking our perception, because often, when we think we're seeing another, what we're seeing is a projection of our own minds, right? We make others in our image. We make the world in our image. So through reflection, we check, is this true? Is my understanding accurate? If it isn't, we ask—particularly if there's a person in front of us, but even when there are things—they show us, reveal to us who they are, what they are, so we can better understand. If it's a person, to really listen so we can see them and not our idea of them.

The third aids in those two, which is focus. In paying attention, we do so completely without distraction, as if there isn't anything more important, as if there isn't anything else to attend to, because in that moment, there isn't.

I remember years ago, I was working with my teacher in his studio, and he was dictating letters, he was taping them in a very small handheld tape recorder, and we had worked for about an hour or so, a pretty good clip, when the tape got stuck in the machine. I waited for Roshi to open up the tape recorder, and he carefully took out the very small cassette tape, and just tried to

untangle the film from the spools. It was a mess. I glanced at the stack of letters still to be done on the desk, and I was sure that he would just throw the whole thing in the waste basket and grab another tape so we could keep working. Instead, he began to unspool the plastic film while I watched, and patiently untied the knots, and then wined it back into the tape with a point of a pencil. At one point, he'd hit another tight knot, and I was sure again, he would just give up. But then what he did was he just rummaged in his desk, and he took out a tiny, tiny pair of scissors, and he used them to clip the tape very cleanly, and with two very thin strips of scotch tape, taped the film together. Then he finished winding it into the cassette. It took about 45 minutes of painstaking work to do the whole thing. Then he pressed play, sat back in his chair, and we both listened as his own voice dictated the last letter he had done with just a couple of very minor blips. When it was done, he looked at me with pleasure. It is that kind of focus, that kind of care.

### **What Does Love Look Like?**

The roof of the house is loving-kindness. There is the habit of asking yourself, what is the kind and loving response here? Or, as a friend said to me, what does love look like in this moment? Now, this is particularly important to do when an interaction is causing us pain, because, like the roof of a house, loving-kindness is protecting a relationship from the elements. It protects us from anger, jealousy, and indifference. It ensures that our actions, words, and thoughts, are coming from a place that is good, affirming, and a place of protection, or refuge.

Of course, this isn't always easy to do. When hurt, our impulse is to hurt. But appropriate attention shows us that this never leads to peace. It doesn't make the other happy, it doesn't make us happy.

So what if, instead, we try wishing ourselves and the other love and wellbeing in our minds? This is part of the four immeasurables practice—the metta, or loving-kindness, practice. If you've tried this, you know it is impossible to hold an angry thought and a loving thought simultaneously in your mind. It is not possible to do that. So by focusing on loving-kindness, we shift our relationships toward love.

If there are situations in which this feels impossible, that's OK. The dharma isn't just a feel good practice, although it does often feel good. The dharma is a revolution. It's the transformation of all that leads to conflict, hatred, and suffering into that which lives as love.

### **Opening Space**

The doors and the windows of the house open up space in our relationships. Our relationships are hard. Cultivating good relationships is harder. And so we can expect that building that house of right relationship is going to take time. It's going to take effort. It's going to take perseverance. It's going to take patience, and a kind of grit. It's like the grit of a bodhisattva vowing to realize themselves for the sake of everyone, like the grit of a lover, of a partner, of a friend, who will go to great lengths to protect and to get up again when they fall, when they fail.

So space is the way that we let in air and light into our relationships. It appears every time we stop reacting or strive to take a wider view. When we do the opposite, when we choose to live inside our stories instead of the reality of who we are, we've opted to shut ourselves inside the house, locked doors, drawn curtains, keeping out the world. Space lets us breathe. It lets us pause and ask what is really going on.

### **The Courage to Care**

That too is challenging, because sometimes we don't want to see and that's why the last building block of the house is courage. I think of it as the nails, the screws, the bolts, invisible to the naked eye, invisible at first glance, but they keep the whole structure together. They keep it upright. We do need courage to see ourselves, to see one another, to keep caring in the face of indifference. Of this regard, this is where the term bodhisattva warrior is appropriate.

Reality is not warm and fuzzy. Relationships are not warm and fuzzy. Not all of them, not all parts of them. So we need both courage and strength to care for what is important—what is good, not just for me, but for everyone. Because whether we like it or not, whether we're aware of it or not, we are constantly relating to one another. It does take tremendous courage. Courage to take up those relationships, to be willing to study them, to learn from them, and to commit to doing them.

### **A Crossing Between You and Me**

Maybe a house isn't actually the best image for right relationship. Maybe it is a bridge. Eighty feet tall, 4,200 feet long, a crossing between you and me—a millimeter, an instant—not there when we inter-are. So in one sense, it is unmissable, beautiful. In another sense, before it is built, utterly, outlandishly improbable. Who would ever think of doing such a thing? And how would we live without it?

Intervening, regard, attention, loving-kindness, space, courage: the building blocks of right relationship. May they be of benefit. May they be of benefit and help your relationships thrive. Thank you for your practice.